Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

Ruth's Improvisors

To the Editor:

In "Improvising Rules in the Book of Ruth" (100 [1985]: 145–53) Jan Wojcik deftly surveys an aggregate of biblical scholarship and emancipates a story too often sterilized by theological and linguistic cruces. But he disappoints me by curbing his own thesis: if the book's "dialogues illustrate a creative use of law and circumstance to circumvent fate" (152), then why not track Ruth herself, as she creatively improvises on events and expectations? And why not differentiate between characters who do and do not improvise, as well as consider whether all improvisations merit approval?

Indebted though Wojcik is to Sasson's reading of Boaz as the folktale trickster, he broadens the implications of that identification. But he finds a trickster where there is none and overlooks improvisations that invite ethical scrutiny. When Boaz assembles the juridical scene at the city gate, Wojcik declares, "[W]e are free to imagine that Boaz and the kinsman might be as adept at playing the game of laws as Naomi is at the game of Boaz and Ruth's love" (150). No textual evidence warrants making the kinsman a fellow gamester (Sasson 104–48). But the graver error lies in asking us to regard as an innocuous and romantic game the various pieces of advice that Naomi gives Ruth—including her instruction that Ruth visit Boaz at the threshing floor. Given under the pretext of Naomi's wanting Ruth "happily settled," this instruction may be construed as the improvisation of a matchmaking widow. But this interpretation presumes that Naomi has elsewhere shown concern for Ruth, a dubious possibility. Her counsel, hazardous to Ruth's person and reputation, can be seen to exploit Ruth as the means of securing her own well-being. Naomi's improvisatory self-seeking, everywhere evident in the tale, establishes her as the classically satirized mother-in-law (which I cannot here demonstrate), not as Wojcik's "good woman," dancing "as in a stately minuet" (150).

Wojcik disappoints me more by ignoring Ruth's own remarkable improvisations. The "rationale behind" Ruth's famous pledge to Naomi ("whither thou goest . . .") may conceal "an incalculable amount of reasoning" (148). But Naomi's self-seeking character may support two calculable reasons. First, Ruth's pledge answers Naomi's insult, which has impugned the daughters-in-law for expecting their mother-in-law to bear or find them new husbands. Naomi's silence in the face of Ruth's pledge may vouch that the pledge has the force of a curse, implying Ruth's determination to make Naomi eat the words of her imputation: that Ruth should be regarded as a leech, an obstacle impeding her mother-in-law's future! Second, Ruth's pledge shows her esteem for Naomi's pluck. After all, Ruth knows that Naomi had earlier agreed to the risky venture of leaving Bethlehem, knows that she was game to wrestle with, rather than passively submit to, fate or providence. Ruth's pledge is to a woman whose independence and irascibility reveal valued aggressiveness. Naomi's accusations against the Almighty, who "brought disaster on" her, cannot be the first Ruth has heard, and this irreverence may well contribute to Ruth's loyalty. In a word, Ruth's pledge improvises on expected behavior, violates deference and obedience.

To show that others must reckon with her improvisations, Ruth promptly declares that she will glean in the fields, using the "cohortative first person" to express "firm determination" (Campbell 91). And once in the fields of Boaz, she behaves in anything but an "innocent," "uncontrived," and sincere fashion (148), although Wojcik's adjectives cleave to the long-established reading of Ruth's conduct. In asking for permission to "gather among the swathes behind the reapers" (2.7), a favor that exceeds the right customarily granted aliens and widows (Sasson 47–48), is Ruth innocent or artful? Is she free of contrivance when she prostrates herself in gratitude to Boaz, even though he has denied her petition, instructing her to "follow the gleaners," not the reapers? Is she sincere, thanking him simply, or is she calculating, pressing for some advantage by asking, "Why are you so kind as to take notice of me when I am only a foreigner?" Wojcik sees Ruth standing "before [Boaz] thinking of herself as an ordinary woman" (148), but her final petition shows otherwise, leaving Boaz speechless. For in her impudent request, "[M]ay I ask you as a favour not to treat me only as one of your slave-girls," Ruth asks to be treated both better than, and not at all as, a slave girl.

Ending his discussion of the dialogue in the fields, Wojcik asserts, "There is no space between motive and deed, perception and action in this world. No hypocrisy or irony could find a purchase" (148). To heed Wojcik requires ignoring Ruth's greatest act of improvisation, her visit to Boaz at the threshing floor. Hearing

Naomi's instructions and declaring, "I will do what you tell me," she proceeds to improvise rather than to obey them to the letter, despite the storyteller's ironic assurance that "she went down to the threshing-floor and did *exactly* as her mother-in-law had told her" (3.6); Naomi told Ruth to "go in, turn back the covering at his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." But Ruth denies Boaz the chance to tell her "what to do." On waking, he scarcely has time to ask, "Who are you?" Ruth quickly calls herself his "servant" (*'āmāh* 'handmaiden')—rather than a "slave-girl" (*šipḥāh* 'maidservant'), as she had in the fields—thus insinuating her eligibility to "aspire to marriage with her master" (Campbell 101). More important, she immediately instructs him, "Now spread your skirt over your servant," and explains that he must do this "because you are my next-of-kin." Whether she already knows what he soon tells her, that a "nearer kinsman" has first duties and rights, we can never know. But we do know that by disobeying her mother-in-law's instructions—a "creative use of law and circumstance to circumvent fate" (152)—Ruth impels Boaz's commitment to her and his solution to the question of Naomi's security, impels as well my regard for her resourcefulness, a quality that seems to have eluded Wojcik's harvest. An overlooked grain, perhaps? One left for a gleaner to pluck?

Gerry Brenner
University of Montana

Reply:

The difference in Gerry Brenner's and my readings lies in the readers and not, I think, in the text, which is full of silence. We catch different innuendoes in the silence. Sometimes the silence is literal, when no words are given. When Naomi does not respond directly to Ruth's protestations of loyalty on the road to Bethlehem, Brenner imagines her so involved in the calculations of self-interest that she forgets to speak; I imagine her unable to better what Ruth has said. Sometimes the silence is what seems to be inferred about what is said. For Brenner, Ruth is "impudent" negotiating with Boaz in his field; for me, discreet about her awakening desire. Similarly, the kinsman at the gate is a fall guy or a fellow player at the game of love.

We each supply different tones to the narrator's austere voice. His narrator, like Sasson's, satirizes the "classic mother-in-law"; mine displays her pluck in cultivating her self-interest (perhaps), as part of a small coterie of men and women seeking their self-interests in mutual satisfaction of their religious, sexual, and financial needs. Take your pick—but carefully. Scripture implies; our response reveals.

My apology to Jack M. Sasson. In note 6 I mistakenly identified as his the statement of another scholar he himself is criticizing. As Brenner says in his letter, I am indebted to Sasson's fine work on Ruth.

Jan Wojcik
Purdue University
Clarkson University

1984 Presidential Address

To the Editor:

In her provocative address as 1984 president of the MLA (100 [1985]: 281–86), Carolyn Heilbrun asked other women to respond (more precisely, to give their blessing), and I take up her invitation. I cannot summarize or quote at length here from her densely woven text (and intertext) but can only comment on a few points and on the underlying implications.

Quoting the 1980 president, Helen Vendler, Heilbrun likens our biological lives as women and mothers to spending " 'ten to fifteen years in a Cro-Magnon cave' " (281). I have spent a good many years in that cave, which I have found a warm and sun-drenched spot. Whence this contempt for the "primitive" parts of our life—our rootedness in the oral (and the anal!) tradition—and for the transmission of human life, human values, and culture? (This contempt for "child-rearing" is perhaps all the odder coming from a professional educator.) Still more disturbing, there is in Heilbrun's discourse a strangely misogynistic-sounding revulsion for the female body: " 'menstruation, intercourse, pregnancy, miscarriage, childbirth, nursing' "—that's what is in the primitive "cave" (along with " 'toilet training, and child-rearing' ") (281). One has the decided impression that Heilbrun (and Vendler) would rather not have, be in, such a body. (Just think how feminists go after men who dare to speak in this vein!)

Heilbrun lauds feminist "solidarity" and "identification with other women." "To be a feminist . . . is to be where women are" and "to value the presence of women there" (282). Re: "We women." This is simply not one of the collectives that matter most to me in life. And in the workplace I want to be surrounded, not by *women*, but by *people* of a certain kind: learned, competent, good colleagues, not so overpowered by ambition that it obscures their humanity. Their sex is, and I believe should be, only a minor consideration.

As for "valuing the presence of women," and seeing to it that women are "where one is" (282): surely this is a double-edged sword. Why couldn't men just declare that they "value," prefer to be surrounded by, men? *De gustibus* . . . ! A shocking thought, no? (Especially given feminist reluctance to allow men—heterosexual men—to enjoy one another's company at all.)

Heilbrun, quoting Adrienne Rich, speaks of " 'the