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# Supersession, the Comedia nueva, and Tirso's *La mejor espigadera*

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## Supersession, the *Comedia nueva*, and Tirso's *La mejor espigadera*

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EVEN SPAIN'S SELF-IDENTIFICATION with the Roman Catholic Church under the Hapsburgs, what is one to make of the great number of *comedias* that take as their protagonists figures from the Hebrew Bible, individuals revered by Jews as righteous ancestors, models of behavior, and illustrious examples of the triumphs of the Hebrew people faced with endless persecution and oppression? Most of these plays focus on the actions of men (e.g., King David in Tirso's *La venganza de Tamar*, and Joseph and Jacob in Mira's *El más feliz cautiverio*), but a number of them focus on righteous Hebrew women such as the title characters in Lope's *La hermosa Ester* and *El robo de Dina*, as well as Ruth in the play that interests us here, Tirso de Molina's *La mejor espigadera*. According to John Beusterien (357), the *comedia* in general demonstrates considerable ambivalence toward the Jews, but ambivalence alone may not be sufficient to explain the appearance of such plots, and the questions that arise are numerous. How did Jewish characters end up as protagonists and models for behavior in so many plays written during a time of overt hostility towards the Jews? This was, after all, the nation that not only forced the Jews to leave Spain or convert in 1492, but tirelessly and brutally persecuted their descendents who were never considered quite as good, quite as deserving of the same consideration accorded other human beings, or quite as legitimately Spanish as other citizens, who were always suspected of continuing to practice their religion in secret, and who were deemed so dangerous their mere presence in the society could not be tolerated. Is there some additional process at work in those plays in which the protagonist is a Jewish woman?

The existence of this group of plays, and the apparent contradictions they offer, may be explained by placing this phenomenon of the *comedia* in the context of the larger project of Christianity as it grew from a small, dissident Jewish sect to a larger, non-Jewish religion and adjunct of European empires. This process of appropriation and displacement is called supersession, or,

variously, supersessionism or replacement theology, the simplest definition of which is a “belief that the old Jews of the Bible had been replaced, or superseded, by the New Jews—believing Christians” and that “all promises to Jews by G-d—an eternal covenant; the Land of Israel—had been shifted to Rome, and away from Jerusalem” (Adlerstein). “God has rejected [the Jews] because of their rejection of Jesus, with ethnic Israel being abandoned by God in favour of the non-Jewish ‘new Israel’, the [Christian] church” (Longenecker 36). If one expands the conception of supersession even further, it becomes a process in which one culture—any culture—supplants another, not by confronting and eliminating the latter directly but by insinuating itself and appropriating for itself the prestige, the distinctions, and the cultural identity and authority of those previously in power. For Jewish historians, supersession is essential to understanding the establishment, growth, and self-identification of Christianity, but the concept is almost never mentioned in Christian accounts of the rise and expansion of the early church, the efforts to “reclaim” the Holy Lands during the crusades, or modern efforts—from the expulsion of the Jews by Fernando and Isabel to the Holocaust—to remove Jews from positions of power and influence.

Supersession—whether religious, political, or, as I hope to show, artistic—always involves the relations between two groups of people, two ideologies, or two beliefs, one old and one new, one dominant and one not (it is not always necessary for the relationship to be that of oppressor and oppressed) and the way that one comes to occupy the position of power previously held by another. Rather than the military defeat and elimination of one people by another, supersession employs more subtle strategies to allow for the crossing of boundaries, and they require some additional features that provide for a shift in the power structure. At the same time that they underscore the differences between the groups, the newcomers, who inevitably assert their moral, ethical, or political superiority over those whom they hope to supersede, also hope to take the place of the older establishment. As a result, the *nouveau régime* takes care not to demean the *ancien régime* too broadly and too thoroughly because clearly the latter has something to commend it or the former would have no interest in taking onto themselves the mantle and signifiers of their position and prestige. As a result, those engaged in supersession denigrate and undercut the positions and authority of the former power structure, in sometimes astonishingly vile terms, while simultaneously speaking highly of certain specific aspects of those who are being superseded.

Both groups, old and new, may overlap or in some other way share something in common, either through multiple identifications or the existence of a third term. One technique important to the process of supersession is the exploitation of specific attributes or signifiers that both

the old and the new can claim as their own in order to bridge the gap of otherness, thus allowing for the usurpation of the one by the other. Another technique is based on the concept of exceptionalism, by which the claim is made that a group of people is in general unworthy, or corrupt, or sinful, or inadequate, but one shining example (the piece of the puzzle, the cog in the machine that needs to be replaced for the truly virtuous and worthy newcomers to take over) is extraordinarily talented, or virtuous, or beautiful, or useful. By identifying with the exceptional, those who wish to take over the reins risk little contamination with the disparagement leveled at the vast majority of the older group. Both of these strategies provide means and opportunities that allow for a change, a crossing, an infiltration—a way to enter and inhabit the power structure. These can be relatively small and seemingly innocuous (a marriage, especially when the new wife weds a ruler), more obvious but still in the realm of the individual (a change in a dynasty), or more broad-based (a change in the beliefs and mores of a culture). This process can take many forms and depend on a wide variety of situations that might include an inherent weakness of the powerful that can be exploited, a moment of inattention or distraction, or, in some cases, outright treachery.

At some point, usually after the new group has infiltrated the power structure and essentially hollowed it out and come to inhabit it, the power relations are flipped and those who were previously powerless come to dominate the powerful. As a side note we might point out that supersession appears to be tailor-made for authoritarian regimes—which is the case with empires—and one formidable technique of supersession is to keep in place and use the structures and institutions of that regime to remove the authority figure and replace it with a new one; all the systems and institutions of hierarchy designed to maintain control remain in place. Thus concepts such as loyalty to one's master, obedience (to God, to king, to civil authorities, etc.), belief in the infallibility of the ruler or the cause—all these built-in social ideals are easily transferred to and appropriated by the new regime. Once the new have superseded the old and the appropriation of real power and symbol authority is complete, there follows an intensification of the campaign to discredit those formerly in power, to diminish their accomplishments and their entitlement, and to build up the new at the expense of the old, all the while paying a kind of ironic and hollow homage to the very people now seen as hopelessly deficient.

The history of the Hebrew people is marked by oppositional binarisms that delineate Jews from non-Jews: those who believe in the one true God of the Jews versus those who believe in different gods, the circumcised versus the uncircumcised, the Hebrews as a tribe in competition with others like the Canaanites or the Philistines, and so on. Likewise, Christians and Jews differ in a great many ways: the belief that the Messiah has come, the observance, or

lack thereof, of dietary and other laws related to one's daily life, the necessity for or unimportance of circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God, the difference in the willingness to evangelize and bring into the faith members of peoples of all nations, ethnicities, races, and tribes, just to name a few.

Equally as important as the differences between Judaism and Christianity, however, are their commonalities. Christianity, after all, began as a Jewish sect that blurred the distinctions between "us" and "them." Jesus and his original followers were all Jews; they were simultaneously descendants and members of the Hebrew tribes and the Jewish religion, heirs to long-shared cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions. They worshiped the same God, they were both oppressed minorities in the larger society of imperial Rome, and they both participated in the larger culture even while maintaining different individual beliefs and customs. The ministry of Jesus was not so different from those of others of his day, including many who also taught radical theologies. His life, as much as we know of it, was not so different from that of other Jews, even if he used the familiar occasions and activities to unusual purpose. He went to temple, he preached his beliefs, he gave his opinions regarding the Roman occupation of Palestine. Even those aspects that Christians think of as uniquely theirs, such as baptism and crucifixion, were not unique to him. Even as early Christians, including Jesus and his disciples, characterized the existing Jewish power structure as corrupt and more interested in the letter of the law than the spirit of making the world and its people better, they never disassociated themselves from their Jewish traditions. Jesus was a Jew who came not to destroy the law or the prophets, he said, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). The early Christian Jews, of course, were radical non-conformists who not only also laid claim to being God's chosen people but who eagerly accepted converts and actively sought to spread their new gospel to their larger host cultures and societies—Jewish, Greek, and Roman—thus opening the way for people of many nations and ethnicities to worship the God of Israel and to expand the reach of their influence in ways the closed, tribal traditions of Judaism did not. This acceptance of non-Jews into their midst came at a price, for some a repudiation of what it meant to be a Jew (at least in the conception of the Apostle Paul), but as an exercise in the creation of a movement, it was hugely successful.

Ultimately, Christians were able to surround, to supplant—to supersede—the law, the culture, the identity of the Hebrews and, since they believed that they fulfilled God's promise to the Jews, not only displace the Jews as God's Chosen People but, due to their growing influence and the problems it caused the civil authorities, change their position in the larger culture by occupying positions of power, influence, and authority previously held by others. The process of supersession was slow and painful, especially against the backdrop of the Roman Empire; it functioned not by overthrowing the Jews

or the Romans directly, but by infiltrating and dominating the host culture. Nevertheless, after three centuries of proselytizing and conversion, the size and power of the Christian population (aided by their extensive project of evangelism and conversion as well as the faith of some important allies, such as the Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena) created the political situation in which it became necessary for the Roman Empire to legalize the practice of Christianity. Later that same century the Spanish-born Emperor Theodosius completed the political supersession of the Roman gods by Christianity by making it the official state religion of the Empire. These early Christians, who were not predominantly ethnically or culturally Jewish, nevertheless appropriated for themselves the word of God, the mantle of God's chosen people, and the claim to the idea, the land, and the state of Israel, and ended up dominating the Jews, thus inverting the earlier hierarchy. Finally, it was not enough that Christianity should have risen to rule over the population from which it sprang, it was important to create an entire litany of anti-Semitic talking points that became beliefs and eventually informed policies. Christians of the Middle Ages created a panoply of horrific stereotypes to demean and vilify the Jews from whom they claimed to be descended: that they killed Christian children to make unleavened bread, that they were untrustworthy, treacherous and seditious, that they were greedy and materialistic, and that they were less than human.

Perhaps nowhere can the consequences of this process of supersession be seen more clearly than in the attitude of modern-day Christian fundamentalists towards Jews and the nation of Israel. From a political point of view there are few supporters of the State of Israel more ardent and devoted than these Christian dominionists; one Christian church, headed by televangelist John Hagee, regularly presents its "Night to Honor Israel," inviting notable conservative Israeli politicians to speak. Indeed, any analyses of the neo- and theo-conservative policies note the bringing together of conservative Jewish and fundamentalist Christian notions regarding the essential importance of Israel in the Middle East. What is frequently omitted in these seemingly ecumenical ideas and events is the second step, the real aspect of supersession, in these dominionist plans. Israel must triumph, but the Jews who live there and elsewhere must convert to Christianity in order to be saved; they must, to use Ann Coulter's terms, be "perfected." In this scenario, the Jews have been superseded as God's "real" chosen people by the narrowly focused Christian sects.

The story of Ruth, in both its original Biblical version and in Tirso de Molina's *La mejor espigadera*, is not overtly a story of supersession, yet it contains enough of the necessary elements so that it definitely lends itself to a reading based on supersession in the context of seventeenth-century Spanish politics and religion. Otherness is at the heart of the story of Ruth; among

the many binarisms posed by this story are Israelite/Moabite, rich/poor, abundance/famine, generosity/miserliness, patrilinearity/matrilinearity, noble/humble, and the like. However, unlike other episodes, such as the story of Esther, which maintain traditional binarisms and show the eventual triumph of one over the other, Ruth, while grounded in tribal difference, aims toward going beyond ethnic and national differences, as Ruth is not just accepted by the Israelites but becomes the bearer of the bloodline that gives us David and, more important from the point of view of the supersession of the Jewish by the Christian, Jesus of Nazareth.

Tirso, of course, repeats all the references to otherness found in the Bible, and adds a few more that he uses to flesh out the very brief narrative. The *comedia* underscores the distinctive characteristics of the Hebrews (“pueblo circunciso,” 1020b) and their God (“el Dios de Sión,” 1018a), and places them in opposition to both Moab, an idolatrous land of plenty (938b, 988b-90b, 1022b) and the Ishmaelites. The characters are very aware of the differences in their identities: Masalón and Bohoz refer to Rut as “moabita” (1003b) and “idólatra” (1019b), and Rut highlights the national origin of both her husbands by calling each of them “hebreo” (1003b, 1020b). Even after she has left her native Moab to live in Israel with Naomi, and despite the fact that she is accepted by the workers in the field as a potential mate for Boaz, they still refer to her as “moabita en profesión” (1019b). Such crossing of tribal boundaries brings with it severe consequences. Elsewhere in the Bible we learn that Israelite men who abandoned their faith and their tribe to consort with the beautiful women of Moab are punished by death (Num. 25: 1-9), and Tirso includes several references to the impossibility of marriage between Israelites and Moabites (1003a, 1008b).

This story, however, is not about the elimination of the other but its successful incorporation. Ruth marries both Israelites, Masalón and Bohoz, converts to Judaism, and is welcomed into Israelite society without incident. There is no indication that either man suffers solely because he marries her: Masalón dies either for punishment for his avarice and hard-heartedness (Glaser 206) and his turning away from the God of Israel,<sup>1</sup> or because of the jealousy of Timbreo and the ferocious cruelty of the Ishmaelites (an invention of Tirso), and Boaz ends up being one of the revered patriarchs of the line of David and Jesus. From a historical perspective, the point of the entire story is that Ruth must marry an Israelite (1008a) and Boaz must marry a Moabite (1018a-b, 1019b) in order to give birth to Obed, the ancestor of both David and Jesus. Marriage, of course, is a traditionally approved manner of overcoming otherness by introducing new different bloodlines into the population. The natural figure for such inmixing of otherness is, of course, the woman; not only does she carry another individual within her body, but her child literally embodies characteristics of both the father and the mother.



In this case, it is also interesting that it is the mother, Ruth, who is marked by otherness by virtue of her status as a Moabite. Even more remarkable in Tirso's theatrical version is the blurring of boundaries made possible by the unusual double-casting of the roles of Masalón and Boaz. On the one hand, Masalón's role seems to be merely a means for Ruth to move to Israel in the company of her mother-in-law, Naomi, so that she can eventually meet the future father of her son, Boaz. On the other, having the same actor play both roles conflates the two characters into a kind of generic Israelite which conforms to Ruth's dream that she will marry an unnamed member of the "tribu de Judá" (992a), "el más noble de Efratá" (992a) so that she can give birth to the Messiah, "un Rey-Dios que a Israel ama" (992a).<sup>2</sup>

It is clear, however, that this story does not depict the bringing together of two tribes as a whole. Rather, as frequently happens in supersession narratives, the extraordinary natures of the main characters from both tribes—the Israelites Nohemí and Bohoz and the Moabite Rut—are exceptional in their willingness to look beyond their tribal suspicions and enmities. Considerable praise is heaped on Nohemí: her compassion for the poor and hungry demonstrate that she is virtuous (982b-83a, 1013a); prudent (1013a); a saint (1016b)<sup>3</sup> who is miserable that Ruth is suffering on her account and who would rather go without food than see Ruth have to work so hard in the fields (1017b). Bohoz is likewise presented as not just noble but one of the Judges of Israel, honorable, upstanding, *generoso*, and *benigno*.<sup>4</sup> Because of Rut's enthusiasm for Israel, and because supersession requires a *sic et non* attitude towards those to be assimilated—the *ancien régime* must have some kind of status or ethnic authority for one to want to join with it rather than eradicate it—it is not surprising that Tirso includes many kind words for the Hebrews. Ruth describes the Israelites as a distinguished people ("ilustre," 1007b) whose men are *varoniles* (1007a), charming (998b), good-looking (1009a), and adept at conquering their enemies: *gentiles* (1007a), a term to which we shall return later. Indeed, Israel is held up as a model of a hospitable society that receives strangers well (1007a).

Not all characters, however, are so generous with their praise for the Israelites. The conflicts between Elimelec and the poor in Bethlehem as well as the historical, cultural, and religious enmity between Israel and Moab, provide Tirso with myriad opportunities for his characters, both Israelite and Moabite, to speak of the Israelites in ways that buttress any preconceived anti-Semitism his audience may have harbored. The Moabite pronouncements against the Jews—that they are vile (997b) and barbarous (998a) idolaters (1008b)—are the least surprising and interesting, since one would expect such invective from an enemy tribe that has a history of wars with the Israelites. Of more interest here is the fact that the Israelites themselves provide an astonishing array of criticism and disapproval of other Jews,



attitudes that would not have been at all unfamiliar to Tirso's audiences.

Elimelec, whom Jewish tradition depicts as a symbol of stinginess and selfishness because he abandoned Bethlehem and his countrymen at a time when they needed his help the most (*Midrash* viii, 20; cf. Glaser 204), naturally comes in for a great deal of criticism, and both the people who are begging for help, as well as his wife Nohemí, describe him as *avariento* (982b) and *cruel* (986b). His own actions do not bring him any greater honor, as he threatens the poor with death (986a), blames their starvation on their own laziness (986a, 988a), demonstrates his selfishness when he commands Nohemí not to share the family's food with the needy (986a-b), and reacts to the plight of their suffering not with compassion but with anger (986a) and threats of violence (986b, 987b). Though an Israelite himself, Elimelec appallingly characterizes the less fortunate among his own people as garbage, thieves, and *pobres viles heces* (986a). Consider, for example, the densely-packed invective contained in the following two *quintillas*:

Salid, harpías monstruosas,  
que mi mesa profanáis;  
salid, moscas enfadosas,  
que en mi mesa os asentáis,  
inútiles y asquerosas;  
que la mesa he de quemar,  
que dejáis contaminada  
la que os vino a convidar,  
y la casa que apestada  
ya es oprobio del lugar. (987a)

At the same time, Elimelec's wealth provides an opportunity to add another stereotype that would have been immediately recognizable to a Spanish audience: the rich Jew (981a) who only cares about money (*interés*, 1022b). Because he effectively abandoned his fellow Israelites in their time of need and moved his family to Moab, a land of idolaters, Elimelec's death in Moab is described as a well-deserved *maldición* (988b; cf. Sorensen 72; Glaser 202).

Masalón and Quelión, Elimelec's sons, appear to be little better than their father, and their own mother speaks of their *malicia* (984a). Quelión echoes his father in calling his tribesmen *vil sustancia* (988a) and *mendigos bribiones* (987a; cf. 988a); Masalón calls the poor Hebrews *viles ratones* (987a) and a plague on Israel (986b), an attitude that would later resonate with the Crusaders who wanted to "reclaim" the Holy Land for Christians, God's real and worthier chosen people. Given their similarities to their father, Masalón and Quelión also appear to deserve their untimely deaths (Glaser 206). As bad as Elimelec and his sons are, however, they are not the only Jews characterized by their selfishness: Gomor, for example, the character

Tirso developed for his subplot, will not share his food with his beloved, Lisis (981a-b, 1015a), and when Nohemí returns to Bethlehem with Ruth in Act 3, despite her earlier generosity and compassion toward the starving, both women anticipate that the same Jews who benefited from her earlier kindness will not help her in her time of need (1014b, 1017a, 1022a). Her nephew Elfi not only refuses to help but even denies any relationship with her (1022a-b).

Selfishness is not the only trait associated with the Hebrews in the play. Gomor, complaining that Lisis will not return his love, describes the effect of her *desdenes* as turning him into an animal: a mewling cat and a dirty, grunting swine who no longer even takes care to wash himself; he is reduced to begging for her affection with his snout (“dame a hocicar esa mano”) because his love is reduced to a *porquería* (1014b). The life-threatening famine plaguing Israel provides evidence for the Hebrews that God is punishing His Chosen People because of their sinfulness (980b, 985b). He has abandoned His people (983b) and they deserve their misery (990b). Nohemí notes that Israel, at least as the play begins, is no longer the Promised Land (983b). So dire is their hunger that two minor characters, Herbel and Aser, discuss their having had to eat food that not only is not clean—Jewish law allows a departure from its dietary restrictions if one would otherwise die of hunger<sup>5</sup>—but that would be considered disgusting by Biblical Hebrews, contemporary Spaniards, and audiences today, including dogs and rats (981a). Most shocking of all—but, alas, not that surprising given the anti-Semitism of the day—is Jaleel’s assertion to Zefara that he has the right to eat his child:

Digo, Zefara, que yo  
tengo derecho a comer  
el hijo que nos quedó.... (984b)

La vida y el ser le di,  
págueme lo que me debe;  
(...) pues el Decálogo manda  
que al padre el hijo sustente. (985a)

This outrageous claim to the flesh of his son, characterized by Zefara as *bárbaro* (985a) but stated by Jaleel in rather rational terms and supported in his reasoning by a perversion of the Decalogue, cannot be other than a reference to the blood libel that Jews kill and eat children (or use them to make unleavened bread), a calumny that has existed since ancient times but was widely disseminated throughout the Middle Ages, and would have been well-known to Tirso’s audiences.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the blood libel is to shock the conscience while providing an all-purpose justification to persecute the Jews who, according to this calumny, clearly lack basic human decency. By means of this torrent of anti-Semitic rhetoric, Tirso thus appropriates a story of great importance in the history and genealogy of the Jewish people while

simultaneously reinforcing the idea that the Jews are inferior and deserving of the misery they endure.

It is against this backdrop of praise for a few, select Israelites and opprobrium for the vast majority that we turn our attention to the main character. Ruth is the non-Jewish ancestor of both David and Jesus, but she is not your typical Moabite. Ruth dreams of Israel and practically the first words she utters indicate her desire to worship the God of Israel: “A Israel soy inclinada” (991b), “al Dios de Israel me inclino” (992a). Once in Israel, she embraces her new identity without timidity or regret, moved as she is by her love for the Israelite law (1019b) and God (1025a). Even though Bohoz’s first characterization of Ruth is “idólatra” (1019b), he is won over by her exceptional devotion, her faith, her obedience, and her love.<sup>7</sup> God has clearly smiled upon Ruth and placed her in a position of great and unusual importance. As such, she might be said to be the character with whom, one might imagine, the Spanish audience, also not Jewish, is to identify most closely. Indeed, Tirso’s version of the story of Ruth embeds the Biblical account within a dense complex of plot devices common to the *comedia*. Ruth shares most of the characteristics of the familiar *dama principal*. She is *gentil* (996a), a word that brings together many connotations that describe the virtuous protagonist: she is noble, kind, exceptional, full of grace, and, of course, not Jewish. Ruth is also so exceedingly beautiful (e.g., 996b) that men fall in love with her at first sight. She is virtuous and concerned with honor,<sup>8</sup> and she embodies many of the positive aspects of both the honorable noblewoman and the virtuous peasant, as she is variously described as *leal* (1014a), *honesta* (e.g., 1017a, 1020a), *compuesta* (1018a), and *humilde* (1017b). As she demonstrates in both word and deed, she is generous and selfless in her sacrifice for Nohemí and obedient and loving toward Bohoz (1026b), although, again typical of women in the *comedia*, she is not above participating in deception in order for the action of the play to end well.<sup>9</sup> Even before her acceptance of the God of Israel, she is presented as a wise prophet who understands that her destiny lies in Israel (992a); later, when she tells her father why she will not marry Timbreo, she reveals again that it is her destiny to marry an Israelite (1008a).

Many other plot elements also serve in one way or another to recast the familiar Biblical narrative, to displace it, supersede it, and surround it with material more enjoyable to *comedia* audiences (Sorensen 70; Metford 149, 154). The Gomor and Lisis subplot adds a dash of comic relief and mirrors both Ruth’s difficult relationship with Timbreo in Act 1 and her happy marriage to Bohoz in Act 3. The love triangle of Ruth, Masalón, and Timbreo provides the motivation for Masalón’s death, as well as high, drama as Timbreo’s love for Ruth turns to hatred. Both Ruth and Boaz have prophetic dreams while sleeping, dreams that indicate that the destiny of

both of the characters is foreordained (992a, 1007b, 1018a-b).<sup>10</sup> And all of this is in addition to remarkable coincidences (Ruth and Masalón stop to rest at the same spring, 990b); characters who do not recognize each other (Rut does not recognize Masalón when she sees him again in Act 2, 999b); stereotypical characterizations of women as deceptive, undependable, and prone to intrigue (Ruth pretends to reject Masalón and manipulates her father into accepting him, 993a, 1008b-9a); depictions of field hands as happy rustics who sing while they work (1015b ff.), a scenario most often associated in the *comedia* with *cristianos viejos*, as in *Fuenteovejuna* or *Peribáñez*;<sup>11</sup> and preoccupations with issues of class—the wealthy but miserly Elimelec<sup>12</sup> and the royal but unhappy Ruth (989b-90a) in contrast with the wretchedly hungry poor who metaphorically do not exist (“no tiene ser” 1004b, 1005a, 1022b) but are nevertheless more virtuous than those with rank and power, as we see in the theme of *menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea* when Ruth gives up her wealth and renounces her position as princess in order to live as a poor but happy and fulfilled gleaner in Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Completing the recontextualization of the Biblical narrative as a seventeenth-century *comedia* is the dense nexus of pagan references that may not be historically appropriate—and indeed can be often quite jarring—but induces the Spanish audience to relate to Naomi and Ruth not as foreigners living in ancient Palestine, but as familiar dramatic characters. Since many of the characters are primarily shepherds and farmers, it is not surprising that there are numerous references to Ceres (e.g., 980b, 1017a), Bacchus (980b, 989a), Amalthea (988b), Narcissus (989a), and Flora (1020a). Because Tirso has created an elaborate back-story about Rut and Timbreo that involves love, rejection, jealousy, and revenge, and has recast the relationship between Rut and Bohoz as one of passion as well as benevolent obligation, the play is peppered with dozens of references to the “niño Amor” (e.g., 998a) who is not just a metaphorization of love but who is described quite specifically as being the son of Venus (991a) and directly connected to the Renaissance/pagan theme of *omnia vincit amor* (993a, 1003a, 1009b). Indeed, the scene that introduces Ruth (988a-90b) takes place in a pastoral setting completely familiar to Renaissance literature, with descriptions of an idyllic natural setting and a young, beautiful girl whose failure to return the love of her suitor, Timbreo, results in her being out of tune with nature (989a). Other pagan references that one would consider inappropriate in the context of the Hebrew Bible, but are part and parcel of Renaissance literature, include Apollo (989a, 1009a), Theseus (999a), Mercury (997a), Jove and Ganymede (997b), and Cyprus (Aphrodite’s birthplace, 1024b), as well as concepts that strongly inform a pagan world view but are not limited to it, such as Fortune (1010a, 1016b, 1023b).

To sum up, Tirso’s treatment of the principal characters in the play

dovetails nicely with the larger Spanish project of appropriation of the religious and historical significance of the Hebrew Bible, the mantle of defender of the faith, and its self-identification as God's Chosen People. By praising the actions of a few extraordinary Hebrew characters, while simultaneously embedding them in a context of anti-Semitism and familiar *comedia* settings and themes, he provides his audience with a way to identify with the exceptional good Jews while repeating the familiar slanders against the majority of bad Jews. It is also interesting to note that, despite the frequent references to "Judá" throughout the play, nowhere are Naomi and her kinspeople referred to as "judíos"—indeed, the word is nowhere to be found in the entire play.

In addition, he artfully focuses on the story of Ruth, the non-Jewish character, and her importance to the future of the kings of Israel. The focus on Ruth demonstrates that it is not necessary to be Jewish in order to be chosen by God and serve His will. More important from the point of view of the Christian project, Tirso adds plot elements, anachronistic or not, that show Ruth's importance to the eventual birth of Jesus and the Christianity of which Spain will ultimately take on the role of defender. *La mayor espiadera* several times foreshadows the birth of the Messiah (984a, 1007b,<sup>14</sup> 1024b). At the end of the play he alters the final genealogical tableau that mirrors that of Ruth 4:21-22 by taking the story beyond its Old Testament confines and displacing David with Jesus as the culmination of Ruth's lineage. Finally, he recontextualizes the entire story by the massive addition of elements more common to the *comedia* than to the Biblical story.<sup>15</sup> The overall effect of this strategy is to unlink "Israel" from "Jewish" and to forge a new identification between the Hebrew Bible and imperial Spain (and the concomitant elision of the Jews). Just as *gentiles* comes to mean "non-Spanish" in other plays,<sup>16</sup> it is also important to divorce the history presented in the Bible from the Jewish people expelled in 1492, leaving Spain—not Palestine, and not the Jewish people—to come to represent *verissima Israel*.<sup>17</sup>

If we step back even further from the close reading of Tirso's text, we can see in *La mejor espiadera* an example of a more comprehensive Spanish history of supersession that marks not just the political progress of the peoples of Spain but the literary history of the *comedia* as well. As one tribe or ethnic group after another came to dominance in Spain, they did not always approach the challenge from the perspective of vanquishing and eradicating the people who were already thriving in the Iberian peninsula. The Visigoths did not achieve dominion in Iberia by eliminating all traces of the Romans but rather by taking on the very mantle of Roman civilization, including their language, their religion, and their status as the ruling class. The Moors, who entered Spain and came to dominate it with the help of treachery by the descendants of Witiza, did not kill all the Christians they encountered; they

merely decapitated their regimes and installed themselves as rulers, leaving the peoples and cultures they came to dominate largely intact. By the end of the Reconquest, and probably in no small part due to their long experience living alongside significant Jewish populations, Christian Spaniards had internalized the idea that they were God's Chosen People, elected to defend the Catholic Church against pagan infidels and protestant heretics, not just by expelling the Jews from the peninsula but by taking upon themselves markers of special status traditionally used by Jews. Despite the fact that many Spanish families, especially noble ones, had intermarried and lived harmoniously with Jews since ancient times, once the Reconquest was complete and the Jews were expelled, it was equally necessary to exalt *limpieza de sangre* and to impugn the honor and dignity of all those suspected of having Jewish blood mixed into their lineage. Finally, considering that the story of Ruth deals with how a nation deals with different kinds of citizens—those native born who never left, like Boaz; those who left and came back, like Naomi; and those who were born elsewhere but who for various reasons decided to immigrate, like Ruth (Graham 379-80)—it is also not hard to imagine its applicability to the inhabitants of the Spanish Empire who came to their citizenship by many diverse means and the problems posed by trying to integrate people of different ethnicities and national origins. All of this historical and religious context, coupled with the not completely flattering portrayal of the Jews in the play, may help explain why, at the same time that Jews were exiled from Spain and *conversos* were actively persecuted, figures from the Hebrew Bible continued to be exalted in Spanish literature.

If we then expand the focus of the notion of supersession to the theatrical genre of the *comedia* itself, we see how the playwrights, especially as documented in Lope's "Arte nuevo," consciously set out to establish the new *comedia nueva* as the model destined to supersede Aristotelian precepts of what a play should look like. Lope may have written in his "Arte nuevo" that he locked up Aristotle's precepts with six keys (41), but the fact is that he took the basic structure of classical theater and adapted it to his purposes rather than eliminating it or dismissing it completely. The *comedia* was not a brand new genre created from nothing. As a literary manifestation of the Renaissance, it sought to imitate classical models, but with the Baroque addition that the playwrights did not feel constrained to limit themselves to Aristotelian prescriptions as they created their own new formulas. Thus, tragicomedy superseded tragedy and comedy as rigorously separated genres, action superseded description, and three acts superseded five acts as the conventional standard.

All of this helps to explain how, in a country that expelled the Jews or forced their conversion to Christianity in 1492, we have not just this retelling of the story of Ruth but many plays that extol the history of the Jewish



people. The early Christians were Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth had come to complete the Hebrew prophecies, and that they embodied the fulfillment of God's promise. Spain, in part as a consequence of an 800-year Reconquest, in part as a response to what it considered to be Protestant heresy, saw itself as God's Chosen People, the defenders of the true faith. The *comedia*, which may not always have been a monolithic instrument of imperial propaganda, was not inherently opposed to taking on that role from time to time. Ruth, like the other figures of the Hebrew Bible subjected to this process of supersession and *españolización*, has become a hero suitable for appropriation by Spanish audiences, packaged in a new genre, a *comedia nueva*, proclaimed by its practitioners to have superseded the models and ideals upon which it was founded.

## Notes

1. Sorensen 74-75; Glaser 209. Masalón's two-part punishment seems to follow quite closely the Midrashic commentary, "First God punishes a man by depriving him of his property and only after that does He smite him in his person" (*Midrash* 31n).

2. Regarding Ruth's marriage to two Israelites, Sorensen understands "nobility" as a personal virtue rather than just a function of lineage, and believes that Ruth is deceived when she marries Masalón; he cannot be "el más noble de Efratá" because of his serious character flaws (72-73). In this light, the double marriage and the double-casting present an opportunity to show how two very similar characters can embody opposing moral stances: Masalón, who is motivated by lust and is willing to abandon his God, vs. Boaz, who is motivated by virtue and submission to the law (77; cf. Glaser 209). By the same token, however, Sorensen omits any mention of the fact that without her marriage to Masalón (which Tirso could hardly have left out), Ruth would not have been Naomi's daughter-in-law, she would not have moved to Bethlehem, and she would never have been able to achieve her apotheosis in Israel.

3. Given the overall thesis of this study, that Tirso consciously set out to unlink the story of Ruth from the Jewish people and appropriate it for his Christian Spanish culture, the use of the term *saint* would not have been merely an instance of carelessness.

4. E.g., 1021a, 1023a. At one point, Rut utters the hope that perhaps some generous person will leave some grain for them to glean (1017b), and, indeed, Bohoz orders his field workers to do just that. While the gesture is indeed generous, it is not actually indicative of some unusual character trait of Bohoz, but rather Jewish law. Different but related is Sorensen's effusive praise of Bohoz for his devotion to the letter of the law by seeking out Masalón's next of kin and resolving the issue of his right to marry Ruth (77). While this fact may reflect well on Bohoz's virtue and ties in with Sorensen's reading of the bad Masalón vs. the good Bohoz, it is not he but Nohemí who reminds Ruth of the law and the existence of the other unnamed family member who has a claim on her, and it is also true that its appearance in the Book of Ruth implies that Tirso could hardly be said to have constructed this plot point solely to fit his thematic purpose. Glaser (212) notes that Tirso takes additional liberties with the character of Bohoz, including transforming him from a circumspect older man to an ardent lover whose attitude toward Ruth is not that of benevolence but of a consuming passion.

5. The precept of *pikuach nefesh*—saving life—allows one to violate Sabbath and other laws, including dietary ones, if observance of the law would result in death. In only three cases—murder, adultery, and idolatry—is it preferable to die in order to obey the law. See Steinberg 272-74.

6. Dundes 337. Later, Dundes comments on the famous case in La Guardia near Ávila, in which a group of Jews and *conversos* allegedly ritually murdered a child in 1488. Since the trial took place in 1490 and 1491, the incident "was apparently used as part of the pretext to expel Jews from Spain in 1492" (341). In the same volume, Sanford Shepard discusses the prevalence of the blood libel under Franco, but also adds that, in the La Guardia case, the murdered infant never actually existed (162).



Metford (155) also relates the scene to that found in 2 Kings 6: 24-33. In addition, one cannot help but call to mind Lope de Vega's dramatization of the events in *El niño inocente de La Guardia*.

7. Sorensen posits that between Acts 2 and 3, Ruth undergoes a dramatic *desengaño* and comes to embody those attributes one associates with the Biblical character: filial love (75), self-denial and humility, as seen in her willingness to give up her active pursuit of love, wealth, and position in order to live a good, moral life in poverty, and passive submission to the will of God and her husband (76). Glaser disagrees, believing the principal thematic binarisms to be that between *pietas* and *impietas* (204), and notes that Ruth is portrayed throughout as the model of piety (205-6) whose actions are always divinely inspired (217).

8. The scene in which Ruth goes to Bohoz while he is sleeping evidently caused considerable difficulty for Tirso, who goes out of his way to repeat that she is "casta y cuerda" and is only carrying out Nohemi's plan (1025a), not indulging in an unseemly display of sexual license and potential dishonor. See Glaser 213.

9. Ruth is a much less attractive figure in Sorensen's reading of the first two acts. For him, she is altogether too motivated by personal gain and pride (71-73) and too willing to deceive those around her, including both her father and her fiancé and cousin, Timbreo (73). Sorensen focuses his study on the theme of *engaño-desengaño*, and posits that Ruth's marriage to Masalón is marked not only by literal *engaño*, as seen in the trick she plays on her father when she presents Masalón to him and her lie about the gold chain, but also religious *engaño* because she prizes the riches and prestige of this world over the everlasting reward offered to her by converting to Judaism and occasions Masalón's turning away from God toward idolatry (73-75). This account seems to elide her repeated statements of affection for Israel and devotion to its God.

10. Destiny, here, of course, is different in nature from that found when discussing actions in real life, or even in creative works of fiction. The task of both the writer of the Biblical Book of Ruth and Tirso himself is to give narrative life to events "foreordained" because they already exist in previous versions (oral history, the Bible itself) and the authors do not have total artistic freedom. As I noted in a study on Cervantes's dramatization of the siege of Numancia (Stroud, 145-48), there is inevitably a sense of fulfillment of a destiny whenever a writer produces a new version of a story so famous that everyone in the audience will already know how it ends.

11. Blanca de los Ríos, in the introduction to her edition of the play, sees in the harvest scenes the direct influence of Lope de Vega on Tirso de Molina (975).

12. For Blanca de los Ríos, Tirso's portrayal of Elimelec is a not-so-thinly veiled criticism of the cruelty, arrogance, and excesses of the Duque de Lerma, Felipe III's *privado* (973-74, 979-80, 1055-58).

13. Ruth's royal status comes not from the Bible, but, as Glaser has noted (200), from rabbinical sources (*Midrash* 31n), refuted by Christian commentators Nicolas de Lyre and Cornelius a Lapide.

14. Glaser (216-17) notes the reference to Isaiah 16:1 in the reference to the tree (the bloodline) that will grow from the rock (Ruth).

15. Metford tries to parse Tirso the dramatist vs. Tirso the theologian, and notes his scrupulous fidelity to the Biblical text and his erudite annotations, on the one hand (151), and his structuring of scenes in such a manner as to elicit the greatest dramatic effect, on the other (154, 156). While Metford deems the piece to be manifestly more moral and religious than theatrical and secular (150), Glaser believes the combination of *comedia* elements and Biblical plot demonstrates the two aspects of Tirso, playwright and theologian, in perfect harmony (218).

16. See, for example, Calderón's *El mágico prodigioso* (614b); Tirso's *La lealtad contra la envidia* (3334); and Lope's *El castigo sin venganza* (2086).

17. The particular histories of both Iberia and Palestine provide another means for identifying Spain and Israel through their opposition to a common foe. The plight of Naomi and her sons offer an opportunity to repeat and create slanderous characterizations of the Ishmaelites, thus overtly identifying them with the Muslims, of more immediate concern to Golden Age audiences. The Bible merely notes that Elimelech and Chilion died; but Tirso arranges to have them killed during an attack on the Israelite family by the Ishmaelites (994a-b), who are described in terms of their barbarity (994a, 995a), their base appetites (994b), and their uncultured cruelty (1000a), all demonizations that support quite nicely the anti-*morisco* invective of the seventeenth century. If one needed additional proof that Tirso intentionally added the Ishmaelites to his story in order to make a connection with the Moorish occupation of Spain

during the Middle Ages, one could point to his anachronistic use of Arabic words in his descriptions of the Ishmaelite attacks (“alfanje,” 995a; “alarbes,” 1000a).

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