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**Heaven Is A Space On Earth:  
Friendship and the Book of Ruth**

by  
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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of M.Phil.

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to establish that the relationship between Naomi and Ruth in the book of 'Ruth' is one best interpreted - for feminist purposes - as one of 'ideal' friendship. I will show that Naomi and Ruth's friendship is the context within which their agency is expressed and their full humanity illuminated. In order to provide the theoretical criteria for such an interpretation I will be bringing into my reading Aristotle's model of *τελειά φιλία* (perfect/ideal friendship) which he develops in books eight and nine of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The resulting dialogue will provide a revision of both Aristotelian theory and modern biblical exegesis of 'Ruth'.

The book of 'Ruth' has been interpreted in ways that emphasise extra-textual considerations such as genealogy or divine providence despite the centrality of the women's role in the story. Furthermore, most feminist readings often project modern ideals of womanhood onto the text which equally obscure the subversive potential of the story as one in which female bonding determines plot development. On the other hand, theories of friendship have equally excluded women despite the equally strong presence of such ties in reality and in fiction. Starting with Aristotle and continuing with the Roman and Humanist tradition, I will show that the history of writing on 'ideal' friendship compromises this ideal on three levels. First, the overt exclusion of a female presence as such and with it, any hint of femininity - as traditionally defined and established as a set of 'essential' traits - have produced theories which emphasise a disembodied, rational ideal. Last, the belief in self-sufficiency further marginalises women and compromises the potential of 'ideal' friendship as a basis for an egalitarian society. Both discourses - biblical exegesis and philosophy - will be shown to suffer from androcentric biases which have colluded in preventing an interpretation of Naomi and Ruth's relationship in terms of friendship. My reading will illustrate why the model of friendship these women project re-defines existing androcentric models and provides a more inclusive theory and practice of friendship on which community may be modeled.

By shifting the focus of the relationship from kinship to friendship textual nuances take on meanings which support a gynocentric reading and give way to a feminist literary interpretation of the narrative. The interpretative framework throughout the thesis supports a redefining of concepts such as 'virtue', 'good', 'self', 'identity', 'duty', 'freedom', and 'difference', so that they are compatible with a feminist viewpoint and produce a revisionist reading of the book of Ruth in which a utopian vision of community is projected. If Naomi and Ruth's actions are seen to proceed from feminist model of friendship - in its 'ideal' form, non-hierarchical, mutually beneficent and responding to emotional need as well as intellectual engagement - they become alternative models of community not only for women but as a goal for all humanity.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle	NE
Journal for the Study of the Old Testament	JSOT
Re-Mapping the Moral Domain	RMD
In a Different Voice	IDV

Nor is it right for me to enjoy pleasures, I decided, while he who shared things with me is absent from me.

Terence, *Eautontimorumenos*

Can I see another's woe  
And not be in sorrow too?  
Can I see another's grief  
And not seek for kind relief?

William Blake

Birth, and the Growth of the Soul;  
The Soul, in the body established,  
In the ever - new beauty of childhood  
In the wonder of opening power,  
Still learning, improving, achieving,  
In hope, new knowledge, and light,  
Sure faith the world's fresh Spring,  
Together we live, we grow,  
On the earth that we love and know  
Birth, and the Growth of the Soul.

'His Religion and Hers'  
Charlotte Perkins Gilman

## Introduction

i

My thesis will develop an interpretation of the book of Ruth from the point of view of friendship and in turn this interpretation will re-define the theories of friendship I will be using. Thus, I will be conducting a revisionist reading of both the concept of 'ideal' friendship and this biblical text within a feminist literary framework. My re-interpretation of the book of Ruth will take issue with existing interpretations (both feminist and non-feminist) and the concepts I will be subjecting to a feminist critique include 'the good', 'the self', 'selfish', 'equality', and 'community'.

In the first chapter I will be looking at the Aristotelian tradition of writing on friendship which I will be calling 'ideal' friendship because it encompasses ideas which are important for the development of my thesis, such as equality, goodness, a common life and as an alternative model for community. Other modern translations<sup>1</sup> use supplementary words which are insufficiently descriptive or fail to encompass what I see Aristotle suggesting as the utopian character of 'ideal' friendship<sup>2</sup>. The tradition will include writers heavily influenced by Aristotle (Cicero, Bacon, Montaigne, Kant and C. S. Lewis) who do not pass critique on his writing in any fundamental way and as I will show, share in his androcentrism. Despite the temporal and geographical differences these writers share a common aversion - some explicitly, others implicitly - to including women, or anything related to the 'feminine' in their theories of friendship. Moreover, they share a belief in self-sufficiency which I will

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<sup>1</sup>These are: perfect, character, complete, primary, virtue, end, and companion. There is no consensus since *Philia* encompasses a broader range of attributes than its modern equivalent 'friendship' but all of these touch on important facets of this term and refer to friendship of the highest virtue. See Neera Kapur Badhwar, Introduction, in *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p.4

<sup>2</sup> I will be using the term 'utopian' to refer to the vision or desire for a better society as represented in the example of 'ideal' friendship. For a contemporary discussion of feminist revisions of the utopian ideal see Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996)

argue is fundamentally opposed to an ideal of friendship. Thus, they compromise the 'ideal' they set out to argue in favour of through a series of exclusions. So although there is much to be salvaged in the Aristotelian model of ideal friendship this can only be done if first, the androcentric biases are foregrounded and then re-interpreted within a feminist framework which emphasises inclusion.

In the second chapter I will utilise Aristotle's ideas on friendship to interpret the book of Ruth focusing on the point of view that the determining factor in their relationship is best characterised as 'ideal friendship'. This will first entail a discussion of how Naomi and Ruth are 'good' both as people and to each other since it is only the most virtuous who are capable of such friendship according to Aristotle. And while I would agree that showing that Naomi and Ruth are good friends is not sufficient to establish whether they are also good to all, I will need to re-examine the idea of goodness which will be shown to proceed from double standards based on gender difference. Furthermore, the ideal of friendship which is promoted excludes the female and the feminine by its very definition so that even if the same standards were applied women would fall short of the ideal. This will lead to a conclusion that reveals how concepts of morality are bound up in conceptions of the self in relationship which are fundamentally opposed to ones developed in the patriarchal tradition. For example, though Ruth and Naomi pass the 'test' of moral excellence required in friendship, I will show that it is not the kind of excellence that the patriarchal value system promotes for women.

I will then go on to a textual analysis of the book which will focus on the three 'requirements' of 'ideal' friendship: mutual beneficence, equality and a common life. I will show that the events which take place and the verbal exchanges between Naomi and Ruth not only exemplify all of the above characteristics but also posit an inclusive/feminist model of ideal friendship which challenges Aristotle's exclusive male/masculinist model. Thus, just as Aristotle's theory of friendship illuminates a dimension of Naomi's and Ruth's relationship hitherto unexplored<sup>3</sup>, the relationship

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itself challenges the theory in its androcentric bias. The result is a feminist revision of both theory and story in which both parties benefit by the interaction.

Other issues implicated in ideal friendship which I will be looking at include Aristotle's statement of 'the friend as another self'. Here the concept of 'self' is again under scrutiny and the points that need to be examined are the similarities between the two women which in Aristotle's scheme would make this statement valid. There will also be a need to re-define this phrase from a feminist point of view which will allow a greater inclusion of differences in friendship than Aristotle's ethics permit. For in Aristotle, the rational part of oneself is the 'essential' part - the one with which friends identify. I will argue that identification at this level is not sufficient nor desirable as it omits the range of characteristics that constitute identity beyond the merely rational. The 'differences' which proceed from these characteristics need to be assessed in relation to the women's friendship to ascertain not only whether they are insurmountable but also whether they entail a total sacrifice on Ruth's part. I will argue that this kind of sacrifice is unnecessary and incompatible with 'ideal' friendship and that it is possible for Ruth and Naomi to retain their distinct identities but also remain 'other selves'.

It is not only the concept of 'self' which will be redefined in view of Naomi and Ruth's relationship but also the concepts of duty and freedom in friendship. First I will argue that 'ideal' friendship is the only relationship where the conflict between duty and desire is non-existent because of its emphasis on mutual goodwill which stems from moral goodness. I will then examine whether the conflicting loyalties to the community and to one's friend can be resolved favourably on the part of 'ideal' friendship. For Aristotle there is no conflict between the demands of the state and the 'demands' of friendship but he does not involve the case of women where the dilemma lies in obeying both the rule of the state and the rules of men - thus leaving the

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<sup>3</sup> The only exception is the short exegesis by C.P. Smith in *The Interpreter's Bible* vol. II. (New York Abingdon: Cokesbury Press 1953), pp. 834-844. The friendship between Naomi and Ruth is assumed but not developed. Unfortunately, it is undermined in the very same section by James T. Cleland's exposition, see especially pp. 835-838.

'demands' of friendship to one another last. What ensues is the suppression of women's friendship as a priority. I will argue that in the case of demands made by society which would sever ties of friendship it is the friendship which should not be sacrificed and that such a demand is indicative of a dystopic/patriarchal society which cannot/will not reverse the significance of women's sustained relationship. This will bring me to the utopian potential of friendship to act as a model of relationship opposed to oppressive structures of hierarchy and alienation. In the example of Ruth and Naomi, this subversive potential of their relationship acts as a model of community unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible.

## ii

The sub-title of this thesis: 'Friendship and the Book of Ruth' and in particular the conjunction 'and' points to the initial difficulty of establishing an argument which would support my original title 'Friendship *in* the Book of Ruth', that is, my view that what is going on in this text, between these two women, fits easily with my idea not only of women's friendship but also ideal friendship. The difficulty lies in the usual - for the Bible - lack of data on character motivation and intention<sup>4</sup>. Though it seemed obvious to me that Naomi and Ruth did not want to part because no good friends do, I soon discovered that this was not at all obvious to most other interpreters - including feminist biblical interpreters like myself. To support my position my only clues lay in the text itself: the abundant dialogue available, the detailed report of these women's often clandestine actions and the suspicion that this story was unique in the Hebrew Bible in its portrayal of women's relationships.

What ensued was the problem of reconciling my own firm belief in the validity of such a reading with two disparate tendencies in the interpretations of this text which I found to be on the extreme two ends of my own position. On the one

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<sup>4</sup>Robert, Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London and Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1981): "The biblical narrative is often silent where later modes of fiction will choose to be loquacious, it is selectively silent in a purposeful way", p.115

hand was the traditional, mostly male readings which included both historical-critical and more modern, literary approaches which also completely ignored the nature of the women's relationship as a salient point in the story but assumed and celebrated it as an amicable one defined by kinship. On the other hand were the mostly feminist approaches which, though innovative and thought provoking, more often than not criticise the women for failing to confront patriarchal power or for desiring anything other than the usual security of marriage<sup>5</sup>.

In dealing with these distinct tendencies in Section two, I will bring to the text Aristotle's classic - and classical - theory of friendship. The analysis which will follow I hope will illustrate how neither of these approaches successfully deals with the 'excess' of emotion expressed by Ruth since kinship relationships - especially ones involving women and their mother-in-laws - are not typically represented in biblical literature with such manifestations of loyalty. By explaining the women's behaviour with reference to friendship I will show how such an exceptional case in the Bible can be read in a positive light for feminist critics and at the same time, Naomi and Ruth's particular friendship may yield an equally positive re-interpretation of friendship.

Utilising Aristotle's theory, however, raises questions of methodology in terms of the applicability not only of a Greek classical text to a Judaic biblical one, but also of a male/masculine theory to female relationships. This is why I have chosen the conjunction *and* - in order to focus on the nature of the dialogue between classical Greek masculinist theories of friendship and a masculinist/Hebraic inscription of women's relationships. I would like to examine the results such a dialogue will yield and especially whether there is anything worth salvaging from a modern feminist viewpoint<sup>6</sup>. Finally, if I am approaching the Bible as a literary text, what do I mean

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<sup>5</sup>I agree with Mieke Bal who points out that "...in spite of major differences in the innumerable readings in the Bible there has been...a continuous line toward a dominant reading...this does not imply that all female characters are seen as negative; quite the contrary. It does imply that any positive view of a female character has to be reevaluated for its recuperation within male interests," p. 2 in *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

by literary and how do I deal with the question of theology in a text which makes little mention of God?

The first problem is that of employing a Greek 4th B.C.E century text to approach a much older, Hebrew text. It is necessary here to clarify the present reader's position vis-à-vis the Judaeo-Christian inheritance of the past three thousand years. There are two parts to this answer: first, as a Westerner, my understanding of the Hebrew Bible is informed by concepts which have long evolved and interacted in a common geographical space and therefore, even as a reader without a theological agenda, it would be impossible to separate a history of interpretation which has evolved with mutual influence<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, as a feminist reader, the equally long inheritance of male centred interpretations has shown itself to be quite similar - at least in some of its assumptions on women - in spite of evolution. For example, the lack of belief in women's potential for ideal friendships by the classicists goes hand in hand in my opinion with the lack of mention of such a possibility in Hebrew interpretations of the book of Ruth. Or is this only due to cultural differences I am not aware of? My answer is no, because of the fact that where the 'wrong' questions are asked<sup>8</sup> - in this case none concerning the nature of Naomi and Ruth's relationship - then it would be impossible to expect the kind of 'answers' I am looking for.

My position as a feminist in the latter half of the 20th century will inevitably

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<sup>6</sup>I owe this idea of dialogue between theory and biblical text to Mieke Bal, 'Dealing/With/Women: Daughters in the Book of Judges', pp. 16-39, in Regina Schwartz, (ed.), *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Bal utilises 'and' to produce a reading in which theory and text stand as equals "speaking and listening to each other". She uses narrative theory which will then be "challenged on its own terms and the text, in response to that challenge will challenge the theory, point out its limits and force it to go beyond itself", p. 17. This is akin to my own project except here, the content of my thesis mirrors the content of my methodology, i.e. the equality which defines friendship is mirrored in the equal and dialogic nature of my interdisciplinary thesis - and both 'parties' are transformed as a result.

<sup>7</sup>As Luce Irigaray states: "We are all involved with the many Greek, Latin, Oriental, Jewish and Christian traditions at least, through the art, philosophy and myths we live by, exchange, and perpetuate, often without our realising. The passage from one era to the next cannot be made simply by negating what already exists," p. 23 in Alison Martin, (tr.), *Je, Tu, Nous, Toward a Culture of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993, orig. published 1990)

<sup>8</sup>See for example, D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of The Book of Ruth* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, vol. 2, 1977) for the kind of questions ancient and medieval Jewish exegetes were interested in.



influence the kinds of expectations I bring to the ancient texts I read but as in reading any literature, I do not expect it to conform to my idea of what 'proper' feminist concerns should be. In my desire to allow the text to speak for itself I will focus on the biblical textual evidence in supporting my argument. In order to deal with the many modern interpretations I will also examine extra-textual information which will allow me to find equally positive meaning for the present without forcing the past to conform to this present. In other words, reading the Bible as literature means that I do not believe there is only one 'true' message in the text but that this approach opens the way for a reading that has great relevance for feminist biblical exegesis today. That is, Ruth can remain a book which will continue to be read and interpreted as a positive illustration of women's agency in the past without necessitating recourse to historical or theological knowledge.

By reading the Bible as literature I do not mean as Robert Alter does, a study of "the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions and imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units"<sup>9</sup> which he then uses to support a theological interpretation. The textual nuances are important for what they reveal of the plot and characters themselves and for what at the same time is left out of the narrative. Nor as Northrop Frye asserts, am I interested in "presenting a unified structure of narrative and imagery"<sup>10</sup>. What I aim to do is consider the thematic interest of the book as one would first read any story, without a theological agenda in mind, although clearly, my feminist viewpoint will colour my reading. What theological issues may arise will then be grounded in the literary reading which preceded. The issue of structure is an interesting one but it will be discussed only briefly at the end of the thesis in relation to the possible correspondence between form and content. My hope is that the unique

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<sup>9</sup>Alter, p. 12

<sup>10</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1982) p. xiii, Introduction. Strangely enough, Frye decides to omit the book of Ruth completely from his discussion even though it has "a particularly obvious literary reference", p. xxii. Why then does he not justify this omission?

content of the book of Ruth is reflected in its structure and not vice versa<sup>11</sup>. That is, I aim to show how the harmony and balance which characterises friendship is reflected in the literary 'perfection' of this short story<sup>12</sup>.

### iii

Writing about women's stories or stories about women in the Bible is not necessarily in itself a feminist endeavour - although it does serve the purpose of making women visible in the context of a male-centred culture defined by female suppression and oppression<sup>13</sup>. Recognising however that a reading of the Bible that will take into consideration the "social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes"<sup>14</sup> is a part of the feminist project. But in the case of the book of Ruth which is already quite visible in the context of the Hebrew Bible a feminist reading would entail an exploration of the issue of female agency in a world where options for women without spouses are precarious and even dangerous. Within this context, the theme of friendship serves as a potentially subversive force which undermines patriarchal power by placing same sex relationships as a priority to which male rule must respect and ultimately, accommodate. But it must not be assumed or expected that this is done via some direct or violent confrontation with male power. It must be understood within the context of a past whose ideological climate was not conducive

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<sup>11</sup>See Phyllis Trible, 'A Human Comedy', *God and The Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 166-199, for a feminist interpretation of content and structure in the book of Ruth which although not explicitly stated is, in my opinion, utopian.

<sup>12</sup>Many have commented on the special literary attributes of the book of Ruth. See for example, Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth: The Anchor Bible, A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1975)

<sup>13</sup>Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', p. 129, in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, (eds.), *The Feminist Reader, Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1989). See especially the section on 'female criticism and feminine theory' for a lucid discussion, pp. 120-132.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 118

to open and direct action by women whose desires did not suit or defer to the status quo<sup>15</sup>.

This is an even more difficult enterprise when considering the temporal distance of this Hebrew text from today. And though my own reading is not concerned with the means by which the book of Ruth in its present form became part of the canon, I am concerned with interpreters who rely on such data for the task of interpretation. For example, the question of whether the genealogy at the end of the story was a latter addition and how this influences the 'message' of the text though interesting in its own right, does not help the assumptions with which I am working i.e. those of a student of literature who reads the Bible while assuming the unity of the final form of each text. The problem of dealing with such interpretations will be dealt with in the second chapter, but I would like to introduce here some of my own reasons for taking issue with most of these (feminist or non-feminist) interpretations<sup>16</sup>.

As with any literature of the past - and especially the depiction of women's lives in the past due to biased masculinist inscriptions in literature and history<sup>17</sup> - there is a danger of "colonising the text with our meanings from the viewpoint of the present"<sup>18</sup>. As Gillian Beer points out, this is a fallacious enterprise since it assumes a stable, fixed and unyielding present subject - to which all else must assume relevance or be discarded<sup>19</sup>. To be sure, some interest in the likeness of past women's lives to

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<sup>15</sup>Mieke Bal also finds Naomi and Ruth's actions subversive, though not for the same reasons as my own, see pp. 85-87, *passim*, in *Lethal Love*

<sup>16</sup>Amy-Jill Levine, in Carol, A. Newsom and Sharon, H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: John Knox Press, 1992), p. 78. Levine expects Ruth's actions to offer a "prescription for changing the circumstances in which women find themselves impoverished and without financial independence". She is not alone in these expectations, but I will show how they prove to be unjust not only to past texts but also to their own aims in the act of reading.

<sup>17</sup>Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, argues that: "Historical sources on women are not descriptive but prescriptive...ideas of men *about* women, therefore, do not reflect women's historical reality", 'Remembering the Past in Creating the Future: Historical-Critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation,' pp. 43-63, in Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Cal., U.S.A.: Scholars Press, 1985), p.57

<sup>18</sup>Gillian Beer, 'Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past', pp. 63-80, in Belsey and Moore, p. 69

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67

our own is a matter of importance but this does not involve a stretch of the imagination - it would be naive to assume that we are not experiencing some of the same oppression under patriarchy<sup>20</sup>. For example, the constraints on women's freedom for self-determination are still very much present today. On the other hand, in the case of Naomi and Ruth, this "presentist mode of argument"<sup>21</sup> has lead many feminist commentators to forget about our differences from women of the past, subjecting them consequently to ideals that have only attained significance in the past thirty years, forgetting also that the ideals themselves are subject to shifts in meaning over time<sup>22</sup>.

Equally, in the case of friendship, though some characteristics still hold true today, there is no 'essential' or 'universal' notion of 'ideal' friendship which one can refer to<sup>23</sup>. The point is that if such words can change meanings then, as Mieke Bal says<sup>24</sup>, patriarchy can change also since there is a "relation between fiction and reality which is more fundamental than a simplistic theory of fiction". My point is that the mutual influence of theories of friendship with a biblical example of women's relationships has implications beyond (but including) the assessment of whether they are compatible or whether either is irretrievable from a modern perspective.

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<sup>20</sup>Fiorenza, p. 58 in Collins. Fiorenza states: "Women's experience of solidarity and unity as a social group is...based ...on their common historical experiences as an oppressed group struggling to become full historical subjects, such a theoretical framework allows women to locate their strength, historical agency, pain and struggle within their common historical experiences as women in patriarchal society and family. It is also theoretically able to account for the variations of social status, class differences and cultural identity". I would like to emphasise that the latter is equally important in the act of reading.

<sup>21</sup>Beer, p. 67

<sup>22</sup>In any case, as Toril Moi points out: "there is not, unfortunately, such a thing as an intrinsically feminist text: given the right historical and social context, all texts can be recuperated by the ruling powers - or appropriated by the feminist opposition", p. 132

<sup>23</sup>The same holds true for other kinds of 'friendship' or even 'love' which is another word for friendship. See Victor Luftig, *Seeing Together: Friendship Between the Sexes in English Writing from Mill to Woolf* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993). Cf. Gottfried Quell and Ethelbert Stauffer, *Love, Bible Key Words* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1949), for a history of ancient meanings of 'love' in the Hellenic and Hebraic world.

<sup>24</sup>Bal, 'The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape', p. 79, in *Diacritics*, winter 1989, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 71-79. She goes on to say "that gender is poetically relevant, and that fiction is socially relevant, as two indissociable aspects of the one problematic of the place of texts in society."

Since the Bible has influenced both people's lives and imagination for much longer than any other text in western culture it would be useful I think - again as with any literature and theory - to allow ourselves, as Gillian Beer concludes, to be engaged in an activity of reading which "tests and de-natures our assumptions in the light of the strange languages and desires of past writings"<sup>25</sup>. It would not be 'radical' to subject past (male) inscriptions of women's lives, actions and relationships to expectations distinctly modern but instead to allow ourselves to be equally influenced, and this, I agree with Gillian Beer, is radical reading. If readers are open to the possibility of reading with an emphasis on the women's perspective perhaps they too will re-assess their biases and 'see' in this ancient Hebraic text, a powerful representation of women's friendship. In turn, perhaps their assumptions on friendship may be tested and re-defined. My aim is that this thesis will open the way towards this different approach to interpreting both ideal friendship and the book of Ruth.

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<sup>25</sup>Beer, p. 80

## Chapter One

### Some (male) theories of (female) exclusion from ideal friendship

Although male friendship has been a celebrated topic since ancient times both in literature and in philosophy female friendship has not been the focus of much attention until quite recently<sup>1</sup>. Its absence from literature may be attributed to an equivalent lack of female writers but in philosophy this exclusion takes on more complex ramifications which incorporate concepts directly and indirectly related to that of 'ideal' friendship. Since the concern was to define not only 'ideal friendship' but also what kind of attributes were necessary in people to attain such a relationship it soon becomes clear that the assumptions male philosophers have been working with - ones concerning reason and moral virtue for example - necessarily exclude any consideration of female friendship. The ability to 'reason' well has traditionally (in the western, male, Judaeo-Christian context) been attributed to men,<sup>2</sup> and this I see as contributing to the development of a discourse of exclusion for women from ideal friendship. What I am interested in doing is 'rescuing' the notion of ideal friendship from such androcentric restrictions not only so that women's friendships are not subject to such criteria but also

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<sup>1</sup> I am not speaking here of erotic/friendship as discussed in Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Love and Romantic Friendship Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Women's Press, 1985) or 'ordinary' friendship as in for example, Janet Todd's *Women's Friendship in Literature* (Columbia University Press: New York 1980). Unfortunately, Todd does not discuss 'ideal' friendship but a much broader range of relationships between women as illustrated in the 18th century novel, including 'manipulative' friendships. See her introduction for a description of the five categories, (sentimental, erotic, manipulative, political, and social) p. 1-6.

<sup>2</sup> Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason 'Male and Female' in Western Philosophy* (Routledge: London, 1993, first published in 1984 by Methuen). According to Lloyd it is not so much that women are considered incapable of reasoning but that the development of ideas on 'reason' have been based on characteristics that are associated metaphorically with the inclusion of the masculine and an exclusion of the feminine whose definition subsequently has developed based on this exclusion

so that the delineation of ideal friendship itself is influenced and redefined from a feminist perspective which emphasises inclusion and does justice to the 'ideal'.

By foregrounding the levels on which women and the feminine are excluded I will show how these writers are compromising the very ideal they are honouring. The diachronic trajectory I will follow will show that male discourses on ideal friendship function on assumptions that preclude actual women from partaking in ideal friendship as well as barring characteristics - such as emotion and need - traditionally associated with women. Thus, they are compromising this ideal on another level beyond the simple exclusion of women. The feminist ideal I will be supporting will value not only the inclusion of women but also the necessity of emotion and inter-dependence as determining factors in developing such a relationship.

I will then be using the term friendship to signify 'ideal' friendship (from the Greek *τελεία* - perfect/end/ideal) in order to designate the kind of relationship I am interested in - one stemming from equal moral goodness and beneficence. It is also one that is continually negotiated and not static and fixed<sup>3</sup>, one which involves the possibility of realisation in the present but also of dissolution and most importantly, one which differs at key points from classical definitions but retains its potential for a new vision of society which is non-hierarchical but also non-exclusive. The 'ideal' friendship I will describe shares in some of the characteristics classical writers included while at the same time testing them against modern concerns especially with regard to

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<sup>3</sup> Although Aristotle calls this friendship a 'state' his description is a dynamic one, p. 267, *The Ethics of Aristotle. The Nicomachean Ethics*, (tr.) J.A.K. Thomson, (London: Penguin, 1955)

gender issues since their 'ideal' was constructed without this consideration<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, "friendship can be used as a test itself...of the adequacy of rival moral and political conceptions"<sup>5</sup>. There is much to be salvaged from Aristotle's model of ideal friendship but always from within the feminist critical viewpoint.

Feminist readers/interpreters are faced with the problem of deciding which ideas on friendship to reject/overlook/replace and which to utilise. Unfortunately, the problem is not limited to explicit references to the female sex or even to the feminine. More significantly, as I will discuss in the third section - 'The Other' - there are also masculinist assumptions on the concept of 'inter-dependency' which must be dealt with for their reliance on essentialist ideas of the 'nature' of relationship and autonomy. By exposing these assumptions and foregrounding their contradictions<sup>6</sup> my purpose is to demonstrate how women are 'naturally' excluded from such a discussion not only

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<sup>4</sup> I disagree with Amelie O. Rorty, that "Aristotle's account of *philia*...is hardly recognisable as the ancestor of our notion of loving friendship" on the basis of the different role of friendship due to closer familial ties. Rorty does not make clear if this is meant for both men and women or is he assuming male friendship? In either case I believe there is much relevance not only because of women's entrance into the public sphere but also because of common ethical requirements of this kind of relationship. What I can agree with is the questioning of their emphasis e.g. on the question of whether it is better to love than to receive love (p. 83). See "The Historicity of Psychological Attitudes: Love Is Not Love Which Alters Not When It Alteration Finds" pp. 73-88, in Badhwar

<sup>5</sup> Badhwar, Introduction, p. 36. Badhwar is bringing together the polarization of views on morality as either an instrumental means to well-being or as an end in itself, and therefore unrelated to well-being. Friendship becomes the space where this polarity is challenged. I would add only that gender difference, i.e. as exhibited in women's friendship, is a decisive factor in the merging of these two extremes.

<sup>6</sup> As Michèle Le Doeuff points out: "...when philosophers talk about women their discourse unfolds without the usual theoretical requirements," p. 68. , see *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* (tr.), Trista Selous, (Oxford and Cambridge, Ma.: Blackwell, first published 1989 as *L'Etude et le Rouet* by Les Editions du Seuil). This will become evident in the examples I have chosen.



because of practical considerations (status in society, education etc.) but also because of theoretical presuppositions.

Finally, I would like to discuss how friendship, because of its voluntary nature, is the ideal topos for the expression and development of a different kind of 'self,' one that is in many ways at odds with the - self-sufficient, independent - 'self' these Aristotelian influenced theories have been supporting/praising. This individualistic 'self' is in direct contradiction to the kind of friendship their own theories propose i.e. friendship as constitutive of the good life. This is because the possibility of autonomy which they celebrate is only compatible with a different notion of friendship - one which is only an instrument of the good life. On the other hand, the development of a relational 'self',<sup>7</sup> is at the same time not the communal 'self' opposed to the western ideal of individualism but purposefully between the two extremes. It is one in which reason alone is not adequate as the defining cornerstone of the self in friendship but care for the other and responsibility towards their emotional needs is equally important<sup>8</sup>. And it is one which not only suits the feminist project but also one which embodies a utopian vision for both men and women, their relationships to each other and to the world they inhabit<sup>9</sup>. By imagining an alternative self on the small scale of friendship, I will show

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<sup>7</sup> I will be drawing on Carol Gilligan's work on moral development in relation to my argument on the 'relational self' in friendship, especially from her *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Ma. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993 first published 1982), hereafter *IDV*.

<sup>8</sup> I am not then aiming to re-define reason itself or to judge its usefulness - that would be beyond the scope of this thesis - only to emphasise that it must be in constant dialogue with other factors, such as desires, emotions and needs.

<sup>9</sup> This last point is an important one and will be discussed more fully in chapters four and five. It is a point raised in Aristotle but also central to a feminist vision of society since, as Karen Green points out: "this relational

in chapter five how one can set the foundations of an alternative model life on the larger scale of community. Thus both the individual and the community may function on the basis of a 'reason' complemented by emotion and the awareness that inter-dependency is not only assumed but also necessary for the fulfilment of such an ideal in friendship.

## The Female

The first point I would like to make clear is on what grounds women are unambiguously disqualified from partaking in 'perfect/ideal' friendship since it is this term which is employed even when the tone of these texts and subject matter often suggest more accessible models. In other words, 'perfect' friendship is considered a demanding condition to aspire to but not altogether unrealisable which is why other lesser friendships are discussed. Women, as we will see, are found lacking in both practical and theoretical spheres and therefore can only form friendships of the latter kind.

Both Graeco-Roman writers and the Renaissance Humanists whom they influenced accept the importance of discussing the ideal as the desirable goal. Before speaking of the present I will present a survey of examples by Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne and Bacon, as well as Rousseau who did not speak of friendship as such but whose writings align themselves with those of his predecessors in his discussion of

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self embodies a new ethic of care which attempts to bring about the good of women as well as the good of men", pp. 150-1 in *The Woman of Reason: Feminism, Humanism and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995)

women's roles and abilities. Reference to C.S. Lewis<sup>10</sup> as an example of a twentieth century writer familiar with and similarly influenced by the classical tradition will help to illustrate how despite the allowances he makes for women's inclusion in the public sphere, Lewis's own theory still suffers from the same biases concerning women and the feminine. By focusing on this survey of writing on friendship, I aim to show that although these writers purport to be describing perfect friendship they actually fall short of this ideal on the basis of their own logic of exclusion. Therefore this cannot simply be rectified by including women uncritically into their model.

It is Aristotle who has had the greatest influence in the later discourses on friendship as his *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) proposes an analytical and systematic exposition of multifarious facets pertaining to this kind of relationship. Throughout the text, the discussion refers to men only with no hint of a non-generic use except when referring explicitly to other individuals. For example, Aristotle makes it clear how women or other groups of people deviate from the standard male norm. In the eighth book, his first reference to women occurs when the point is stressed that ideal friendship can exist only between equal persons and the husband-wife union is compared to that of an aristocracy of 'separate roles for separate spheres'<sup>11</sup>:

But there is another kind of friendship, which involves superiority: i.e., of a husband for a wife, and of every person in authority for his subordinates...For each of these persons has a different excellence and function, and different reasons for feeling love; and therefore their loves and affections are different too. It follows then, that the

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<sup>10</sup> His well-known misogyny notwithstanding, C.S. Lewis departs from some of his 'predecessors' contentions in *The Four Loves* (Glasgow: Collins, 1963, orig. published 1960)

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, pp. 269-270 and p. 276

parties do not, and should not expect to, receive the same benefits each from the other.

The man rules by virtue of merit, and in the sphere that is his by right; but he hands over to his wife such matters as are suitable for her...the husband (as superior) receiving the greater good, and each party what is appropriate.

The notion of equality will be discussed at a later point but suffice to say that it involves a whole spectrum of practical and theoretical considerations. At least, Aristotle allows the possibility of a lasting friendship between such individuals provided certain obligations are fulfilled in terms of mutual affection and care. However, this kind of 'friendship' is less than ideal when compared to the one between free men/citizens of high status and when the possibility for role changes is ruled out children are seen as the main common interest between men and women: "for the children are an asset common to them both and common possession is cohesive...which is why childless marriages break up more quickly"<sup>12</sup>. Since friendship between women is not mentioned explicitly, and if men and women are of different merit, it then follows that women will form friendships with each other which are of lower value since the ideal is realised only in the male. Yet it is not enough simply to include women in his theory of friendship since, as I will discuss in the next section, there are other levels at which women's relationships could not conform to this theory.

Aristotle's influence continues to be strong in the Roman period when Cicero employs many of his ideas in his dialogue, *On Friendship (Laelius de Amicitia)*. Cicero also relies on 'nature' to justify his conclusions and like Aristotle, stresses the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 281

importance of "common interests, wishes, and opinions" and virtue<sup>13</sup>. But since from the very start he lists only men from history or mythology commonly believed to have achieved such a relationship<sup>14</sup> and there is no mention of women at all, hints as to his non-generic use of 'man' come from other sources. One of his main concerns is the difficulty of maintaining friendships where politics are involved and when the demands of political office are imposed on men, then friendship becomes impossible. It is clear from this extract that women are not a part of Cicero's argument since women were not a political force:<sup>15</sup>

Human nature is at its weakest when it comes to refusing power; and those who achieve power at the expense of friendship think the fact will go unnoticed, because they had a good reason for their neglect of friendship's duties.

Thus, although he is in the midst of praising friendship as the highest virtue, he undermines his argument both by admitting friendship's vulnerability to power and by assuming it is an obstacle only men will encounter. Since women do not have this access to power then it is not a factor in their friendships in the way that it presents itself as a conflict of interest in male friendships. It does however become a factor to consider when the power of men over women force the latter to make choices concerning their priorities. The result is more often than not obedience to patriarchal power - whether it is one's husband, father or the state - over one's friendship to another

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<sup>13</sup> Cicero, *On Friendship and the Dream of Scipio*, Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary by J.G.F. Powell, (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1990), p. 35

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., for example, Paulus, Cato, Galus, Acipio and Philus, p. 39

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.57

woman. Although the intricacies of this dilemma will be discussed more thoroughly in the third section suffice to say here that the dilemma for these male philosophers lies in the conflict between their own access to power and their ties to others. For women who are doubly excluded from power this would mean alienation which is absent from male friendships and is associated with their peripheral position in relation to public centres of decision making. At the basic level then of female exclusion from friendship, Cicero is in agreement with Aristotle. This conflict of power however, cannot be solved merely by including women into the realm of political power, it is also necessary to critique the societal forces that produce such a conflict<sup>16</sup> for how 'perfect' can the friendship be when it is assumed to break under the pressure of power?

The influence of Cicero (and through him Aristotle) in the Renaissance was considerable and with reference to friendship quite clear in the Humanists of the time<sup>17</sup>. Michel de Montaigne is aware of both but is less concerned with justifying his views and simply agrees with his predecessors when he asserts that it is the weakness and untrustworthiness of women that make them<sup>18</sup>:

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<sup>16</sup> The societal dimension of this conflict will be examined in the following chapters.

<sup>17</sup> Lorna Hutson de-mythologises the influence of the idealism of the writers in the early modern period by arguing that the saturation of the literature of 16th century England with *De Amicitia* formulae is only ostensibly about the age's commitment to an ideal of male friendship and more about a new kind of system of credit replacing the ties fostered by the old feudal society. See chapter two, pp. 52-85 in *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth Century England* (Routledge: London and New York, 1994)

<sup>18</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, (tr.) M.A. Screech, (London and New York: Penguin, 1993, originally published, 1580), pp. 205-219

...not normally capable of responding to such familiarity and mutual confidence as sustain that holy bond of friendship, nor do their souls seem firm enough to withstand the clasp of a knot so lasting and so tightly drawn...There is no example yet of a woman attaining it and by the common agreement of the ancient schools of philosophy she is excluded from it.

Montaigne's use of language such as 'holy bond' shows that he too is concerned with ideal friendship and like the others raises it above the ranks of those tied to the earthly. The fault here again is due to women's nature and the language of 'the soul' reaffirms that it is a permanent deficiency - women's proximity to the 'material, physical world' that prevents them from forming such bonds. He does not make clear why they are incapable of long lasting ties unless he is implying it is because they are unreasonable and therefore unstable. While Montaigne denies his earthly status using the vocabulary of the heavenly he accepts the heavenly as part of the earthly because of his belief in ideal friendship as something to be cultivated in this life<sup>19</sup>. Women then are denied this special space on earth since it is, as other spaces, already 'occupied' by men. For Montaigne then, friendship can only be ideal when developed by men because of their 'spiritual strength' - without nevertheless describing what this strength comprises so that female exclusion may be argued against.

His contemporary, Francis Bacon, is not as explicit but he does emphasise that men need friends that are male and of equal status because they cannot communicate with the same ease with their wives (or lesser males): "(princes)...that had wives, sons,

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida attributes this quality of immanence, as well as an added "heterology, transcendence, and infinity" (which breaks and supplements the Greco-Roman model of reciprocity) to the influence of Judaeo-Christianity, in "The Politics of Friendship", pp. 353-91, in *American Imago*, Fall 1993, vol. 50, no. 3, (tr.) Gabriel Motzkin and Michael Syrotinski with Thomas Keenan, p. 358

nephews: and they all could not supply the comfort of friendship”<sup>20</sup>. When women are categorised and grouped together with men of a permanently lower status, the implication is that they too, may never aspire to such a privilege. Thus, there is a hierarchy (of ideal friendship) within a hierarchy (of lesser forms of friendship) which goes against the basic tenet of ideal friendship - that of equality of moral excellence<sup>21</sup>. But a feminist revision of friendship would not stop at simply including women within this scheme of things. It would have these hierarchies broken down so that the equality (of virtue, benevolence and beneficence) characteristic on a personal level would also function on a societal level. When one is excluded from friendship on the basis of gender, class or race the ideal of friendship cannot be realised beyond the narrow scope of ‘a few good men’. For a model of friendship to be inclusive, it must first accept women on equal standing with men. It can then proceed to breakdown other barriers which compromise the ideals of equality, virtue and beneficence.

When the ideal of friendship is set up with a series of requirements which are unambiguously male/masculine within a context of socio-economic inequality between the sexes, it seems a foregone conclusion that women are both quantitatively and qualitatively second rate. So although women cannot have friendships with men for reasons both intrinsic and extrinsic to their status, the friendships they can, or are ‘capable’ of, having are decidedly of poorer quality. That women's friendships were defined in different terms is understandable in light of the separation of the public and

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<sup>20</sup> Francis Bacon, “On Friendship” pp.138-144, in *The Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1985, originally published 1597, final form in 1625), p. 141

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle p. 263



private sphere both groups operated within. What is not justifiable is the equation of women's second-rate citizenship with equally second-rate friendships. It is because of this equation that the deeper assumptions concerning ideal friendship must be examined since the simple inclusion of women in the public sphere will not automatically include them in relationships of this calibre<sup>22</sup>.

To summarise this rhetoric of exclusion, it is precisely because the 'male ideal' is being discussed that women fall short of the requirements. In an effort to explain such differences resulting from the public/private sphere demarcation, the general tendency has been to render the descriptive, i.e. what was seen as 'natural', as prescriptive, i.e. what is 'right' or 'proper', (Aristotle uses the word 'just'). The argument they depend on however is self-fulfilling, i.e. since women lack reason, there is no need to include them - therefore their exclusion on the basis of their perceived 'irrationality' is perpetuated.

It has only been since the previous century that even some of these assumptions have been challenged. In writing about *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis, in a chapter on 'Philia' makes concessions to some women provided they share a common education or profession which will lead to common interests: "Where men are educated and women are not, where one sex works and the other is idle, or where they do totally different

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<sup>22</sup> According to Rosemary Radford Ruether: "The chain of being, God-spirits-male-female-inhuman-nature-matter, is at the same time the chain of command. The direction of salvation follows the trajectory of alienation of mind from its own support system, objectified as 'body' and 'matter,'" in *Sexism and God-Talk*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 79

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Glasgow: Collins, 1963), p. 68

work, they will usually have nothing to be friends about"<sup>23</sup>. The lack of equality in this area at least is not projected as a lack in women's nature but in their dissimilar upbringing.

But Lewis is familiar with both Aristotle's 'Philia' and Cicero's 'Amicitia' and attempts, like them, to delineate the attributes of ideal friendship - with some interesting differences. Like them he often mentions the words 'soul' and 'spirit' and uses them interchangeably, and though for him they carry a more theological character, they remain intellectual concepts central to the discussion of ideal friendship. Lewis speaks of Friendship (sic) as: "that luminous, tranquil, rational world of relationships freely chosen - this alone, of all the loves, seemed to raise you to the level of gods or angels"<sup>24</sup>. He even offers an explanation/re-interpretation of what the ancients were motivated by when they too exalted this 'spiritual quality' in friendship. Like them, he accepts the higher value of the spiritual over the physical<sup>25</sup>:

The deepest and most permanent thought of those sages was ascetic and world-renouncing. Nature and emotion and the body were feared as dangers to our souls, or despised as degradations of our human status. Inevitably that sort of love was most prized which seemed most independent or even defiant, of mere nature.

The concept of 'spirit' though was a concept linked to reason and reason (defined traditionally as male) was an essential ingredient in the discourses on ideal friendship. And although the concept of reason, like all concepts, has evolved (since the sixth century B.C. at least) from an idea associated with maleness to one that is

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 56

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 56

'neutral' - or more specifically 'male-neutral'<sup>26</sup> Lewis remains faithful to the old masters by insisting on the mind/body split<sup>27</sup>. As long as this split remains and women are paired with the second, 'weaker' term their exclusion from friendship is a given from the androcentric point of view. For Lewis then too, the ideal is compromised because of his emphasis on an disembodied image of a being lacking in excessive emotions and passions, as if these would threaten the bond of friendship rather than strengthen it.

This brings us to the more theoretical problem of what constitutes the 'nature' of friendship itself i.e. which characteristics are absolutely necessary on an intellectual level for the potential of ideal friendship to materialise. This is where the crux of the matter lies for if it were only dependent on socio-economic factors that needed changing for women then it would be very easy to omit such considerations when applying them to any text, whether past or present. It is in the discussions of 'essential' requirements that women do not qualify, since if women are automatically deficient by nature (not 'spiritual' enough) then there is no reason to consider the possibility of such a relationship for them.

So, if ideal friendship seems unfeasible between men and women, at least, what of women amongst themselves? According to Aristotle's argument their friendship would simply be qualitatively of a lesser calibre but the point here is not to try and test

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<sup>26</sup> Pamela Anderson, 'Myth, Mimesis and Multiple Identities: Feminist Tools for Transforming Theology', in *Literature and Theology*, Volume 10, No. 2 June, 1996. Anderson defines the male-neutral as the "disembodied objectivity of the male point of view with only the pretence of neutrality and objectivity", p. 113.

<sup>27</sup> For a review of femininity and Greek theories of knowledge and ideals of reason from the sixth century B.C. to the present see Lloyd, p. 2-9 passim. Lloyd finds a continuum of androcentricism in which nature and the feminine is a force that needs to be dominated and transcended by rational knowledge.

women's relationships against male standards but to question the nature of the standards themselves and the criteria by which they were established. The next section then will focus on the theoretical criteria of 'ideal' friendship rather than the explicit exclusion of women from the discussion since viewed within a historical context it is unlikely that these writers would concede equal status to women in any sphere. By looking at the criterion of reason as the basis of ideal friendship I will expose how these male theorists are compromising this ideal not only in terms of excluding women themselves (and other categories of people) but more importantly in terms of their assumptions on the 'nature' of reason.

### The Feminine

At the very start I would like to make clear that by 'the feminine' I mean patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed and expected of women by patriarchal culture and social norms - patterns which include characteristics such as modesty, sweetness and subservience<sup>28</sup>. These characteristics are, of course, opposed to the constructed masculine ones of strength, rationality, and dominance. As Helene Cixous has pointed out, the opposition between masculine/male and feminine/female cannot be separated from the central hierarchical opposition between activity/passivity<sup>29</sup>. This is nowhere

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<sup>28</sup> Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', p. 117-132 in Belsey and Moore, pp. 122-3

<sup>29</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in Belsey and Moore, pp.101-116. Cixous lists some of the binary oppositions which follow from this primary one and shows how they extend to all aspects of culture, pp. 101-2

clearer than in male authored texts on friendship where it is assumed that friendship must be an extension of the masculine qualities mentioned above.

I will illustrate that the language utilised in these instances underlines the premises these writers are departing from, mainly, a series of binary oppositions which clearly align the female/feminine to the subordinate, derivative second half. It follows that where man is a rational being woman is irrational, or at least, constituted more by the latter than the former. J.J. Rousseau stated "women observe, men reason"<sup>30</sup>. He allowed them a kind of reason, but one that is qualitatively inferior to that of man: "Reason in women is a practical reason, capacitating them artfully to discover the means of attaining a known end but which would never enable them to discover that end itself"<sup>31</sup>. The cause of this inadequacy lies obviously in their natures though this does not mean that women are incapable of being rational - only that women are as rational and good as they can be. The argument on reason is important for the discussion on friendship because Rousseau is only repeating another classical idea that reason and the 'good' are linked in such a vital way that the 'rational' person is 'good' or in other words "the virtuous person is one who uses his rational faculty well or who lives in accordance with his nature"<sup>32</sup>. If women are less rational then they are also less good and thus disqualified from ideal friendship.

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<sup>30</sup> J. J. Rousseau, 'Emilius', in (ed.), Martha Lee Osborne, *Women In Western Thought*, (New York: Random House, 1979) p. 120

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 117

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 45

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle in Allen, p. 34

There is a continuum here following Aristotle's argument that reason (as a faculty of the soul) is to "guide one's actions and to contemplate the truth"<sup>33</sup> and that in both these functions a woman's soul is present to a lesser degree, specifically, her soul is without 'authority'<sup>34</sup>. By this Aristotle means that the ability to regulate one's actions is inoperative in a woman<sup>35</sup>. Since reason is a requirement of friendships, deficient reason in women constitutes them inadequate for the ideal form of friendship. So the potential for friendship is there but of a less noble kind because if women are not capable of acting on their decisions (the practical application of reason) how could they possibly cope with the demands of ideal friendship?

By positing reason as the determining factor in friendship they are impoverishing not only this relationship but also the emotional development of those who strive to focus only on the rational requirements whether they are men or women. On yet another level the exclusion of women to the detriment of the ideal is perpetuated in these writers. Consequently, a feminist standpoint would critique (male) friendship which does not equally stress the emotional aspect as falling short of the ideal because it does not encompass the whole of human experience.

Cicero follows suit by beginning the conversation in Laelius with the prerequisite of friendship which is virtue: "virtue itself both produces and maintains friendship, nor can friendship exist by any means without virtue"<sup>36</sup>. This is an echo of

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

<sup>36</sup> Cicero, p. 37

Aristotle's idea of virtue being responsible for good action: "Only the friendship of those who are good and similar in their goodness, is perfect"<sup>37</sup>. And if moral action is dependent on moral excellence then the references Cicero makes to good men are limited to them only. Though these conclusions are not surprising the contradiction lies in texts which allow for the possibility of women's participation in the realm of relationships which are not defined by either predetermined modes (such as kinship) or unequal structures (such as marriage), in both of which choice and will are *a priori* not relevant. So if proof were provided that both choice and will are utilised to their fullest in order to bring about a common good then perhaps women could be allowed into the ranks of rational, virtuous people.

Since friendship is determinedly a possibility only between people of equal virtue then the need to define this term is necessary before continuing. In its simplest description, virtue is contingent upon reason, and all actions derive from the ability to reason. This is not only seen as the characteristic which differentiates humans from animals, but men from each other and from other groups such as women, slaves, and children. The difference here is of quantity and the binary opposition of mind/body, reason/emotion is the one on which all other dualisms depends. Within this value system women fall short of the required 'reason' (and therefore 'virtue') in order to form friendships in the male image. So even if their status or education improves or equals that of men, they will still - 'by nature' - fail to reach the full human potential

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, p. 263

required for the most valued of all relationships<sup>38</sup>. We are left then with the task of further editing these texts so that the dualisms collapse into a common ground from which female participation may follow. The question remains: Is this process adequate for the subsequent application of these (masculinist) theories to women's experience? Or is there yet another reevaluative process necessary?

Again, it is necessary to enquire into textual pre-suppositions and premises which belie unity of thought or lack of contradiction.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, it is not only the discourses on reason or friendship which ultimately exclude the female that should concern us, it is also the underlying problematic of the feminine which leads into a cul-de-sac. These writers insist on the primacy of reason over emotion to such a degree in themselves that they cannot allow emotion to enter the discussion on ideal friendship for fear of 'polluting' it. As Genevieve Lloyd writes: "if there is a 'reason' genuinely common to all, it is to be achieved in the future, not celebrated in the present...the confident affirmation that reason 'knows no sex' is only an idea"<sup>40</sup> which masks real inequalities. For the present - one with many real inequalities - I would prefer to espouse the idea of 'substantive reason' i.e. "embodied thinking which remains attached to the substance of desire and bodily life"<sup>41</sup>. Since friendship, like all close

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<sup>38</sup> Cicero, p. 37

<sup>39</sup> This is a Derridian concept, in Jacques Derrida's 'The Politics of Friendship' in *American Imago*, 50, no. 3, Fall 1993 (tr.) Gabriel Motzkin and Michael Syrotinski. The central phallogocentrism in Aristotle's *NE* is discussed in relation to the law and community.

<sup>40</sup> Lloyd, p. 107

<sup>41</sup> Anderson, p. 116



relationships, engages both the mind and the emotions, it would seem more constructive to reject as exclusivist the mind/body dualism which is characterised by power inequality since inequality is another concept alien to ideal friendship.

Throughout the arguments presented in praise of 'ideal' friendship there is a conspicuous restriction on the vocabulary of emotion though at the same time the linguistic style is clearly emotional. By emotion and emotional I mean both the vocabulary of love and affection and also a stylistic tone that is impassioned. It is as if the ruling principle of 'reason' precludes any emotional supplementing yet there is a continual mention of 'love' if only a very intellectual one. It seems puzzling that there should be such a contradiction at the level of style and vocabulary yet a 'solution' is found in these writers that sufficiently 'protects' them from any relation to the feminine. It is as if any concession to emotion would render them equally feminine and thus compromise their status as rational subjects.

Aristotle first speaks out against 'excess' emotion when the discussion turns to the sharing of grief over misfortunes. He states that the 'manly' thing to do is not to share sad news unless the situation is extreme: "But womenfolk and men who are like them, enjoy having others to share their moanings and love them as friends and sympathizers"<sup>42</sup> Evidently, it is the 'strong, silent type' which is the human ideal in Aristotle's world though why he sees the communicating of grief as somewhat

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<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, p. 309. Evidently we ought in all circumstances to take the better man for our model.

unsuitable is not evident - unless he is hinting at a polarization of reason and emotion whereby the latter must ideally be suppressed by the former.

At the same time since friendship is a kind of love he points out that an important characteristic of friendship lies "more in loving, than in being loved and if people are commended for loving their friends it seems that loving is the distinctive virtue of friends"<sup>43</sup>. But he goes on to qualify this by stating that this active loving should only be in proportion to the loved one's worth so that a lasting friendship depends on this rational monitoring of emotion. Aristotle had already made it clear that everyone has a different merit or virtue (by nature) so the implication is again that groups of lesser potential need not be over-indulged where friendship is concerned. In relation to women, their act of loving should be more in proportion to the loving received, which means that there cannot be an equal exchange between men and women. Thus, the concept of 'equality' in friendship is compromised on the basis of Aristotle's own reasoning. Though I will be dealing with this issue extensively in the next chapter, suffice to say here that if 'equality' is bound up with (an avoidance of excess ) emotion then women can never be 'equal' to men since they are by definition more 'emotional'.

Here again is an example of bias against emotion in favour of rational behaviour at all times. Even if we accept that the 'ideal' is being discussed there is something very problematic in supporting the holding back of emotion as if it were also 'ideal' that everyone should want to separate their emotions from their thinking

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 272

faculties. Unless there is a different conception of rationality which involves the emotions then this line of reasoning is not of much use for feminist theorists<sup>44</sup>. At the same time, it goes against the insistence of ideal friendship as the most valued of relationships when half the human psyche must be circumscribed for its full realisation. For the purposes of 'ideal' friendship what I am interested in de-centering is the emphasis on reason alone as the central feature of one's self. In any case, reason alone (and its identification with maleness) is not sufficient to account for the complexity of friendship.

Cicero on the other hand does not seem so concerned with this kind of balance (though in other instances he is more idealistic than Aristotle), and rationalises the importance of friendship by comparing people from different social backgrounds and concluding that none could live without the company of friends even though they would disagree on all other issues<sup>45</sup>. Even those who desire solitude could not fully enjoy this state without communicating it to anyone (!)<sup>46</sup>:

Would not solitude steal away from him all enjoyment of his pleasures?...if anyone were to ascend into the heavens, and see the beauty of the stars and the universe as it really was his amazement at it would cause him no pleasure, though it would be most enjoyable if he had someone to tell about it.

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<sup>44</sup> Green sets out to "provide a genealogy of feminist rationality...that is much more embodied and tied to the emotions than that characteristic of male philosophical texts" p. 23. See her first chapter, 'Against Feminist Anti-Humanism', pp. 10-26

<sup>45</sup> Cicero, p. 67

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 67

However, when Cicero becomes more specific and begins to describe his friendship with Scipio (in the persona of Laelius) the examples focus on intellectual pursuits such as advice on private affairs or agreement on public matters. The problem that is foregrounded is not so much the intensity of emotion attributed to friendship but the whole problematic of the justification of the pleasure of friendship. For Cicero this conflict cannot be reconciled because of the inherent nature of this kind of affection which is not physical as such but not altogether cerebral either. For example, this lack of pleasure is implicit in the painful loss of his good friend Scipio when he later consoles himself by saying that in his own death he will not have to suffer the death of his friend much longer. This is a comment I find blurring the line between the physical and the spiritual<sup>47</sup> since the lack of earthly pleasure he now laments (as personified in his friendship) cannot be restricted to the intellectual sphere only. But Cicero attempts to explain the very physical pain which he experiences as a result of Scipio's death by referring to the cerebral realm of common intellectual pursuits they can no longer share.

It is in Montaigne that the most emotional language of friendship between men is cloaked in the vocabulary of the 'spirit'<sup>48</sup>:

Our souls are yoked together in such unity, and contemplated each other with so ardent an affection, and wish the same affection revealed each to each other right down to the very entrails, that not only did I know his mind as well as I knew my own but I would have entrusted myself to him with greater assurance than to myself.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 73

<sup>48</sup> Montaigne, p. 213

When Montaigne utilises the language of passion to express a specifically man to man relationship he ensures that he purifies it by stressing it is a union of two 'souls'. Here the emotional is neutralised by bringing in the cerebral/ heavenly world - thus not only de-feminizing it but also sanitising it from the corporal influence of the female body. But as Genevieve Lloyd points out "this sexlessness...is a covert way of privileging maleness. The idea of the sexless soul co-exists with the maleness of reason, despite the appearance of tension...The sexless soul thus takes on a shadowy maleness in opposition to female sex difference"<sup>49</sup>. The affection referred to here is characterised by an activity of the mind and soul in order to differentiate it - and oneself - from the kind of affection expressed by women. Yet, despite this emphasis on the non-earthly, ideal friendship remains a relationship to be experienced only by men on earth. By separating the two realms, and establishing male domination on both, friendship also becomes the monopoly of the ruling male class on both planes, thus leaving women spaceless. Women are at the same time too earthly to partake in friendship yet powerless to redress the balance in the earthly sphere.

Only Bacon, otherwise restrained emotionally, sites the sharing of grief and joy as one of the three main 'fruits' of friendship and his tone is consistently emotionally charged: "A principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce"<sup>50</sup>. Yet when he

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<sup>49</sup> Lloyd, p. xi

<sup>50</sup> Bacon, p. 139

states that the second fruit of friendship is 'faithful counsel' he goes on to mention only two kinds - one concerning manners (morals) the other concerning business: "The light a man receiveth by counsel from another is drier and purer than that which cometh from his own understanding and judgement..."<sup>51</sup> The reason of course that it is 'purer' is because it is not clouded by emotion. According to Bacon, the emotional turbulence one feels is to be clarified by friendship itself: "...Whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up, in the communicating and discourse with another"<sup>52</sup>. What is going on here is a separation of emotions and intellect so that they serve different functions. Thus Bacon is contributing to the same biases concerning the reason/emotion opposition as his predecessors despite his impassioned defence of the fruits of friendship<sup>53</sup>.

As to the motivations of these Renaissance thinkers to re-instate the importance of ideal friendship Hutson has written that this may have as much to do with their discovery of the classics as with the changing social and economic conditions of the time.<sup>54</sup> Either way neither consideration is gender neutral or unequivocally motivated

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 142

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 142

<sup>53</sup> According to Lloyd, it is Bacon who equates knowledge with power and since it is in his philosophy that the gap between form and matter was united, it follows that nature is not only female but also knowable. The task of the new science is to exercise the right kind of male domination over 'her', p. 10-11 passim. In this way, he does not differ from the Greek's idea of the relationship between the mind and nature as one of master and slave. See also p. 5 and 6-17

<sup>54</sup> Hutson shows that Renaissance humanists' 'ideal' friendship was not so ideal since *amicitia* (an affective bond) was inextricably linked with *oikonomia* - the managing of people and situations and economic dependency, p. 87

by altruistic considerations. The fact remains that the same androcentric biases were taken on uncritically with the result that there was no 'Renaissance of friendship' for women in quite the same way there was for men<sup>55</sup>. How then can this remain an ideal when the permitted emotions must be kept under (male) control even within their own friendships? Furthermore, the implication of this domination of nature and subsequently of women is that friendship involves beings who are 'more equal' than others. But this lies in contradiction to the main tenant of friendship which envisions equality on a societal level<sup>56</sup>.

Still Bacon remains a kind of exception, even compared to C.S. Lewis in the twentieth century. In an effort to combine the spiritual with the secular, he clearly sides with his predecessors in his description of ideal friendship. He already states at the beginning of his chapter that friendship is the least *natural* (my italics) of relationships. He later adds that "it raises us almost above humanity...This love, free from instinct...is eminently spiritual...It is the sort of love one can imagine between angels"<sup>57</sup>.

Lewis's stress on the spiritual never abandons its effusive tone and like the others, places this relationship (its ideal form) at the top of the hierarchy of relationships by utilising language decidedly emotional and equally unaware of its

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<sup>55</sup> "Women, symbolically, indispensable to the conception of friendship as gift-exchange become caught up in friendship's new economy of representation in ways that actually narrow the scope for positive representation of their agency", p. 11 in Hirtson.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle draws the analogy between friendship and democracy, p. 275-6 passim.

<sup>57</sup> Lewis, pp. 56-57

contradictory function. Lewis unabashedly disapproves of any excess emotion and relegates it to the sheer of the natural world<sup>58</sup>. He then concludes that friendship is:

...the least natural of loves, the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious, and necessary. It has the least commerce with our nerves; there is nothing throaty about it; nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale. It is also the least necessary.

The best of relationships then in his view is so valued because it is most independent of nature i.e of our needs and passions. So although love is accepted as an essential part of friendship, it is more important to align it closer to the idea of agape than eros (which is characterised by physicality). This then sets up a hierarchy of emotions where some are more 'manly' and therefore worthy of contemplation (this is why he dislikes the Romantics' excessive emotion). Also like the others, Lewis brings up the subject of need but unlike them assures the reader that friendship is the only relationship that we have no need for<sup>59</sup>. In this way, he is contributing to the tradition of writing on friendship which juxtaposes the ideal of the self-sufficient male against the human need to form close relationships. A feminist re-appropriation of 'ideal' friendship would emphasise the necessity of dissolving the opposition between the dualism of reason/emotion in the context of friendship which - as in any intimate relationship - does not solely involve one's intellectual faculties, though these writers would have us believe so.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 56

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., "The species biologically has no need for it", p. 56



Yet the argument does not rest here because these writers are still anxious that there should even be a 'need' for such a relationship since part of the description of an ideal/happy human being is that he should be self-sufficient. It is this issue that most problematise women's potential for ideal friendships. How these writers attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction and how a feminist perspective contributes to this debate is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

### The Other

The problem of reconciling the desire for self-sufficiency and the need for friendship created a particular problem for ancient writings on ethics.<sup>60</sup> In their effort to find a satisfactory solution they lead themselves into further contradictions which problematise women's inclusion in these models. The concepts which consistently re-surface are those of use, profit (benefit), pleasure and need. At the outset Aristotle 'solves' the issue by accepting that self-sufficiency is a realisable state and then proceeds to argue why even those who need nothing at all could still benefit from having friends (since independence creates happiness)<sup>61</sup>. But Aristotle reminds us that only good friends are necessary since the self-sufficient man won't have need of the lesser kind (those based on profit or pleasure). Since Aristotle believes in the positive value of things 'in themselves' (i.e. as autonomous entities) he concludes that self-

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<sup>60</sup> Cicero, p.4

<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, "It is maintained that the supremely happy who are self-sufficient have no need of friends because they have their good things; therefore being self-sufficient they need nothing further", p. 303

sufficient men should have good friends because they are desirable for their own sake, and that a good life would be lacking without good friends:<sup>62</sup>

Life is a desirable thing, especially for the good, because for them existence is good and pleasant...If, then, to the truly happy man his own existence is desirable in itself, as being by nature good and pleasant, and if the existence of his friend is scarcely less so, then his friend must also be a thing desirable thing. But what is desirable for him he must have, or else fall short of happiness in that respect. Therefore to be happy a man will need virtuous friends.

In other words, Aristotle accepts self-sufficiency as a pre-requisite for happiness then contradicts this by saying one cannot be fully happy without friends - therefore, one isn't really self-sufficient. Attempts have been made to show that the need for friends and the idea/belief in self-sufficiency are not at odds with each other but are in fact complementary. Suzanne Stern-Gillet argues that for Aristotle virtuous friendship fosters rather than jeopardises human self-sufficiency because of his conception of human beings as essentially social beings<sup>63</sup>. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the whole of Aristotle's *Ethics* it is worthwhile to note just how these two ideas can be reconciled since any notion of the self in relationship will also have repercussions at a societal level and vice versa. I will defend the position that by definition self-sufficiency cannot involve anyone other than one's self and as such it is inimical to the theory and practise of friendship<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 305-7

<sup>63</sup> Gillet, p. 132

<sup>64</sup> Gillet is not alone in believing this. Cf. Lawrence Thomas below.

Gillet points out two strains in Aristotle's *Ethics* that support a harmonious co-existence of these two terms. One has to do with friendship as a necessary component of happiness (eudaimonia) i.e. that friends are a *sine qua non* of the unconditionally pleasurable life<sup>65</sup>. Though I would agree with this last statement (even if by 'pleasurable life' Aristotle is focusing on the contemplative<sup>66</sup>) the fact that Gillet brings in another ambiguous statement - concerning self-knowledge - to support this is problematic: "We are better able to observe our neighbours than ourselves, and their actions than our own"<sup>67</sup>. If self-knowledge is not direct or immediate, the argument goes, then the 'use' of a friend is so that he/she functions as a kind of mirror by which to measure ourselves. Yet since that would debase perfect friendship to one characterised by utility what remains to be mirrored is one's moral excellence, i.e. the contemplation of excellent actions<sup>68</sup>. For immediately afterwards Aristotle points out that "the actions of good men who are friends are pleasant to the good man because they are pleasant both in themselves and because they are familiar (oikeiai)"<sup>69</sup>. Gillet's effort is geared towards reconciling the need for friendship with some form of self-sufficiency without considering the term itself as suspect.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 133. The defence of this part of her argument is from pp. 133-137

<sup>66</sup> See Barnes's Introduction in *NE* for an explanation of contemplation, pp. 37-38

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, p. 304

<sup>68</sup> Gillet, pp. 134-5

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, p. 263

Aristotle's argument is at its weakest, when he falls back on the meaning of 'living together' which is neither based on pleasure nor profit but on "rational discourse"<sup>70</sup>. In this world, women's dependency on men places them outside the circle of independent men coming together for the mere purpose of intellectual stimulation, a kind of narcissistic reflection of what they perceive as their own moral and mental superiority. And what then of the realm of emotions and lived experience? It seems that again these are peripheral to the 'self-sufficient' man because what matters most is intellectual bonding in the context of a rational dialogue<sup>71</sup>. Since women are dependent on other men, they cannot aspire to the intellectual self-sufficiency Aristotle envisions for men within ideal friendship. Men's dependency on women for their basic, daily needs does not come into consideration since the focus always remains intellectual. Thus, though women are excluded because of their dependent 'nature' it is because of this inter-dependency that men may enjoy the highest form of friendship. This self-delusion of autonomy is another level of which the discourse on ideal friendship suffers because it is only an autonomy from women and 'lesser' citizens that is being proclaimed.

This leaves us with Gillet's second argument in support of Aristotle in which friendship is found to lead to self-actualisation, i.e. "humans are so constituted that they require others to actually become what they essentially are, and virtuous agents are

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<sup>70</sup> Gillet does not find this problematic, p. 141

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Thomas in 'Friendship and Other Loves' pp. 48-64 in Badhwar, p. 58. He defines self-sufficiency merely as a lack of material help but I disagree with this because it is clearly not the sense in which Aristotle is employing the term. It would be convenient if this were the case.

those who succeed in actualising their nature to the fullest extent"<sup>72</sup>. While this implies a deepened moral understanding of and a regard for others in and for themselves, it also, at the same time, defines these selves as fundamentally the same. And while it is not in itself problematic that identification takes place on an intellectual level, what is problematic is the exclusive identification with the quality of rational thought. In the process, individual differences, especially race, class and gender are disregarded.

But if the simple conclusion she supports is that self-sufficiency is defined by participation in primary friendship then perhaps it would be useful to reject the term self-sufficiency altogether. To even attempt to edify the term points to its inadequacy to represent lived experience<sup>73</sup>. But I would suggest omitting it altogether in any context since it perpetuates the spurious belief in complete self-determinancy. Acceptance of need for others and more specifically the need for friendship both at the practical level and the emotional level is a more realistic option. It is also more inclusive of difference since a variety of other factors - beyond the sameness of the rational<sup>74</sup> is accepted as necessary for such a relationship.

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<sup>72</sup> Gillet, p. 141

<sup>73</sup> J.O. Umson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). In a similar attempt to reconcile self-sufficiency with friendship he argues that the Aristotelian man of virtue is self-sufficient only materially and in terms of his main occupation - which is the life of contemplation. But since "contemplation is not the whole of the good life thus he also needs friends", pp. 116-7

<sup>74</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory', pp. 57-76, in (eds.), Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, *Feminism as Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 62

This belief in desiring (unselfishly) things for their own sake surfaces in *De Amicitia* as well<sup>75</sup> but here Cicero resolves the dilemma between pleasure/profit and need by arguing that if friendship were based on need, then only the weak would create ideal friendships and clearly this is not the case<sup>76</sup>:

If anyone thinks that this (goodwill) derives from weakness, and from the necessity for each other to acquire from the other what he himself lacks, certainly they leave friendship with a mean origin and so to speak, with no aristocratic lineage, since they wish us to believe it born of Need and Insufficiency. If this were so, those fittest for friendship would be those with least confidence in themselves; but the facts are quite otherwise. In fact an individual excels most in the acquisition and preservation of friendships according as he is fortified with good qualities and wisdom in himself and stands least in need of another, regarding everything that concerns him *as within his own control* (my italics).

Cicero, like Aristotle, accepts the benefits of friendship only as a symptom, or manifestation of such a relationship and not its cause which he places in 'nature' (which for Cicero is the opposite of 'need'<sup>77</sup>). Since they both accept some form of need/profit/pleasure as part of friendship it is disturbing that they should place all of these as attributes which follow from friendship rather than produce it. By identifying need as a kind of weakness these writers expose a deluded belief in man's power of self-determination and at the same time a (paranoid) fear of dependence on others. In this light, the ideal of friendship surfaces as one which is threatened by excessive need.

It is not so surprising then that accompanying the evasion of the feminine is an equal aversion to the idea of dependency and an interest in its opposite, self-sufficiency.

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<sup>75</sup> Cicero, p. 63

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 41

It is only the female/feminine which is assumed dependent whereas the male/masculine is seen as desirably autonomous and self-sufficient. The degree to which the discussion focuses around the question of whether friendship is a relationship pursued out of need or for its own sake I see as a further entrenchment of the demarcation between masculine and feminine traits in which women inevitably end up at the bottom of the hierarchy where they are identified with matter and men at the top of the hierarchy where they are placed beside 'spirit'. According to this value system the 'pleasure' of friendship can only be a spiritual one and the emotional need for such a relationship is divorced from any *a priori* utilitarian purpose. In other words, one needs to develop friendships but not primarily for their potential 'use' (though once achieved this 'use' may follow) nor solely for one's enjoyment (though the accompanying pleasure is taken for granted).

By setting out with the belief in the possibility of self-sufficiency, and by bestowing upon it a positive value, these writers develop a dilemma which will always lead to an unsatisfactory result not only for women, but for themselves and their theories. To shun the primacy of inter-dependency or to relegate and limit it to practical matters (financial in particular) is again to deceive oneself with delusions of complete power and control wherein only 'the weak' are subject to the influence of their emotional worlds. In fact, it is male elites who remain in power because of their dependency on others, i.e women and slaves, thus creating a 'culture of deceit'<sup>78</sup> where

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<sup>78</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether explains this 'culture of deceit' as one where male elites justify their exploitation of the lives of those they use by negating their value and denying their own dependence on them, see *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 200

accordingly, ideal friendship could not exist. This paranoid fear of dependency most effectively maintains women's ejection from the 'male' space of friendship - as if male friendship depended on the silencing of female friendship - and perpetuates the denial of a more holistic view of existence, where terms such as strong/weak, spiritual/emotional, and self-sufficiency/need are not mutually exclusive. By breaking down these dualisms altogether the value and power of the first over the second becomes neutralised and a new set of values may emerge which are inclusive of women/the feminine/others.

In bringing to the debate on friendship women's distinctive experiences of this relationship, I am not only foregrounding a tradition of women-defined ideal friendship parallel to that of the male tradition. I am also re-defining ideal friendship which is based on a conception of the self and of moral action as both rational and thoroughly emotional<sup>79</sup>. It is this formulation, I will argue, which in turn re-defines friendship. Furthermore, the terms themselves need to be re-defined, i.e. 'weakness' is not the expression of emotion, instead, emotional sensitivity can be seen as a strength conducive to the flourishing of relationship<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> Green also argues for a tradition of feminist humanists whose conception of the 'self' intersects and differs from that of the male tradition in that it is not a disembodied rational being, pp. 10-26, esp. p. 23

<sup>80</sup> Unlike Kant who believes that affection and intimacy must be controlled lest one loses respect for the other. See Paton in Badhwar, p. 150

<sup>81</sup> Gilligan, 'Remapping the Moral Domain' pp. 237-252, in (eds.), Thomas, C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellberg, *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1986). Hereafter, 'RMD', p. 19



If the emphasis is on relationship rather than the individual then a shift takes place in the conception of self which emphasises the other's needs and one's responsibility towards them<sup>81</sup>. This morality of care and responsibility would define a virtuous/good person not only in terms of his/her rational excellence (expressed in a void) but their ability to respond and care for the others as each 'real' situation arises. When this care is reciprocated the inter-dependence which defines the web of relationships in society becomes a positive value, one that must be upheld, not avoided.

If we accept that within the context of friendship the demarcation of the rational world from the emotional one is a false division and an affirmation of absolute self-sufficiency is not only spurious but also undesirable then we are free to proceed with the task of re- interpreting these texts in light of more egalitarian and inclusive systems. To say that inter-dependency is a given but also a desirable and necessary given opens the way to the interpretation of texts without the need to jettison all masculinist theories of relationship. By changing the premise on which these arguments are based the solution to the problem of feminist appropriation of masculinist theories to women's stories unravels much more harmoniously and without the pressure of accepting either one extreme or the other. Furthermore, the discourse on ideal friendship may be re-defined not only on the theoretical level which promotes inclusion of emotion and the value of inter-dependence but also on a practical level in the example of such a friendship between women. This will be the subject of my next chapter.

## **Friends *then* Family: The Story of Naomi and Ruth**

### Introduction

In this chapter I will interpret the book of Ruth within the theoretical framework of a feminist model of ideal friendship as delineated in the previous chapter and on the basis of Aristotle's *NE*. I will show that Naomi and Ruth's relationship represents an example of ideal friendship which not only re-interprets the Aristotelian ideal but more importantly does justice to this ideal. It is through their example of women's friendship that I will base my answers to questions concerning feminist biblical interpreters as to the extent these women offer a positive example of women's agency in ancient times. This will entail an examination of the constituent parts of friendship in its highest form since the 'requirements' in this case are distinct from any other form of voluntary relationship. The concept which will first be re-defined is that of moral goodness since this is the premise on which ideal friendship functions. It is also an important consideration in replying to the question of how Naomi and Ruth are positive examples of women's agency because my criteria are based on their desire to remain together as opposed to the traditional emphasis on goodness as piety and obedience. In this process of re-interpretation, the breaking down of the opposition between reason/emotion and autonomy/dependence will become evident on a practical level where Naomi and Ruth will be shown to function on grounds which value inter-dependency and on action where reason is complemented by emotion.

The book of Ruth holds a significant place in the Jewish canon not only in that it is one of only two books named after a woman (the other one is Esther) but also because it is a book read during Shabu 'ot - the Jewish feast of weeks. It is also associated with the giving of the Torah to Moses and as such read as an example of an ideal proselyte - a reading which I will show continues to influence interpretations even today. My reading is not concerned with establishing such a theological agenda but - via a close literary reading - bringing out aspects of the women's characters and

relationship which have hitherto been neglected at least partly due to a greater interest in the book's theological 'message'.

The book consists of four chapters, and the time period it encompasses is roughly five weeks - starting just before the beginning of the barley harvest. In the first chapter, Naomi, a widow and her two widowed daughters-in-law, the Moabitesses, Ruth and Orpah, set out for Judah where they have heard the famine is over. On the way, Naomi asks the other two to return to their own homes but both beg her not to part with them. Finally, Orpah discontinues the journey but Ruth, with a moving oath, succeeds in accompanying Naomi to Bethlehem. Once there, Naomi expresses to the chorus of women her bitterness at having lost her husband and two sons and attributes the blame to God. Subsequently, Ruth goes to work in the field belonging to Boaz who is also kin to Naomi and impresses him with her loyalty to her mother-in-law. In the third chapter, Ruth visits Boaz on the threshing floor during the night and he once again praises her and resolves to marry her. Last, Boaz publicly claims Ruth for a wife and when their first child is born, the chorus of women once again appear to praise Ruth and God for producing a son which will become a 'restorer' of life for Naomi.

It is this story for which in 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated in *The Woman's Bible* that Naomi and Ruth's relationship is "one of steadfast friendship" - one in which for Ruth "Naomi has a peculiar, magnetic charm, one stronger than kindred, country or ease"<sup>1</sup>. She remains one of the few to describe it as such since the defining characteristic of their relationship is commonly assumed to be a familial one - although most commentators agree that these two women share a special closeness. I, too, like Stanton, would like to posit that the uniqueness of this closeness cannot be contained or easily explained by the tie of daughter-in-law to mother-in-law and that the most appropriate characterisation of it would be that of an "ideal friendship" as defined in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* - though between women.

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (Boston: North-Eastern University Press, 1985), p. 39

The main points made in the chapters on friendship are three: that a 'perfect friendship' must first involve good people who desire the common good, that the relationship must be characterised by equality in every way and last, that it must involve living a common life. All other points made stem from these three principles. By using these principles as criteria in passages where the two women interact I will produce a literary reading which will shift the focus from the unequal relationship of mother-in-law to daughter-in-law to the equal one of friendship. Also, since the text is a biblical one, I will propose that this kind of reading produces an empowering image of women in the Hebrew Bible. Finally, I would like to uncover the ways in which this text which for me also holds 'a peculiar, magnetic charm', says something more than just what traditional interpretations want it to say.

When discussing the book of Ruth most traditional commentators<sup>2</sup> tend to bypass the relationship and go on to discuss its (extra-textual) 'purpose'. They go to lengths to explain customs of the times or the book's relation to other passages on the Hebrew Bible. For example in one Bible commentary the author insists that a "crucial question"<sup>3</sup> is whether the law concerning levirate marriages is linked to the laws in Deuteronomy 25:3-5<sup>4</sup> and goes on to conclude that "the Book is concerned with the well-being of the family and the obligations which have to be met to secure this end"<sup>5</sup>. Even recent revisionist interpretations tend either to ignore the possibility of a

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<sup>2</sup>Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publish Co. 1981), on p. 87 there is a summary of the views of the meaning of Ruth proposed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Nineteenth century: 1) A recommendation of the levirate marriage 2) A justification for the Davidic succession 3) The 'power of love' 4) The pious and virtuous ancestors of David are pictured 5) A protest against the vigorous measures taken by Ezra and Nehemiah against mixed marriages. Twentieth century: 1) Relationship to fertility cult 2) As a consolation for the Israelites that returned home from exile 3) A portrayal of the providence of the God of Israel 4) For the preservation of the name of the family and the work is written to the glory of David 5) The incorporation of Ruth into a Jewish family. Most of these ignore the centrality of the women's relationship in the narrative.

<sup>3</sup>William McKane, *Tracts for the Times, Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs Bible Guides*, no. 12 (London: Lutterworth, 1965), p. 11

<sup>4</sup>The Bible *Revised Standard Version* (New York: WM. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd), p. 235-238

<sup>5</sup>McKane, p. 24. Mieke Bal also discusses these two issues, though with very different results. Cf. *Lethal Love*, pp. 80-81

relationship that goes beyond this 'artificial bond' or resort to interpretations that rely on the traditional theological emphasis. Cynthia Ozick for example, accepts that Ruth's love for Naomi is more than is usually exhibited within the limits of the familial but goes on to explain this as an indication of Ruth's prophetic ability to see the 'God of Israel' as the 'One Creator of the Universe'<sup>6</sup>. The 'nature' of the women's relationship is taken at face value i.e. nothing that warrants special attention. Yet by trying to make sense of this text the perceived 'excess' in the women's relationship is not explained, only acknowledged.

So to return to Stanton's choice of words, there does seem to be a bond involved that is "stronger than country, kinship and case". In order to examine the 'nature' of this bond I will first need to explore the character of each of the women since according to Aristotle, a 'perfect' friendship can only involve good people who resemble one another in goodness because goodness is the lasting thing on which a friendship's longevity depends<sup>7</sup>. My aim is to reclaim the story of Naomi and Ruth as an example of perfect friendship between women in which the character, and actions characteristic of such a relationship are unique in biblical literature. As such, its function within the text will also be shown as exemplary by feminist standards since Naomi and Ruth are each other's priority to which the demands of patriarchal order are either secondary or irrelevant.

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<sup>6</sup>Cynthia Ozick, 'Ruth', p.191-214 in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1993), p. 210

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle, p. 363. Many ancient writers agree with this idea, see Cicero, p. 37 and 50; Xenophone, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, (tr.), E.C. Marchant, (London: Heinemann, 1923), p. 135 and 137; Plato, *Lysis*, (tr.), W.R. Lamb, (London: Heinemann, 1925), p. 43

## Chapter 2

### On Being Good

When speaking about the requirements of virtue in the development of ideal friendship I agree with Aristotle that the individuals involved must *already* be characterised by goodness. Otherwise, it would not be the intrinsically moral phenomenon - in the same tradition of Aristotle, Cicero and Montaigne - I take it to be<sup>8</sup>. Consequentially, it could not embody the utopian potential I will show it envisions. To say that two people are good friends - only to each other - but not good people with regard to anyone else - is fundamentally to change the character of this relationship. Also, while two good friends can conceivably be good people - though in my (and Aristotle's) definition not capable of ideal friendship - it is impossible for two good people not to be capable of ideal friendship<sup>9</sup>. And while the parties involved may not be aware if this requirement is realised at the outset, they will always, through intimacy, come to recognise its presence through their shared life<sup>10</sup>. It is important therefore that I discuss Naomi and Ruth's relationship not only in terms of how they are good to each other but also if this is possible *a priori*. In the book of Ruth, we do not have much textual evidence for either consideration but what does manifest itself, I will argue, illuminates how these two women could be described as

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<sup>8</sup>See the Introduction, in Badhwar, esp. p. 12-16 for a summary of how a friendship differs depending on whether its status is considered to be intrinsically, moral, immoral or nonmoral. For example Lewis here departs from the Aristotelian tradition when he allows for exclusivity and viciousness in the character of friendship. Where 'good friends' are otherwise engaged in immoral acts towards others, my opinion is that the concept of 'goodness' is an entirely different one, and outside the scope of this thesis. On Badhwar's conclusion I agree that: a. friendship necessarily involves some moral goodness between friends and b. the recognition of the nature of friendship entails, if we are rational, a recognition of what morality in general requires, see pp. 14-5

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle explains this on the basis of the inner conflict that "bad people" constantly experience, p. 295

<sup>10</sup>Because as Aristotle states: "(friendships) need time and intimacy...until each has proved to the other that he is worthy of love, and so won his trust", p. 264

both good people and good friends - though not necessarily 'good' in the way that has traditionally been ascribed to them.

### i A Shadow over Naomi

Beginning with how Naomi and Ruth could be characterised as good I will first focus on Naomi's character since my discussion of Ruth will focus on re-interpreting her generally acknowledged goodness in the light of feminist ethics. Naomi, usually less the centre of attention, has recently come under attack for what has been characterised as self-centredness and self-interest<sup>11</sup>. I will attempt to show, using Freud's work in 'Mourning and Melancholia'<sup>12</sup> that there is valid justification for Naomi's actions and statements which, not only show her progression from despair, distress and hopelessness to hope and joy and are, as such, a manifestation of this goodness. I will show that Fewell and Gunn's argument criticises Naomi because it is presupposed that the two women act independently of each other's interests - thus reducing the story to a simple description of female antagonism. It further ignores the psychological factors that contribute to plot development and character motivation.

By analysing their actions in the light of the emotional context and based on the textual evidence that the source of their ethical choices derive from a notion of self 'in relation' I will show that it is precisely because Naomi is a caring person and friend that she behaves in the way she does. Naomi's goodness cannot be established without an examination of the effect the severing of all relationships she is bound to by love (her husband, two sons, and God) have on her psyche and her ability to continue to function as a caring, giving person. All her actions and speech (or lack of)

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<sup>11</sup>Dana Nolan Fewell and David E. Gunn, 'A Son is Born to Naomi!: Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth', p. 99-108, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 40 (1988), hereafter, *JSOT*

<sup>12</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 251-268 in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, volume 11, (tr.) James Stachey, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984, orig. published 1957 by London: Hogarth Press). I am not attempting to force modern, complex, psychoanalytic categories on an ancient biblical text, merely to show that it would be hasty to draw conclusions for reactions to such extreme situations as presented to the women without taking into consideration some basic emotional motivations in such circumstances.

will be shown to be intimately related and dependent on the notion of goodness which is spuriously self-sacrificial, i.e. based on the assumption of self-sufficiency that neglects the care of the self in favour of the care of the other. It is through the realisation of the inadequacy of action carried out solely on the basis of reason and the assumption of self-sufficiency that Naomi surfaces from her 'false consciousness' and realises that her desire not to hurt others is dependent on her responsibility towards not hurting her own self. This is facilitated with the help of Ruth - understandable since her pain is less - and via the liberating power of anger towards the perpetrator of this unjust suffering - God.

Fewell and Gunn have highlighted five instances where the silences in the text support a negative characterisation of Naomi. But these silences are not, in my opinion, qualitatively equal. The first, second, and third silence, (on the existence of Boaz), refer to Naomi, whereas the fourth to Ruth (on her part in the scene on the threshing floor), and the fifth, (at Obed's birth) refer to the last two chapters by which time many changes have taken place in the women's lives and five weeks have passed since their arrival. The first silence (1:18) they point out is after Ruth's oath when Naomi accepts Ruth's determined will to follow her. The second is upon their arrival in Bethlehem, (1:19-22), and the third when Naomi fails to inform Ruth of the presence of her kinsman, Boaz<sup>13</sup>. The time factor is an important one because as in any traumatic event - here three deaths in Naomi's family - it cannot be omitted from an evaluation of her responses. It is my contention that Naomi is still suffering the effects of this loss, and this determines her behaviour in the first two chapters.

Whether Naomi is simply still in mourning or worse, suffering from melancholia is a difficult distinction to make since the symptoms for each are exactly the same except for the one related to melancholia - the loss of self-regard<sup>14</sup>. Even if

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<sup>13</sup>Fewell and Gunn, p. 100-102 passim

<sup>14</sup>Freud, p. 252, the common symptoms are: profound painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity. Moreover, Freud sites the same external causes which give rise to these symptoms, i.e. the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some



her relationship to Ruth weren't a close one it would seem very unlikely that the deaths of her husband and later, her two sons would not have a profound effect on her. In fact, she says as much herself when the women of Bethlehem meet her upon their arrival: "I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty" (1: 21). If she does not refer to Ruth at this moment in time it is because Ruth lies outside the comparison Naomi is making between past and present, i.e. when the women last saw her, she had a husband and two sons, now, all three are gone. It is this 'emptiness' she is referring to and not to a negation of Ruth's presence<sup>15</sup>.

But even at the scene of departure from Moab, Naomi emphasises her loneliness: "...for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me" (1:13). Here Naomi links her deprivation to the fate of the other two women should they stay with her. To define oneself in terms of relationship,<sup>16</sup> means that the loss of three close relationships cannot but affect those close to them and create a gulf in the psyche that cannot easily be overcome. Naomi's repetition of her inability to provide yet more for her daughters-in-law, leads to her final verbal withdrawal from the other two. Physically, emotionally and linguistically she is 'empty' - what better way to illustrate this than with silence? The extremity of her pain is not easily represented but here an attempt is made which is not lost on Ruth. In my reading, it is *because* she is/has been so giving that she is now bereft of resources, and thus indicating that the self is not an endless source of beneficence which does not need replenishing.

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abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on. See also p. 266 for additional causes related to melancholia.

<sup>15</sup> This is what Fewell and Gunn support, p. 104. Yet Naomi's lack of reference to Ruth serves another function, that of radical collusion, which I will discuss in the fifth chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Gilligan, 'Remapping the Moral Domain', pp. 237-252, in (eds.), Thomas, C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellberg, 'RMD', p. 239: "The identification of attachment or interdependence as a primary dimension of human experience ties the psychology of love to the representation of moral growth and to identity formation". In other words, if Naomi did not think of herself in relation to the other women this would have led to significant differences in the way she responded in this context.

What we have here is a woman who expresses concern and care for other women close to her and who would, if she could, go to any ends to procure happiness and a secure future for them: "...even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown?" (1:12-13). Her desire to further help her daughters-in-law is unrealisable and this is her motivation behind the repetition of the words: "Go, return...", (1:8), "Turn back...", (1:11 & 12). I will later show how in this respect, Ruth is equally willing to act for Naomi's happiness, only in her case, what is 'required' of her is actually realisable. In the context of friendship what is required of each is what is possible to be realised<sup>17</sup> and here Naomi cannot be held at fault since she is beyond her childbearing years. To use this type of conditional signifies the impossibility of its fulfillment at any future time.

Though this may be a rhetorical question the fact that she decides that they must part (significantly after they have already set off together) is one based on reason. For if she herself cannot help them, then they should seek a solution elsewhere and what is more rational than to return to a familiar place - Moab?: "Go, return each of you to her mother's house...the Lord grant that you may find a home, each of you in the house of her husband!"(1: 8-9). On the one hand, this points to a bond of genuine concern, where one wishes another well for their own sake<sup>18</sup>. But on the other hand, it does not take into account the emotional crisis the women find themselves in.

For Naomi, by relying exclusively on reason in order to reach the 'best' solution to this problem, she is neglecting her own need for companionship at a time of most intense need. The conflict here between acute emotional distress and 'impartial' reason inevitably results in the severing of yet more ties for it is her privileging of reason over emotion that leads Naomi to make the wrong decision. Her concern that her daughters-in-law should re-marry in conjunction with her own distress lead her to believe, on the basis of simple reason, that there is no viable option for the others if

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<sup>17</sup>Aristotle: "Friendship asks only for what is practicable", p. 285

<sup>18</sup>For Aristotle, this is most characteristic however, of friendship based on virtue, p. 300

they were to remain with her. Thus, by ignoring her own emotional needs, she is also shown - in Orpah's and especially Ruth's response - to disregard the needs of the others, thus failing in her own desire to care for their needs: (1: 9-10, 14) "Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people"...Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." It is clear from this example that Naomi's daughters-in-law have no desire to leave her (despite their lack of husbands!). That Ruth convinces Naomi of the erroneousness of her judgement by supplying their common emotions as factors to take into consideration as well as the necessity of relying on each other will be discussed in the next chapter but suffice to say that Naomi is convinced, and the decision is shown to be the correct one for the well-being of all concerned.

To Fewell and Gunn's puzzled question "why should the altruism of Ruth reduce an altruistic Naomi to silent withdrawal?"<sup>19</sup>, we can answer: because a non-altruistic Naomi would not have concerned herself with the impossible task of providing yet more care in her current state. In fact, she would have been capable and willing to continue the homeward journey unaffected and untroubled by the triple loss. It is the selfish individual who neither has need *for* others nor concerns him/herself with the needs *of* others. It is logical then, that Naomi would (despite her distress) attempt to provide Ruth and Orpah with an environment that would care for their needs in a way she no longer can, thus forgoing her own emotional needs for the sake of the others' well-being. Again, if she were 'selfish' she would have insisted on the company of two women who would have further lightened her load by travelling with her to a land she had not lived in for at least ten years (1:13). All her words revolve around her distress at not being able to help them anymore.

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<sup>19</sup>Fewell and Gunn, p. 100

But there is another aspect to Naomi's silence in this first chapter and it concerns her decision to leave. Though the narrative proposes the change of circumstance in Judah as Naomi's motive for leaving Moab, (1:1, 1:13, 1:20-1) her words both in chapter one (1:13) and upon arrival (1:20-21) point to another, more personal incentive. The text does not say that there was, at the same time, a famine in Moab so there was no urgent need to leave (1:6). But it was in Moab that the deaths occurred and in the hope of distancing herself from memories of loss, she attempts to break from all that reminds her of her sorrow in order to heal herself in the process of separation<sup>20</sup>. Since it is unclear whether the passage of time from her sons' deaths has been short or long, (whereas the death of her husband clearly preceded in 1:3) I believe her grieving reaction supports the former possibility<sup>21</sup>. If we combine the lack of famine in Moab and her absence from public in Judah (2-4:15) we find contradiction - if she wanted to return why are her first words (1:20-21) so negative? Because her attempt to distance herself from the place of sadness fails and in Bethlehem she continues to suffer from this loss in private.

But her desire for emotional recovery is complicated by the fact that her husband and sons were not the only people she cared for and to distance herself from all loved ones would be self-destructive since her sense of self depends on retaining ties to others (signalled in 1:20-21 by her use of the word 'empty' and her desire to change her name to Mara - Bitter). When she says (1:20) that her name should change, she is pointing to the only negative change in her life which was the loss of her kin. So the severance of ties to the ones close to her produces an identity crisis which leaves her feeling helpless to respond to the needs of others, i.e. Orpah and Ruth.

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<sup>20</sup>Freud, in the case of simple mourning, stresses the intense opposition to letting go of the feelings towards the 'object' lost, even if there is a 'substitution' already present since this process can only be carried out gradually, "at great expense of time and ... energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged", p. 253

<sup>21</sup>See Sasson, p. 21 for a discussion of the different possibilities.

In opposition to Freud's stipulation on the ability to love after loss, stands another possibility which better suits the fabric of human relationships. Ruth is part of "the story of love that must be told not so that it can be forgotten but so that it can continue into the present"<sup>22</sup>. Because she is part of their common past, she embodies all the positive memories which constitute their common (his)story which, in turn, can continue to flourish in the present if only it is not abandoned. In her pledge, Ruth reminds Naomi "how attachments located in time and arising from mutual engagement are by definition irreplaceable"<sup>23</sup>. Her "Entreat me not to leave you..." (1:16-17) makes sense in the context of their common loss and ten year co-habitation in Moab. That is why Naomi is silent - because she can but only agree.

Yet this desire to sever her ties with the past points rather to the possibility of her suffering from melancholy rather than mere mourning. Upon arrival in Judah, she effectively retreats from the public space/world after making known her disillusionment towards another object of love - God. My stipulation that Naomi defines herself 'in relation' and not 'in isolation' is further exemplified by the affect these deaths have on her relationship to God. Her unconcealed accusation towards YHWH as the perpetrator of her emotional poverty is articulated in a phrase that signals the kind of self-denigration symptomatic of melancholia - since her 'self' is also dependent on all ties bound by love: "Why call me Naomi when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (1:21). It is clear here that although she is not the one who has died, she nevertheless perceives the three deaths as somehow her own punishment, for it is she who has had to suffer this loss most.

In every statement Naomi utters in this first chapter she ends by referring to God, signalling therefore another loss. In this case it is not an actual physical loss but a more ideal kind, where what is lost is not the object of love itself (God still 'exists',

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<sup>22</sup> Gilligan, 'RMD', p. 245

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 245

insofar as one's faith continues in Him), but the loss in one's love in this object<sup>24</sup>. In an attempt to reconcile her belief in her innocence with her doubt in the love of God, Naomi suffers - because of this loss - an identification which displaces her disappointment in God with a disappointment in herself<sup>25</sup>. The pattern in the first chapter progresses from God's indirect effect: "It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me"(1:13), to God's direct action: "...the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me"(1:20) and finally to personal identification with the act: "Do not call me Naomi call me Mara (bitter)" (1:21). The linguistic trajectory moves from adjective to adverb to noun - from a modifier to an act, to total identification. For what she is asking is how it is that she has failed to respond to the ideal of goodness and what more she could have done.

The internalisation of the damage done to her is illustrated in the ambivalence of her feelings toward God - "someone she loves, or has loved, or should love"<sup>26</sup> and traces her struggle to come to terms not only with her mourning for the loss of the others but also her inner conflict of how to continue to have faith in God when the good are punished. When she questions the appropriateness of her name she is signifying a crisis in her identity which involves her moral stature as well. For she does not believe that she has failed in goodness in a way which warrants God's punishment - her expression of estrangement would have been unnecessary if this were the case.

Her ambivalence is further exemplified by the fact that although she continues to have faith in God's power to care and provide, it is in relation to her own

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<sup>24</sup>Freud, pp. 253-4, there is also the possibility of one not being conscious of what it is that has been lost, i.e. s/he does not know what (quality) s/he has lost in the object of love. This is in contradistinction to the psychology of mourning where there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 258. It is here that Freud states "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego".

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 257, "The reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it" to the individual him/herself. I am using this in relation to Naomi's faith because God is the only one Naomi addresses with ambivalent feelings. On pages 257-8 Freud explains this displacement in detail.

predicament that she suffers a conflict of loyalties. When she bids her daughters-in-law good-bye she evokes the Lord's name in a positive way only for their sake: "May the Lord deal kindly with you...The Lord grant that you may find a home..."(1: 8-9). Despite the fact that Orpah and Ruth are not Israelites, Naomi extends God's care in their interest even though, ironically, she herself experiences a personal abandonment. Since there is no textual evidence for Ruth and Orpah to have already converted to Judaism<sup>27</sup>, this ambivalence could only signify internal conflict in Naomi between a continual faith in God's benevolence and evidence to the contrary. In the first chapter she refers to God three times negatively, (1:3, 1:19, and 1:21) and only once positively (1:9). It is only in the second chapter that she unequivocally makes a positive statement (2:20) and this is further emphasised by the inclusiveness of her utterance: "Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" (3: 20). Is this not another piece of textual evidence of her goodness when, despite her spiritual and emotional alienation, she continues to care for the well-being of the women close to her?

That Naomi is somehow implicated in the deaths of her family (or feels that she is) is an issue that points to her relational sense of identity - in the parting scene it is in her connection to the people close to her, and here in connection to God. For this reason she does not need to refer to Ruth when she answers the women of Judah<sup>25</sup>: "...the LORD has brought me back empty" (1:21). Furthermore, if punishment was due to her husband and sons (for marrying Moabitesses or any other reason) then why is she also the subject of such suffering? From Naomi's point of view this deprivation can be explained in two ways: first, as an unjust betrayal of God's love because in punishing the three men God is also inadvertently punishing her for wrongdoings she

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<sup>27</sup>This is what one anonymous Rabbi believed in order to explain the expression "has gone back" (1:15) p. 118, in D.R.G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1977). Most Midrashic writers see this scene as the proselytism of Ruth, see p. 3-31 for a comparison of 1: 16 amongst writers.

<sup>28</sup>Fewell and Gunn see this omission as "proof of Naomi's withdrawal from Ruth", p.100

has not committed<sup>29</sup>, and second, because if she is also meant to be the object of such a 'sentence' she has no recourse in reality for understanding why. In both cases, the implication is that she herself has not committed any crime worthy of such a reaction and the indignation/lamentation she repeatedly expresses stems from the knowledge of her own goodness. Her cry then is one of innocence and of disillusionment in the faith which she has placed in God<sup>30</sup>.

Yet her loss of self-regard is not something that needs to be interpreted as stemming from actual guilt. In fact, as Freud points out, "there is no correspondence between the degree of self-abasement and its real justification" - a good woman will speak in an equally negative manner about herself<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, it is in such cases that one does not shy from speaking of what ails them, quite the contrary, "there is an insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure"<sup>32</sup>. In Naomi's case, both to her daughters-in-law and to the women of Judah she makes clear with whom her complaint lies as well as her inability to answer the question 'why?'. And unlike the men in the Old Testament who have also brought suit against God (Jeremiah, Job, Jonah)<sup>33</sup> she is alone in her societal powerlessness. Consequently, it is fitting that she addresses these complaints only to women, who, in their shared powerlessness are in a position to empathise. Naomi is able to be assertive because she is in the safe environment of familiar women and Ruth. It becomes now evident

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<sup>29</sup>Edward Campbell Jr. points out that the language Naomi uses is that of someone who "portrays herself as a defendant in a legal action, in which she has been deemed guilty, in which punishment has already been meted out. Worst of all, her antagonist is God." p. 83. Also, her use of Shadday (in 1:20-21) supports this, since Shadday "seems to have had a special connection to judging and to conferring of deliverance or punishment, blessing or curse." p. 77 in *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Co. 1975)

<sup>30</sup>Campbell points out that this is "a profound affirmation of faith", because it assumes faith in the covenant, p. 32. On the other hand, Naomi's outcry has also been judged as disloyalty and foolishness: "Naomi allows events to control her instead of bringing her inner self to control them...she was self-inflicted with ...a maudlin self-centeredness", James T. Cleland in *The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 838. I am suggesting that both her faith and her sense of self are disturbed only temporarily.

<sup>31</sup>Freud, p. 255

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 255

<sup>33</sup>Campbell discusses the other instances of these 'legal cases' brought against God, p. 83



how the initial bitterness had to do with feelings of abandonment by God as well as the loss of her ties.

In being the only woman who takes this stand she is not only proving her unconventionality<sup>34</sup>, she is also voicing the anger and anguish of the countless innocent women usually 'silent' but profoundly affected by the 'violence of separation' they have had to suffer. By being rendered incapable of caring for those close to her, (and to receive care from them) she has lost what constitutes for her the fundamental meaning in life. Naomi embodies the consequences of this injustice in one's own psyche, in the sphere of human relationships, and towards the divine. And her refusal to remain silent is especially important in view of her status as widow in a society in which selfhood is defined corporately<sup>35</sup>

In condemning this injustice, her distinctly female voice stands as a subversive element not only in the book of Ruth but in the whole Hebrew Bible where women are either silent/silenced (the levite's concubine in Judges 19-20), compliant/treacherous (Delilah in Judges 16), or uncaring for the plight of other women (Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16: 1-16; 21: 9-21). The liberating power of her expressed anger enables Naomi to re-claim her self-esteem and re-build her sense of identity<sup>36</sup> thus opening the way to dissociation from masculinist ideologies of autonomy and self-sufficiency and re-association with loved ones. Naomi's anger suggests the collusion of patriarchal terrestrial and celestial justice in preventing her from continuing to care for others and the fact that this is most pointedly exhibited in her relationship to Ruth is significant for feminist readings of the book. She is the only woman who brings her case to God

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<sup>34</sup>Fewell and Gunn consider Naomi's response indicative of her conventionality, p. 104

<sup>35</sup> As John H. Otwell argues in *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 125: "A widow was a 'silent one' (*ʿalmānā* - to be silent) a person often denied participation in the economic and legal life of a community because she lacked identification with a family."

<sup>36</sup>Ruether here is speaking about Christian women but the same can be said in the Hebrew context of socialization, in *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 186

without a mediator and without being punished for doing so and as such she joins the ranks of Abraham and Moses. It is not necessary for Naomi to display "leadership qualities" in order to prove she is a mother with a difference<sup>37</sup>. She is not only angry at this injustice but at the same time, her anger at a textual level is shown to be justified since she is not punished for its expression.

Finally, Naomi, regains her sense of self worth and with it the ability to care through the passing of time and the nurturing care of Ruth. In the text, this is signalled through her effort to help Ruth: "My daughter, should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you?" (3: 1), and her eventual re-entrance in the sphere of human relations. As for her third silence in not informing Ruth of the presence of her kinsman Boaz<sup>38</sup> this is keeping with her mourning. Not only has she withdrawn from the public sphere to heal her wounds with the help of the one person/woman who has unconditionally offered it but also she has indicated her loss of faith in the workings of men, and by extension, of God - for how is she to believe that any one man may help her when "the Lord had afflicted/testified against her" (1: 21), for some unknown reason? Thus, the only serious accusation<sup>39</sup> against Naomi's character has been found to be wanting in its superficial denouncement of the morality of her actions.

So it is in the character of Naomi where the effects of patriarchal injustice (because of God and loss of male protection) are most evident. Equally, the problem of ascertaining her moral goodness cannot be divorced from her response to extreme loss since it is this loss that curtails her ability to care and respond to others in need.

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<sup>37</sup> I am disagreeing here with J. Cheryl Exum in 'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered', pp. 73-85, in (ed.), Adela Yarbo Collins, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Scholars Press: Chico, California, 1985), p. 84-85 where she discusses Deborah.

<sup>38</sup> Fewell and Gunn, pp. 104-105 express confusion at why Naomi stays home while Ruth goes to the fields. It seems obvious to me that this is because of practical considerations - the many household chores women were responsible for and also because of Naomi's lack of interest in the outside world. See the Carol L. Meyers's discussion on women's domestic responsibilities in 'Everyday life: Women in the period of the Hebrew Bible', pp. 244-251 in Newsom and Ringe.

<sup>39</sup> There is also, of course, the exposition by James T. Cleland, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, esp. pp. 836-8

As Carol Gilligan writes, what is perceived as “women's moral weakness...is inseparable from women's moral strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibility”<sup>40</sup>. It is as if Naomi is asking how she can continue to be caring when the effects of this seemingly 'impersonal' justice render her emotionally scarred.

The problem is further exacerbated by a false dichotomy between selfishness/selflessness where on the one hand, the possibility of motivation which is not in some way selfish is unrealistic and on the other hand, selfishness has, ironically the effect of emphasising the self<sup>41</sup>. This explains the response of Fewell and Gunn who fail to take into consideration that if it is the good who are giving then when they are prevented from doing so the consequences can only be withdrawal. To expect the giving to continue unaffected would be to assume a lack of need in the givers themselves to equally receive care and nurturance. In the context of relationship, - and especially in friendship where mutual affection is willingly offered - to continue 'dutifully' to care does not automatically render the subject morally superior. The expectation that one should endlessly give to the point of self-annihilation is not the ideal of goodness to strive for, since it further betrays an androcentric bias by burdening women to respond to such unrealistic expectations. To investigate then further what ideal of goodness constitutes a pre-requisite in ideal friendship which is also compatible with a feminist critique, I will have to focus on Ruth.

## ii Ruth's 'Sacrifice'

Ruth is presented as the epitome of the virtuous woman for a variety of reasons not all of which necessarily are desirable from a feminist point of view<sup>42</sup>. That most

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<sup>40</sup>Gilligan, *INV*, pp. 16-17

<sup>41</sup>Edward Collins Vacek, 'Love, Christian and Diverse: A Response to Colin Grant', p. 33, in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 24.1, spring 1996. Vacek discusses this irony in relation to self-sacrifice - a concept I will be dealing with later in this chapter.

<sup>42</sup>Amy Jill Levine, pp. 78-84, 'Ruth', in Newson and Ringe, p. 79

commentators commend her for the 'sacrifice' of everything dear to her for the sake of her mother-in-law is at the very least suspicious in its unconditionality. As with Naomi, the confusion of what is 'good' (selfless) and what is not 'good' (selfish), is dependent upon the emotional context and the acknowledgement that these women define themselves in relationship and their actions stem from the responsibility to each other which this entails. Thus if Ruth is 'good' she is so not only to Naomi but because she is also 'good' to others and her relationship to Naomi is an extension and amplification of this. From the point of view of friendship, the pre-requisite of equality of goodness seems to be satisfied at least on one level (where neither woman is harming the other) but there is also the issue of selfless vs. selfish motivation which needs to be addressed.

I would also like to argue here that the establishment of Ruth's 'goodness' should not be discussed in terms of a strict dichotomy between 'selfless' and 'selfish' and that, to do so would be to subvert the tenets of ideal friendship but also of any relationship. For in friendship there is an absence of a clear separation between each agent's interests so that in acting for the good of one's friend one is not sacrificing something of interest to him/herself<sup>43</sup>. In friendship the common good is of the utmost importance so by neglecting one party, the other is also affected and thus the relationship suffers. Consequently, these terms will be re-interpreted from the point of view of friendship conducive to a feminist re-appraisal of the book of Ruth. (Ultimately, of course, it is in Naomi and Ruth's actions toward each other which establish the moral virtue of both their characters and their friendship but this will be discussed in the next chapter).

Ruth's pledge - to remain together- despite Naomi's plea to separate must be seen in the context of emotional need and caring response. I will argue that in the scene of departure the conflict that is being negotiated is how the common good can be attained without the need for great sacrifice on the part of either woman. If in the

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<sup>43</sup> Lawrence Blum, 'Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon', pp. 192-210 in Badhwar, p. 202

traditional interpretative framework Naomi is selfish because she will not take the other women with her, then Ruth is selfless for wanting to remain with Naomi and in the process forsake everything that is known to her. The first proposition was shown to be wrong in its assumption of detachment and separation. In Ruth's case, as well, how can she be exalted as selfless when the result of such self-effacement would defeat the purpose of her responding to Naomi's need? There is a contradiction here on a psychological level which cannot be reconciled in these terms. Put in another way, in order to continue giving to others Ruth is exalted for giving up herself, so care in this light is seen "to connote exclusion of the self whereas selfishness connotes exclusion of others"<sup>44</sup>. If by including Naomi, Ruth excludes herself then this model of goodness has at its centre an equally pernicious dichotomy of 'self' and 'other' which betrays its reliance on masculinist notions of separateness and autonomy.

These notions expose another false dichotomy which was discussed in the previous section - between emotion and reason. If on the other hand the conflict in this scene is interpreted in the framework of care and responsibility then the conjunction of the emotional and the rational must be employed. Otherwise the recourse to only the one or the other in order to reach a solution would entail either the dissolution of the relationship or the dissolution of the self. By analysing what motivates them to be good to each other we see in their behaviour the seeds of their ethical status. Thus what I will characterise as their friendship is an expression of that goodness to the ultimate degree.

But as I have said before, to define oneself in terms of relationship collapses these dichotomies in favour of a solution that would not require any great 'sacrifice'. Naomi, under the weight of despair, attempts to care for the others by proposing what 'logically' would secure the best future for the others but would leave her physically and emotionally alone. Ruth, carrying less pain and recognising the greater need of

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<sup>44</sup>Gilligan, 'RMD', p. 250

Naomi, proposes a solution that derives from the successful fusion of emotion and reason and according to which both need and desire can be satisfied. To re-define then the notion of 'good' or more specifically 'a good woman', from a feminist perspective means to re-define the notion of the 'self' in favour of the dissolution of the myth of the autonomous self. And it is in the context of friendship that the collapse of the categories of selfish/selfless is best illustrated.

Ruth, then, according to the traditional model is also 'selfish' since her desire to remain in relationship would also be satisfying a need of her own and not merely 'selflessly' disregarding herself for the sake of Naomi. If what she is seen to renounce is too great I would say - as Ruth herself does by pledging such an oath (1:17) - that to have parted with Naomi would have entailed a greater loss; for this is what I take her pledge to signify, i.e. a kind of 'till death do us part'. So reason can only effectively resolve conflict if employed in relation to emotion but in times of crisis it is easy to lose track of the proper balance. It would be fallacious then to judge Ruth as either selfish or selfless when what she is concerned with is providing the right solution to a problem which concerns the life and well-being of both.

Before I go on to discuss how the magnanimity of Ruth's goodness is best characterised within the context of friendship I will add that 'goodness' can neither be articulated in a relational void, nor separated from emotion or 'selfish' motivations. Naomi and Ruth are both selfish to the extent that what they desire for themselves is inseparable from what is best for the other; and they are both 'selfless' because the good of the other is as equally important as their own good. As such their story provides yet another subversive element against the interpretations that would have Ruth wanting nothing for herself nor Naomi caring for the others.

The solution these women arrive at reveal on a practical level the inadequacy of a theory of friendship (discussed in the previous chapter) which omits the emotional sphere from the discussion of virtue and focuses on the 'good' only in relation to reason. This is nowhere more apparent than in the next section where the

mutual care Naomi and Ruth reveal to each other challenges the notion that friendship is best developed between the 'self-sufficient'.

## Chapter 3

### Good Friends

The first chapter in the book of Ruth is an important one in that it establishes the special quality of Naomi and Ruth's relationship as one qualitatively different from the one Naomi shares with Orpah. Since Aristotle distinguishes between friendships based on virtue, pleasure and utility<sup>1</sup> it is necessary to show that Orpah's is not based on the first but that Ruth's is. The issue that needs to be dealt with is how Orpah is as equally good as Ruth by 'obeying' Naomi whereas Ruth is 'good' because she disobeys her<sup>2</sup>. By shifting the focus of the relationship from kinship to friendship I will show how this contradiction can only be resolved by interpreting these acts in terms of different degrees of friendship and that it is in this way that both are 'good' - only that the requirements of ideal friendship 'impose' a different set of loyalties. As Aristotle says<sup>3</sup>:

The claims of justice differ...Hence the wrongs committed against these several types of friend differ too; and are aggravated in proportion to the degree of intimacy...It is natural that the claims of justice should increase with the intensity of friendship.

In our case, Ruth and Orpah both can be good and loyal only if they differ in their relationship to Naomi on a friendly level since neither can be more or less a daughter-in-law<sup>4</sup>. On the level of friendship however, "loyalties are relational and partial because they arise out of certain ties to which outsiders cannot claim equal treatment with those who are objects of loyal attachment"<sup>5</sup>. From Naomi's point of

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle: "For there is in each case a kind of mutual affection, known to both parties", p. 261

<sup>2</sup>Campbell, p. 82

<sup>3</sup>Aristotle, p. 273

<sup>4</sup>Another level on which Ruth proves to be a better friend will be discussed in chapter four.

<sup>5</sup>George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.8. Fletcher is also influenced by Aristotle's writing on friendship.



view then, Orpah is not betraying her but only acting in accordance with the demands of their relationship. This is why Ruth and Orpah cannot be compared with the same set of criteria i.e. those based on familial ties because Ruth then will always be found to be acting 'in excess'.

In an effort to characterise Orpah as good commentators have laboriously developed a line of argument that considers Orpah's decision equally justifiable, only less inspired compared to Ruth's<sup>6</sup>. There is an inconsistency here that derives from the emphasis on kinship rather than friendship. If both Orpah and Ruth's duty to their mother-in-law only involves obedience then Ruth is illogically admired as loyal since Naomi repeatedly asks both of them to return to 'their mother's house' (1:8-13). If on the other hand their duty is to remain with Naomi then Orpah cannot be good. What seems to be going on here is that a separate set of criteria are set up so that both women are regarded praiseworthy. But this is unnecessary if the point of view shifts to friendship as the defining characteristic. Aristotle allows for a variety friendships all of which are both qualitatively and quantitatively different<sup>7</sup>. The 'obligations' are then different according to the degree of friendship and it is 'ideal' friendship that requires the utmost loyalty. Thus, although Orpah's decision is the opposite of Ruth's it is simply indicative of the lesser loyalty she 'owes' Naomi. Ruth, on the other hand, in her response to the maximal demand of loyalty, stresses her on-going identification with Naomi's interests as her own<sup>8</sup>.

Furthermore, because of the voluntary nature of friendship, good friends are also willing to do all they can for a friend so that the good they desire for the other is also what they are bound by duty to do. Aristotle distinguishes the friendship based

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell, p. 82, Cf. Ozick, p. 202, where Orpah is "normal" and Ruth's act is "singular" because she makes restitution for her husband's abandonment. Why is the value of their actions judged in relation to their husbands?

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, p. 261-263

<sup>8</sup> According to Fletcher, "...the duty of loyalty vacillates between minimal and maximal demands. It is in the latter that the negative act of non-betrayal expands to include affirmative attention and devotion...", p. 40

on goodness as one in which each party is eager to benefit the other<sup>9</sup>. This equal emphasis on desire is important to counter accusations against Ruth that by staying with Naomi she is remaining faithful to her husband's family<sup>10</sup> and therefore to patriarchal order. If her motivations are based on her friendship to Naomi then Chilion, her husband, becomes if not secondary then altogether irrelevant. In any case, as widows, Naomi and Ruth are not bound to male authority in the vows they make<sup>11</sup>.

I am not assuming here that Naomi and Ruth are good friends in order to then prove that their actions are good. What I am interested in doing is twofold. First, to break down the dichotomy between duty and desire in which one is morally good only if one obeys one's duty (against, or irrespective of one's desire)<sup>12</sup>. This Kantian view is in keeping with the false dichotomy between reason and emotion from which emotions are not considered moral phenomena<sup>13</sup>. Second, and as a consequence of the first, I would like to show that Ruth is good because of what she wants - and what she wants is to stay with Naomi. As such she is a unique example in the Hebrew Bible where a woman's voice is expressed in support of another woman. Since friendship is the relationship par excellence where duty and desire coincide, a good friend cannot divorce his/her feelings/desires from his/her obligations<sup>14</sup> and Ruth is not only staying

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, p. 281

<sup>10</sup> See Georg Fohrer, (tr.), David Green, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1974, orig. published 1968), p. 251; Cf. Esther Fuchs, 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', pp. 117-136. Fuchs considers the projection unto women of what men most want - male offspring a "powerful ideological strategy", p. 130. This may be the case in some instances, but there is no mention of children by Ruth.

<sup>11</sup> Paula S. Hiebert, 'Whence Shall Help Come to Me? The Biblical Widow', pp. 125-141, in Day, p. 130. See also Numbers 30: 9: "But any vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, anything by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her." Hiebert also points out the adverse, for women, consequences of the lack of supporting kinship ties.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, in Paton, pp. 60-63, *passim*

<sup>13</sup> See Lawrence A. Blum for a critique of this Kantian view, in *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London and Boston: Routledge, 1980), pp. 169-207

<sup>14</sup> Blum aptly points out that, "concepts of egoism and altruism are misleading in the context of cooperative behaviour" such as friendship, p. 202 in Badhwar

with Naomi out of a sense of duty to her mother-in-law but also from a clear sense of her own needs.

At the very start of the book (1: 8) Ruth and Orpah are commended by Naomi for the kindness they have shown 'the living and the dead'. Later, in 2:11 she is praised by Boaz with reference to the past, and in 3:10 by Boaz concerning the present. The word used is *hesed* and it connotes a mutual kindness characteristic of the closest of human bonds - including friendship - which cannot be defined in terms of legal obligations<sup>15</sup>. The important instances of *hesed* for this section is the first and second since the first is uttered by a person who has intimate knowledge of another over a time span of ten years (Naomi and Ruth) and the second relies on the knowledge of the first reference (Boaz and Ruth). An important nuance in the meaning of *hesed* is that it implies "goodness or kindness...beyond what is expected or deserved, based solely on ready magnanimity toward others"<sup>16</sup>. In this case, what is "expected" of Ruth, the daughter-in-law, is to act as Orpah has, in accordance with Naomi's wishes. That she does not act as a daughter-in-law should is the cause of what commentators see as "excess" and subsequently attempt to justify, as they have (unsuccessfully), within the parameters of kinship obligations. It is only when seen within the parameters of friendship that Ruth's action is not excessive for in ideal friendship the active expression of goodwill (and not only its feeling) is an essential component, for otherwise one would not help the other or go to any trouble for their sake<sup>17</sup>. In this extreme case, Ruth's action is an expression of her desire to remain with Naomi as much as it is an 'obligation' of friendship.

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<sup>15</sup> Zobel, p. 44-64 passim, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. V (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), (tr.), David E Green. This concept is primarily secular but its extension and application to the religious sphere will be discussed in the conclusion.

<sup>16</sup> Zobel is quoting Stoebe, in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, p. 52

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, p. 296

Such a conflation between duty and desire is not only a component of ideal friendship, it is also a factor which becomes most evident in such moments of emotional crisis. Against the injunction to act on the basis of what is most rational, Ruth responds to what is most needed in this context and as such her action seems 'irrational'. This is another example of the inadequacy of the male model of 'ideal' friendship which restricts this relationship to those who have no need for it (!)<sup>18</sup>. Like Naomi, Ruth is acting for the sake of her friend but unlike her, for the sake of their friendship as well. Where Naomi reaches the conclusion that they must part so that at least one benefits, Ruth, prioritises the relationship so that her decision will satisfy her own desires as well as Naomi's. Thus, the falsity of acting from the assumption of autonomy is exposed for its limitations in dealing with such emotional crises (perhaps because it cannot accommodate such considerations)<sup>19</sup>. In this way the violence of separation is avoided and the decision to remain together is not only the correct one but also the most rational (!), in that both Naomi's and Ruth's emotional needs are satisfied.

So it is in this crisis where what Ruth desires for herself coincides with what she must do for Naomi's sake. What makes her 'good' is that she balances her care for Naomi with the care of herself i.e., her interest for Naomi's welfare is not compromised by her choice to remain together. Equally, what is done for the sake of the relationship contributes to what is best for both. What emerges then is the primacy of inter-dependence in ideal friendship in the course of decision making which makes this relationship exceptional. Ruth reliance on such a notion leads her to act wisely and thus do justice to the ideal. The intricacies of this act and how they further support the characterisation of ideal friendship will now be the focus of the following section.

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<sup>18</sup> As Cicero insists, see chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> See Gilligan, *IDV*, p. 172

## ii Naomi and Ruth

How can we discover then that both these women are good to each other? One crucial factor lies in that which each wishes and does for the other. For Aristotle it is not sufficient that each wishes well of each other - though this may later lead to friendship<sup>20</sup>. It is important that one must wish his/her friend's good for his/her own sake and that this well-wishing is mutual and each is aware of the other's feelings<sup>21</sup>. This is an important argument in determining in what way Naomi and Ruth's actions can be better understood as deriving from friendship rather than kinship.

At the beginning of the story we learn that Naomi had spent ten years in Moab - part, or all of these together with Ruth and her other daughter-in-law Orpah. So when the time comes for Naomi to return to the land of Judah it seems natural that her two daughters-in-law are loathe to part from her and their distress at hearing they must part (1: 9,14) indicates a harmonious co-habitation. For her part, Naomi stresses the practical benefits in their parting ways by repeating in three different versions the importance that they find new husbands: (my emphasis)

The Lord grant that you find a home each of you in the house of your husband!...Turn back, my daughters, *why will you go with me?* Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back my daughters go your way,..Even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you refrain from marrying? (1:8-13)

Since the two young women are also widows like Naomi it seems rather superfluous to focus on this fact. Why then does she insist? If we take all these utterances at face value then Naomi appears to be interested in Ruth and Orpah's welfare despite the fact that she herself is still suffering from the loss of her two sons and husband. There is nothing to make the reader suspect that all this is disguised self-interest<sup>22</sup>, and that Naomi is lying out of concern for her own well being and

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, p. 261

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 261

<sup>22</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *JSOT*, p. 181. This argument is supported with reference to five instances where Naomi remains silent in the text. But silence is not necessarily taken to mean repressed anger or frustration. It could equally mean acquiescence or approval.

cloaks this selfishness in an overflow of emotion. Furthermore, if Naomi truly saw Ruth as a liability, her position as mother-in-law gives her the power and authority to insist on distancing herself from a foreign woman who is also a childless widow. On the contrary, Naomi would not openly request Ruth's company which would require her to 'sacrifice' her gods and her community because that is not something good friends do:

...unless he is exceptionally insensitive (a friend) cannot stand the thought of causing them (his friends) pain.

The best time to call friends to one's aid is when they seem likely to do one a great service with little trouble to themselves. Conversely it is probably the proper course to visit friends in misfortune readily, and without waiting to be invited.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, Naomi sees in this situation that for Ruth and Orpah to partake in her grief would result in too great an sacrifice in practical terms. This is not to say that Aristotle opposes the sharing of grief between friends, on the contrary, he acknowledges that grief is lightened when shared because of one's knowledge of a friend's needs. But in these matters it is the duty of the other to approach the grieving friend, "without waiting to be invited, for it is the part of a friend to do kindness, particularly to those who are in need, and have not asked for it; because such a kindness is more creditable and more pleasurable to both parties"<sup>24</sup>. This is precisely how Ruth reacts. In her response she ignores Naomi's triple insistence on their lack of husbands and settles the issue of familiar gods and relatives by readily renouncing her own. The weight of her emotional reaction falls on the last few lines which are, in fact, an answer to the one question of Naomi's that becomes lost in the plethora of complaints: 'Why will you go with me?' (1:11). There are, however, more complicated issues at stake here than this and in order to elucidate them I must turn to Ruth's react

Ruth answers Naomi's questions with an unequivocal pledge to stay with her no matter what difficulties arise: (1:16-17)

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, p. 309 and 310

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 310

Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; and your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.

The last utterance is, in fact, another way of saying that life would be meaningless without Naomi, that without her she would die. Faced with such an extreme situation where Ruth must choose between returning to all that is familiar to her (the easier choice) yet losing Naomi as a consequence, or losing everything else but remaining with her friend, she makes the only decision she *can* live with. To decide on any other course of action would be to deny the anguish of separation which is what Naomi has done inadvertently. Ruth has held up a mirror to Naomi's words and shown them to be a suppression of that which torments her most, and all of Naomi's questions deflect attention from the one that she refuses to answer herself. Ruth's last sentence then is a reminder of that which Naomi, in her attempt to be 'conventionally' good and overwhelmed by the weight of her pain has neglected by delivering a blow that could do more harm than 'good'. Naomi is, in short, acting in 'bad faith' by denying her own needs, misleadingly believing this will benefit the common good - as if their separation would benefit their relationship!

Their dilemma therefore is an existential one - one which Ruth resolves finally by acting in 'good faith'<sup>25</sup>. It is an interesting irony that to act in a way that is integral to one's being is also one that fulfils one's duty to God. This is why Ruth reminds Naomi of her obligation for honest self-reflection by invoking God - in whose name it would be unacceptable to lie. But even if she had not she is still forcing Naomi to focus on the main issue at hand. So although it may seem very noble to think of Ruth

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<sup>25</sup> René Lafarge, *Jean-Paul Sartre: His Philosophy* (tr.) Marina Smyth-Kok (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970) p. 61 Lafarge points out that the "first act of bad faith is to flee what one cannot flee, to flee what one is. And it is this refusal (or our condition, of the freedom and the anguish which constitute us), which constantly imperils our relations with others." Le Doenff exposes the sexism of Sartre's argument by pointing out that in all the examples he sites "the revelation of the lie to oneself always comes about through a dramatization...which is far from neutral and refers back to social relations of domination, hierarchy, or the great ascendancy of one character over another", p. 70-71.

as 'sacrificing' her future for the sake of Naomi's needs she is actually satisfying a fundamental need of her own. From a point of view of traditional ideas of what is good Ruth appears dangerously selfish but as I have already discussed this label is biased in its assumptions of individuality and autonomy. This act secures the future good of both women since by staying together they are fulfilling another requirement of friendship which is that of living together.

According to Aristotle: "when at a distance from each other (people) are not acting as friends and this distance destroys not only the manifestation of friendship but ultimately the friendship itself"<sup>26</sup>. This is especially true for an age which does not have the means of communication available today. So although Naomi, as we have mentioned, is adhering to one requirement of friendship at the same time she is denying the basic principles that sustain it and without which all other actions become meaningless. This omission on her part is justifiable not only in the light of all the losses she has suffered but also in human condition of denying that which pains us the most. Naomi herself admits the range and depth of her anguish by not wanting to impart any to her friend and by being torn at the same time by conflicting voices - in such circumstances it is easy to lose contact with the voice that matters the most.

They are both then stating to each other the absolute need to remain together and such a choice made - in 'good faith' - is later shown to produce positive repercussions in every area of life as they are rewarded not only by the community but also by God. Furthermore, it would be misleading to assume that Ruth had already renounced her old identity or future possibility of marriage and children<sup>27</sup> because there was no need to make such a choice before this moment in time. When faced

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<sup>26</sup> Here I am using F. H. Peters's translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Kegan Paul, 1893), p. 261 because the language in Thomson's is less striking, Cf.: "...because distance does not break off a friendship absolutely but only in its active realisation. However, if the absence lasts for a long time it does seem to cause forgetfulness even of the friendship", p. 266. Cf. Grock: "οἱ γὰρ τόποι οὐ διαλύουσι τὴν φιλίαν ἀπλῶς, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐνεργεῖαν. ἐὰν δὲ χρόνιος ἡ ἀπουσία γίνηται, καὶ τῆς φιλίας δοκεῖ λήθην ποιεῖν."

<sup>27</sup> Ilona Rashkav, 'Ruth: The discourse of power and the power of discourse', pp. 26-41, in Brenner, p. 31-2



with the possibility of a life without the Naomi she readily decides to relegate those factors which are ultimately replaceable to a secondary position.

So it is Ruth and not (only) Naomi who 'has no choice'<sup>28</sup> in deciding to remain together and this is because of the nature of 'freedom' that she exercises. It is not the male defined freedom of the 'lonely will'<sup>29</sup> (based on a 'dispassionate' reason dissociated from concrete reality) which motivates Ruth but a freedom exercised within the context of the reality she perceives<sup>30</sup> i.e. the extreme need Naomi experiences. In the first chapter's 'no-man's land' where the women are not subject to patriarchal rules, they are 'free' to act as they will. Were they to act out of duty to their respective husbands how is it that both Orpah and Ruth act properly by taking opposite decisions? Again they are acting/reacting not only to the circumstances that befall them but also with regard to the relationships that these decisions will affect. As Murdoch says: "We act rightly 'when the time comes'...out of the quality of our usual attachments and with the kind of energy and discernment which we have available"<sup>31</sup>. This is especially true in ideal friendship where time has cemented the ties so that "in crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over"<sup>32</sup>. In this respect, choosing freely coincides with choosing out of necessity<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Many commentators assume this is the case, see for example, Jack M. Sasson, 'Ruth', pp. 320-327, in (eds.), Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987), p. 323

<sup>29</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 36 Murdoch criticises this existentialist idea as well as the concept of 'total determinism'.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. Murdoch stressed that this kind of freedom is a moral concept. Thus, this adds another element to the virtue of the protagonists.

<sup>31</sup> Murdoch adds: "The moral life is something that goes on continually not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices". Ruth then is acting consistently with her moral goodness and with the nature of her closer - compared to Orpah - relationship to Naomi, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39, for Murdoch this is the ideal situation. She goes on to say that this is "a notion of the will as obedience to reality, an obedience which ideally reaches a position where there is no choice", p. 41. I would like to add that this is more pointed in extreme situations and more frequent with respect to more intimate relations.

and once again the opposition between duty and desire collapses. What Ruth decides to do out of friendship is also the only thing she *can* do. Again here we have Naomi and Ruth's relationship shown as compatible with the demands of friendship but at the same time the constituent parts of this friendship are re-defined from a women's perspective which posits inter-dependency and response to emotional need as the determining factors when taking action. Thus it is *their* friendship which fulfills the ideal because of the moral excellence expressed by both in the deep and genuine regard each shows for the other's good<sup>34</sup>.

But there is another point to stress in establishing Naomi's virtue. For Aristotle the friendship in which each loves one another for himself/herself is only possible between good people<sup>35</sup>. In other words Ruth - who is universally accepted as 'good' by traditional interpreters but also as I have shown from a feminist perspective - could not possibly incur losing everything she has known or hopes to have for someone who is not as equally virtuous as herself. Her previous co-existence with Naomi has provided her with enough evidence to base such a recognition on.

I am not asserting that her marrying again is not a concern but only that these issues are not of *immediate* concern to her. Again, to applaud such an attitude and to say as one commentator does, that in this decision and all further decisions, "Ruth, even in the sphere of her most private desires has subordinated everything to her husband's family"<sup>36</sup> is to be presumptuous. Even supposing we knew what Ruth's most private desires were her words at the beginning of the narrative focus only on her desire to remain with Naomi. This is where I locate Ruth's uniqueness - in her clarity of purpose and the potency of her desire.

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<sup>34</sup> Blum goes on to say that "...the deeper and stronger the concern for the friend - the stronger the desire and willingness to act on behalf of the friend's good - the greater the degree of moral worth", in Badhwar, p. 192

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, p. 263 and 267

<sup>36</sup> McKane, p. 22

Where modern views reject such a positive interpretation it is because they place the emphasis again on the mother-in-law to daughter-in-law relationship as one on whose success the man's household depends<sup>37</sup>. In fact David Jobling considers the message of Ruth to be just that<sup>38</sup>. The assumption here is that the two women's actions are only adhering to laws that benefit the perpetuation of patriarchal order without allowing the possibility of a woman's voice. But Naomi is not obliged to take Ruth with her. Her age and status supply her with the power to enforce *her* will if only on another woman. If on the other hand Naomi is responding to a friend (as I will further discuss in the next chapter) then her age and status are not factors that contribute to inequality. In other words, Naomi's decision signifies a respect for Ruth that transcends the differences in these two respects.

### iii Equality

This brings us to another crucial factor in establishing Naomi and Ruth's relationship as an ideal friendship and that is the issue of 'equality in giving' because this is another factor Aristotle stresses as a necessary condition of friendship<sup>39</sup>. In this case also, I will show that the equality and reciprocity that characterises their relationship is one qualitatively different to the one Aristotle refers to. On the surface, there are two obstacles against Ruth (I will consider her foreignness as a factor in the next chapter): she is younger, and childless. Of the two, only the first seems to be a real obstacle in that it is a factor that cannot be altered. Though she is a daughter-in-law, she is still not a daughter (that Naomi addresses her as such I will suggest in the next chapter is a term of endearment) which in Aristotle's terms would require a whole different set of obligations. He states that what each gives to the other cannot be the same and

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<sup>37</sup> David Jobling, 'Ruth finds a Home: Canon, Politics, Method', pp. 125-139 in Brenner, p. 133

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 134 "The virilocal system, summarised in the triangle of the head of household, his wife and his surviving mother, is more important than mere fertility, which any system achieves".

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, pp. 269-70. Cicero does not agree on this point because he supports a more generous expression of beneficence between friends, p. 55

should not be because parents have given their children the gift of life<sup>40</sup>. Nevertheless, there is a possibility for a lasting friendship as long as the child/younger person returns the love received. In this case, as I mentioned in the beginning, Naomi's gift to Ruth - even though she has not given birth to her - is nevertheless the gift of life, a child, and a gift which Ruth must repay if equality (of giving) is to be re-established. But Aristotle is quick to point out that the love returned in relationships based on inequality should be proportional in terms of 'quantity' i.e. the more needy one should give more than he/she has received<sup>41</sup>. This means that Ruth would have to give even more than what she had received which, in this case, is impossible. What is possible however, is a re-defining of 'equality' so that the realisation of reciprocity is possible.

In this scheme, Naomi seems to be the superior one to whom Ruth must perpetually 'give'. As their action in deciding to remain together shows, this is not the case, nor is it in the rest of the story. Ruth's generosity as we have seen is linked to caring for Naomi in her state of mourning, which, once over, results in Naomi's re-appearance in public space. But it is also linked with the need to equally show the kindness that Naomi - despite her distraught state - has shown to Ruth. This would also explain the constant emphasis on Ruth's generosity towards Naomi (2:18, 3:17 - both examples of nourishment, not only for the body but also for the mind!) she is eager to bridge the gap created at the beginning of the book. If Naomi were actually the superior one in the relationship this could never be accomplished. Interestingly enough Aristotle singles out parents and the gods as instances where one can never repay all that is due and so should only strive for what "lies in his power"<sup>42</sup>. In Ruth's

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 270

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 272

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 288

case what transpires is the possibility of finally 'repaying' her debt in full because of her ambiguous (official) position as daughter-in-law.

Her first step in this direction is when she decides to go and glean in Boaz's field and asks Naomi: "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favour" (2:2). She returns to Naomi with the gift of food and news of what transpired. To belittle the practical nature of their exchanges until the final success of their plan is to underestimate not only the difficulty in carrying out such a plot but also the intelligence of the women who devised it. The scene where Ruth approaches Boaz on the threshing floor could have easily gone wrong if it were not for Naomi's knowledge of decorum and Ruth's ability to carry out directions. So whereas Naomi supplies the necessary knowledge Ruth exhibits resourcefulness in carrying out directions so that the wisdom of both women is pooled to the best effect. That they are not part of the dominant male order is a reality they know all too well. If they were not subordinate there would be no need to go about manoeuvring in the dark in order to secure their place in its hierarchy<sup>43</sup>. The significance of their combined effort at the theoretical and practical level is that it "goes beyond the eudemonia of a single, isolated, individual"<sup>44</sup>. In this way, Naomi and Ruth's actions express the supreme commitment of ideal friendship which at the same time stresses the importance of inter-dependence that makes its realisation possible.

Friends are considered to be of one mind where practical matters are involved, meaning that solutions are not only "made in agreement but are produced under the same conditions" and as Aristotle concludes "friends wish what is just and for the common interest, and make united efforts to obtain it"<sup>45</sup>. What they both want in this

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<sup>43</sup> Maria Varsamopoulou, 'Women in the Old Testament and the Language of Subordination' unpublished essay, University of Lancaster, 1991

<sup>44</sup> Sherman, in Badhwar, p. 99

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, p. 298

case is a secure, shared future which can only be accomplished if Boaz agrees to marry Ruth and this cannot be accomplished by Ruth alone. Whether or not the custom of levirate marriage was linked with redemption<sup>46</sup> and this was the motive behind the actions of either one would mean that the friendship was based on profit and would end as soon as one ceased to be useful for the other<sup>47</sup>.

As for Ruth's offering of food to Naomi, it has nothing to do with Boaz being a suitable redeemer<sup>48</sup> because her main priority is to remain with Naomi - everything else - husband, children or land is important but secondary, and only a means to an end. When Ruth reports to Naomi the night after her 'encounter' with Boaz and states: "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'You should not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law'"(3:17), she is mainly interested in caring for Naomi's needs. Whether Boaz himself actually meant this<sup>49</sup> or Ruth made it up, it still remains an indication that their common welfare is at the uppermost of her mind<sup>50</sup>. Naomi's priority also is to remain for if she did not want this 'attachment' to Ruth, she need not have sent her to a kinsman of her own. Where Naomi facilitates Ruth's acquiring a husband then, Ruth delivers Naomi her lost property - an equal exchange is accomplished.

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<sup>46</sup> Commentators are in disagreement over this. For example, McKane sees this issue as a "central one". See also Mieke Bal in 'Heroism and Proper Names, or the Fruits of Analogy' p. 42-69 in Brenner, p. 59: "The tension between the two laws is inherent in the two domains they cover, which are not unrelated: the law of the possession of land; levirate law concerns posterity. These two aspects constitute history. That they do is exactly one of the messages that the Book of Ruth, where they are constantly mixed, delivers".

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, p. 262. He calls these friendships 'accidental'.

<sup>48</sup> Sasson, 'Ruth', in (eds.), Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987) p. 326. Sasson seems to think she does.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Esther Fuchs in 'Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism', pp1 137-144, in Collins, who argues that "...women in the Old Testament are not punished for their deceptive acts as long as they are shown to enhance male power", pp. 141-2. This assumes however that Ruth's motivation is to remain faithful to Naomi - the representative of her late husband rather than Naomi the woman/friend, herself.

To say that these changes of initiative and role are not adequately grounded in the narrative<sup>51</sup> relies again on the assumption that their relationship is primarily a familial one. It does not matter that Naomi "never praises her"<sup>52</sup> because this is not of much consequence. What matters - and is of consequence - is that one helps another for the other's sake<sup>53</sup>. Nor is it problematic for Naomi herself that Ruth is a Maobitess - she is merely aware that it could be a hindrance if they settled in Judah. It is the other characters in the story and the commentators of today that project this complication unto the two women's relationship<sup>54</sup>. Nowhere in Bethlehem does Naomi herself refer to Ruth's foreignness and it is mostly within theological interpretations that this concern surfaces as one which has to be explained<sup>55</sup>. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Ruth's identity is to be considered within her relationship to Naomi.

As the narrative moves towards resolution we see that Ruth is universally accepted as a virtuous woman and worthy of becoming 'officially' part of the community. When she produces a son the last act in her efforts to remain with Naomi is complete. She has returned a 'life' (her own) for a 'life' (a child) in this final gift and has refunded in full her 'debt' to Naomi thus re-establishing equality in the relationship. The equality established is on two levels: first, the rebalancing of the inequality at the beginning of the narrative - but not the beginning of their relationship. Second, it is also the equality established in the public sphere since Ruth is also now a mother. In this aspect the narrative is linear: a resolution is achieved

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<sup>51</sup> Athalya Brenner 'solves' this 'problem' by supporting a folklorist theory which brings together two different women's stories into one, in 'Naomi and Ruth', pp. 70-84, in Brenner, p. 74

<sup>52</sup> Zefira Gitay, in 'Naomi and Ruth', p. 178-190, in Brenner. Gitay sees Ruth as trying to win the favour of Naomi and thus the title of the book reflects a criticism of her inflexibility, p. 186

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, p. 293

<sup>54</sup> Gitay, p. 180

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, p. 82: "What makes Ruth a true Israelite is that she, like others in the story who are generically Israelites *behaves* like one (emphasis mine). Is this comment an attempt to 'apologise' for difference, or is loyalty, love and friendship a prerogative of certain races only?"

which changes both women's status - both 'become' mothers - and security replaces insecurity, happiness replaces despair. At the same time, as Phyllis Tribic has pointed out<sup>56</sup>, the narrative is circular: these actions lead us to the beginning of the story, where Naomi and Ruth shared a household. According to Aristotle, this is another characteristic of friendship: "There is nothing more desirable than (friends) spending their lives together"<sup>57</sup>.

The fact that the child is given over to Naomi and proclaimed as hers has been seen by many as problematic. Athalya Brenner asks the appropriate question: In what way do these women belong together, so much that one is nothing without the other? She answers it by applying Propp's categories of functions in folklorist stories and thus concludes that Naomi and Ruth are two aspects of one person: The younger fertile woman and her aged, barren, counterpart<sup>58</sup>. However, in perfect friendship this degree of identification is not considered implausible but necessary: "The good man...extends to his friend the same relation that he has towards himself (for a friend *is* another self)"<sup>59</sup>. If what Naomi and Ruth desire most is a common life then it is hardly a point of contention whether the son belongs to the former or the latter, because in fact, it belongs to both; it is surely an important issue for patrilineage<sup>60</sup> but this is outside Naomi's and Ruth's immediate concerns.

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<sup>56</sup> For Tribic this circular design "bespeaks a feminist content", p. 180

<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, p.310

<sup>58</sup> Brenner, p. 73 In this exegesis Brenner is trying to "smooth out the inconsistencies in the narrative". Although I do not see such 'hindrances' even if they existed I do not agree with this effort to homogenise the narrative. She sees as chief difficulties in the joining process: (see p. 81) a) the exchange of roles and dominant positions, b) a tension underlying the motherhood of either of both, c) the redemption problem - who is being redeemed? I am not convinced by any of these since they are easily resolved by placing the emphasis on friendship.

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, p. 294

<sup>60</sup> For example, André LaCocque in *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), on p. 85 he states that "Boaz's admiration for Ruth is based on her unselfish efforts to perpetuate the Israelite name even though she is a Moabitess". How this is supposed to make Ruth a subversive figure is sadly unconvincing.



## Conclusion

That Naomi and Ruth are inter-dependent is evident where winning over Boaz is concerned. Without Ruth, Naomi could not put the plan into action and without Naomi there would be no kinsman to appeal to. It would be erroneous to see Naomi as putting Ruth at risk by sending her to the fields without warning because of a supposed personal prejudice towards foreigners or a hidden guilt at her sons marrying outside their culture<sup>61</sup>. As a good woman and a good friend, Naomi would not consciously desire to harm Ruth. When Ruth arrives at the field Boaz is told how generously she has behaved towards her mother-in-law (2:11). Who could be the original source of such praise but Naomi herself? As Aristotle points out: "...it is only the friendship of the good that is proof against slander"<sup>62</sup>. Would Ruth venture into foreign territory if she suspected her actions to be undermined by Naomi? If so, this would be equating Ruth's goodness with an equal lack of intelligence<sup>63</sup>. And even if Naomi were mostly concerned with 'keeping up' appearances why would she then further support a plan that would ultimately and permanently bring their lives together once again in a common household? These questions can only be satisfactorily and consistently answered if Naomi and Ruth are motivated by their friendship.

As I have shown, this is a women's model of friendship which questions and re-defines the qualities of rational action by autonomous beings which an androcentric perspective advocates by assuming, instead, connection and inter-dependence and proposing the inclusion of emotional need when decision making is called for. What is left is to discuss what this entails at the level of identity and how Naomi and Ruth's friendship redefines Aristotle's notion of the friend as 'another self'.

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<sup>61</sup> Fewell and Gunn, pp. 103-4 passim

<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, p. 265

<sup>63</sup> D.F. Rauber, 'Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth', pp. 27-37 in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. LXXXIX, 1970. Rauber seems to believe this: "Ruth, in her enormous and touching innocence has understood very little", p. 32

## Chapter 4

### The friend as 'another self'

(ἄλλος αὐτός)

I would like to discuss in this chapter Aristotle's notion of the friend as 'another self'. As I have already suggested the concept of 'self' is one that differs not only in relation to present definitions but especially in relation to women's experience<sup>2</sup>. When I use the words 'self' and 'identity' I am not thinking of an essential, rational, or universal (male-neutral) concept but a non-essential, emotional as well as rational, constructed entity which in the context of friendship finds its fullest expression. I am going to begin by foregrounding the line of reasoning behind Aristotle's phrase with particular emphasis on its implications for women's identity within relationships. The question of what is 'like' among friends and keeps them together is linked to what is 'different' and therefore allows for two people to remain in a close friendship without losing their own uniqueness. This is particularly important for accusations concerning Ruth's renouncing her 'identity' for her mother-in-law's sake.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that since Ruth's relationship to Naomi is an integral part of her 'self' i.e. her life, she would be giving up more were she to sever this tie. Furthermore, I will be referring to Carol Gilligan's work on moral development to illustrate that friendship - one that encompasses equality, mutuality, and a common life - is the ideal topos for these characteristics to find full fruition. Finally, I will develop a link between 'ideal friendship' and the 'relational self' which provide a model for a non-violent, non-

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<sup>1</sup>Bacon uses the same phrase, p. 144; Montaigne re-phrases: "The unique, highest friendship loosens all other bonds...he is me". p. 215

<sup>2</sup>For a clear summary and feminist critique of the history of the 'male, autonomous, modernist' subject, see Susan J. Heckman, *Moral Voices Moral Selves, Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1995), pp. 71-112

<sup>3</sup>Esther Fuchs accuses Ruth of sacrificing "her own freedom and identity in order to perpetuate the identity of her late husband and father-in-law", p. 118, footnote 4, in 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,' pp. 117-136 in Collins. I have already discussed why Ruth is acting on her own free will, I will also argue against the claim that she is giving up her identity.

biased community where responsibility and care for others is not obstructed by individual differences.

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Aristotle's 'ἄλλος αὐτός' is first mentioned in Book Nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he compares a man's relation to his friend with his relation to himself<sup>4</sup>:

...(for it is the mark of a good man to direct his energies to what is good) and he does so for his own sake (for he does it on account of the intellectual part of him, which is held to be the self of the individual). Also he desires his own life and safety, especially that of his rational part;...And it would seem that the thinking part is or most nearly is, the individual self...Thus it is because the good man has these several feelings towards himself, and extends to his friend the same relation that he has towards himself (for a friend is another self/ἔστι γὰρ ὁ φίλος ἄλλος αὐτός), that friendship is regarded as one of the said feelings, and friends as those to whom these feelings apply.<sup>5</sup>

This summary encompasses two considerations: the theoretical and the practical. On the one hand, Aristotle sees the "essential human self as noetic"<sup>6</sup> and to be fully oneself human beings must fulfil their rational capabilities, i.e. they are to identify with their *nous*<sup>7</sup>. It is in recognising another person as equally fully rational that two friends are alike. Failure in this area means that one cannot be loved in himself. We have already seen why this is problematic for women<sup>8</sup>. Since Aristotle considers the rational/ thinking faculty as the 'essential part' of oneself, i.e. the part

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<sup>4</sup>Aristotle p. 293-4

<sup>5</sup>Cicero disagrees with this pronouncement because he explains that there are times when one does not treat himself well but is capable of treating his friend rationally, p. 55. Nevertheless, he agrees with Aristotle that "...a true friend...is...another self", p. 65

<sup>6</sup>Gillet, p. 35

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 41

<sup>8</sup>It is not enough to say as Nancy Chodorow does, that "because the self is constructed in a relational matrix and includes aspects of the other, it can better recognise the other as a self, and, ultimately attain the inter-subjectivity that creates society". It is necessary to delineate under what conditions this is promoted and what 'self' it is to be recognised. See 'Toward a Relational Individualism' p. 204 in (eds.) Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David E. Wellbery, *Reconstructing Individualism, Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 197-207

one identifies with, then women - defined by emotion, and their friendships fall short of this requirement. Also, if Aristotle employs the term 'another self' in order to further support his belief in self-sufficiency, i.e. if by "internalising what appears to be the irreducible alterity of the friend" he buttresses the idea of the virtuous person's lack of dependence on external factors<sup>9</sup> then this phrase cannot represent friendship as a relationship in which two separate but different 'selves' come together. If love and knowledge are bound together in friendship then "to overlook differences is ultimately to obscure an awareness of self"<sup>10</sup> as well as the other. If the defining characteristic of identity ceases to be limited to reason alone then actions deriving from friendship can be revalued from a more holistic perspective where differences of opinion on intellectual matters do not necessarily warrant a dissolution of the relationship.

Furthermore, the idea of the 'other' as a mirror to one's own virtue implies, as Carol Gilligan writes, "a self defined in terms of separation although it is placed in a context of relationships"<sup>11</sup>. This formulation of a 'separate self' is, according to Gilligan, not only foreign to most women's concept of relationships, it is also, in my opinion, in contrast to the demands of a feminist conceptualisation of ideal friendship in which inclusion of difference is paramount. As Gilligan points out, the central framework within which identity is formed is dialogue rather than mirroring: "the self is defined by gaining perspective, and known by experiencing engagement with others"<sup>12</sup>. Thus the configuration of identity, relationship and moral action brings us to the second of Aristotle's claims in relation to his 'friend as another self'.

With regard to practical matters, Aristotle states:

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<sup>9</sup>Gillet, p. 15

<sup>10</sup>Nancy Sherman, 'Aristotle on 'The Shared Life'', in Badhwar, p. 107. The idea that 'love is knowledge of the individual' is Iris Murdoch's, see *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 28. Murdoch does not talk about friendship but her example is of the relationship between a mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law (!).

<sup>11</sup>Gilligan, p. 240, 'RMD'

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 250

Thus concord is concerned with practical ends, and among these only with such as are important, and can be achieved by both parties, or by the whole body of citizens....For the fact that they have the same thought does not mean that the two parties are in concord no matter what it is; the thought must be in relation to the same object...

This sort of concord is found among good men, because they are in accord both with themselves and with one another, having (broadly speaking) the same outlook...and they wish for what is just and advantageous, and also pursue these objects in common.<sup>13</sup>

This second condition has important consequences for moral action. The choice of a friend - not only at first instance but as an ongoing choice - is primarily moral in its formation and then in its cultivation<sup>14</sup>. So then friendship is a relationship which two people jointly 'become each other's self' by each other's example and practice of doing good - not only for each other but to all. That is, the recognition - on an emotional level and not merely rational - that another person is also involved in friendships entails deferential treatment towards everyone - whether friends or not. And this is a process accomplished by example. If the emphasis is on practice, and apprehension of the other's particular virtue is seen to include emotion as well as reason only then can it be said that ideal friendship meets the conditions of intimacy, mutuality and equality of virtue like no other human bond. It also means that ideal friendship is the privileged topos for treating the other always as an end and never only as a means<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, it is not only on the basis of reason that this is enacted, on the contrary, knowledge of the potential emotional harm one can cause - and its widespread consequences - is equally important 'data' to consider<sup>16</sup>.

There is a responsibility here for one to respond to another's need that attends to the other's particularity in a way that Aristotle's identifying the self solely with the

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<sup>13</sup>Aristotle p. 297 and 298

<sup>14</sup>Gillet, p. 57. Gillet sees this as a "signal of concordance between reason, passion and desire". I can agree with the first and third but cannot see how equal importance is given to passion in Aristotle's view of friendship.

<sup>15</sup>Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law* (tr.) H.J. Paton, (London: Routledge, 1948), p. 91

<sup>16</sup>Lawrence Blum considers the "level of caring itself which primarily determines the level of moral value in the friendship," p. 199, "Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon" pp. 192-210 in Badhwar.

rational renders inadequate<sup>17</sup>. One loves one's friend because one knows him/her in a way strangers or lesser friends do not and this enables him/her to respond more effectively in different situations. When this kind of care is mutual then "the process of coming to know others...implies the possibility of generating new knowledge and transforming the self in the experience of relationship"<sup>18</sup>. Needless to say, the sole identification with another's 'rational' self is inadequate for such a process<sup>19</sup>. Connection on an emotional level is equally important if positive identification is to take place. The point of reference for judging and acting then becomes the relationship between the two friends. It is within this context of mutual development that I would like to look at the relationship between Naomi and Ruth<sup>20</sup>.

## ii

What needs to be established then is the grounds on which Naomi and Ruth are each other's 'self' without however, subjecting them exclusively to Aristotle's sole criterion of rationality. In terms of practical matters I have already shown how Naomi and Ruth prove that they are capable of acting both rationally and in response to their own as well as each other's emotional needs. To carefully plan and execute a course of action which would end their poverty and secure them with a place in society is not a simple matter considering the precautions needed to ensure that they do not appear to be acting 'out of bounds'. In this respect alone, Naomi and Ruth provide an example of rational behaviour which would easily 'pass' the test of its practical applicability.

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<sup>17</sup>He is not alone in doing so. In terms of friendship, Kant also agreed that: "the most fundamental, and the most precious element in friendship - the very core of friendship - is the free intercourse of mind with mind." This does not however imply the inclusion of emotional matters. See H.J. Paton, 'Kant on Friendship', p. 133-149 in Badhwar, p. 142

<sup>18</sup>Gilligan, 'RMD' p. 240

<sup>19</sup>For a critique of the notion of reason which is opposed to "desire, affectivity and need" as well as its consequences for the notion of alterity see Young, pp. 60-63

<sup>20</sup>It appears here that I am privileging the practical application of reason - albeit in a revised form - to the first, more contemplative definition. As it is beyond the scope of my thesis to elaborate on the nuances of Aristotle's thought in this area, see Jonathan Barnes's discussion in his Introduction to Aristotle's *NE*, pp. 9-43, esp. pp. 38-39

What remains to be seen is whether the maxim 'the friend is another self' can be applied to Naomi and Ruth despite their differences in age, ethnicity and religion. My aim is to show that it is possible for a friend to be 'another self' without this 'self' being limited to the 'like' beings Aristotle supports. I will also show that the concepts of 'similarities' and 'differences' must also be reconsidered so that they are not limited to disembodied intellectual exchanges. What Naomi and Ruth share, beyond a combined, rational/practical effort to achieve what they desire, is also an awareness of the similar societal/patriarchal forces that have acted upon them and have contributed to their identification at an emotional level. They share a commitment to a web of relationships - including their own, special friendship - which they prioritise and refuse to compromise. Finally, the differences they bring to their relationship and to the society they find themselves in, are utilised for the common good, as a source of strength rather than division.

If friends are brought together by similarity of virtue and interests then what can be said of Naomi and Ruth's 'differences' seem to outweigh the similarities they share? At the same time, one of the most important similarities of ideal friendship - moral virtue - has been shown to be a common trait but can this be enough to claim that one is 'another self' to the other? I will first claim that not only are these differences not marked in the text but neither would be they be in a contemporary context<sup>21</sup>. Second, I will show that even greater similarities lie in an area usually overlooked - that of gender. What binds them at the level of gender I will show is more significant than any 'differences' they may have. Yet, as I will suggest, even the differences themselves are part of an ongoing dialogue characterised by equality, equity and care.

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<sup>21</sup>I am saying that it is again necessary to refrain from imposing our contemporary assumptions on the text since in the case of women's past lives the data are incomplete. See Carol Meyers, 'Everyday life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible,' pp. 244-251 in *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

First, the difference in age between Naomi and Ruth is not shown to hinder the women in any way - in fact it is a complementary factor<sup>22</sup> both at a practical level and an emotional one. Since Naomi is not only older but also in mourning, Ruth takes upon herself the initiative of offering to work in the fields: "Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain"(2: 2). Thus, Naomi is left in the security of their home while Ruth ventures into the outside world of strangers, without, nevertheless being told to do so by Naomi but out of concern for the older woman's well-being. In this case it is quite possible that the age difference is not more than fifteen years and the domestic skills required of both are more similar than different<sup>23</sup>. Yet what could have become a serious 'difference' and a source of conflict in the division of labour is used positively so that their friendship profits rather than suffers from it. In the text itself, there is no mention of Ruth's ignorance of working in the fields, in fact, in 2:17, she seems to know exactly what is involved: "So she gleaned in the fields until evening; then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley". She is able thus to help Naomi with the harder, outdoor work while the domestic duties are carried out by the older woman.

The status factor - that Naomi has been a mother - which accompanies the difference in age, is equally less a hindrance and more an aid<sup>24</sup> as Naomi better understands the codes of behaviour particular to that society. Because of Naomi's greater wisdom and knowledge of her society, she is able to function as a valuable advisor to Ruth's youth and ignorance of that particular community. In particular, as

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<sup>22</sup>Campbell estimates between 10 to 15 years difference, p. 67

<sup>23</sup>Historically, because of the age limit of marriage the differences in terms of domestic duties in the wider area of Palestine are minimal. See Meyers, in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, pp. 244-251. She adds that "many more female tasks involved skill, experience and planning" p. 248. In any case these factors are extrinsic to the text. On the issue of women's history, see Jo Ann Hackett, 'In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel', pp. 17-22 in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles, (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985)

<sup>24</sup>This stands as an exception to the paradox Cheryl Exum points out for women who play crucial roles in the Bible but are rarely major characters in 'Mother in Israel: A Familiar Figure Reconsidered' pp. 73-85, in Russell, p. 85



a woman of greater experience, she is in a position to advise Ruth on how to prepare for her visit at the threshing floor: (3:3-4)

Wash...anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down;

It is advice Ruth readily accepts and by understanding the necessity of such tactics she is not only acknowledging Naomi's greater wisdom but also their common subordinate position within patriarchal society. For if they were not clearly subordinate as women, they would have no need of conducting their affairs surreptitiously. As Dale Spender explains, women are required to know the reality of the dominant group and how to operate within it since "in patriarchal order male reality has usually been posited as the only reality"<sup>25</sup>. In this way, Naomi and Ruth not only use their rational faculties to improve their situation, they use reason to undermine the rules they did not set but are obliged to follow in order to manipulate reality to their own advantage. Where age and status then might be seen as too great a difference in the Aristotelian model, here, in the example of Naomi and Ruth, it is an asset which contributes to the common good.

This brings me to a consideration of the women's common 'outsider' status and on the possibility of their sharing a common 'truth' as C. S. Lewis defines it<sup>26</sup>. Lewis phrases the question of "Do you see the same truth" or "Do you care about the same truth?" as an important one to consider in the case of similarities in ideal friendship. What I would like to propose is that Naomi and Ruth share a condition which, although related to gender, is defined by their common status as foreigners. Ruth is not alone in being the only foreigner in Judah - Naomi herself has become an outsider and this is partly signalled by the reactions of others and partly by her own actions.

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<sup>25</sup>Dale Spender, *Man-Made Language* (London: Pandora, 1990, first published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980), p. 90

<sup>26</sup>Lewis, p. 82

When the women of Judah first see her and ask "Is this Naomi?" (1:19) the reasons are not made explicit though I would suggest that the lack of recognition on their part is partly motivated by Naomi's state of mourning but also partly because of her acquired 'foreignness'. Equally, Naomi's retreat into the private sphere - only to emerge again for the important occasion of Ruth's giving birth to a child - has to do with her mourning and her alienation from a society she has not been a part of for at least ten years. Her ten year residence in Moab has placed her in the unique position of comprehending Ruth's status in a way no one else can.

Notwithstanding the fact that not all women can be said to have their common gender as a source of identification and resistance there remains the possibility of individual instances where this is made explicit since gender is also a construction whose common denominator is patriarchal oppression. In the 'no-man's' land of the scene of departure Naomi and Ruth's decision to rely on each other for a source of strength and nurturance is an instance of female bonding unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible. Just as Naomi has lived as a foreigner in Moab, so will Ruth now become a foreigner in Judah. The answer to the question "do we share the same truth" is yes - to the primacy of their friendship above all other relationships. This mutual voluntary positioning on the periphery of society gives the two women a common point of reference which only they fully apprehend<sup>27</sup>. Again, Ruth's foreignness is not an obstacle in her friendship with Naomi, it is only constituted as such by contemporary interpreters<sup>28</sup> as well as the other characters in the text who are the real 'outsiders' - to the women's friendship.

To illustrate this point textually I will need to point out the juxtaposition between Naomi and Ruth's behaviour in the public and private sphere. In both public

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<sup>27</sup>According to Paula S. Hiebert, the Hebrew widow, 'almana,' like the 'ger' (sojourner, stranger, resident alien) existed on the fringes of society.: "Unlike the 'ger,' the 'almana' lived in this liminal zone as a woman. Not only was she bereft of kin, but she was also without a male who ordinarily provided a woman with access to the public sphere", in Day, p. 130

<sup>28</sup>Amy-Jill Levine, 'Ruth' p. 79 in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 78-84. Levine calls Ruth's background a 'stigma'.

appearances Naomi does not address herself to Ruth - thus pre-empting the biased response of the community she knows well and wisely waits until Ruth herself wins their favour, (perhaps in the same manner Naomi herself was obliged to do in Moab?). Furthermore, in all cases of private exchanges, Naomi addresses herself to Ruth by saying 'my daughter' - for a total of six times!<sup>29</sup> Why such secrecy? Because in a world where both are designated 'other' making their alliance to each other public would be foolish and catastrophic<sup>30</sup>. And just as Ruth remains till the end 'the Moabites' Naomi refuses to engage in dialogue with any man publicly - her complaints are restricted to the women who inhabit the same social space. The suppression of their alliance from the public eye - until they have achieved all they have planned - parallels the suppression of their story at the narrative level. Once in Judah, the public sphere of work and male justice take precedence over their lives (especially in chapters three and four) ending with a genealogy which is not directly relevant at a textual level since it does not further the plot in any way.

As to the other characters identifying Ruth consistently as a Moabites (in 2:2, 2:6, 2: 21, 4:5, and 4:10) a feminist position needs to be consistent. We cannot lament the 'loss' of Ruth's identity and at the same time find fault with her 'failure' at total integration. Nor can we support difference without allowing integration because integration does not automatically imply assimilation<sup>31</sup>. Ruth cannot be called anything other than 'Moabites' because despite 'converting' to Judaism, she has not erased all that has contributed to the formation of her own identity from one day to the

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<sup>29</sup>Beattie points out that the number six was said to have prophetic significance and that Jewish exegetes agree that "Ruth was to be the ancestress of six men who would each be blessed with six blessings...the spirit of wisdom and discernment, counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord". Unfortunately, this consensus refers to the six measures of grains Boaz gives to Ruth and Ruth then gives to Naomi, overlooking the six clandestine pronouncements of endearment. I propose this is another instance where the praise is proper but the emphasis is misplaced. Here again Ruth and Naomi provide hints of their real alliance against interpreters who want them only concerned with marriage and property, p. 182

<sup>30</sup>Such mutual trust is, according to Lawrence Thomas, one of the three salient features of 'companion' friendship: "because the bond is cemented by equal self-disclosure and as such, a sign of special regard each has for each other", in 'Friendship and Other Loves', pp. 48-64 in Badhwar, p. 49

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Levine, p. 79 and Fuchs, p. 118 as aforementioned.

next. Ruth herself signals this when she identifies herself as a foreigner in 2:10: "Why have I found favour in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" The important point is that Ruth's different ethnic origin does not stand as an obstacle to her friendship with Naomi and as such sets the example to the rest of the community for a harmonious accommodation/acceptance of difference.

If Ruth has not 'given up' her identity then it follows that the scene of departure did not require any 'sacrifice' on her part and she is able to remain both a Moabitess and a friend to Naomi. In any case, Naomi and Ruth could not be friends if this kind of 'sacrifice' had transpired. Although Aristotle attempts to reconcile the idea of sacrifice with the nobility of 'ideal' friendship by saying that the sacrifice of one's life is justified if it contributes to a greater good I would ask, "Whose greater good?" In the case of women's friendship the inevitable conflict between the commitment to one's friend and the greater patriarchal good leads only to a less than noble sacrifice of the former. But if the immediate result was the dissolution of the friendship this would go against the basic tenant of friends' continued shared life.

In the book of 'Ruth' what is at issue is not the sacrifice of one's life but the 'lesser' case of the sacrifice of identity. Notwithstanding that I have already argued why Ruth's fidelity does not constitute a sacrifice, another point that must be raised is that it stands against reason - as well as the common good - to subject a friend to an act that would change the friend in such a way that one could no longer remain friends; for even if the intention was virtuous (i.e. to save one's life) the result would once again be separation. This is because, as Aristotle has pointed out, when a friend changes beyond recognition one can no longer be expected to maintain that friendship<sup>32</sup>. In Naomi and Ruth's case, the intention (renouncing one's identity for another's well-being) may be construed as virtuous but if it were realised within friendship the result would once again (as in the case of sacrificing one's life) prevent an ensuing common life.

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<sup>32</sup>Aristotle insists on this even if the change does not involve a compromise of one's goodness, pp. 292-3 passim.

There are several more aspects which support an interpretation against 'sacrifice'. If in order to remain together Ruth forgoes that which constitutes her uniqueness vis-à-vis Naomi then this would constitute an immoral demand on Naomi's part which would then require Ruth to separate from her. At the same time, should Ruth still desire to remain with Naomi, she would not be the 'same' Ruth and this also would require separation. What has been successfully negotiated then in the departure scene is the terms in which what is valued as the same (goodness, outsider status,) and different (religion, ethnicity, age) in each woman will continue to remain valued as such in the future.

In relation to religious faith, in light of the fact that Naomi is the only one who utters the name of YHWH - in an effort to regain her faith in Him - and Ruth not even once<sup>33</sup>, the strategic wording of Ruth's oath eludes the need for any sacrifice. This allows the women to continue in Judah as they had been living in Moab - in the company of each other, practising those common interests they possess as women and with the virtue that defines them and their friendship in order to satisfy the rest of their needs. And this takes place - at least initially - independently of their surroundings. If the rest of society does not accept them they still retain the community of each other's company - they are in fact, each other's only country<sup>34</sup>.

### iii

It is in the last scene of child birth that is important for the argument that gender construction is a significant factor in these women's identification with each other. The child is part of 'giving' that is not biological but social, as in carrying out the task of caring and nurturing. The life given to Ruth by Naomi - a new home - is returned

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<sup>33</sup>According to medieval, Jewish exegete, Salmon Ben Yeroham, "...for if they were not going with her (Naomi) for the sake of great love of religion she would not allow them to go with her", in Beattie, p. 54

<sup>34</sup>I disagree with Tribble who sees Ruth as "standing alone" and possessing nothing. However, immediately afterwards she praises Ruth's committing herself "to another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel", p. 173. This is in agreement with my own thesis.

by Ruth as a new life in the procuring of a child<sup>35</sup>. In a subversive twist in plot development Naomi and Ruth express to each other their commitment to their friendship which, once in Bethlehem, cannot be expressed explicitly in words, not only because of their presence in public patriarchal space but also because of their exclusion from "man-made language"<sup>36</sup>. The only language they share - to the exclusion of men - is that of their maternal bodies and the women's chorus acknowledges this in their proclamation: (4:15-16)

Then the women said to Naomi...for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons has borne him. Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.

In the book of Ruth, the only 'text' (as means of communication) Naomi and Ruth can share in the public sphere is their maternal bodies and by extension the only 'text' they possess is Ruth's child<sup>37</sup>. As such, it is a 'text' they are to share, thereby resisting its - and their own - traditional inscription in patriarchal order as signs of credit which, as Claude-Lévi Strauss says, constitute "the ultimate gift"<sup>38</sup>. Here they are changing the rules on their own terms so that structure of gift 'exchange' is transformed into gift 'sharing' in order to match the ethic of care by which they

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<sup>35</sup>As the Hebrew word illustrates, 'redeemer' is used in both instances. So just as Naomi helped Ruth in procuring Boaz as a 'next of kin', (3: 12), Ruth has provided a 'next of kin' for Naomi in Obed (4:15). In each case, the men are to 'take care' of the women but they are also the means by which the women are 'officially' bound together! There is not only mutual care at work here, but also, equality, logic, daring and intelligence. See Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook of Ruth* (London: United Bible Societies, 1973), p. 4.15

<sup>36</sup>For Spender men have had the monopoly of 'naming' the reality they experience because of their position as the dominant group whereas women have been excluded from this process. Thus "without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling...by assigning names we impose a pattern and a meaning which allows us to manipulate the world", p. 163. In view of this context it is remarkable that Naomi attempts to 'name' herself, p. 183

<sup>37</sup>My line of argument is indebted to Lorna Hutson's thesis on 16th century male friendship but I will reverse the terms so that it applies to women's friendship. It then serves as a radical subversion of the domination of the narrative upon Naomi and Ruth's story and of society on their bodies. In Hutson's thesis, women (in marriage) and literary texts (in reading) are part of the gift exchanging which form alliances, otherwise known as friendships, see pp. 6-7.

<sup>38</sup>Claude-Lévi Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1969, orig. published, 1949), p. 65

function. The child then becomes an extension and illumination of their own positioning as subjects, i.e. a sign of resistance to the male economy of 'exchange' and division. By claiming the child as their own they are refusing to submit to the patrilinear emphasis of the ending which ironically, but aptly, omits the man in whose name all this was ostensibly carried out - Chilion.

The language then that they both understand and to which the men do not have access<sup>39</sup> is one characterised by equality, nurturance and care. In this public setting, it is a language which can only be expressed physically and in silence since the language of laws and rights is shown to be the domain of men (chapter four). That Naomi "laid him in her bosom" instead of speaking does not signify her disinterest in Ruth<sup>40</sup> but her final justification in the case of a woman wronged early in the book. Only in this case it not an economy of exchange which is being enacted but the equality and equity of sharing. And against the legality of marriage they juxtapose - outside the space of formal rules and regulations - the justice of caring and taking mutual responsibility for the young. There can be no issue of 'whose' child this is since this is a concern of patrilineage - the women know that all children are a common responsibility. Again, Naomi's and Ruth's relationship re-interprets the notion of ideal friendship so that different values are assigned to notions of mutual beneficence and benevolence.

In an unexpected final appearance Naomi re-appears to signal the end of her mourning of death in order to partake in the celebration of new life. She does not need to speak because the language of equality, nurturance and care can only be expressed via their bodies - in silence - since it is *of* their bodies and as such without

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<sup>39</sup>Because of what Spender names 'tunnel vision', p. 96: "Men inhabit a monodimensional reality characterised by tunnel vision whereas women have had to develop skills which are an inherent part of multi-dimensional reality". The same analogy could be drawn between masters and slaves.

<sup>40</sup>As Fewell and Gunn further argue: "(the women of the city) gently chide her by reminding her about the baby's mother", p. 102 in 'A Son is Born to Naomi!'. Fewell and Gunn consistently posit an either/or question between selfishness and altruism because of their assumption of animosity between the two women. Thus the possibility of ambivalence inherent in intense emotional states is absent for them.

representation in the patriarchal narrative. In keeping with ideal friendship: "Friends have all things in common"<sup>41</sup> and the issue of whether Naomi 'legally' adopts the child or 'merely' cares for it is a non-question. Since the women's identity is bound up and inseparable from their relationship the sustained effort to procure a common life continues with the birth of the next generation. The chorus of women provide a hint of Naomi's state of mind by linking her happiness to her relationship with Ruth and to her specific accomplishment in creating a new life i.e. Naomi is not happy merely because she now has a child/grandchild but precisely because it is due to Ruth that this child comes into existence: "He shall be a restorer of life to you and a nourisher of your old age; for you daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons has borne him" (4:15).

Finally, Naomi and Ruth are not the only silent onlookers in the final scene, Boaz also has become a part of their community. In the scene on the threshing floor, what Boaz praises Ruth for is allowing him to partake in the model of relationship established between the two women and he is willing to negotiate on the part of all of them so that it is secured on a 'legal' basis. This would give a satisfactory answer to the commentators who agonise over the meaning of "...you have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men whether rich or poor" (3:10)<sup>42</sup>. In the context of ideal friendship the virtuous would only seek out the company of the equally virtuous and for Naomi and Ruth to accept Boaz he would first have to prove worthy of his name - pillar of society.

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, p. 273

<sup>42</sup> Following Hutson's argument, p. 78, Boaz shows that "the instrumental value of what is shared tends to be identified with its confidentiality as a knowledge transaction". In other words, Naomi and Ruth's narrative secrecy is opened to include Boaz who immediately understands the need for equally surreptitious behaviour. He then is awarded with the inclusion of his name in the genealogy.



## Chapter 5

### Naomi and Ruth: Role Models?

In order for Naomi and Ruth to be role models both for women and for the whole of community and for this model of community to be based on friendship I will examine how Ruth's relationship to Boaz, to her 'foremothers' (Rachel, Leah and Tamar), and to God functions when related to this concern. What I would like to explore is how the feminist model of friendship produced through the interaction of Aristotelian theories and the book of Ruth can serve not only as a subversive basis of women's resistance against patriarchal structures but also as an alternative model of society which is transformative of those patriarchal structures.

### i Leah, Rachel and Tamar

When the elders of Bethlehem gather at the gate and convey their wishes to Ruth they also mention in praise the names of three other women, Rachel, Leah and Tamar. On one level these women do not seem to have much in common with Ruth except that one - Tamar - also was a foreigner and the others are the first women in Israel to inhabit Bethlehem: "May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel...may you prosper...may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah." (4:11-12).

But as the stories of these women illuminate, there are more points in common. Tamar (Gen: 38) and the sisters Rachel and Leah (Gen: 29-31) also used deceit to secure sons for themselves. As such they all form examples of bearers of wisdom that the men in the stories do not have access to or comprehension of - despite their high ranking in God's eyes. Like them, Ruth and Naomi inhabit what Elaine Showalter calls the 'wild zone'<sup>1</sup> of female experience/consciousness to which the male

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', pp. 331-353, in David Lodge, (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, (London and New York: Longman, 1988), p. 347. Like Dale Spender, Showalter is also influenced by Ardener's theory of dominant and muted groups.

point of view is off limits. So Jacob may be able to converse with God Himself (Gen.28: 13-15 and Gen. 35: 10-12) but he is easily manipulated by both Rachel and Leah in sexual matters (Gen. 30:3-4,9,16). Tamar on the other hand, must disguise herself as a harlot in order to trick Judah into fulfilling his duty towards her as a childless widow.

But the resemblance ends here. Where Rachel and Leah utilise this knowledge clearly for the purpose of gaining Jacob's favour and Tamar to regain her standing in society as a mother, Ruth has a different agenda<sup>2</sup>. She puts this wisdom - with the help of Naomi - to use in order to secure hers and Naomi's common good which is based on a sense of their relationship as a priority. Even when Ruth secures a promise from Boaz that he "will do the part of the next of kin" (Ruth 3: 13) Ruth's concern is still with Naomi. When she returns the next morning with the six measures of barley she gives them to Naomi saying that Boaz insisted she "should not go back empty-handed" to her mother-in-law (Ruth 3:17) when in fact he had only given the food to her. This is yet another sign of Ruth's emphasis on her relationship to Naomi and her well-being as a priority - one that is reciprocated by Naomi in her immediate response which signifies an equal emphasis on the Ruth's well-being: "Wait my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out" (Ruth 3:18).

But there is more to the sharing of the six measures of barley than this 'white lie'. What is Naomi asking her to 'wait' for when Ruth offers her the barley and before Boaz officially settles the matter? It is the celebration - the sharing of food - of their accomplishment, a private celebration which immediately precedes the public negotiation of Naomi's land and Ruth's hand in marriage. Though Ruth seems secure in the knowledge that their plans have been successful, Naomi, as an insider to the

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<sup>2</sup>Bal, *Lethal Love*, p. 85-87, passim. Bal also considers the link between Ruth, Leah, Rachel and Tamar one of common subversive - of female sexuality against male fear - and also presents Ruth as going further than the other women in this respect. Though I agree here, I am more interested in going beyond the confines of the perpetuation of the 'story of Israel' - since this has the women acting for patriarchy's interests as well as their own - to another level of subversion which transgresses the patriarchal status quo and has the women acting for themselves and each other's interests.

ways of her society, cautions for one last pause before they can begin to partake in 'common food' once again - food of course which has been made available by a man but which officially secures their life-long cohabitation, which is as I mentioned, most desired by friends.

The fact that Ruth and Naomi show such solidarity for each other is not only unique in the Hebrew Bible for the representation of relationships between women it is also important for the function of women's friendship in society. According to Aristotle, and unlike Cicero<sup>3</sup>, the demands of friendship do not come into conflict with the demands of community since the analogy he uses is that of democracy<sup>4</sup>. This is understandable in the context of male friendship when loyalty to male power is only an extension of their loyalty to each other. Ruth and Naomi set the example for a woman's voice in friendship which posits its own rules for agency to which patriarchal order must comply - since it is society which is based on the notion and practice of friendship and not vice versa. If they are to respond to the demands of their friendship it is inevitable that this will bring them into conflict with patriarchal demands since these posit loyalty to men first and foremost. And this is exactly what Naomi and Ruth do by focusing on each other's well-being regardless of the consequences that may follow as a result. But from beginning to end, neither woman does this alone - she has the other to rely on<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>Cicero: "It is a bad and unacceptable excuse for any sort of wrongdoing but particularly if a man says he has acted against the interests of the state for the sake of his friend", p. 47. How much more 'unacceptable' if it is women's friendship which does so.

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, p. 277

<sup>5</sup>In this respect I disagree with Daphne Hampson's assertion that: "Ruth is rewarded for the faithfulness of her behaviour within this patriarchal context. But the story in no way questions that context or the rights of men". Hampson too quickly dismisses Ruth as acting strictly out of duty to Naomi whom she sees merely as a representative of her dead husband's world. But if Ruth had also returned to her people would she not then have been seen as faithful to the patriarchal world of her father? It seems that there is no 'right' action that would absolve the women in this text for Hampson. See *Theology and Feminism*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 103

and Aristotle himself points out that: "Between friends there is no need for justice, but people who are just still need the quality of friendship; and indeed friendliness is considered to be justice in the fullest sense"<sup>8</sup>.

By justice of course, Aristotle has in mind the written law with its rules and regulations<sup>9</sup> but as I have shown, the obligations of friendship are not obligations in the strict sense of this word. And since ideal friendship also encompasses moral excellence and equality of beneficence such a model for society is one compatible with feminism's ideals for an egalitarian society. In such a society there would be no need for sacrifice since there would be no conflict between the values which bind people together and the society which is an extension of these values on a larger scale.

But since both ideal friendship and its counterpart as a vision of community is to be constantly striven for neither can be seen as static i.e. as a once and for all accomplished state of being or even one which cannot be accomplished in the present. On the personal level of friendship, the mutual beneficence which stems from moral excellence must be constantly exhibited and on the societal level this must be accomplished for the majority of citizens if it is to be an effective alternative of community. But first, it must be acknowledged as a value to be respected and prioritised as a relationship to be developed<sup>10</sup>. Instead of marriage as the cornerstone of society, which, given the time and place of the Biblical world remains an unequal

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freely grants; it brings about that harmony in which violation of mutual rights no longer occurs and so there is no longer any occasion even to think of justice", p. 963

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, p. 259

<sup>9</sup> As Derrida writes on Aristotle's democracy: "one can see a form of friendship which is coextensive with relationships of justice. One would have to specify that justice has two dimensions, one not written and the other codified by law", p. 383. Derrida is echoing Aristotle, p. 282

<sup>10</sup> As Mary Daly asserts in *Pure Lust* (London: Women's Press, 1984): "...the work of be-friending can be shared by all, and all can benefit from this Metamorphospheric activity. Be-friending involves Weaving a context in which women can Realize our Self-transforming, metapatterning participation in Be-ing...Every woman who contributes to the creation of this atmosphere functions as catalyst for the evolution of other women and for the forming and unfolding of genuine friendships". In this redemptive potential I would like to include all humanity.

and Aristotle himself points out that: "Between friends there is no need for justice, but people who are just still need the quality of friendship; and indeed friendliness is considered to be justice in the fullest sense"<sup>8</sup>.

By justice of course, Aristotle has in mind the written law with its rules and regulations<sup>9</sup> but as I have shown, the obligations of friendship are not obligations in the strict sense of this word. And since ideal friendship also encompasses moral excellence and equality of beneficence such a model for society is one compatible with feminism's ideals for an egalitarian society. In such a society there would be no need for sacrifice since there would be no conflict between the values which bind people together and the society which is an extension of these values on a larger scale.

But since both ideal friendship and its counterpart as a vision of community is to be constantly striven for neither can be seen as static i.e. as a once and for all accomplished state of being or even one which cannot be accomplished in the present. On the personal level of friendship, the mutual beneficence which stems from moral excellence must be constantly exhibited and on the societal level this must be accomplished for the majority of citizens if it is to be an effective alternative of community. But first, it must be acknowledged as a value to be respected and prioritised as a relationship to be developed<sup>10</sup>. Instead of marriage as the cornerstone of society, which, given the time and place of the Biblical world remains an unequal

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freely grants; it brings about that harmony in which violation of mutual rights no longer occurs and so there is no longer any occasion even to think of justice", p. 963

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle, p. 259

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basis on which to form a society, friendship would prioritise equality in a practical, realisable manner accessible to all who cultivate it.

In the book of Ruth, this is shown to be endorsed when, in the last scene, Ruth gives birth to Obed, and the women (following the praise of the elders but with an altogether different emphasis) posit friendship above kinship: "...your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him" (4:15). How is it that Ruth's relationship to Naomi is more than that of a son? Officially, Ruth is 'related' to Naomi, but she is not a blood relation and in the precarious position of daughter-in-law she could easily have married someone else and lost all contact with Naomi. So again there is excess in the relationship which, like the pledge at the beginning of the story goes beyond the call of duty characteristic of kinship relationships to that of the voluntary nature of friendship. Where the duty of familial relations ends - and does not suffice - there is the desire to develop and maintain friendship which, as a model, is a better guarantee of prosperity - for Ruth is more worthy than *seven* sons, not merely one.

For those who see Ruth as negative role model - or not one at all - because she portrays all those "feminine qualities of docility and submission, of obedience and devotion to wifely and maternal duties"<sup>11</sup> is to disregard the strategic manipulation of the feminine role Ruth employs to ends that are not traditionally 'feminine'. At the same time, the qualities of kindness and strength, intelligence and co-operation developed within the context of friendship should not be seen as secondary virtues or as useless for the feminist project. They are the qualities with which an equally

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<sup>11</sup>Leila Leah Bronner, 'A Thematic Approach to Ruth in Rabbinic Literature' p. 169 in *Brenner* p. 146-169. It is Bronner who points out that non-midrashic sources such as the Syriac Targum as well as modern scholars working from etymological evidence, consider Ruth's name to derive from the root re 'ut or 'friendship' or 'female' companion' (quoted on p. 150 from BDB, p. 946). Sasson, on the other hand, in 'Ruth' p. 322 prefers to agree with the other argument that says this is an edifying interpretation because for them, the name 'Ruth' is related to a Semitic root meaning 'to be soaked, irrigated'. Since all the other names have clear symbolic meanings, I fail to see why translators prefer this more opaque rendition (do they find it potentially subversive?). In any case, it seems suspicious that, although known, the former etymology did not influence their readings of Ruth.

radical revolution may be forged, provided, as shown here, that the priorities and aims such qualities are **made to serve** are not androcentric/exclusivist.

And as I have shown, the qualities women 'possess' as defined by androcentric discourse need reevaluating in the context they are shown to function in and the purposes they serve. Ruth is shown to be submissive to Boaz when she first meets him (Ruth 2:10) but not at all when she visits him on the threshing floor! (Ruth 3:9). And she is never 'dutiful' to Naomi. Naomi is also equally assertive when she refuses to engage in dialogue with any men and addresses her complaints directly to God without any male intermediary. It is only within the background of patriarchal power that this masquerade of subservience and docility takes place for the purpose of attending to these women's desires. And unlike so many other women in the Hebrew Bible who do not voice their desires let alone fulfil them, Naomi and Ruth speak of, demand and fulfil the many goals they pursue. The potential however for alternative society does not only rest in the 'methods' Naomi and Ruth utilise in order to secure a better life for themselves within patriarchal structures, it lies in exemplifying the values of women's friendship which subvert those structures.

Could it have been possible for an independent, autonomous Ruth to have survived? To have these women openly defy male control would have rendered them foolish since the exclusion of one from the community would well have made the dissolution of their friendship inevitable. In bringing attention to what the book itself denotes - a unique example of friendship<sup>12</sup> - one finds the most significant - for the purposes of a feminist vision of society - image of the book. For instance, why is it 'allowed', in the context of the Hebrew Bible, to be forged between two women? It could be that like slaves, women as a social group which does not have direct access to power, have no need to be involved in the kind of conflict that men are inevitably drawn into. Therefore, they are often left to argue over who secures which man or

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<sup>12</sup>Aristotle, p. 264 "That such friendships are rare is natural, because men of this kind are few". This comment is borne out by the (lack of) examples in the Bible.

whose son will become king (Rachel and Leah, in Genesis 30) These less than noble pursuits though perfectly justifiable given the conditions under which women lived, are nowhere in the book of Ruth. Not only do Naomi and Ruth function in complete harmony but the whole community of men and women follow their example. Though the hint of danger and scandal exists (in Ruth 2:9, 3:14 - and these are the true outsiders) there are no jealousies, no pettiness, no wrath of God. Could the book of Ruth then be a Biblical Utopia?

In the potential it presents on the model of friendship, Naomi and Ruth's relationship is a concrete realisation of the kind of relationships that - were everyone to aspire to - would result in a truly egalitarian, non-violent and harmonious society. In its feminist reappropriation of a model friendship which is both emotional and rational, pleasurable and responding to need, it functions as a basis of a society which celebrates life in all its forms and difference in all its varieties. In its reinterpretation of the notions of duty and freedom, desire and sacrifice, it privileges the sustaining of non-violent relationships over the demands of a society that is ultimately dystopic were it to prohibit or attempt to sever such ties. But in this book it is not only the onlookers who seem to condone and support Ruth and Naomi's friendship, it is also a text whose imagery suggests the approval of God.

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Most commentators interested in a theological interpretation of the book of Ruth go to lengths to 'prove' that it is God's providence at work in the story of common people. I would like to argue that in the examples of the use of the word *hesed* lies a clue as to what kind of behaviour is ultimately condoned. Since *hesed* is a term to be understood primarily as a human manifestation which then has theological implications<sup>13</sup> it should be examined within the context of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz's utterances in order to draw any theological significance.

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<sup>13</sup>p. 62 in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*



An important aspect of *hesed* is its mutuality even where it is not explicitly shown<sup>14</sup>. It is also often explained as doing more than one's duty. Both of these instances are compatible with the notion of friendship as re-interpreted in this thesis. Since Ruth is commended for showing *hesed* three times in the text this implies a reciprocity in *hesed* which singles out the 'space' between Ruth and Naomi and Boaz as one of mutual care and responsibility which is voluntarily given.

The first instance (1:8) as I have already mentioned is establishing a link with the past which establishes Ruth as already good since she is commended for the kindness she has shown to her husband and to Naomi: "May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me". This is uttered by Naomi, who, despite her distress at losing her sons, praises Ruth and Orpah by wishing them further well-deserved happiness. Ruth is further praised by Boaz (3:10) when she approaches him on the threshing floor by comparing, rather ambiguously, Ruth's last 'kindness' with her present 'kindness'. Was the last kindness related to him or to Naomi? It seems that Ruth is so gifted that she is able to suitably respond to each need as it arises - but is she actually alone in possessing this gift?

According to the uses of *hesed* mutuality of benevolence is always implied and this seems to be another way of saying that this quality in Ruth is recognised by Naomi and Boaz because they too are capable of *hesed*. According then to the logic of the text, Naomi's efforts in Ruth's securing a husband and Boaz's rising to this occasion are also examples of *hesed* - only it is not necessary for them to be commended for it because it is in Ruth's foreignness that possessing such an attribute is found to be extraordinary. Yet the whole text is permeated with the desire for goodwill as exemplified in the constant praising by the women at the beginning and end of the story, by Boaz's servant, Boaz himself and finally, God is called upon to bless Boaz since His "*hesed* has not forsaken the living or the dead!"(2:20). But already, it has been the people themselves, Ruth, Naomi and Boaz who have not

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 48

forsaken each other and have responded to each other's needs; it has been their kindness to each other in the 'here and now' of the text that reflects what the Lord is asked to further endorse. To disregard this sense of urgency for mutual care in the present space/time of the protagonists by pointing to the final paragraph of genealogy is to impose a disproportionate emphasis on extra-textual matters which do not concern the protagonists of this story and should not concern the reader until at least the main protagonist in this list (David) is mentioned.

The genealogy however is seen to provide further proof to those who seek it that the book of Ruth is an example of God's providence in the lives of common people, foreigners, and especially the Israelites. Although the Lord's name is often mentioned throughout, one must believe that His hand guides all the action, in such a way that a happy ending ensues for everyone<sup>15</sup>. In order to draw some theological meaning in this case nothing of the aforementioned need be cancelled since He would obviously approve of such a friendship - in the book of Ruth God is shown to be neither racist, ageist, nor misogynist and confers his blessing almost every step of the (narrative) way. Not only does Ruth become accepted in Bethlehem but Naomi also had already been accepted in a foreign land. To see God's providence as singled out for special use only by the Israelites is not useful even today or even worthy of a theological interpretation.

Here is a story where His involvement is minimal - yet Naomi and Ruth have what seem to be so many differences - in age, status, religion, ethnicity. How is it that Ruth as a foreign woman - who never once mentions YHWH after her oath - should be the one to act in 'good faith' when so many others have failed? Is it because as a foreigner, she is less constrained by what is considered to be 'God's will'? Is the radical message of the text that the Israelites - as a representative community - can

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<sup>15</sup>Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, p. 87, sees Him as a "hidden God", Campbell (p. 29), as "a primary actor in the drama", while Sasson (p. 221) sees "a paucity of occasions in which God's activities are of consequence to the narrative (2:3, 4:1) as distinguished from rhetorical impact" (1:6, 4:3).

become blinded to the meaning of their own actions by neglecting the value of human relationships and focusing instead on divine will? Could the ethical message be that we should all aspire to relationships such as that of Naomi's with Ruth? The answer is yes - but with regard to ideal friendship.

## Conclusion

It is safe to say that if it were not for David<sup>16</sup> the story of these two women would have never made it into the canon, but once there I propose it is not Naomi and Ruth who are made significant because of David but that David is who he is because of such women - after all, they did come first! Nor do I find it surprising that Jesus is part of this genealogy because perfect friendship not only assumes love but is synonymous with love. I mention these two men in particular because though they are extra-textual factors while reading 'Ruth', they are well known enough to 'influence' a reading of this story in a way which diminishes the importance of the women's actions within their own context<sup>17</sup>. Naomi and Ruth's relationship needs to be read without anachronistic interference from men's stories because as a women's story in an ancient text it has already been subjected to enough patriarchal bias in the history of interpretation<sup>18</sup>.

Why then has Naomi and Ruth's relationship not been interpreted and celebrated to a greater degree as friendship? Perhaps, because Naomi and Ruth's relationship does not 'fit' the androcentric theoretical model nor the one overt example of male friendship in the Hebrew Bible, it is assumed to be of an altogether different

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<sup>16</sup>On the other hand, if one wanted to read Ruth in relation to David's friendship with Jonathan - an altogether different project - one should be aware of the risk involved in for example, holding such a relationship as a model of community because of the imbalance in power between David and Jonathan. When there is already inequality inherent in the relationship, friendship falls short of the ideal.

<sup>17</sup>Even Alter, whose approach is literary, follows this line: "The alignment of Ruth's story with the Pentateuchal betrothal scene becomes an intimation of her portentous future as progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David", p. 59

<sup>18</sup>See Fiorenza, p. 60

nature. Or is it because, as Irigaray states, that “the existing norms of society and culture depend on separating women from each other?”<sup>19</sup> - whereas to see Naomi and Ruth as friends challenges this separation? Perhaps also because to see these two women as friends is to acknowledge their full humanity as female subjects who act and refuse to be acted upon<sup>20</sup>. In view of the potential for a radical re-vision of society it poses, I can only explain this omission on the basis of fear - of what women's friendships put into question and offer as an alternative. Yet this is unnecessary, since the values it is based upon - inclusion of difference, inter-dependence and responsibility to emotional need - promote equality, equity and non-violence at a societal level which begins at an inter-personal level. As the quotes at the beginning of this thesis illustrate this is not an ideal that is necessarily only realisable by women. As Ruether writes, it is in “wrong relationship that evil lies...and good lies in its limits, a balancing of our own drive for life with the life drives of all the others..., so that the whole remains a life-sustaining harmony...the life force...becomes ‘evil’ when it is maximized at the expense of others”<sup>21</sup>. The practice of friendship is such a life sustaining force, one in which ‘heaven’ need not be reserved to the afterlife, it can be experienced in the here and now, on earth<sup>22</sup>. Naomi and Ruth's story shows that if their example was followed there would be no need for divine complaint - or any other complaint. Though they may not have known it, in their struggle to find a place in society *and* stay together, Naomi and Ruth have provided an example of community based on friendship that still remains a largely unrealised vision.

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<sup>19</sup>Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (tr.), Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 104

<sup>20</sup>Unlike the majority of women in the Bible, see Sharon H Ringe, ‘When Women Interpret the Bible’, pp.1-9 in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p.3

<sup>21</sup>Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 256

<sup>22</sup>Augustine's heavenly city, in its vision of peace and happiness, seems quite similar to the earthly utopia of friendship, see pp. 326-7, in *The City of God*, Book nineteenth XIX, (tr.), Marcus Dods, M.A., pp. 293-344, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871)

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