

Research Space

Other

Naomi's redemption

Hirst, D.

NAOMI'S REDEMPTION [WORKING TITLE]

DRAFT LIBRETTO FOR AN OPERA IN TWO ACTS

CAST

NAOMI, a widow

RUTH, her widowed daughter-in-law

BOAZ, a wealthy middle-aged landowner

TWO WOMEN

CHIEF REAPER

THE OTHER KINSMAN

WOMEN, REAPERS, GLEANERS, ELDERS

Overture: The Journey from Moab to Bethlehem

VIDEO SEQUENCE **Naomi and Ruth** are seen parting from Orpah, then leaving Moab for Bethlehem.

ACT I, Scene 1 – Beside the well at Bethlehem. Mid-afternoon on a late spring day

(Two Women are drawing water from the well.)

FIRST WOMAN: Now Passover has gone, it's almost harvest time.

SECOND WOMAN: In Boaz' fields they're already cutting the barley.

*(Two figures appear rear stage right. They are **Naomi and Ruth**. They are walking wearily, **Ruth** supporting **Naomi**.)*

FIRST WOMAN: Who are those two women?

SECOND WOMAN: They're not from Bethlehem.

FIRST WOMAN:

Could the older one be Naomi, who went to Moab
that summer when the rains failed?
That first year when there was no bread in Bethlehem,
the so-called house of bread?

SECOND WOMAN: Oh, yes! *(Calls out as **Naomi and Ruth** approach.)*

Naomi, is this you, returned from Moab?
Be welcome back in Bethlehem!

*(Draws water and hands it to first **Naomi** and then **Ruth**.)*

NAOMI: (*Pushes **Ruth** away and falls into **First Woman's** arms*)

Never call me Naomi again.
Life for one called Naomi should be pleasant, sweet.
My life has become sour.
From now on call me Mara,
Mara, the bitter one, yes, the bitter one.
Oh, Jehovah has dealt heavily with me.

FIRST WOMAN:

Oh, Naomi, your life was blessed before.
Why so bitter now?

NAOMI:

Elimelech was smitten, smitten by Jehovah
for deserting Bethlehem Judah in its time of trouble.
Though he had a king's strength, he was taken by a bloody pestilence.
Elimelech no longer suffers. In his stead
it's me who's suffering, being punished.
Why? I did no wrong.
I obeyed my husband and went with him to Moab.

SECOND WOMAN: What of your sons? What of Mahlon and Chilion?

NAOMI:

Two more reasons for my bitterness!
After Elimelech died, we heard
the famine years in Bethlehem had ended.
We should have quitted Moab then.
But my two sons were settled, tilling Moabite fields
and each had married a Moabite woman.
Life slipped by steadily until in the tenth year
the bloody Pestilence suddenly swooped down.
First one son was gone, and then the other.
And worse, those Moabite wives had given them no children,
not even half-breed grandsons, to look after me.

*(During this whole exchange **Naomi** is ignoring **Ruth**, who hangs back, timid, among foreigners.)*

Oh, the Almighty's wings have dealt me heavy blows.

*(**Naomi** weeps. **Ruth** makes to come forward as if to comfort her, but **Naomi** gestures her away.)*

*(The women lead **Naomi** away. **Ruth** follows at a distance.)*

ACT I, Scene 2 – An interior, later that day

(Naomi lies on the floor, with Ruth seated beside her, stroking Naomi's arm)

NAOMI:

Oh, go away, stop stroking me.
It irritates, you do not help me in my plight.

It was madness to return to Bethlehem.
There is nothing, no-one here for me,
no living kin of Elimelech who'll offer to redeem me.
As I have told you many times,
no-one would want me now.
I can no more give birth to sons, for you or anyone,
than I could tell you what the future holds.
And even if I could, would you want to wait
fifteen, twenty years for them
to be of marriageable age?

Why did you not return to your mother's house
as I entreated you, over and again,
instead of sticking leech-like to my shadow
as I traipsed along the Jordan Road?
Oh how the hot sun burned my neck!
Your sister-in-law Orpah returned to Moab,
to her mother's house and to her god Chemosh.
Instead you're here. There are two of us to feed,
and no-one to provide for us.
I have been found guilty by Jehovah.
I'm being punished. But I do not know my crime,
nor do I know who testified against me.

RUTH: Naomi, I could not have left you.

NAOMI:

Don't call me by that name,
my name is Mara now.

RUTH: Mara, you were wrong
to tell me to abandon you.
Four times you begged me to return
as we stood looking down at Judah from the heights of Moab.
But you were weak and weary.
What if you had stumbled among the ruts and boulders?
No, I could not have let you make the journey here alone.
You are the one reminder I have of Mahlon.
Just as we shared grief for our dead men,
so I shared that journey with you and

I will share whatever is to come.
I have turned my back to Moab and
if your Jehovah will allow it,
your Judah people will see me as your daughter.
Your people will become my people and
your Jehovah will become my god.
I had already broken with my family and faith
when I married your son Mahlon, an Israelite.

NAOMI: At the moment you are a nuisance, a millstone around my neck.

RUTH:

Tomorrow this millstone will go and find grain to mill.
I'll find it gleaning on the barley fields.
Be sure I will find fields whose owner
will look benevolently on me!

NAOMI: *(resigned)* Go, then, my daughter, for I do not know what else to do.

ACT I, Scene 3 - The barley fields. Mid-morning, the following day

*(Ruth is standing under a tree at the edge of the field. Two male reapers are looking at her and exchange approving looks. Two female gleaners are working near them.)
(Boaz enters. By his clothes and bearing, he is obviously wealthy and used to giving orders. As he looks around at the work going on, the workers all turn to look at him, and Chief Reaper comes towards him.)*

BOAZ: God be with you!

REAPERS AND GLEANERS: And God bless you, master!

BOAZ: *(to Chief Reaper)* Whose is that young woman, that stranger?

CHIEF REAPER:

She is the Moabite
who came with Naomi from Moab two days ago.
This morning she was waiting in the rising sun,
and asked if she might glean.
As a foreigner and widow
the law gives her the freedom to do that.
But she was resolute she should seek permission
from the owner of the field.

BOAZ: *(muses)*

So she is Naomi's daughter-in-law
I have heard talk of in the city, the widow of Mahlon.
I remember him, a lad who was always sickly,

and his brother, Chilion, never strong.
To think that they are dead, along with Elimelech!

*(Beckons to **Ruth**, who approaches nervously.)*

BOAZ: What is your name, my daughter?

RUTH: I am called Ruth.

BOAZ:

Listen to me, Ruth, my daughter.
You may glean in my fields.
I don't want you to go to anyone else's.
Watch where my other women go, stay close to them.
I saw the young men looking at you,
and I will order them to treat you with respect.
When you're thirsty in this heat and dust,
go to the vessels in the shade of that mighty oak
planted by my ancestors
and drink the water the young men have drawn.

RUTH: *(falls to her knees)*

I thank you from the bottom of my heart.
But why are you so kind to me?
I am an alien, a refugee from Moab.

BOAZ:

I am called Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's husband.
In the city, there is talk, approving talk,
of your kind courtesy to my kinswoman since your husband died
and Naomi was left without inheritance.
What you have done is virtuous,
to leave your family and home,
to come to live among strange people.
Jehovah under whose wings you are seeking shelter
will reward you. So it is right that you
should glean in the fields of Naomi's kinsman.

RUTH:

I am the lowest of the low,
humbler even than a handmaid,
yet you have spoken to my heart.
I do not understand.

*(**Ruth** now lifts her eyes and looks directly at **Boaz** for a moment. **Boaz** smiles at her.)*

BOAZ:

Rise now and go to glean.

(Ruth rises and turns to go.)

When it is meal time you will join the others to eat bread. Remember, dipping it in vinegar will cool you!

(Ruth moves back to join the women gleaners. Boaz follows her and speaks to the gleaners.)

BOAZ:

Make sure you look after Ruth.
Let no harm come to her.
And keep the men from bothering her.

RUTH: *(to herself)*

He has the bearing of a mighty man
But he is a man with a big heart
who understands the plight of lesser people.

(Boaz now moves to talk to the reapers out of Ruth's hearing.)

BOAZ:

You are to let Ruth glean where she will. And treat her with respect!

And mind to leave some sheaves on ground
where Ruth will pass,
so she will find plenty.

(Boaz takes one last look at Ruth. They catch each other's eye. He leaves the scene. Ruth watches him.)

ACT I, Scene 4, An interior in the evening of the same day:

(Naomi is looking disconsolate, seated on the ground. She looks up at the sound of Ruth's approach)

RUTH:

Mara, I have had such a day!
See, here, I have gleaned all this barley.

NAOMI: *(takes up a handful of grain, and lets it trickle back into the pile.)*

So much barley! A whole ephah!

RUTH:

I waited underneath a tree until the owner of the field arrived.
He was so generous and told me I might glean until the end of harvest, his wheat fields too!
At noon his workers rested and he made me join them.
He gave me food, bread and parched grain.
Here is some I saved for you.

(Ruth holds out the food to Naomi, and pauses while Naomi eats. She wants to surprise Naomi and waits until she can catch her eye.)

He said he was your kinsman.
He said his name is Boaz.

NAOMI:

Boaz?! May he be blessed!
He is a mighty man in Bethlehem,
the wealthiest of Elimelech's kinsmen,
a worthy man, a pillar of the city.
Jehovah led you there.
You fell upon the best field, my daughter, you fell upon the best field!

RUTH: He told me to stay close to his young men until the end of harvest!
[THIS SEEMS AT ODDS WITH BOAZ' ADVICE TO RUTH, BUT IS ACCURATE
ACCORDING TO KJV]

NAOMI: My daughter, you would do better to stay close to his young women!

ACT II, Scene 1 The same interior, several weeks later. It is the end of harvest

(Naomi is alone, looking at the grain they have stored.)

NAOMI:

What a harvest!
We will not starve this winter.
Ruth has been industrious in the fields.
And Boaz has been generous to us!

Boaz has been generous to Ruth!
Boaz smooths her path, guides her
into Bethlehem's community.
From the start Boaz made sure
she was not troubled by the young men in the fields.
Why?

*(After a few moments' thought, she calls **Ruth**, who enters)*

Ruth, Ruth, come here, daughter!
Listen carefully to what I have to say!
You have shown me gracious courtesy,
and with your help my fortunes have changed.

Now it's time things changed for you.
Up to now you have been modest, keeping company only with the other girls.
You know that by our laws
the brother of a man who dies
must redeem the widow
so the line goes on.
Elimelech has no living brothers,
but Boaz is a near kinsman.

RUTH: You mean that Boaz should redeem you?

NAOMI:

No, no. I've said before there are no more sons in me.
But you, my daughter, you have sons in you.
I mean you to ask Boaz to redeem you.
You, my daughter!

RUTH: *(shocked)*

Me, Mara? I wouldn't dare!
He's such a mighty man!

NAOMI:

Has it not been shown how he favours you?
Gives you extra grain? Makes sure the young men do not trouble you?
He may not realise it himself, but he's in love with you.
He wants you for himself!

RUTH:

I hadn't dared to dream that such a man would honour me.
But perhaps you are right.
Boaz is like the oak his fathers planted.
With mighty branches spreading out like wings,
he shelters me and favours me.

How can I ask Boaz to redeem me?

NAOMI:

What you must do is this!

Tonight in Boaz' barn there will be celebrations
for both wheat and barley harvests safely gathered in.
Draw extra water, and wash yourself all over.
Then dress in your best clothes.
As the fowl, before she meets her mate,
sheens her feathers, you must preen yourself.
And perfume, even if you use the last drop in the vial.
Go down to the threshing floor and hide behind the piles of grain,
your face concealed beneath your veil.
Be careful not to let Boaz see you there.
Once the drinking and feasting are over, everyone will drift away,
but Boaz, if I am right, will stay in the barn to guard his grain.
Wait until he falls asleep. Then creep over to him,
and softly lift the coverlet from his feet and lie beside them.
You can leave the rest to him.
He will tell you what to do.

*(In a state of excited anticipation, **Ruth** prepares herself as **Naomi** watches.)*

ACT II, SCENE 2, Threshing floor of Boaz' barn, late evening the same day

REAPERS, RUTH, BOAZ

*(Musical interlude while men celebrate the harvest. **Ruth**, heavily veiled, enters and conceals herself at the edge of the barn. After a while men drift away and **Boaz** lies down in the opposite corner of the floor, covering himself with a blanket, and immediately falls asleep. **Ruth** goes to him, uncovers his feet and lies down beside him.)*

VIDEO SEQUENCE: BOAZ' DREAM

Ruth unveils herself. She BECOMES A WOMAN, NOT A DAUGHTER in the eyes of Boaz

DUET

RUTH It's Ruth, your handmaid, and I am so much in your debt. But you are not only my master. You are a near kinsman, and I am come to ask you to spread your wings over me, to redeem me.

BOAZ Ruth? My worthy handmaid Ruth? Who has served her mother-in-law so well, as well as me since she came here. Who has embraced Jehovah for her god?

RUTH It is my master and kinsman who says so!

BOAZ You want me to redeem you, me with my thin white hair and grizzled beard? You who have ignored the attentions of the younger men in the fields. You choose me?

RUTH I choose you!

BOAZ You have behaved in an exemplary fashion, and you choose me?

RUTH I choose you!

(Boaz wakes.)

BOAZ Whoa! Who's there?

RUTH: I am Ruth, your handmaid.

BOAZ:

Are you Ruth?
Why are you here?

RUTH:

I am already so much in your debt.
But you are not only my master.
You are a near kinsman,
I am come to ask you to spread your wings over me.

BOAZ:

Ruth, my dearest daughter,
you are a worthy woman!
You have served me as well as Naomi
since you came here two months ago.
You have embraced Jehovah for your god.

You have become the apple of my eye.
I would like more than anything
to fold you with my wings,
to have you for my own wife,
to father Mahlon's son,
for you to bear my son.

But I must tell you there is a kinsman who has a greater right than me.

What I will do is this.
Tomorrow I will wait at the City gates
until he passes, this other kinsman.
I need to talk to him.
If he will not redeem you as a kinsman should, then I will.

(He takes each of Ruth's shoulders in his hands and fixes his eyes on her eyes).

This I promise you.
But tonight stay here with me,
beside me, but apart from me.
It is not safe to return home while it is dark.

At first light you should go,
but let no-one know a woman spent the night here on the threshing floor.
Before you go, hold out your apron –
I will fill it with barley
so if anyone should ask what you are doing abroad so early,
you have been to fetch some barley.

ACT II, SCENE 3. An interior, very early the next morning

RUTH, NAOMI

(Naomi, who has been sleeping, sits up expectantly as Ruth enters.)

NAOMI: And how are you, my daughter?

RUTH :

See how full with grain my apron is!
Boaz gave it to me.
He said ‘Go not empty to your mother-in-law!’

And he says he will redeem me!

No, he says there is another kinsman who has a stronger claim,
He will go to find him at the city gates this morning.
If the other man declines, then Boaz will redeem me.

NAOMI:

Then you can relax! We’ve done everything we can!
All you have to do is sit and wait.
If I know Boaz, he won’t rest until he has arranged everything!

ACT II, SCENE 4, City Gates, the same day, bright sunlight

BOAZ, THE OTHER KINSMAN, ELDERS
[DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE TEN ELDERS!]

(Musical interlude. Boaz arrives at the gates, looks round, and sits down on a bench. The Other Kinsman enters carrying some sacks.)

BOAZ:

Ho, Kinsman, have you got a moment?
There’s something I must talk to you about.
Come and sit here by me.

OTHER KINSMAN: What do you have to ask?

BOAZ:

You know of Naomi who recently returned from Moab.
She would like to sell a stretch of land that once belonged to Elimelech,
our brother and our kinsman.
You're her nearest kinsman.
I thought I ought to let you know,
so the land can be kept in the family.

OTHER KINSMAN:

The piece that lies along the northern slopes?
I know the one you mean.

BOAZ:

I should add I'm next in line,
and if you're not interested, then I'll redeem it.

OTHER KINSMAN: Oh, no, I'll redeem it. It's fertile land.

BOAZ:

There's just one thing. On the day you buy the land from Naomi,
I will acquire in marriage Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth, the widow of Elimelech's son,
Mahlon.

OTHER KINSMAN:

That would not make sense for me.
The land-use would revert to Elimelech's family at the Jubilee,
I would damage my estate for my own son.
You say you're next in line? You should redeem the land yourself.

*(The **Other Kinsman** bends down and removes his sandal.)*

Here, here is my sandal to confirm we have agreed.

*(Boaz takes the sandal. **Ruth** and **Naomi** enter. **Boaz** takes **Ruth** by the hand.)*

BOAZ: *(addressing the elders)*

You have been witness to this agreement
between the kinsmen of Elimelech.
This day I have bought from the hand of Naomi
all that was Elimelech's and Mahlon's and Chilion's.

With it I have bought her daughter-in-law Ruth
that the name of the dead shall not be cut down like a dying tree,

but the tree shall flourish
and bear fruit once more.

ELDERS AND WOMEN:

Like Rachel and Leah before her, from Ruth will spring the scions of the House of Israel.
Like Tamar, she will be famous in Bethlehem.

ACT II, SCENE 5. An interior, nine months later

WOMEN, RUTH, NAOMI

WOMEN

Now you are Naomi once more, Naomi the pleasant.
Jehovah has blessed you with this grandson, who shall be famous in Israel.
We will name him Obed for you.
He will restore your life and fortune and look after you in your old age.
Ruth, whose daughter-love for you has been better than the love of seven sons,
has given birth to him for you.

[TWO UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS: WHAT HAPPENS TO RUTH – SHE DISAPPEARS FROM THE STORY AT THIS POINT? AND WHY IS OBED’S ANCESTRY THROUGH BOAZ AND NOT THROUGH MAHLON AS LEVIRATE MARRIAGE WOULD DICTATE?]

(Naomi is seated. Ruth is holding the baby, who she hugs tightly and embraces, before giving him unwillingly to Naomi. Ruth leaves the room in the same clothes and with the same bag as she had when she arrived in Bethlehem. Naomi sings Obed a lullaby.)

NAOMI:

I shall sing you seven generations, Obed.

Pharez and Hezron,
Ram and Amminadab,
Nahshon and Salmon,
Boaz

and Obed.

(very quietly)

Jesse ... David

END