

# A Note on Mr Pinter's Book of Ruth:

## The Homecoming

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*The Homecoming* is, in one sense, a play about two women, one absent from the home, the dead wife and mother, Jessie, and the wife of the son, Teddy, who comes into the house and takes Jessie's place, but in taking that place converts it into new functions.

The house is quite clearly associated with the absent wife and mother, the home's centre, because of its very unhomely qualities. Where there had once been a 'living-room' with enclosing walls to make it both warm and safe, there now is an open back wall ('The back wall, which contained the door, has been removed'). This is quite positively identified for us with the missing woman by her son, Teddy, when he and his wife are first in the room:

What do you think of the room? Big, isn't it? It's a big house. I mean, it's a fine room, don't you think? Actually there was a wall, across there ... with a door. We knocked it down ... years ago ... to make an open living area. The structure wasn't affected, you see. My mother was dead.

(Act I, Methuen, 1967. p 21).

As so often in Pinter, suggestions build up behind the formal language, and we can think of the house as having tried to get rid of Jessie, or as having been opened up to more light and more air. But the domestic arrangements have now altered so that Lenny has what he calls 'a kind of study, workroom cum bedroom' (p 25) downstairs next to the 'living room', much as he might have a room in a large house which had been turned into bed-sitter accommodation.

The feminine role of looking after the menfolk has been turned over to the father, Max, who makes a very poor show of the cooking. Lenny asks at the beginning of the play for the name of the 'dinner we had before' (p 10), and calls his father a 'dog cook' (p 11).

When Joey comes in, he asks indirectly for a meal by saying that he's hungry, and Sam is too, he says, but the response which the father and brother makes is a sour parody of the weary wife or mother who, while berating the individuals, would still, in spite of all, get a meal for the hungry family. Elements of what she might

have said jostle in Max's shouts:

Who do you think I am, your mother? Eh? Honest. They walk in here every time of the day and night like bloody animals. Go and find yourself a mother.

What do you want, you bitch? You spend all the day sitting on your arse at London Airport, buy yourself a jam roll. You expect me to sit here waiting to rush into the kitchen the moment you step in the door? You've been living sixty-three years.

Why don't you learn to cook? (p 16)

Max's parody of Jessie comes out strongly in the second act when he's talking to Ruth about his wife and about the hardships that he has had to endure, mixing probable fact with improbable fiction and the memory of other people's conversations:

I worked as a butcher all my life, using the chopper and the slab, you know what I mean, the chopper and the slab! To keep my family in luxury. Two families. My mother was bed-ridden, my brothers were all invalids. I had to earn the money for the leading psychiatrists. I had to read books! I had to study the disease, so that I could cope with an emergency at every stage. A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slut bitch of a wife – don't talk to me about the pain of childbirth – I suffered the pain, I've still got the pangs – when I give a little cough my back collapses – and here I've got a lazy idle bugger of a brother won't even get to work on time (p 47)

Jessie's place is being taken by another mother of three sons, and Pinter seems to have in mind the situation which the Biblical *Book of Ruth* originally set out. That old story had been about the homecoming of Naomi from the land of Moab, where her husband and her two sons had died, to Bethlehem accompanied by the Moabitess, Ruth, the wife of her dead son, Mahlon. It had also depended heavily on famine conditions and on the prosperity of harvest time. Famine had driven Elimelech and his family into Moab, and the return is to harvest ("and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest"). Naomi objects to the significance of her name ("sweet one") when she returns, and she rounds on her neighbours in Bethlehem and says that she should be called "Bitter":

Call me not Naomi; call me Marah: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. (I 20)

The Biblical story is the success story of the alien woman who manages to attract (and marry) the "mighty man of wealth ... Boaz", while gleaning in his field.

The general resemblance between the play and the scriptural story are obvious enough, and have been commented on sufficiently, as has the general Jewishness of the names and situation.

In terms of origins we have here three names of Biblical derivation and three popular with Jews adopting European fashions. However, 'Ruth' gives everything away, for 'Ruth' is the name of King David's Moabite mistress.

(William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, *Harold Pinter, 'Modern Writers'*, Edinburgh, 1973. p 111).

In fact, there is far more to the Jewishness than might at first glance be seen (ignoring the slip of 'Moabite mistress' for 'Moabite grandmother'). We could, for instance, see the origin of Max's ambivalence about Jessie in Naomi's double names of Sweet and Bitter. We could also say that Ruth II who is the alien in the play, is not an alien at all; she's on her home-territory of human sexual relations, her familiar territory. Just as Ruth I knew how to ensnare a man, using the local rules and conditions ("Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him, in whose sight I shall find grace", II, 2), so Ruth II knows how to ensnare men:

Look at me. I ... move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear ... underwear ... which moves with me ... it ... captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg ... moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict ... your observations to that ? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ... than the words which come through them. You must bear that ... possibility ... in mind. (pp 52 - 53)

Boaz had been willing to marry Ruth I, the widow, because of the laws of kinship which she invoked when he discovered her lying at his side on the threshing floor.

"I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread thy skirt over thine handmaid, for thou art a near kinsman." (III, 9)

He agrees to marry her if a nearer kinsman than himself declines to marry her.

And he said, Blessed be thou of the Lord my daughter: for thou hast showed more kindness in the latter end, than at the beginning, in as much as thou followest not young men, whether poor, or rich. (III, 10)

When Boaz swears before witnesses to marry Ruth it is with the express purpose of raising "up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren" (IV, 10). The witnesses think this an excellent thing to do, and there promises to be a new start for the house of Israel.

We are witnesses: the Lord make the woman that is come into thine house, like Rachel, like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephrath, and be famous in Bethlehem. (IV, 11)

Accordingly, the union is blessed with a son, Obed, who begets, in his turn, Jesse, who begets David. So, the house of David is founded in Bethlehem by the union of a Moabite, exiled from her own

people, and in a second marriage cleverly manipulated by the pretty woman, with an older man who is drawn to her by laws of kinship.

The ironic parallels between the scripture and the play are striking. In Pinter's play it is precisely the young men whom Ruth lies down with, or, at least, the youngest man, Joey. She lies on stage with him while Lenny "caresses Ruth's hair as Joey embraces her" (Act II, p 59), but when she is upstairs with Joey the event seems as sterile as that on the threshing floor with Boaz.

*Joey* I didn't go all the way.

*Lenny.* You didn't get all the way.

*Pause.*

*(With emphasis).* You didn't get all the way?

But you've had her up there for two hours. (Act II, p 66)

When the old man 'lies with her' in Pinter's play, the situation is alarming. An old man lies on the floor (Sam), and it's not clear whether he's quite dead or almost dead, and he lies there for the last minutes of the play unregarded. Another old man, Max, crawls towards the young woman, unregarded by her.

*He falls to his knees, whimpers, begins to moan and sob.*

*He stops sobbing, crawls past Sam's body round her chair, to the other side of her.*

I'm not an old man.

*He looks up at her.* (Act II, p 81)

Instead of a fertile union between an older, vigorous man and a young, childless widow, we have an essentially professionally infertile union of a young married woman with three sons, with a family of three men who want to bring in an extended family made up of paying members. Where the original union had begun in Bethlehem and had led into the house of David via Jesse, this one leads back from the religion which started in Bethlehem (if Ruth is, as we suspect, a gentile or a 'Christian') and is to replace Jessie who begat Teddy and Lenny and Joey.

As for the person of Ruth herself, when Boaz first sees her he wants to know who she is:

Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers,

Whose damsel is this? (II, 5)

And the reply that he gets is:

It is the Moabite damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab. (III, 6)

Max's question is simply, "Who's this?" (p 41). He calls her in turn a "dirty tart", a "smelly scrubber", a "whore", a "slopbucket", and a "bedpan", and, finally, a "disease". Moab turns into America with its apparent plenty, though this is seen by Ruth as a country of famine, or at least as sand and rock (p 53), and "damsell" is nothing if not vilified.

The Old Testament had shown Boaz keeping Ruth close by him in his field and promising her both protection from sexual assault and drink when she needed it.

Have I not charged the young men, that they shall not touch thee? And when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn. (II, 9)

Lenny in *The Homecoming* tries to combine a kind of sexual assault with a drink of water, but he finds that the sexual aggression turns against him, and that the glass of water suffers a secular transubstantiation and becomes a potent sexual symbol.

Lenny. Just give me the glass.

Ruth. No.

Pause.

Lenny. I'll take it, then.

Ruth. If you take the glass ... I'll take you.

Pause.

Lenny. How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

Ruth. Why don't I just take you? (p 34)

The play, then, takes elements from the *Book of Ruth*, the alien who accommodates to a new environment and new customs, the sexually clever woman, the kinship theme, the opposition between old and young, the solidarity of the Jewish people and its ability to absorb the alien, and turns them all into a modern and soured version. Here the kinship is cruel, relationships bitter and antagonistic, brother against brother, son against father. Faithfulness beyond death turns into faithlessness in life and 'home' has become emptied of its former meaning. The mother has been replaced by the whore. Traditional values have disappeared leaving only remnants behind as a bitter comment on the lost ideals. It is a new world made out of the rejection of the values and goods of that once-new world of America, and the rejection of that never-new world of traditional firm bonds of religion, kin and tribe. It is Pinter's comment on the failed Jewishness in the world that he knows.