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Matthew D. Stroud

Trinity University, mstroud@trinity.edu

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The Biblical Ruth as *Dama Principal*: Tirso's *La mejor espigadera*

Matthew D. Stroud
Trinity University



APPROPRIATION BY THE *COMEDIA* of previously existing plot material was not only considered acceptable, but, indeed, in light of the Renaissance project of *imitatio* and the baroque aim to imitate with the idea of surpassing the original, desirable. By reworking easily recognized plots and characters, most notably histories of Spain and elsewhere, mythology, and, of course, the Bible, playwrights could offer their audiences new plays that still seemed comfortable, that did not challenge the audience too greatly, and that allowed theatergoers to anticipate what would happen next because they already knew the general outlines of the narrative, while at the same time demonstrating their talents in the ways they chose to recast, update, or revise otherwise predictable plays. On the other hand, basing a new work on a familiar text also came with built-in and unavoidable limitations on artistic freedom. At some point, an adaptation that departs too radically from its source becomes a new play that offers only a nod to the earlier work, and it frequently happens that the source texts use characters and actions to highlight just one personality trait, exemplary action, or moral lesson, which means that the received plot element(s) may not be of great interest from a dramatic point of view.

The Book of Ruth provides an excellent case study of these rewards and challenges. As one of the more notable and familiar stories from the Hebrew Bible, frequently used in sermons and commentaries on the proper role of women in Christian society (Metford 149, 154), any seventeenth-century playwright could have relied upon the fact that audiences were well-acquainted with the story as Ruth leaves her native Moab with her mother-in-law, Naomi, marries Boaz, and gives birth to the bloodline that includes both King David and Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the Book of Ruth provides very little in the way of dramatic narrative; there are no villains, no obstacles that appear to be insurmountable, no internal conflicts that any of the principal characters must resolve. As a result, the characters as portrayed in the Bible are rather one-dimensional, and all the main characters are exceedingly virtuous. In spite of the

limitations of the source material he chose, or perhaps because of them, as we shall see, Tirso de Molina's version of the Book of Ruth, *La mejor espigadera*, is extraordinary. Not only does he make his Biblical characters come alive as dramatic characters rather than just moral *exempla* (Metford 154), but all of the Biblical source material takes up no more than one-third of the play, leaving the remaining two-thirds (and, like many of Tirso's works, this play is longer than an average *comedia*, totaling over 3,600 lines) for supplementary material that is bound only by the playwright's imagination.

Although *La mejor espigadera* has garnered little critical attention, the existing studies of the play have noted the disproportionate amount of new plot material and the wide variety of different kinds of characters, actions, and themes by means of which Tirso chose to augment the Biblical story. Blanca de los Ríos makes the interesting and provocative assertion that Tirso's representation of Elimelech and his sons is a thinly veiled social criticism of the abuses and arrogance of the Duque de Lerma, Felipe III's *privado*, as well as the general unhappiness in Spanish society as a result of his policies (973a-b, 979a-80b, 1055a-58b), and Valbuena Prat notes the Castilian recontextualization of the action through use of "cantares de siega" in the play: "habla el corazón y no la literatura Revivirá en los campos castellanos la humana anécdota del Antiguo Testamento" (168, cited in Glaser 199; see also Ríos 975b). Not surprisingly, most focus their remarks on the relative importance to the added material of Tirso's religious background and his attempt to provide additional Biblical exegesis (Metford 151), on the one hand—the portrayal of Elimelech as the embodiment of avarice and cruelty (Glaser 202-4); tensions between the Israelites and the idolatrous Moabites (Glaser 201); the famine sent by God to punish the Israelites for their sinfulness (Glaser 202); the allusions to other passages in the Bible (Glaser 208, 216)—and, on the other, his theatrical training and interest in creating an entertaining play—the subplot with the commoners, Lisis and Gomor; the importance of dreams as prophecy (Glaser 205); the use of deception and intrigue (Sorensen 71, 73; Metford 156); and the inclusion of baroque contradictions as poetic ornamentation (Glaser 206). In addition to noting many of these staples of *comedia* stagecraft, my companion piece to this current study placed the play in the larger context of supersession, the process by which early modern Spain set out to displace the recently expelled Jews and appropriate the mantle of moral authority and theological primacy for itself (Stroud). While the existing criticism disagrees to some extent on the relative weight of Tirso's two imperatives, there is consensus that *La mayor espigadera* weaves together both the theological and the theatrical. Metford (150) believes "the Mercedarian seems to have guided the hand of the dramatist"; Sorensen (70) opines that Tirso occasionally takes the opportunity to provide a religious exegesis, but, since he is a playwright first and a theologian second (70), his additions are intended to make the play more entertaining to his audience;

Glaser notes that the work is solidly moral and religious (200-01) but that the play reflects the perfect harmony of playwright and theologian (218).

The Biblical Ruth can be summarized with very few adjectives. She is a widow (Ruth 4:5) and a foreigner (2:2, 10; 4:5) who is loyal (1:14, 16; 3:10), devoted to the God of Israel (1:16), willing to leave her home and family (1:14, 2:11), capable (3:11), hardworking and willing to support Naomi (2:3, 7, 18), submissive (2:13), vulnerable (2:22), and so obedient that she follows Naomi's recommendation to put herself in a compromising position at Boaz's feet (3:5-8). He purchases the right to marry her (4:10), after which she gladly becomes his wife (4:13), the mother of his child (4:15), and the ancestor to the Kings of Israel (4:22). All of these characteristics also apply to the Rut we see in Tirso's Act 3 after she has moved to Bethlehem, and, because they merely mirror the Biblical narrative, are of less interest here. Rather, let us focus on the massive backstory provided in Acts 1 and 2, in which Rut is depicted as a much more complex and interesting character, one whose trajectory parallels that so common to female protagonists in other *comedias*.

In its description of Ruth, the Bible fails to mention several aspects that are common to the *dama principal* in the *comedia*—beauty and nobility first among them—and it even fails to provide information regarding whether or not she marries her two husbands for love or any other reason; except for her loyalty, it reveals very little about her character. Tirso, recasting Ruth in the mold of the leading lady, fills in those gaps in part by relying occasionally on traditional commentaries of Ruth, and even more importantly by portraying his Rut as the typical young woman caught up in the dilemmas posed by a love triangle. The Bible may not comment on Ruth's beauty, but Tirso demonstrates no such reticence. Whenever anyone first lays eyes on Rut, they cannot help but remark on her *belleza*. Masalón's first speech upon spying the young woman asleep by the fountain is peppered with references to her attractiveness:

¿Vióse hermosura mejor?
No durmáis, ojos, velad
mientras su amor me desvela
y el alma en su vista hermosa,
imita a la mariposa
dando vueltas a la vela. (991a-b)¹

She is, for him, a “sol de luz resplandeciente” (994a). Bohoz, too, when he first sees his future wife, is overcome by her beauty:

¿Quién es esta mujer bella,
que me ha dado sólo en vella
mil vuelcos al corazón? (...)
¿Hay más bella compostura?
¿Hay más compuesta beldad? (1018a)

Both Masalón and Bohoz, of course, like many other *galanes* in innumerable *comedias*, fall in love with her at first sight (991b; 1018a-b, 1019b-22a),² but even the workers in the field characterize her beauty as among her most noticeable traits (e.g., “la más hermosa nuera,” 1016b; “muchacha y bella,” 1022a). Likewise, in order to recast the Biblical narrative as a *comedia*, the main characters must also be of noble rank; Tirso’s Rut is a princess, the daughter of the King of Moab (991b), and *gentil* (996a) in the multiple senses of the word; Timbreo is her cousin; Masalón is not just wealthy but noble (1000a); and the nobility of Bohoz is mentioned repeatedly throughout Act 3.³

In light of her desirability, it is not surprising that she should end up as the object of desire of more than one man, and the love triangle, which is wholly absent from the Biblical version, occupies most of the first two acts of Tirso’s play. Rut’s father, we learn, has promised her in marriage to Timbreo, who loves her so much that he would rather lose her than cause her any unhappiness (996b). For a variety of reasons, however, she does not want to commit herself to him. Even before she meets Masalón, the third participant in the triangle, both Timbreo and her father complain about Rut’s *melancolía* and *luto* at the prospect of this marriage and the *rigor* with which she responds to his affection (989a, 996a, 996b). It is clear that Rut simply does not love Timbreo (“ni corresponde amor siempre al deseo,” 989b), and she does not want to marry a man she does not love (991b), an attitude that reflects the familiar tendency in the *comedia* to cast as problematic marriages arranged for reasons other than love. Indeed, Rut complains of the obligations of her royal status and the sadness they cause her (989b-90a). According to the Renaissance ideal of universal coherence, a beautiful woman in harmony with nature is supposed to return the love of a proper suitor; Timbreo is unable to understand her rejection of his love, and her father, by means of references to a variety of elements in conflict, questions how her vaunted beauty could be in such discord with the orderly functioning of the human condition:

¿Qué interior melancolía
eclipsa la luz hermosa
de esa cara que es mi día?
¿Qué cierzo seca la rosa
de esa primavera mía?
¿Qué riguroso pirata,
hurtando al gusto el tesoro,
te aflige y matarme trata? (996a)

Having earlier accused Rut of being “ingrata y leve” (990a), Timbreo reacts with anger, but Rut is swayed neither by arguments nor by insults. In a departure from her depiction in the Bible, Rut is presented as a strong-willed, intelligent, competent woman who is not only loath to submit meekly to the wishes that

others may have for her, but she is quite aware that she can use her power to get what she wants:

¿El poder
de un príncipe, cara prima,
no es de tal valor y estima,
que mide con su querer
su potencia? (1004a; cf. 1005a-b)

Of course, one of her desires, as has been revealed to her in her dreams, is to marry a man from Bethlehem, “el más noble de Efratá” (992a), abandon her Moabite religion, and follow the God of Israel.

In many ways, as Glaser has noted (206), Rut’s relationship with Masalón follows the conventional contours of the *comedia*. They meet by chance when they both coincidentally stop to rest at the same idyllic spot, and their mutual attraction is immediate. Masalón, although plagued by contradictory emotions—“¿...dulce y amargo en un punto? / ¿Pena y gusto en un sujeto? / ¿amor, sospecha y respeto?”—is captivated “[i]nstantáneamente” by the beautiful, sleeping “ángel” (991b). Asleep and dreaming by the cool spring, Rut reveals that she is the daughter of the Moabite king, that she does not want to marry Timbreo, that she prefers Judaism to her tribe’s pagan religion, and that her husband will not only come from the tribe of Judah but that he will be an Ephrathite (“De la tribu de Judá / y vecino de Belén / ha de ser solo mi dueño,” 992a). Masalón, who overhears Rut’s discourse, cannot believe his ears since it appears that she is referring to him. Like others who overhear the utterances of sleeping characters, Masalón’s instinct is to take what she says as the true expression of her desires (Glaser 205), but, in order to verify that everything she has revealed while asleep is true, he wakes her up, then feigns that he is asleep next to her (992b). Rut is startled by Masalón’s presence and passes through multiple reactions: she wants to kill him, she is grateful that this stranger did not try to force himself on her, she judges him to be of noble birth, she notes that he is an attractive Israelite, and she realizes that he represents a way for her to assert her independence and rebel against her father, reject a man she does not love, follow her own desires, fulfill the prophecy, and fall in love with and marry a man to whom she is truly attracted (992b-93a).⁴ At the same time, she worries about the intractable problems created by the fact that they are from different tribes as well as Timbreo’s inevitable jealousy. Despite her attraction to him in part because he is an Israelite, Rut decides to resist his advances (993a). Masalón, aware of her secret hopes, tells her exactly what she wants to hear:

Si a mi nación quieres bien,
y desees que un hebreo
sea tu esposo, efrateo

soy, y mi patria es Belén;
 en la tribu de Judá
 no hallarás quien me aventaje
 en hacienda ni en linaje. (993a-b)

Although it might appear that they are perfect for each other—both noble, both wealthy, both attracted to each other—there would be no drama without conflict, and the next few words of each character foreshadow the unhappy complications their relationship faces. Rut fears that Timbreo will kill Masalón, while Masalón, using a standard association based in courtly love, relates his love for her to his own death: “Dame muerte, y quedarás / libre” (993b). Showing flashes of the mean-spirited arrogance and *malicia* that he demonstrated earlier with the poor in Israel (984a; see also 986b-87a), Masalón then accuses her of being hard-hearted and ungrateful; he could, after all, have dishonored her. She responds that she is grateful but repeats that they both put themselves at risk if they pursue this relationship, gives him a token of her gratitude, a gold chain that will cause problems for her later on, and then, like other flirtatious *damas*, urges him on with the exhortation, “El que bien ama bien busca. / Busca si amas bien, hebreo” (994a, and later repeated back to her by Masalón, 1001b). The course of the relationship between Masalón and Rut quickly becomes even more complicated when Nohemí enters to announce that Elimelec has been killed and all the wealth of the family has been stolen, and she underscores the irony of the family’s move to Moab to prevent just such a turn of events.⁵ Masalón’s sudden poverty and his accompanying self-pity lead him to back away from his love for Rut. He complains that he has lost his father, his brother, his fortune, and his homeland, and now love wants him to lose his freedom (994b). His poverty, he worries, will make him less attractive and thus prove to be an insurmountable obstacle in his love for Rut:

Si los bienes
 son las alas del amor,
 ¿cómo es posible que vuelen
 mis esperanzas sin alas?
 Pues no es mucho que se seque
 la yedra de Amor, faltando
 interés que la sustente. (995b; cf. 999a)

The loss of his wealth and social prestige now makes him unequal in status to Rut. A contemporary commentary on the Book of Ruth by Cornelius a Lapide asks how the King of Moab could have given his daughter to some poor, hungry stranger (cited in Glaser 207).

It is in Act 2 that Rut acts least like a righteous woman of the Hebrew Bible and most like the scheming *dama principal* of the *comedia* as she engineers a series of intrigues and deceptions in order to avoid marrying Timbreo

and overcome the obstacles to her marriage to Masalón.⁶ Indicative of the development of her character as an *intrigante* is the issue of the gold chain that Rut gave to Masalón toward the end of Act 1. She deliberately deceives Timbreo, her father, and Orfá by telling them that a foreigner took the gold chain from around her neck while she was sleeping, thus threatening not only her honor but her life (997a). Despite her Freudian slip, “que me robó el corazón, / quiero decir la cadena” (997a), she says that, as a woman, she is susceptible to “livianos antojos” and “mujeriles disparates” (997a). Using the loss of the chain as an excuse for her being out of sorts with Timbreo (“¿Quién, padre y señor, creyera / ... / que de la pena en que estoy / la causa una joya fuera?” 997a), she declares that the episode has her entirely too upset and distracted to pursue a marriage with Timbreo. No one—not her father, not Timbreo, not Orfá—finds this explanation convincing (997a-98a), so Rut adds that it is not the value of the chain itself that has her so distraught, but the fact that her mother gave it to her (997b). Moreover, she feigns outrage that it should be an Israelite that took it, and she swears to take revenge on the thief. Timbreo supports her and, in a bit of foreshadowing, declares that the “vil hebreo” will find no rest or haven in Moab (997b). Alone again, Rut finds herself in the typical predicament of the *dama principal* in love faced with a situation marked by paradox and dilemma, and besieged by contradictory emotions (998b).

Masalón enters dressed as a poor man. Since one’s wealth is intimately tied to one’s social status and even to one’s identity, Rut does not even recognize the wretch before her at first, and she admonishes him that only royals are allowed in the palace (999b). Rut begins to realize that he is the same man she met earlier, but she thinks he is only trying to deceive her with a disguise. As she draws him out with a series of questions, she realizes that Masalón is now poor, but that he still loves her (1000a-b). He may have lost his material possessions, but he is still noble (1000a) and comes to her rich in love and hope (999a-b). When she gives him another gold chain as an act of charity (1000b), he thanks her and reveals that he gave the earlier one to his mother and brother so that they might buy food and clothing (1001a). He now cannot help but love her (1000b) and hopes that she will not reject him, that his love will prove worthy: “soy pobre y acreedor; / amor te di, dame amor, / que ‘amor con amor se paga’” (1001b). When she continues to fail to admit their previous encounter and the amorous connection between them, even though they are speaking alone, Masalón reacts as a typical *galán*, accusing her of being fickle and expressing his love in familiar images: he is dying because she no longer loves him; he burns with desire; her rejection has rendered him mad; and he is consumed with jealousy (1002a). They discuss their earlier conversation when he first overheard her talking in her sleep, then pretended to sleep while talking to her. She is upset at the deception (“¡Oh traidor!”), but Masalón reminds her that love is deception (“Amor es arte”) and she is forced

to acknowledge the power of love that conquers with its “*armas secretas*” (1002b).

Masalón believes that love can overcome all their obstacles: their different religions, Timbreo’s jealousy, and the possible opposition of her father (1003a). He takes Rut and kisses her, and she declares that she will be no one’s wife but his (1003b), thus paving the way for Rut’s most ingenious and complicated bit of intrigue. First, she has to justify to herself her marriage to a poor man by noting that he may have lost his possessions but he is still the same valued person:

Un pobre casi no tiene
ser que su humildad levante,
y si es ilustre, es diamante
que engastado en plomo viene. (1005a)

As a princess, however, she has the power to bestow status: “*el dar ser a lo que es nada / es hazaña reservada / al rey y a Naturaleza*” (1005a). She will embed this diamond in her love and return to him his status by marrying him (1005a), but first she will deceive her father into thinking that he is still a man of means. She will demonstrate the power that befits her royal status by having Orfá take him to court and dress him in royal purple (1005a-b). Telling her father that she is miserable (“*de una tristeza afligida,*” 1006a), she insists that only he can cure what ails her. As a loving father who wants his daughter to be happy, he responds that she does not have to marry Timbreo; in fact, although he finds the thought of such a mismatch impossible to imagine, she may even marry a lowly shepherd if that would please her (1006b). Rut launches into a long speech, a mixture of truth and deception, in which she extols the virtues of the Israelites (1007a) and explains that one of her servants, an Israelite slave and a relative of the great and noble judge, Bohoz of Bethlehem, taught her about the God of Israel. Just as Rut had dreamed of marrying an Ephrathite, Bohoz, according to the servant, also had a prophetic dream that a member of his family would marry a young, noble Moabite woman, and together they would produce the bloodline that would give birth to the Messiah (1007b). Rut has become convinced that she is the Moabite, which explains her unusual affection for Israel and the God of Zion, and she will not marry anyone who is not an Ephrathite “*y del escogido origen / de Judá no descendiere*” (1008a). At this point in her lengthy narrative, her father becomes alarmed because, in the eyes of the Moabites, the Israelites are idolaters (1008b).

Rut now proposes a hypothetical situation: what if there were such an Israelite who not only fulfilled all these requirements but, because of his love, was disposed to renounce his faith in his God and adopt the Moabite religion? Her father rightly notes that this scenario would not lead to the future

prophesied by the servant since Rut would not have converted to Judaism; he also doubts that such a man exists, but he admits that he would allow her to marry him (1008b). In a startling *coup de théâtre*, a curtain opens revealing Masalón dressed in royal finery; this, says Rut, is her future husband:

Mira el valor de Belén,
la nobleza de Efratá,
el hechizo de Judá,
el objeto de mi bien. (1009a)

The King is overwhelmed by his appearance and his good looks, confirms that Masalón will renounce his God, and is comforted by the knowledge that he will provide him with grandchildren so that his royal line will continue. The King declares that this is the will of heaven (a rather interesting turn of phrase, given the circumstances), and he gives to Masalón Rut's hand in marriage (1009b). Even though Rut insists they keep the marriage a secret from Timbreo, Orfá sums up the astonishing events she has just witnessed:

Imposibles llevo a ver;
mas ¿qué no hará una mujer
y un Rey que hechiza, amorosa,
pues la más difícil cosa
vencen amor y poder? (1009b)

Just as the King predicts that Timbreo will not like this turn of events, Nohemí and Quelión are brought to court as prisoners. Ostensibly the purpose is to charge them with the theft of the gold chain given to Nohemí by Masalón, but the theatrical reason is to bring them on stage so that Masalón can inform them of his good fortune as well as arrange the marriage between Quelión and Orfá (1010a). Nohemí and Quelión are still trying to absorb this news when Timbreo enters, raging in jealousy, condemning Rut and Masalón of being lawbreaking traitors (1010b), and singling out his former fiancée for additional insults as a "cruel," "ingrata," and "desdeñosa tirana" who has caused him untold suffering with her "liviandad" (1011a-b). Because of her actions, he claims that she is the death of him ("Rut me mata," 1011b); his rage is driving him mad, and, at the end of Act 2, he swears to punish those who have deceived him and, more specifically, to kill Masalón: "pierda la vida quien a Rut me quita" (1011b). His fury endures the ten year gap between the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3, when Timbreo reappears to heap more insults on Rut and to let the audience know that he has killed both Masalón and Quelión (1012a-b).⁷ Despite her rejection of him, he still loves Rut and offers to marry her and restore her to her position as princess; indeed, in true paradoxical baroque style, he states that the more she hates him, the more he loves her (1013a). Nohemí encourages her daughter-in-law to marry the man who killed her sons (1013b). Rut, of course,

refuses, and the arc of the *comedia* with Rut as *dama principal* essentially ends as the play picks up again the thread of the Biblical narrative.

Once she has left Moab, moved to Israel with Nohemí, and converted to Judaism (1014a), Rut has undergone a radical change. No longer is she the energetic, self-possessed, capable, independent, powerful, and privileged princess who was perhaps a bit too headstrong to notice that her intrigues and deceptions might lead to unfortunate consequences. For reasons beyond her control, including the death of Masalón, the loss of her wealth and status, and her fate as revealed in the prophecies, and faced with limited choices—marry the man who killed her husband, live alone with no support, or worse (a life of prostitution or even death), Rut relinquishes those qualities that made her most impressive. The once haughty *dama principal* has been reduced to a humble slave (1016b-17b) who appears to embody those attributes one associates with the Biblical character: filial love, self-denial, and humility, as seen in her willingness to support her mother-in-law and to live a good, moral life in poverty.⁸ She and Nohemí must now stave off hunger by gleaning grain from the lands of the good and noble Bohoz (1017a). When Rut and Bohoz first see each other, they can hardly believe their eyes. Although Rut mistakenly interpreted Masalón to be the man of her dreams, both of them sense that they have literally found the persons they have each independently dreamed of meeting and marrying (1018a-b, 1020a-21a). Rut is even more amazed because Bohoz looks exactly like Masalón (and, indeed, the two characters are played by the same actor). Bohoz comments on her “*mudanza tan dichosa*” (1021a), this time referring not to any fickleness on her part, but on her new life and new religion. She has gone from active to passive (Sorensen 75-76; Metford 157) as she declares that she will be Bohoz’s “*esclava*” and he will be her “*cabeza*” (1026a). Even when she engages in a bit of manipulation, she is merely following the instructions of Nohemí to lie down with Bohoz so that he may make her his wife (1025a; cf. Glaser 213). The play also insists that Rut is utterly “*honesta*” and “*limpia*” (1017a, 1024b-25a, 1026a), so that we do not infer that her interest in Bohoz is in any way lascivious. In order to achieve a happy ending—which for a woman in the *comedia* almost always means marriage—she has had to relinquish a great deal of her personality and spirit. In Rut’s case, her reduction to an exchange object could not be more manifest: before Bohoz can marry her, he first has to obtain the right to marry her from Masalón’s closest living male relative (1025b; at least Tirso left out the detail that Boaz was able to “buy” the right to marry her in exchange for a sandal, Ruth 4:7-10). In compensation for giving up her independent spirit and submitting to the requirements of husband and society, she receives not just the multiple blessings of other characters (1017b, 1022a-23a, 1025b, 1028b), as well as the joys of giving her husband a child (1023b, 1024b), but the ultimate glory of becoming an ancestor to both King David and Jesus Christ himself.⁹

Her rewards may surpass those of other women, but in reality she is like so many other *damas principales*—Ángela in *La dama duende* and Rosaura in *La vida es sueño* are but two examples—who may once have demonstrated the determination and will to follow their own hearts, as well as the quickness of mind to devise and carry out their plans, but who have to lay all that aside and accept their roles as submissive and obedient wives.

The Book of Ruth is a very brief story, one of the shortest in the Bible with just 85 verses divided into four succinct chapters, and it needed a great deal of additional plot in order to provide enough action for a three-act *comedia*. Even so, it is still remarkable that Tirso expanded just two verses of the Bible, Ruth 1:4-5 into roughly 2,000 lines of baroque poetry. While it is expected that the Mercedarian author should follow the Biblical narrative rather closely in the rest of the play (Metford 150), it is also not surprising that he should have relied on his creative talents as a playwright when confronted with so much additional plot to be created. Perhaps more importantly, it is clear that Tirso took advantage of the opportunity to introduce new and familiar plot elements designed to appeal to his Christian, Spanish audience. Tirso's Rut is a much more interesting and dramatic character, who grows and progresses from a petulant woman unhappy with an arranged marriage to an independent spirit willing to take matters into her own hands and resort to manipulations, lies, and deceptions before finally, in the last act, becoming not just the Biblical figure known for her submissive, obedient, loyal, charitable, and completely virtuous behavior, but for her role in giving the world Christ and Christianity. Solely on the basis of the amount of plot based on the Book of Ruth in contrast to the amount of exposition devoted to depicting Rut as a *dama principal*, one simply must agree with Sorensen that theater trumps theology in *La mejor espigadera* (70). Tirso more than adequately demonstrates the baroque aspiration to imitate its models with the goal of surpassing them, and *La mejor espigadera* subtly, and probably subconsciously, makes a statement that the *comedia* as a genre should take second place to nothing, not even to the Holy Bible.

Notes

1. Even the setting described by Tirso calls to mind the world of the *dama principal*. Not only is the scene punctuated with references to pagan gods more typical of Renaissance poetry—Amaltea (988b), Narciso, Baco, Amor, and Apolo (989a)—but Masalón first spies Rut asleep amid the “sombras deleitables / de este bosque” (990b) and the “risueños cristales” (991a).

2. Glaser (212) notes the transformation of Bohoz from the benevolent but circumspect older man in the Bible to an ardent lover in the *comedia*, a *galán* filled with a consuming passion for Rut.

3. 1021a, 1022b, 2025b. Tirso traces the nobility of both Masalón and Bohoz to Abraham through Jacob (1009a, 1012b). Understanding nobility as a virtue rather than just a function of lineage, Sorenson (72-73) discounts Masalón’s claims to nobility and believes that Rut is deceived when she marries Masalón; he cannot be “el más noble de Efratá” (992a) because of his serious character flaw. For more on the tradition of Rut as a princess, see Glaser 200.

4. Palomo has studied scenes in a variety of plays by Tirso in which a character comes upon a potential lover who is asleep, focusing specifically on the two possible reactions of such a discovery, respect or fear on the one hand, daring or desire on the other. In the case of *La mejor espigadera*, she delineates a variety of plot elements, including love at first sight, contradictory emotions of the lover (Masalón came to rest and found love), the revelation of Rut’s hopes and desires in the speech she delivers while asleep, Masalón’s feigned sleep as a way to verify the truth of what he has heard, and the change in Rut from her panicked discovery of Masalón’s presence to her gratitude that he has treated her with such respect (223-24).

5. 994a-b. While Tirso casts the death as the result of an attack on the family by “barbarous ismaelitas” (994a), tradition holds that his death was divine justice for his having failed to help the poor, a perspective also echoed by Nohemí, who deems it a “castigo del Cielo justo” (994b).

6. Sorensen (70, 71, 73-75) believes that Tirso created this backstory for his main character in order to set up a dichotomy between the lying, deceiving Rut, who is motivated by personal gain and in general exemplifies the vice of pride and the theme of *engaño*, and the virtuous Biblical character she becomes in Act 3. Sorensen sees Ruth’s marriage to Masalón as marked not only by literal *engaño*, exemplified by the trick she plays on her father when she presents Masalón to him, but also religious *engaño* in that she marries Masalón without converting to Judaism and causes Masalón to abandon his faith because she prizes the riches and prestige of this world over the everlasting reward offered to her by converting to Judaism. Glaser (205-6, 217) interprets Rut’s interest in Masalón as a function of divine inspiration and religious fulfillment, not of her personal desires.

7. Sorensen (74-75) sees Timbreo’s jealous rage and his murder of Masalón as instruments of God’s punishment of the Israelite who abandoned his faith, a notion echoed by Nohemí: “no favorece el Cielo / amor que a su Dios olvida” (1010b; see also Glaser 206, 209; Metford 151). It is also possible, although not stated in the play, that Masalón and Quelión deserved the same punishment their father received because, at the beginning of the play while they were still in Israel, they treated the poor no better than their father did (984a, 986a-87b).

8. The changes in her character between Act 2 and Act 3 are stark, and demonstrate both Sorensen’s view of the play as the triumph of *desengaño* over *engaño* (71-77) and Glaser’s description of the binary structure based on *pietas* and *impietas* (204).

9. 1028b. Glaser (217) interprets her giving birth to the ancestors of Jesus Christ as her reward for her *pietas*, but one cannot overlook the way that Tirso used numerous prophetic passages and dreams to surpass the Hebrew genealogy that culminates in King David (Ruth 4:17-22) and to anticipate the birth of Christ and the supersession of Judaism by Christianity. In essence, Tirso creates a parallel between the Moabite Ruth, Christianity, and Spain itself in that a woman, a religion, and an empire, not Jews themselves, come to fulfill and surpass the role given to the Israelites by the God of the Hebrew Bible. For more on the appropriation of Biblical texts to support the claim of Spain to be the *verissima Israel* and the supersession by Spaniards of the mantle of God’s Chosen People, see Stroud.

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