

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* 'hand-maiden')—rather than a "slave-girl" (*šiphāh* '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?

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*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.

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### 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

danger of identification with the male mentor'” (284). I agree—though my reasons are different. Many women have indeed identified with male mentors to their own detriment. They often knew these men only at the office and failed to realize that many of these scholars had, at home, connections with the world of human life, with “reality.” Most had wives and children. Thus, many women scholars have unwittingly taken as their model only *half* the life of a male scholar—the bookishness and the professionalism. They failed to note that as women they couldn't be husbands, couldn't take wives—and they knew nothing of being wives, mothers themselves.

Will feminists provide broader models for young women scholars? I fear, rather, that the unconscious androgyny of the old system will be replaced by an aggressive androgyny. There will be, one fears, no room in these women's lives for love, for family, for the “primitive” things that have provided the deepest satisfactions for most women (and others) over the centuries.

Heilbrun, quoting Myra Jehlen, promotes the idea that women (the “particular”) are not “‘part of a larger whole’” but that “‘the particular is already complete in itself’” (284). But we women are not a race apart; rather, we constitute *half* a species. Quarrelsome, tiresome as the battle of the sexes has been, still we don't just despise each other; we love and need—we complete—each other. The idea that we women are complete, coupled with Jonathan Culler's notion (also encouraged by Heilbrun) that we can simultaneously “‘minimize and exalt sexual differentiation’” (284) strikes me as permeated by an astonishing narcissism. From “Know thyself” (with its inevitable attendant humility), we have moved to “Know thyself—as superior, or at least as equal, but never, never as inferior; as maligned, as victimized, but never, never guilty as charged.” Some self-knowledge! The view of self is that of the viewer determined to adore. The only truly coherent principle in all this is the need for self-esteem.

Heilbrun speaks enthusiastically of a “woman's space,” of “emigration,” of “creating another country” (283). Well, *bon voyage!*—but such emigration holds no charm for me. I want to be part of the human race. I'm willing to share the space with that pushy, arrogant, irritating roommate, of whom I am also so fond: the male half of our species.

Ultimately, one wonders: just what does Heilbrun want? All that seems to matter to her is text (or textile: woman-woven works) and hegemony. But hegemony (here) is just a fancy name for power, the love of which is always fairly ugly. Why any handsomer in women than in men? And there's nary a principle in sight—other than *more* hegemony for women.

This is, then, above all, a power play. The goal: usurpation; attack against patriarchy, beginning of course with God. Heilbrun takes the Bible—which “can dare to go wrong”—and endows it with new “archetypal”

meanings (285). The patriarchy used to confiscate things from us; now, by gum, we'll just snatch things back from them. So Jacob and the angel in Genesis are now (by what right I cannot say, other than tit for tat), “archetypally,” women wrestlers. (And now it's women doing the blessing. Why not?: we're taking over.) O archetype, what rubbish is committed in thy name!

What does Heilbrun want from men? Is it enough that they treat women with respect, fairness? Hardly! That they lift their little daughters for St. Geraldine (“whose sight still dazzles”) to touch? That they read literature with an effort to see things through the eyes of others, including the opposite sex? Not enough. What Heilbrun & Cie. are demanding is, in my view, something more drastic, more painful: that men submit to a sex-change operation, at least mentally, intellectually. They must become, insofar as possible, women, feminists. They must see and feel things the way women do. They must read texts “in the feminist way.” They must give up “some of their old [male] pleasure” in books that don't think right. (What of the epic? Can we—can men—continue to enjoy it? Not according to my feministically indoctrinated female students: since women aren't important in it, the epic is antifeminist!) If men don't read works by women, read as women, if they don't become “male feminists,” don't undergo that “conversion” that makes Heilbrun happy, if they don't sweetly hand over the hegemony—well, then, they remain “the wrong people,” presenting “danger” to women; they are the enemy.

By the time the feminists are through with men, if the latter (now “male feminists”) can still work up any enthusiasm for women, it will no longer be as heterosexuals—actually drawn to an opposite sex, enjoying the difference—but, conceptually, as lesbians. (Men can continue to function as sperm banks if not as fathers.)

Your ideal of manhood? Not mine. And I say, “Men, don't go for it!” I prefer the battle of the sexes to this vision of peace: the feminist Final Solution.

As for us women, especially those of us heretofore lacking in the proper *esprit de corps*, Heilbrun demands our blessing. (I will say I am weary of menacing discourse from feminists.) I am willing to comply—but what I have to offer may not be quite what Heilbrun had in mind: the blessing that I give is not my own but God's; it comes from Him, and I see myself as competent merely to transmit it. I do not know that Heilbrun will welcome such a blessing, but it is hers.

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Reply:

My initial impulse was not to answer Evelyn Birge Vitz at all. Sadly, those of us who have tried to under-