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The Monstrous Other and the Biblical Narrative of Ruth

Abstract

Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) restages the biblical narrative of Ruth in Cold War America, crystallizing the parallel through setting numerous scenes at a local cinema that is playing *The Story of Ruth* (1960). The book of Ruth tells the tale of how a non-Israelite outsider could be welcomed into the kingdom of God and ultimately into the lineage of Christ. Likewise, del Toro populates his tale with multiple outsiders—multiple 'Ruths'—including a mute woman, an African American cleaner, a Russian Communist, and an elderly homosexual male. However, these are merely reflections of the ultimate outsider, Del Toro's 'Monster'. A new and anthropomorphic species of fish has been caught by the government, and these four outsiders must bind together in order to return him to the sea. During this process, the mute Elisa and the Monster make love, transgressing multiple sexual norms of the age and symbolizing true unity with 'the other' (all while being equally as ribald as Ruth at the foot of Boaz' bed). This 'otherness' is contrasted throughout by the main antagonist, Strickland, who quotes bible verses about power in order to justify his own abusive behaviour, suggesting that the central ideological tension in the narrative is between a theology of power and a theology of liberation. The film then ends with the villain dying, while the mute Elisa is resurrected and given the promise of "happily ever after," paralleling the coming of Christ from the line of Ruth and suggesting that the only way into the kingdom of heaven is through embracing 'the other'. This parallel is likely intentional, for del Toro similarly ended *Pan's Labyrinth* (2007) with the protagonist resurrecting to heaven. Thus, del Toro—himself a Mexican immigrant—has used film and theology to craft a modern version of Ruth that transgresses multiple boundaries in a way similar to the ancient version. Further, in making his modern Ruth into a sea-monster, he not only hints at ethnic, normative and cultural liberation for humans, but the embracing of a trans-human liberation that could include animals and possibly even the future rights of AI.

Keywords

Ruth, liberation theology, del toro, the shape of water, otherness, Foreigner, Christ

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The Shape of Water (2017) took the world by storm, but many missed the heavens shimmering off of its murky surface. Guillermo del Toro layers his tale with dozens of allusions to the biblical book of Ruth, applying its ancient narrative of divine liberation to our contemporary socio-political context. Resisting a simplistic or hegemonic viewing, del Toro's 'multiple Ruths' are empowered to reflect upon what it means to be created in the image of God and take seriously the role of care for the Other (Genesis 4:9), whether human or monster. Ruth's narrative illustrates multiple aspects of this 'otherness', including ethnic identity, sexual ambiguity, violence, vulnerability, voicelessness, dangerous hospitality, and sacrifice. The first section of this article will chart these critical themes throughout the biblical story of Ruth, which will then be paralleled to *The Shape of Water* in the subsequent section. These parallels will ultimately elucidate the ways in which del Toro uses biblical imagery to weave a modern-day liberation narrative. Although some reviewers have noted in passing that the film references Ruth, few seem to have picked up on how this connects to its central narrative,¹ with most focusing instead upon the negative connotations of religion in the film,² rather than the positive ones that we shall bring to light here.

The Biblical Story of Ruth

Ruth's ethnic signifier is one of disdain throughout the biblical narrative; from a tribe of "incestuous bastards."³ The details are sparse in the biblical

accounting of the female Ruth, and this sparsity only serves to highlight her secondary status. Her identity as a Moabite is one of the only details we are given, which is mentioned in the story six times (1:22, 2:2,6, 21; 4:6, 10). One imaginative rabbinical interpretation reveals the absurd and vile attitudes toward the Moabite people. This interpretation envisioned a scene where, upon Orpah's return to the house of her mother after the death of her husband, she is described as being raped by several men and a dog.⁴ The account lacks any assessment, either positive or negative, and this indifference highlights the disdain for the Moabite people. Furthermore, their origin story in Genesis 19 communicates that the people of Moab are indeed 'Other', and perhaps even 'monstrous.' In the Genesis 19 account, Lot's daughters seduce their father for progenerative purposes, spawning the incestuous line of Moab. Such crisis in lineage pervades these stories of beginnings, both in the Genesis account and in the story of Ruth, which makes Ruth's ultimate connection to the Davidic line of the Messiah all the more potent in contrast.

An additional intratextual indicator of Ruth and Orpah's Otherness is highlighted immediately in Ruth 1:4, when the men take them as their wives: "Then they 'lifted/carried' wives for themselves, Moabites. The name of one was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth and they dwelled there for ten years." The verb *נשא*, which means "to lift" or "to carry" connotes the issues of Ruth and Orpah as *Other*; as foreign, Moabite, women. The use of this verb with taking a wife is consistently used of foreign women. The more commonplace idiom is *לקח*, "to take"

a wife rather than “to carry” one (see Genesis 24:4). The multiple reminders of Ruth’s Moabite origins, along with the idiom “to lift/carry,” remind the reader that Ruth is marked as Other. As will be argued later, this Otherness is the primary reason del Toro utilized Ruth in *The Shape of Water*, for she parallels the Otherness of his characters, who are second-class citizens in 1950s America.

After the tragically mysterious death of the male providers, Naomi—Ruth’s mother-in-law—urges her two daughters-in-law to return to the house of their mother. After a time of weeping, Orpah does as Naomi urged and returns home. Ruth stubbornly refuses, uttering one of the most passionate and profound oaths in the Hebrew Bible, promising that she will go where Naomi goes and worship Naomi’s God (Ruth 1:16-17). The two nouns associated with the idea of oath are אלה (“an oath”) and שבועה (“an oath, curse”).⁵ Though Ruth does not use this particular noun, the broader formula Ruth invokes—“וכה יוסיף... כה יעשה” (literally, “thus do... then thus do again”)—is commonly spoken by men in powerful positions. Thus, despite her helpless position, Ruth is nonetheless painted with an empowering brush. Further, Ruth invokes the name of Israel’s covenant God, YHWH. This type of oath invoking the name of YHWH is attested to in 1 Samuel 20:13. In the examples within Ruth and Samuel, both oath givers are willing to sacrifice for the sake of the Other. In 1 Samuel 20:13, Jonathan is giving up his rights to the throne in support of his friend, David. In the story of Ruth, Ruth is committing her life to Naomi when she utters that she will die where Naomi dies.

In this place of self-determination in Ruth 1:18, an intensified form of the verb, *רָמַח* (“to strengthen self”) is used. This *strengthening of self* reveals the agency of Ruth despite her vulnerability, as she verbalizes her willingness to lay down her life for Naomi. Ruth subsequently risks exposure in the fields to provide sustenance for Naomi, embodying a self-sacrificial and dangerous hospitality as a field worker, a woman, and as a Moabite. Ruth thus turns her vulnerability into empowerment, sacrificing herself for the sake of the Other.

In order to provide for herself and Naomi, Ruth soon becomes a gleaner in the field of Boaz, a workplace where violence looms in the background, especially for an immigrant female. Within earshot of the foreman, Boaz makes it clear that no one is to “abuse” Ruth, emphasizing her vulnerability and the normative violence of her workplace by the very need for such a command to be uttered:

Then Boaz said to her towards mealtime, “Draw near and have some of the bread and dip a bit in the wine vinegar.” So she sat at the side of the harvesters and he reached out to her grain. And she ate and was satisfied and had some left over. (Ruth 2:14)

Then she rose to gather and Boaz commanded his young men, “Let her gather between the sheaves and do not abuse her. (Ruth 2:15)

“And also, pull out for her from the bundles of grain and leave them for her to gather, and do not rebuke at her.”⁶ (Ruth 2:16)

The daily possibility of violence for a vulnerable widow in the fields is pervasive, and her objectification as the sexualized Other is made all the more likely in light of her Moabite status. Ruth’s gender and ethnicity thus limit her agency, with Boaz

becoming a key voice speaking on her behalf (as well as providing her with food). Even so, a critical component to the plight of the immigrant and foreigner is this silence; the voicelessness that permeates their experience. For the immigrant, ‘racial melancholia’ accompanies the unvoiced trauma.⁷

‘Racial melancholia’ focuses on the multiple losses caused by trauma, exile, and immigration that have not been voiced for the immigrant and her experience. Indeed, in the final chapter of the story, Ruth is quite literally voiceless. She does not utter one word. Though much has been gained by chapter 4, the loss of homeland, husband, and family in Moab in the first chapter pervades every scene. The women of Bethlehem speak on Ruth’s behalf in the final chapter, singing that Ruth is “better than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). Amidst this applause, Naomi is also notably silent to remark on all Ruth has done for her. Perhaps amidst the praise from the community of women, Ruth and Naomi are experiencing unvoiced trauma.

Once the barley and wheat harvests are finished, Ruth provocatively lays down at the ‘foot’ of Boaz’s bed one night. One of the controversial terms presented in this space is מרגלות (“place of the feet”) in Ruth 3:7, which contributes to the strategic theme of sexual ambiguity. It is derived from the noun רגל (“foot”). The meaning of this term and the understanding of what body parts were exposed ranges from Ruth uncovering the foot of Boaz to uncovering his genitalia. It has also been suggested that Ruth has uncovered herself, revealing a ploy of seduction. The term used for the place of the feet, מרגלות, is found five times in Ruth and in only one

other place in the Hebrew Bible, with the terrifying vision in Daniel 10:6.⁸ Sasson remarks that this term “foot” is “contrasted with arms [and] so is rendered legs.”⁹ Yet the use of רגל (“foot”) in the Hebrew Bible is also normally associated with both male and female sexual organs (male: Exodus 4:25; Judges 3:24; 1 Samuel 24:3,4; and female: Deuteronomy 28:57; Ezekiel 16:25).¹⁰ What is curious is that the use of גלה (“to uncover”) in the *piel* is employed two times with a foot and both occurrences are indicating an act of uncovering the body. In fact, in Isaiah 47:2 the exposure of the leg of the woman, Babylon, is an indication of her shame. The intentionally ambiguous nature of Ruth’s act, coupled with her Moabite identity, provides a highly sexualized and ambiguous scene on the threshing floor, one that serves to highlight the provocative nature of the foreign Other becoming ‘one flesh’ with an Israelite.

Ruth is thus a central figure of resistance, embodying a multiplicity of meanings within the liberation motif. While Gutiérrez’s liberation theology focused primarily on Exodus—laying the groundwork for anti-colonial studies, Hispanic, Latino/a/x, Asian and Asian-American hermeneutics, among others¹¹—Ruth has slowly but surely become another powerful voice from the margins of liberation studies. Chloe Sun remarks that Ruth is “one of the most frequent characters to be examined through an Asian American lens.”¹² Inhabiting borderlands of ethnicity, gender, and social status, Ruth embodies what it means to be Other. She is an immigrant foreigner whose “assimilation” into Israel remains a point of

disagreement even within biblical studies; does Ruth model a *true Israelite* or does she exemplify a *faithful Moabitess*? The intentional ambiguity resists closure. This strategic use of ambiguity and Otherness within the story adds creative tension that withstands a simplistic portrayal of Ruth, making her an influential model for the liberation motif and enabling multiple representations of her resistance. The following section will now explore how these liberating themes in Ruth are paralleled and developed by del Toro's *The Shape of Water*.

The Narrative of Ruth in del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) opens with the lovely Elisa (Sally Hawkins) alone in her apartment, with a faint crackling in the background. Sinking through the floorboards, the camera reveals that Elisa's apartment is built atop an old movie theatre, its sputtering audio roaring up through her room. The camera then pauses to linger on the marquee outside the Orpheum theatre,¹³ revealing that *The Story of Ruth* (1960) is being featured on its big screen. This shot of the marquee will be recycled throughout the rest of the film, as will the sounds of *The Story of Ruth* playing, which echo up from beneath Elisa's feet through dozens of crucial scenes. Yet in case the beating of this theological heart was too subtle for some viewers to notice, the cinema owner then yells out after Elisa as she leaves: "Come see the Bible movie!" Del Toro thus frames his work from the

beginning as a reinterpretation of the biblical story of Ruth, set in Cold War America.

Throughout the film, Elisa is the strongest connection to the figure of Ruth. Due to a mysterious childhood incident where her vocal cords were slashed, Elisa is left mute and orphaned, echoing the outsider status of Ruth. Yet as the film progresses, it becomes clear that Elisa is merely one of many ‘*Ruths*’ layered into the narrative. Elisa soon brings eggs to her neighbor Gilles (Richard Jenkins), an elderly, struggling artist who is also coded as homosexual. Gilles, in response to Elisa’s culinary gift, says: “I would waste away without you... I am the proverbial starving...” Gilles is busy sketching an advertisement of an idyllic 1950s family, full of smiles around a large plate of Jell-O, whose ‘happy heteronormativity’ starkly contrasts his own isolation. The audience is also introduced to Elisa’s boisterous cleaning partner, Delilah (Octavia Spencer). Delilah is an African American, who finds herself a second-class citizen in public and stuck in an abusive marriage in private. Elisa also works in proximity to Dr. Robert Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg), who is secretly a communist with a love of animals. Del Toro has thus populated his narrative with a handful of such outsiders—with a handful of ‘mini-Ruths’—who for sexual, racial or ideological reasons are unable to assimilate seamlessly with 1950s cultural and social norms. The commentary would almost seem too scattershot—too spread over a multitude of issues to do any one of them justice—until one realizes del Toro is not merely commenting on this or

that social issue, but is attempting through multiple examples to elevate our minds to an encounter with ‘Otherness’ as such. He is providing particular examples of Otherness in order to distill a common essence, to try and get at the *thing-in-itself*; to isolate and wrestle with the very noumenon of the Other.¹⁴ The many outsiders in the narrative are but appetizers for the main event, foreshadowing the moment when particular ‘others’ are transcended, and Otherness itself is encountered in a rarefied, pure form. While Elisa and the surrounding players provide multiple parallels to the character of Ruth, the true symbol of Ruth’s Otherness *as Otherness*, is del Toro’s ‘Monster’.

Elisa’s place of employment is soon revealed to be a top-secret government program, and soon after that we meet the very Monster (Doug Jones) which requires their secrets to be so ‘top’ in the first place. Captured from a South American river, the nameless creature is amphibious, capable of living underwater as well as standing upright, giving it just enough humanness for its dissimilarity to be rendered all the more stark.¹⁵ Before capture, it is revealed that local villagers would even call this Monster “God.” Now caged and helpless, the Monster wastes away while all manner of experiments are mustered upon his flesh, and while his keeper, Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), punishes him out of spite. Strickland is portrayed as the All-American ‘power’ male, who drives a Cadillac with “power steering, power windows, power breaking, power seats,” and who has the perfect 1950s family, with children running to him when he comes home, a freshly

delivered bottle of milk on the table, and an obliging wife (Lauren Lee Smith). In one scene, Strickland actually comes home to Jell-O on the table, paralleling Gilles' earlier advertisement, where an actual caricature of the 'perfect' American family is pictured eating Jell-O. This implies that Richard is meant to be a representative of the white, powerful, middle-class male in contrast to the other characters, who are seen as foreigners and outsiders without any power. Such outsiders are powerless and excluded from the nostalgia of the American dream, an ideology which is perhaps more powerful in hindsight today than when it was allegedly being lived. This makes the liberating critique of this modern Ruth all the more relevant to today (it is of note that the director, Guillermo del Toro, is himself a Mexican immigrant).

These juxtapositions of the powerless and powerful are lent a cosmic significance when Strickland—upon hearing Delilah's name—tells the biblical story of Samson, who is a powerful, violent, Herculean character.¹⁶ Strickland relays the story to Delilah and Elisa after they have been summoned to his office, where he is trying to establish himself as the 'Samson' in the power-dynamics of the situation.¹⁷ This introduces Samson into the story of Ruth, and it is the juxtaposition of these two competing Old Testament narratives that will drive the ideological tension of the story. While Ruth is a vulnerable foreigner who is accepted into the Jewish faith, Samson is a powerful warrior who purges the land of foreign Philistines. Reminiscent of Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014)—where Noah (Russell Crowe) and

Tubal-Cain (Ray Winstone) present contrasting interpretations of biblical ‘stewardship’, one of dominance and one of care—the audience is then left to sit in the tension and decide between two differing interpretations of the religious spirit; between Samson and Ruth; between a theology of power and a theology of liberation. Indeed, at one point, Delilah actually says, “I guess my momma didn’t read the good book close enough,” inviting the audience to reconsider these stories, to discover how the Old Testament is not just full of wrath and power, but full of liberation and care for the oppressed. Similar to the invisibility of the *Other* on the margins, the biblical story of Ruth is too often side-lined and forgotten.¹⁸ Del Toro practically dares us to ask ourselves, “have we read the good book close enough?”

As the story progresses, Elisa comes into contact with the oppressed Monster during her late-night cleaning shifts. Just as she had used food to bond with her neighbor, Elisa also offers eggs to the Monster, and it is this gesture that breaks the barrier of Otherness, initiating an intimate relationship. This is, of course, reminiscent of Ruth’s first encounter with Boaz, when he offers to let her glean for food in his field; the Bible is replete with stories of such table fellowships breaking down walls and initiating intimacy.¹⁹ Further, neither Elisa nor the Monster can speak, and so they share an unspoken bond, one that not only unites them in their common muteness, but in the voicelessness of their oppression. This is another possible parallel to the last chapter of Ruth, where Ruth is both metaphorically voiceless—in the sense that the powerless are always voiceless—as well as literally

voiceless in the final section of her narrative. Not only are the powerless without a voice in *The Shape of Water*, but the powerful encourage and fetishize this silence. In one scene, Strickland covers his wife's' mouth during sex, saying "Don't talk, I want you silent. Silence. Silence." The camera then cuts to Elisa, implying that he had been fantasizing about her muteness during the act of intercourse, eroticizing her disempowerment and his subsequent dominance. Such fetishization of difference is a way of encountering the Other that may almost come off as admiration, but is indeed a betrayal with a kiss, seeking to possess rather than embrace, to appropriate rather than appreciate. Strickland's attraction soon manifests as action, asserting sexual dominance over Elisa through his voice and physical presence. These moments leave the viewer aware that Elisa is not safe in this workplace and that the possibility of a violent encounter is always looming in the background, similar to the gleaning fields, when the workers have to be specifically commanded not to abuse Ruth.

Thus, Strickland, in his rejection, domination and even fetishization of the Other, presents one way of approaching difference. In contrast, Elisa's growing relationship with the Monster presents an alternative, 'Ruthian', approach. These two outsiders grow closer and closer, despite—or rather, precisely because of—their common voicelessness. Indeed, they are both the same for they are both Other. This union of self and Other draws nearer and nearer until it is made explicit in the act of transhuman sex between Elisa and the Monster.²⁰ This act is equally as ribald

as Ruth at the foot of Boaz, and occurs almost immediately after Elisa finds the Monster in the theatre below her apartment watching *The Story of Ruth*, suggesting the parallel between the two sexual acts is intentional. Immediately after making love, Elisa traces two raindrops along the window pane, until the two drops merge into one, symbolizing the two becoming one flesh, a notably biblical image. Del Toro's other films also portray similar themes of oneness. Most notably, the plot of *Pacific Rim* (2013) is built upon two humans becoming one in mind and body ("drifting") to control gigantic Jaegers.²¹ At one point in the film a human even drifts with a member of an extra-terrestrial species, becoming one with the ultimate foreigner; an actual *alien*. Further developing such themes, the oneness between Elisa and the sea Monster symbolizes the ethical call of del Toro's film to embrace and become one with the seemingly monstrous Other. Whereas Strickland abuses and fetishizes the Other, Elisa becomes one with it, like Ruth becoming one with Boaz and thereby joining the Israelites. The contrast between the two options—between Strickland and Elisa, between Samson and Ruth, between fetishization and making love, between hatred and oneness—could not be more stark.

Elisa eventually rescues the Monster from the government facility and hides him in her bathtub. Her neighbor Gilles, upon discovering her plan, refers to the Monster as a "freak" and "not even human." Yet tellingly, in the next scene Gilles is thrown out of a restaurant—along with two African Americans—when his homosexuality is discovered. Returning to the apartment, Gilles' attitude toward

the Monster has now miraculously shifted, for he seems to realize he has treated the Monster in the same sub-human fashion the restaurant owner treated him. Gilles thus comes to identify himself and the Monster as the same for they are both Other. In this, del Toro juxtaposes the trans-human status of the Monster with the sub-human status of homosexuals and other oppressed groups. Further, in an earlier scene, Strickland makes explicit the racial division between himself and Delilah in the following exchange:

Strickland: “The thing we keep in there [the Monster] is an affront... You may think that thing looks human; stands on two legs, right? But we’re created in the Lord’s image. You don’t think that’s what the Lord looks like, do ya?”

Delilah: “I wouldn’t know what the Lord looks like.”

Stickland: “Human! He looks human, like me. Even like you... Maybe a little more like me I guess.”

Ironically, those characters who cling to their personal picture of the divine image seem to be furthest from it, while those who extend the image beyond themselves seem closest to it. Those who absolutize their personal brand of humanity are portrayed as the least human, while those who reach beyond humanity encounter humanness in its truest, *divinest*, form (for what else could the image of a triune God be than the meeting of self and Other?).

This feature of the film challenges the narrowing of the divine image not merely to white, middle-class, western males, but to the human species as a whole (it also harkens back to Genesis, where image-bearers are called upon to watch over

and care for creation). The embracing—indeed, the act of sex with—the non-human Monster, not only suggests we embrace other kinds of humans, but that which is Other than humanity itself, paving the way for contemporary conversations about animal rights, as well as possible future conversations about the status of Artificial Intelligence and even Extra-terrestrials. While one doubts bestiality was really del Toro's target—indeed, few would be willing to get behind the film if it was—he certainly capitalizes upon the image of trans-human sexual encounter as a broader metaphor for embracing Otherness in all its forms, both human and non. The point is not bestial sex, rather, the point is openness to the Other, and the fleshly entanglement of two bodies is arguably the most penetrating image the artist has to visually display such a union. Similarly, the potent ambiguity around Boaz's bed would have been incredibly provocative to the Israelites, especially to those who focused solely on the moral question of the premarital act itself, rather than on the symbolic oneness of Moabite and Israelite.

In the climax, Elisa is murdered by Strickland while trying to free the Monster, sacrificing herself out of love for the Other. While Strickland uses his power to take from others and assert himself, Elisa is empowered to lay down her life for her friends, paralleling the coming of the Messiah from the Davidic line of Ruth. This act inaugurates del Toro's passion narrative, for after her Christ-like sacrifice Elisa is then resurrected by the Monster, who now reveals the extent of his mysterious powers. In response to this resurrection, Strickland declares in shock,

“You are a god,” confirming the beliefs of the South American villagers which he had formerly dismissed as primitive. He is then killed by the Monster, solidifying the power-reversal of the story, for the helpless Elisa is resurrected in glory while the powerful Strickland is now stripped of life itself. She who lost her life has found it, while he who clung to power has lost it. Precisely because Strickland was unwilling to embrace the monstrous Other, he is the true monster who needs to be defeated in the end. This is similar to the reversal in the book of Ruth, where a poor, Moabite widow is declared to ultimately be “better than seven sons.” (Ruth 4:15). It also echoes Ruth’s sacrifice for her mother-in-law,²² which is made through an empowering oath usually uttered by ruling males, furthering the reversal.

In the act of resurrecting, Elisa’s three slashes across her throat (that made her mute as a child) are then transformed into gills, allowing her and the Monster to swim off together into the sea, while the narrator gives them the promise of “happily ever after.” This further parallels the coming of Christ from the line of Ruth, providing a divine resurrection along with a resurrected body where the wounds of this earth (like Jesus’ stigmata) are still there but transformed and redeemed (i.e., into Eliza’s gills). The characters’ resurrection to “happily ever after” also parallels the promise of our resurrection to eternity in the kingdom of heaven. This parallel is likely intentional, for del Toro similarly ended *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2007) with the female protagonist essentially resurrecting to heaven and hearing the words: “Come sit by your Father’s side... He’s been waiting so long.”²³

The Shape of Water then closes with a wide shot of Elisa and the Monster holding each other close beneath the waves, reinforcing that the only way to this eternal, resurrected life in the kingdom of God is through embracing the monstrous Other. This divine theme is then solidified in the narrator's closing words, which are a quote from an Islamic theologian about God: "Unable to perceive the shape of you, I find you all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with your love. It humbles my heart, for you are everywhere."²⁴ This clarifies the title of the film, *The Shape of Water*, along with the constant water imagery throughout, as inherently theological. God's love surrounds us like the sea surrounds Elisa and the Monster in that final moment when the poem is read. We may not be able to grasp or pin down the Other anymore than we can 'perceive the shape of God', and yet Otherness is all around us; we are immersed in it like the waters of baptism.²⁵ It is crucial here that the Monster is the representative of pure Otherness, and that in the final scene he is declared to be a "god." For God is the ultimate Other; we are finite, God is infinite; we are temporal, God is eternal; we are sinners, God is perfect. Yet through death and resurrection God has now welcomed us, despite our Otherness, into God's all-encompassing embrace. God's liberating love overcomes the chasm between self and Other, surrounding us on every side like the deep. God's emancipative embrace reminds us that if we cannot embrace the Other on earth then we will never be able to embrace it in heaven; never resurrect to our "happily ever

after,” when all nations, classes, and ethnicities—including many destitute, foreign widows like Ruth—become one with God and each other.²⁶

¹ For example, John Moffatt’s review for *Thinking Faith* briefly mentions Ruth in a sentence but fails to see how it connects to the larger narrative of the film. Thinkingfaith.org (2017) The Shape of Water [Review]. Retrieved from <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/shape-water>. In turn, Elijah Davidson and Elissa Wilkinson’s reviews both made the connection but had little space to develop it. Vox.com (2017) The Shape of Water, from Guillermo del Toro, is a Beautiful Adult Fairy Tale about a Fishman [Review]. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/12/16288080/shape-of-water-del-toro-review-best-picture>; Reel Spirituality (2017) The Shape of Water [Review]. Retrieved from <https://www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/reelspirituality/film/reviews/the-shape-of-water>. Surprisingly, some reviewers from overtly religious organizations simply failed to notice the multiple references to Ruth at all. E.g., Catholic.org.au, 2018 Film Reviews: The Shape of Water [Review]. Retrieved from <https://www.catholic.org.au/film-reviews-2018/the-shape-of-water>.

² E.g., “...religion for del Toro is mainly on the side of ‘fear’.” Ken Derry, ‘The Shape of Water’, *Journal of Religion & Film* Vol. 21, Iss. 2 (2017): Article 22.

³ Randall Bailey, “They’re Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in the Hebrew Canon Narratives,” in *Reading From This Place, Vol 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States.*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 128.

⁴ Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), 48. See also *Ruth Rabbah: An Analytical Translation*, translated by Jacob Neusner (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1989), 172.

⁵ Yael Ziegler, *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative*, (Leiden, Holland: Brill, 2008), 9. See also Greenburg, *Oaths*, 77; and Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Problem of Curse in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 1963), 2. See Numbers 5:21 for the use of both nouns in one verse.

⁶ Translation my own.

⁷ See Stephanie Powell, *Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth*, (Oxford: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2018), 135-157.

⁸ In Ruth and Daniel, both scenes also contain the strong emotion of fear. Boaz wakes at midnight, literally trembling (Ruth 3:8) and Daniel is told after the vision, “Do not fear” by the messenger (Daniel 10:12).

⁹ Jack Sasson, *Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 69.

¹¹ Isasi-Díaz and Segovia, eds. *Hispanic/Latino* (Theology Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).

¹² Chloe Sun, “Recent Research on Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics Related to the Hebrew Bible” *Currents in Biblical Research* 2019, Vol. 17(3), 243.

¹³ ‘Orpheum’ could suggest a foreshadowing to Elisa’s death/resurrection, for the Greek religion of Orphism emphasized the death of Dionysius, while Orpheus himself descended into the underworld and returned to the land of the living.

¹⁴ Del Toro said as much in an interview: “The movie is about connecting with ‘the other’... The most intimate space is getting bated by this idea that there is ‘Us’ and ‘Them’... [But] ‘Them’ is an illusion for me, there is only us.” Npr.org (2017) Guillermo Del Toro Says ‘Shape Of Water’ Is An Antidote For Today’s Cynicism [Interview]. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/01/567265511/guillermo-del-toro-says-shape-of-water-is-an-antidote-for-today-s-cynicism>.

¹⁵ Making the monster a fish is symbolic, for as del Toro said about the film, it’s “not exactly a secret that a fish is a Christian symbol.” Ibid.

¹⁶ While Samson is a brute, he is also on God’s side in the biblical narrative, which suggests that Strickland sees himself as the ‘good guy’, who is purging the world of unrighteous outsiders in the same way that Samson purged the world of ungodly Philistines.

¹⁷ As Delilah sleeps with Samson in order to trick him into revealing the secret of his power, this may also be a way for Strickland to cast the African American and female Delilah as both an enemy and a sexual object. And if Cecil B. Demille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949) is being referenced here—where Delilah falls in love with Samson and comes back to him after her betrayal—then Strickland’s sexualization of her might be rendered all the more stark.

¹⁸ The story of Ruth is remarkably absent from volumes on Old Testament Theology up until recently. See Amy Erickson and Andrew Davis, “Recent Research on the Megilloth (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther)” in *Currents in Biblical Research* 2016, Vol. 14 (3): 298–318.

¹⁹ Later in the film, it is also over a meal that the mute Elisa will have a vision of herself verbally telling the Monster she loves him, finding an empowering voice through their relationship while seated at a common table (an angle that del Toro’s camera perfectly captures).

²⁰ Expressing sexuality is a critical theme throughout the film, from Elisa masturbating in her bathtub to her sexual encounter with the Monster. Despite living in a time when women were expected to submit their sexual expressions to the whims and expectations of males, Elisa seems to have a fully realized, expressive and liberated view of her sexuality, as well as an open-ness to the sexuality of others (e.g., Gilles). One cannot help but see this in light of Ruth, who was not sexually passive but rather made the first advance upon Boaz.

²¹ In *Pacific Rim*, gigantic monsters called Kaijus have appeared on earth, and can only be fought by equally gigantic robots called Jaegers. A Jaeger is so large, however, that it requires two

humans—perfectly synched in body and mind—to pilot it with tandem movements. Finding such unity between two humans is difficult and requires an almost soul-mate like union. This union is then intensified when they are hooked up together in the Jaeger, gaining interpenetrative access to each other’s thoughts, feelings and movements in order to pilot the Jaeger in unison.

²² Del Toro picks up this theme of sacrifice in several other key moments of the film as well. Because of his love for his one and only friend, Gilles offers to lay down the isolation and comfort of his apartment and routine to partner with Elisa to save the Monster. Similar to the biblical character of Ruth, Gilles *strengthens himself* to offer his life for this mission. He says, “yes,” not knowing the cost, but when it is time to pay, he is willing to give all he has for Elisa and the Monster. These two outsiders become agents on a liberation quest for this Monster, who, as the embodiment of the extreme monstrous non-human Other, is deemed worthy to care for and ultimately sacrifice themselves, if called upon. For Elisa and Gilles, they acknowledge that they are charged with this task to care for and guard the Other. It is a gesture of dangerous hospitality, sacrifice, and ultimately liberation.

²³ While del Toro does not ultimately believe in an afterlife *per se* (and considers his Catholic faith lapsed yet still influential upon him), he nonetheless finds the celestial moment of transition from life to death to be particularly telling. Regarding the afterlife scene in *The Shape of Water*, he writes: “I don't think there is life beyond death, I don't... But I do believe that we get this clarity in the last minute of our life. The titles we achieved, the honors we managed, they all vanish. You are left alone with you and your deeds and the things you didn't do. And that moment of clarity gives you either peace or the most tremendous fear, because you finally have no cover, and you finally realize exactly who you are.” Antidote For Today's Cynicism [Interview].

²⁴ Oddly, though del Toro has publicly stated he found the quote in a book of Islamic theology, no one seems to have been able to track down the exact location of the quote. See Peter Armenti, ‘Who Wrote the Poem at the End of “The Shape of Water”?’ ‘From the Catbird Seat: Poetry & Literature at the Library of Congress’, webpage, 9 March 2018, [//blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2018/03/who-wrote-the-poem-at-the-end-of-the-shape-of-water/](https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2018/03/who-wrote-the-poem-at-the-end-of-the-shape-of-water/).

²⁵ Liberation comes not only *through* the waters of embrace but *within* them. In addition to this baptismal imagery, perhaps it is possible that God leading the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea may be hinted at here, which would work well with the emphasis in Liberation theology upon Exodus.

²⁶ There is a sense here in which the art may have transcended the artist (or perhaps, our analysis has transcended what it was supposed to be analyzing). While del Toro was raised Catholic and employs religious imagery throughout his films, he has also stated he is an “atheist.” Nonetheless, while one does not wish to psychoanalyse del Toro, there is undeniably a sense in which his religious imagery is not merely aesthetic or peripheral to his films, but central to their meaning. Indeed, it is one thing for a character to wear a stylistic cross around their neck, and another thing entirely to conclude a film with a dramatic quote from Islamic theology about how God is “everywhere.” Now, del Toro followed up his claim to atheism by bringing up the adage “once a Catholic, always a Catholic,” and, in answer to whether he was still religious or not, qualified his answer in terms of degrees rather than absolutes, stating: “I think I am lapsed *enough*.” Thus, one wonders if his films are less statements of his beliefs and more conflicted attempts to wrestle with what he believes, with what he was raised to believe, and with images of “happily ever after” that he is unsure if he can still believe in light of his experiences (e.g., the morbidity of ‘Mexican

Catholicism', his father's kidnapping, or the pile of aborted fetuses he stumbled upon in a hospital). See Charlierose.com (2009) Guillermo Del Toro [Interview]. Retrieved from <https://charlierose.com/videos/14026>.

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