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**Trans-Atlantic Crypto-Judaism and Literary Homage:  
Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte and the Women in his Life**

Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, many New Christians (Jewish converts to Catholicism and their descendants) eventually migrated to Latin America.<sup>1</sup> As baptized Catholics living in lands where Judaism was forbidden, those New Christians, also called *conversos* (converts), who wished to practice Judaic rites did so secretly. These so-called crypto-Jews, or *judaizantes* (Judaizers) in Inquisition parlance, and their descendants preserved a Jewish identity for centuries, including, in certain

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instances, up to the modern era.<sup>2</sup> However, in many cases, the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in their respective American territories persecuted families with the same thoroughness as was occurring on the Iberian Peninsula. Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte (1592-1649) was the most famous of 14 Judaizing New Christians killed after the *auto de fé* of April 11, 1649, in Mexico City for relapsed and unrepentant heresy, and the only one burned alive.<sup>3</sup> Treviño achieved fame in official chronicles of the event and in Mexican popular culture for his leadership of a small circle of likeminded *conversos* who were also secret Jews, and especially for refusing to renounce his Judaizing heresy and accept the Inquisition's offer of mercy. Less well known among scholars today than Treviño are some of the crypto-Jewish *conversas* who taught him and lived by the same clandestine ways: his mother, Leonor Martínez de Villagómez; an apparently scorned lover, Margarita de Rivera; and his wife, María Gómez. The attempts of these women to formally practice Judaism show that crypto-Jews forged a recognizably Jewish identity behind the appearance of faithful Christianity. Yet such practices, minutely described in Inquisition documents, are absent from the glossed-over representations of Treviño in two poems and a prose account of Mexican folklore as a larger-than-life figure worthy of popular attention and a certain begrudging respect. By exploring the absence of these women's cultural practices from the representation of such practices in the person of

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the use (and abuse) of the term *judío/judía* (Jew) to describe crypto-Jews in seventeenth-century Mexico, whether by inquisitors, the population at large, Judaizers themselves, or modern scholars, see Martin A Cohen, "Some Misconceptions about the Crypto-Jews in Colonial Mexico," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 61 (1972): 277-293.

<sup>3</sup> *Auto de fé* (act of faith) was the term the Inquisition used to describe the public reading of guilt and sentencing that it imposed on convicted heretics. See María Moliner, *Diccionario del uso del español* (Madrid: Gredos, 1998), 1:302. Unrepentant and/or relapsed heretics were handed over ("relaxed") to secular authorities for the public execution of a sentence.

Treviño alone, this essay will demonstrate how the women in his life helped make possible his popularization and even rehabilitation in cultural memory on both sides of the Atlantic.

Born to a *conversa* mother and Old Christian father in Medino de Ríoseco, Spain, Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte immigrated to Mexico in 1612 after murdering a fellow page in the service of the admiral of Castile. In Oaxaca, Guadalajara, and Mexico City, Treviño prospered as a merchant and storeowner exporting cochineal dye and importing goods from Europe and the Philippines. He also became a leader of crypto-Jewish communities after deciding to ignore a promise to foreswear Judaic rites made at the conclusion of his first trial for Judaizing, in 1625. This defiance of the Inquisition lasted nearly a quarter century and was most noteworthy during his second trial (1644-1649), during nearly the entire course of which Treviño refused to admit his crypto-Judaism, despite testimony to the contrary given by 35 witnesses. Only when sentenced to the stake did he confess to being a relapsed heretic; he then insisted on dying as an unrepentant Judaizer, despite the tireless efforts of several priests to convince him to seek the Church's forgiveness before the pyre was lit.

In societies such as post-1492 Spain and colonial Mexico that forbade public expression of Judaism, women used their primacy in the domestic realm to practice crypto-Judaic rites and teach them to their children in both quotidian and lifecycle events, such as culinary practices, prayers, and rites over newborns, newlyweds, and the dead. In fact more than a century after the expulsion of Jews from Spain and its territories, women were better positioned than men to preserve many basic tenets of Judaism. While men

lost their public gathering spaces, such as the synagogue, school, and shop, “the women had never been dependent on a center outside of the home... and when all the other institutions disappeared, they did not have to undergo a major transition.”<sup>4</sup> Leonor Martínez de Villagómez’s ability to teach her son the forbidden beliefs while he was a church-going teenager shows the relative success of such women as guardians of secret Judaism. According to testimony Treviño gave at his first trial for Judaizing, he was probably 14 at the time of his so-called indoctrination scene, when Leonor led him by the hand to a pantry on the second floor of their home and made him listen to the secret of her own crypto-Judaism. Narrations of these scenes were common in Inquisition trials, and usually consisted of the accused relating how a female family member revealed the family’s secret Judaism when he/she was an adolescent.<sup>5</sup> At first Treviño was not interested and started to walk away; his mother brought him back and then explained:

lo que los cristianos adoraban eran unas figuras de palo y de metal, y que Jesucristo nuestro señor era hijo de un carpintero, y que la verdadera Ley era la que Dios había dado a Moisés en el desierto,... y que la dicha Ley dada por Dios a Moisés era la cierta y la verdadera y en la que se habían de salvar,... y le instó mucho a este confesante a

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<sup>4</sup> Renée Levine Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel: The Crypto-Jewish Women of Castile* (New York: Oxford University Press), 32. See also Levine Melammed, “Medieval and Early Modern Sephardi Women,” in Judith R. Baskin, ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 139.

<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Kagan and Abigail Dyer, *Inquisitorial Inquiries: Brief Lives of Secret Jews and Other Heretics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 164 n. 32. In the same note, they also write, “there is no way to tell whether these scenes were as common as they appear to have been from the trial records, or whether defendants realized that inquisitors expected such a scene and would interrogate them until they got one.”

que de todo corazón la creyese y guardase como ella lo hacía, y que Dios se llamaba Adonái.

(what the Christians worshipped were figures of wood and metal, and that Jesus Christ our Lord was the son of a carpenter, and that the true Law was the one God had given Moses in the desert,... and that the said law given by God to Moses was the real and true law, and the one in which they must be saved,... and she insisted to this penitent that he believe and keep this law with all his heart as she did, and that God was called Adonai).<sup>6</sup>

His mother ended this revelation by teaching Treviño some of the prayers she recited as a Judaizer, commanding that he commit such prayers to memory, and warning him not to tell anyone of their conversation. The order not to write anything exemplified the centuries-long survival of crypto-Judaism as almost exclusively an oral set of beliefs, in the absence of prayer books and regular contact with communities of openly-practicing Jews of Iberian descent, such as those of Amsterdam or the Ottoman Empire.

This spiritual and geographical isolation constrained and modified the ability of Judaizing *conversos* to practice Judaic rites, with the result that their understanding of such beliefs became an approximation or vestige of normative Judaism. In fact, most so-called secret Jews “rapidly lost familiarity with the subtleties of Jewish theology and the

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<sup>6</sup> “Causa criminal contra Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte, por judaizante, *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 6, no. 3 (1935): 425. Published by the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, where Inquisition documents pertaining to Colonial Mexico are housed, the *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* contains the complete record of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte’s two trials. See 6, no. 1 (1935): 99-148; 6, no. 2 (1936): 305-308; 6, no. 3 (1935): 420-464; 6, no. 4 (1935): 578-620; 7, no. 1 (1936): 88-142; 7, no. 2 (1936): 256-272; 7, no. 3 (1936): 402-436; 7, no. 4 (1936): 596-599; and 8, no. 1 (1937): 1-171. In Inquisition documents Jewish beliefs are often referred to as *la Ley de Moisés* (the Law of Moses). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

complexities of Jewish observance.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless small groups of these Iberian and Colonial New Christians did maintain varying degrees of familiarity with some of Judaism’s teachings and practices after the 1490s, most likely due to commercial ties and familial visits between such individuals and the newly created diaspora of former Iberian Jews.<sup>8</sup> Dissembling was crucial to carrying out these practices at a formal level; Judaizers needed to hide their potentially heretical conduct behind a guise of behaviors expected of faithful Christians. For example, when Treviño asked his mother why she and other women in the family kneaded bread on Saturdays even though she had taught him that on this day Jews were supposed to rest, Leonor responded that “Luis Martínez, su hermano, había ido de rodillas a pedirle con las manos puestas, que mirase lo que se notaba, y que por esta causa amasaban los sábados; que Dios sabía lo que se sentía, en su corazón no poder guardar aquella fiesta” (Luis Martínez, her brother, had gone on his knees to ask her with clasped hands that she heed that which was being noted [by others], and that therefore they used to knead [bread] Saturdays; that God knew what was felt in her heart, to not be able to keep that sacred day).<sup>9</sup> Treviño’s mother also put out clean clothing for her family on Saturday evenings, after the end of the Jewish Sabbath instead of before it; beheaded and bled poultry in private, to avoid showing others her use of a slaughtering technique associated with a Jewish origin; and prepared dishes with pork, a meat that crypto-Jews considered unclean. Treviño said he did not know that the way in which his

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<sup>7</sup> David Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Martin A. Cohen, “The Religion of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte,” in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram Wallace Korn (New York: KTAV, 1976), 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 6, no. 3 (1935): 434.

mother prepared meat conformed to a Jewish manner of slaughtering until, after arriving in Oaxaca, he heard a description of this practice contained in one of the Inquisition's own *Edictos Generales de la Fé* (General Edicts of Faith) warning the public how to recognize and report crypto-Jewish behavior.<sup>10</sup> The fact that in this case the source of Treviño's knowledge of a Jewish culinary ritual was the Inquisition itself, rather than his mother, confirms the secrecy with which crypto-Jews guarded their practices, even in some cases from their own children.

More than most Jewish rites, kosher regulations governing the preparation and consumption of food survived among generations of *conversos*, often regardless of how much an individual considered him- or herself a Judaizer or a faithful Christian. However, an unintended consequence of this survival of culinary rites was the increased familiarity of inquisitors and meddlesome Old Christians with practices potentially threatening to one's Judaizing identity. The following observation of Gitlitz explains why Leonor Martínez de Villagómez attached great importance to slaughtering fowl as a means of affirming her family's Jewish identity: "the dietary restrictions ensure that Jews and gentiles do not commingle because the laws effectively bar Jews from taking part in gentile social occasions. Thus Jews considered them to be a bulwark against the eroding influences of assimilation. Christian leaders felt similarly."<sup>11</sup> While a kosher kitchen could be an end in itself, for many crypto-Jews it also served as a means of preserving a visible identity in an environment that forbade such an identity.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gitlitz, 531-532.

One example of this attempt to maintain a recognizable identity through culinary means was the adherence of crypto-Jews to *shechitah*, the Talmudic laws regulating the slaughter of animals for consumption. Regardless of their lack of books, formal learning, or access to a synagogue, Judaizers transmitted and practiced such laws in the relative privacy of their homes. As Gitlitz's description of these regulations shows, these individuals did so because kosher butchering reaffirmed their identity as a group distinct from faithful Christians:

The animal to be slaughtered must be free of any defect...  
The knife used for slaughtering must be spotlessly clean and smooth, with no nicks on the blade. Traditionally before it is used it is tested by drawing it across the thumbnail... The bird or animal is slaughtered by bending its neck backward and then cutting its throat with one clean motion... The blood was then drained out on the ground... and generally covered with dirt until no sign of it remained.<sup>12</sup>

The testimony of Margarita Rivera against Treviño at his second trial indicates the faithfulness of Judaizers to this culinary mandate, despite the passing of decades. She related how Treviño's mother-in-law, Leonor Núñez, beheaded the chickens at his wedding feast,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 543-544. Not all these rules could always be observed. For example Gitlitz also notes that in Mexico at this time "minor spots [on an animal's lungs] were overlooked" (543), permitting the slaughter of an otherwise unclean animal.

a usanza de los judíos... teniendo la cabeza de la gallina en la mano e hincando el cuchillo muy bien afilado, porque no penase la gallina, tres veces en la tierra, diciendo tres veces, bendito sea Aquel que te crió para sustento mío, y a mí para la tierra, mirando hacia la parte donde nace el sol.

(according to Jewish custom... taking the head of the chicken in her hand and thrusting the well-sharpened knife [through its neck] three times into the ground so that the chicken would not suffer, saying three times, “blessed be He who created you for my sustenance, and me for the earth,” looking towards the place where the sun rises).<sup>13</sup>

Given that this practice could be interpreted as evidence of an individual’s rejection of Christianity, accusations of its existence or that of other rites associated with the preparation of meat were a staple of many trials against Judaizers. Leonor Martínez de Villagómez eventually paid with her life for such Judaizing; after her death in the Inquisition prison of Valladolid, a wooden or cardboard effigy representing her likeness was burned at the *auto de fé* of 1623 there.

Treviño was no stranger to the company of women, having fathered children by the respective wives of a Spanish marquis and a local chieftain while he lived in Antequera (Oaxaca). After his reconciliation in the trial of 1624-25, he consorted with women whose crypto-Judaism complemented and validated his own. One of these individuals, Margarita de Rivera, was apparently later rejected by Treviño; she provided some of the most damaging evidence against him at his second trial. The other, María

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<sup>13</sup> *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 7, no. 2 (1936): 268; Cohen, “The Religion of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte, 98 (for help with the translation).

Gómez, became his wife and perished with him in 1649. Both these women were daughters of families with intricate histories of Judaizing, and both had been reconciled once by Inquisition tribunals in Mexico for heresy, María in 1635 and Margarita in 1646. Trial records and narrative accounts show why Margarita and María were both attracted to Treviño; their inner strength, commitment to Jewish practices, boldness, and eccentricity matched the presence of these characteristics in him.

Margarita de Rivera belonged to the Blancas, a family of well-known Judaizing women in Mexico consisting of Blanca Méndez de Rivera and her five daughters. All these individuals were arrested by the Inquisition in May 1642 as part of the Holy Office's response to the so-called *complicidad grande* (great conspiracy) among *conversos* living in Mexico. The trials resulting from these arrests swept up between 150 and 200 New Christians, and resulted in *autos de fé* in 1646, 1647, 1648 (two), and 1649 that decimated the colony's Judaizing population. The arrest of New Christians for ostensible heresies permitted the Holy Office to fill its depleted coffers with the confiscated wealth of its defendants; it also partially assuaged the fears of the Spanish crown about the potential for increased Portuguese interference in Spanish territories. In Spanish domains at this time, "Portuguese" was a term used synonymously with New Christians, since so many Portuguese people in Spain and its colonies were *conversos*.<sup>14</sup> Portuguese New Christians had migrated to Spain and its territories in part due to increased Inquisitorial activity in Portugal during the period of Spain's annexation of that kingdom, between 1580 and 1640. As was the case with much testimony deemed

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<sup>14</sup> Gitlitz, 44, 52. See also Renée Levine Melammed, *A Question of Identity: Iberian Conversos in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64-65.

admissible by the Inquisition, evidence for the alleged *converso* plot was hearsay: a priest claimed that two of his servants said to him that they had overheard four “Portuguese” say to each other that if another four likeminded individuals could be found in Mexico City, they would set fire to Inquisition headquarters and the people inside it.<sup>15</sup>

The plot was never corroborated nor carried out, but led the Holy Office to initiate arrests, even though it had to borrow money to rent homes to house prisoners; the Inquisition planned to repay the loans using funds it expected to confiscate from *conversos*. This machination placed the Inquisition “en la misma actitud del hambriento mastín a quien la suerte ha deparado alguna buena piltrafa que no está dispuesto a compartir con nadie” (in the same mindset as the hungry mastiff which good fortune has provided with some good scraps that it is unwilling to share with anyone).<sup>16</sup> The arrests of the Blancas and more prominent families such as those of Treviño, Simón Vázquez Sevilla, and Simón de Acevedo effectively destroyed nearly all the roots of Judaizing heresy in New Spain in the 1640s. Nevertheless, the extent of “scraps” these detentions yielded did not bring the Inquisition continued solvency. A sign of the slim pickings was that many individuals detained were of such scarce means themselves that they had to borrow money in order to pay for their detention.<sup>17</sup> In fact, its implacable persecution of people like Margarita de Rivera during the mid-1600’s subsequently rendered the Holy

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<sup>15</sup> José Toribio Medina, *Historia del Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en México* (1905) (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1991), 199.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 201-202. Jonathan I. Israel, *Race, Class, and Politics in Colonial Mexico, 1610-1670* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 215, also wrote that confiscations were not as widespread as inquisitors and the viceroy of New Spain at the time, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, had anticipated.

Office in Mexico spent, as, except for a few brief periods of activity, it gradually lost influence until its abolition at the time of Mexico's independence.

Margarita was born in Seville in about 1614, the second of five daughters of Blanca Méndez (more commonly known as Blanca de Rivera) and the Portuguese merchant Diego López de Ribero. All the daughters—María, Margarita, Clara, Catalina, and Isabel—were baptized in Seville and not instructed in crypto-Judaism by their mother and another crypto-Jew, Justa Méndez, until after the family had moved to Mexico City in 1621.<sup>18</sup> In either 1624 or 1625, Margarita, still not a teenager, became engaged to a Portuguese New Christian cousin of the same age, Miguel Núñez de Huerta, “por contrato de palabras” (by an oral agreement),<sup>19</sup> but whether they actually married is uncertain. Miguel left for Havana during the early 1630's, and had been gone 11 years when the Blancas were arrested in 1642; during this absence neither he nor Margarita were free to wed anybody else, because a priest had not approved the dissolution of their engagement.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Miguel must have returned to Mexico soon thereafter, because Mathías de Bocanegra, the Inquisition's chronicler of the *auto de fé* of 1649, stated that Miguel was already in custody by the time of Margarita's reconciliation three years earlier (in 1646), for having committed “the most atrocious and enormous crimes and blasphemies [such] that merely writing them would color the paper.”<sup>21</sup> Between the dates of these two *autos*, Miguel died in prison, and thus was spared the terrible death

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<sup>18</sup> Kagan and Dyer, 154, 158-159, 164-167.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Ferry, “Marriage of Margarita de Rivera,” e-mail attachment to author, August 15, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Kagan and Dyer, 155 n. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Seymour B. Liebman, trans. and ed., *Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico: The Great Auto de fé of 1649, as Related by Mathías de Bocanegra*, S. J. (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1974), 172.

that would have been the consequence of his relapse; instead he was relaxed in effigy in 1649.

The testimony Margarita provided at her own and Treviño's trials and the summary of her trial contained in don Pedro de Estrada y Escovedo's *relación* (account) of the 1646 *auto* suggest that much of her crypto-Judaism consisted of rites for newborns and the dead. Estrada y Escobedo described Margarita as a "sumamente ceremoniática" (highly ceremonious) woman who made talismans and "moños" (friveries) for infants, washed bodies, sewed burial shrouds, and participated in "las demás ceremonias ridículas" (the other ridiculous rites) of Judaizers.<sup>22</sup> She had learned clandestine burial customs from her mother and Justa Méndez. At her own trial Margarita narrated how she later helped put on the body of Justa Méndez a clean old shirt as well as a shroud of linen that she herself had cut and sewn.<sup>23</sup> On another occasion she, her mother Blanca, and her siblings gathered in the home of a recently buried crypto-Jewish woman with the intention of mourning seven days, until arrest by Inquisition officials appeared so imminent that they tossed out their so-called Jewish meal of fish and vegetables and fled the city.<sup>24</sup> The weeklong period of fasting, mourning, and eating a diet of fish indicates the ascetic syncretism of Judaizers in colonial Mexico. Followers of the Law of Moses combined the Judaic custom of sitting *shiva*, or mourning for a week in the home of a

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<sup>22</sup> Genaro García and Carlos Pereyra, ed., *La inquisición de México; autos de fé; tumultos y rebeliones en México; el clero durante la dominación española; don Juan de Palafox y Mendoza*. Documentos inéditos o muy raros para la historia de México (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1974), 165.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Ferry, "Testificaciones de doña Margarita de Rivera," folio 413, (notes from Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City [AGN]: Sección de Inquisición [Inq.], vol. 453, exp. 2), e-mail attachment to author, June 29, 2006. Reconciled in the *auto* of 1596, Justa Méndez continued to live as a crypto-Jew for thirty years and also taught Jewish beliefs to her children. A wooden effigy of her likeness was burned the same day as Treviño's immolation.

<sup>24</sup> Kagan and Dyer, 172-173.

recently deceased person, with the Catholic custom of eating fish during periods of fasting. While not required by Jewish law, this culinary preference then became associated with Judaizing during the colonial era.

The various funeral rites that Margarita practiced were more directly connected to formal Judaism than other customs she practiced, which appeared to be rooted not so much in Judaism but in their opposition to Christianity. Margarita's crypto-Judaism showed to such an extent the influence of the very religion she claimed to reject that it is hard to imagine how the one could have existed without the other. For example, Estrada y Escovedo noted in his summary of the *auto* of 1646 that she once instructed another Judaizer to disregard any wealth divinely conferred upon bishops, priests, and the viceroy of the colony, because such goods expired at the time of death, while in contrast God had made heaven for Judaizers. In the same place Margarita also claimed that Judaizers who slept with Old Christians rather than marry "doncellas judías" (Jewish virgin young women) and those who during their lives had not lived faithfully as "tan buenos judíos" (such good Jews) would be condemned to the underworld. The sentence would be permanent in the first case and temporary in the second, but both offenders would suffer "ya en bueyes, ya en culebras, ya en otros animales, ya en quicios de puertas" (as oxen, snakes, other animals, and door hinges).<sup>25</sup> Finally, Margarita thought she could make herself invisible by placing broad beans in the eyes and nostrils of a skull, and she used to make powders of roasted swallows and the brains of buzzards that she believed would

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<sup>25</sup> García and Pereyra, 165. See also Gitlitz, 114.

tame men.<sup>26</sup> Margarita's use of Christian beliefs about the afterlife and her practice of superstitions that exist in neither Christianity nor Judaism indicate that the spiritual isolation of Judaizers created a worldview independent in many ways of both faiths.

The most outstanding example of Margarita's crypto-Judaism was her participation, along with Blanca and her siblings, in the repeated flagellation of the family's wooden crucifix. This crime was so grave that in November 1643 the inquisitors in New Spain wrote a letter to the *Suprema* (head office of the Inquisition) in Madrid, asking whether all participants in the whipping should be relaxed for burning, regardless of any confession they might make.<sup>27</sup> While iconoclasm was not uncommon at the time, "it was more dangerous in colonial Mexico to insult an image than a human being," as Margarita discovered.<sup>28</sup> Why would individuals aware of the importance of Christian iconography and whose lives depended on their ability to keep secret their heretical beliefs do something so foolhardy and sure to attract attention? An observation made by Michael Alpert with regard to crypto-Jews in 1700's Spain applies equally to Mexico during the 1600's for its description of the mindset of Judaizers: "They needed tangible and visible, rather than intellectual, explanations of what being Jewish meant, given that they lived in a world of mental and verbal discourse that was entirely Catholic;... a physical demonstration of the impossibility of being Jewish and Christian at the same

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Medina, 203-205. The inquisitors were Domingo Vélez de Assas y Argos, Franciso Estrada y Escobedo, Juan Sáenz de Mañozca, and Bernabé de la Higuera y Amarilla.

<sup>28</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to "Blade Runner" (1492-2019)*, trans. Heather Maclean (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 167-168.

time would be far more effective than any amount of theological argument.”<sup>29</sup> Margarita’s practice of a violent act condoned nowhere in Judaism as a means of affirming her crypto-Judaism showed the need of Judaizers to define their identity through tangible rejection of powerful Christian imagery. It is no surprise, then, that the most committed Judaizers chose ways of such rejection that were physical, such as flagellation, fasting, and tangible funeral rites. These kinds of practices doomed Margarita’s family: three sisters died in prison, while she and their mother Blanca were banished destitute to Spain.

Treviño told inquisitors at his first trial that he had foresworn Judaizing after arriving in Mexico; however, in 1629, he married María Gómez, a teenager born in New Spain (Mexico) into a family of longstanding crypto-Jews. They successfully practiced their version of Judaism over the course of two decades of married life, but at the price of nearly-constant scrutiny and prosecution by the Inquisition, as they lived in states of accusation, reconciliation, and relapse. One way in which the couple wasted no time becoming “une famille de judaïsants fervents” (a family of fervent Judaizers)<sup>30</sup> was through a secret marriage ceremony celebrated apart from their church wedding. At this event, guests washed their hands the way Jews supposedly did, and were served chicken slaughtered in a kosher manner and fried honey cakes symbolic of the divine honeycomb

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Alpert, “Did Spanish Crypto-Jews Desecrate Christian Sacred Images and Why?,” in *Faith and Fanaticism: Religious Fervour in Early Modern Spain*, ed. Lesley Twomey (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1997), 90-91.

<sup>30</sup> Nathan Wachtel, *La foi du souvenir: Labyrinthes marranes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 120.

the Egyptian Asenath received before she married Joseph.<sup>31</sup> According to testimony of Margarita de Rivera, Treviño slept with his bride on their wedding night, but did not do so again until six nights later. This claim accorded with what Margarita asserted was a custom of Judaizers that forbade repeated intercourse between a man and his bride, in order that “se purgue de aquella primera sangre por no quedar trefo” (so that he would be cleansed from that first blood in order to not be impure).<sup>32</sup> Certainly Margarita’s statement shows the awareness of crypto-Jews of the prohibition in Judaism against sexual relations “during any sort of vaginal bleeding or menstrual flow.”<sup>33</sup>

A second way that María tried to live as a Jew was by making her and Treviño’s homes in Mexico City and Guadalajara clandestine centers of worship and fasting. She even paid the poor to fast in her stead, a custom common among Judaizing New Christians whose precarious position restricted the extent to which they could observe Judaic teachings.<sup>34</sup> Additionally María was regarded by her co-religionists as a potential mother of the Messiah, thus personifying the belief of Mexican crypto-Jews that this figure would appear from among one of their own adherents. María showed herself the spiritual equal to Treviño as much at the end of their lives together as at the beginning. Upon hearing her sentence of death at the stake at the *auto* of 1649, she and her mother, Leonor Núñez, tried unsuccessfully to exchange an *osculo de paz judaico*, a so-called

<sup>31</sup> *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 7, no. 1 (1936): 117; and 7, no. 3 (1936): 267-269. For an account of the events surrounding the marriage between Joseph and Asenath, see Vincent of Beauvais in McGaha, 318-322.

<sup>32</sup> *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 7, no. 2 (1936): 268-269.

<sup>33</sup> Gitlitz, 260. See also Cohen, “The Religion of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte, 99-100; Leviticus 18:19 and 20:18 (Kenneth Barker et al., ed., *The NIV Study Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], 168, 171).

<sup>34</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico: The Great Auto de fé of 1649*, 135; Solange Alberro, *Inquisición y sociedad en México: 1571-1700*, trans. Solange Alberro (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), 442-443.

Jewish kiss of peace.<sup>35</sup> Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte lived on in Mexican popular lore for two centuries, due in part to a martyrdom achieved through his last-moment, theatrical refusal to disavow his Judaizing heresy. At least three official chronicles recorded the infamous scenes leading up to and culminating in his spectacular death: the account of Licenciado Francisco Corchero Carreño, inserted into the final section of the Inquisitorial trial record, in which the Dominican priest attempted to convince Treviño to recant; the aforementioned *relación* of the *auto grande* (great *auto*) of 1649 written by Mathías de Bocanegra; and the narration of the events of April 11, 1649, in the *Diario de sucesos notables: 1648-1664* of Gregorio Martín de Guijo.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, Leonor Martínez de Villagómez, Margarita de Rivera, and María Gómez were all but forgotten except to historians of the Inquisition, even though they had used their privileged position in the home to practice and perpetuate Jewish teachings governing both daily practices and milestone events. How did such practices at a formal level contrast with literary representations of Treviño that expressly glossed them over?

Before addressing this question, I should say that crypto-Jewish women martyred in colonial Latin America have not always been excluded from historical memory and literary representation. Mathias de Bocanegra, in his aforementioned *relación* of the *auto de fé* of 1649, summarizes the lives, heresies, and deaths of the six women executed at the conclusion of the *auto*, including Treviño's wife (María Gómez), mother-in-law

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<sup>35</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico: The Great Auto de fé of 1649*, 136. According to Gitlitz's reference to this episode (619, n. 90), the *Baba Batra* tractate of the Talmud describes how God offered such a kiss to a "departing soul."

<sup>36</sup> For Francisco Corchero Carreño, see *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 8, no. 1 (1937): 154-158. For Bocanegra's biography of Treviño, see Liebman, *Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico: The Great Auto de fé of 1649*, 136-140. Guijo's narration of the *auto de fé* and Treviño's nefarious role in it is contained in his *Diario: 1648-1664* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1952), 1:38-47.

(Leonor Núñez), and sister-in-law (Ana Gómez). Boleslao Lewin devoted the last chapter of his *Mártires y conquistadores judíos en la América Hispana* to María Francisca Ana de Castro, the last victim of the Inquisition in Lima to be burned at the stake for Judaizing, in 1736.<sup>37</sup> Well known for her beauty and possible amorous liaison with a viceroy, Castro spent nearly six years in prison in Lima, during which time she admitted to having Judaized in Spain and later in Peru. Inquisitors were not convinced by the sincerity of her claim to have rejected her Judaizing beliefs; Castro herself, having heard “con grande denuedo y desembarazo” (with great boldness and ease) the sentence of death pronounced against her, refused the attention of priests in her final hours and in fact “revocó a gritos sus confesiones declarando ser fiel católica” (revoked with shouts her confessions declaring [herself] to be a faithful Catholic).<sup>38</sup> The contemporary Mexican-Jewish playwright Sabina Berman described the women of the Carvajal family in *Herejía* (*Heresy*, 1983), a play that dramatizes the Inquisitorial persecution of the family of the New Christian conquistador Luis de Carvajal the Elder, first governor of the province of Nuevo León during the late sixteenth century.<sup>39</sup> The following words in the play spoken by Isabel, sister of Luis de Carvajal the Younger, nephew of Luis the Elder and the most religious member of the family, could well describe the attitudes of the three women discussed in this essay: “I am baptized, I go to mass. God pardons me because it’s all done in order to be able to love him secretly in the only law, the law for which I am ready

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<sup>37</sup> Boleslao Lewin, *Mártires y conquistadores judíos en la América Hispana* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Candelabro, 1976), 265-274.

<sup>38</sup> Lewin, 272-273.

<sup>39</sup> Sabina Berman, *Heresy*, in *The Theatre of Sabina Berman: “The Agony of Ecstasy” and Other Plays*, trans. Adam Versényi (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).

to live and for which I am ready to die.”<sup>40</sup> In fact Isabel did die, along with her brother Luis, sisters Leonor and Catalina, and their mother Francisca after the *auto de fé* of 1596 for their relapse into heresy.<sup>41</sup> Isabel’s secret love for God and fervent belief that God forgave her Christianity show the mindset of crypto-Jews forced to square appearances with their true beliefs. This trust in God’s omniscience and forgiveness undoubtedly permitted Judaizers to negotiate a conflictive existence between two faiths.

The most famous contemporary literary account describing the ordeal of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte written by a Jew or New Christian was a sonnet of Miguel (alias Daniel Levi) de Barrios, who had lived as both. Barrios was born in Spain in 1635 but immigrated to North Africa, Italy, and then briefly either the island of Tobago or Cayenne, in northern South America, where his recently wed wife died. He spent the next 15 years in Brussels as a captain in the Spanish army and an apparent crypto-Jew. He then moved to Amsterdam for the remainder of his life, where he openly practiced Judaism and became a well-known poet in the large Sephardic community there.<sup>42</sup> In the sonnet, written in about 1660, when the poet was in Brussels, Barrios confused Treviño with Francisco Maldonado de Silva, the famous crypto-Jew persecuted by the Inquisition in the *Complidad Grande* (Great Conspiracy) of Lima in 1639:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>41</sup> See Seymour Liebman, *The Jews in New Spain: Faith, Flame, and the Inquisition* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 158-182; and Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr: Luis de Carvajal, A Secret Jew in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Oelman, ed. and trans., *Marrano Poets of the Seventeenth Century: An Anthology of the Poetry of João Pinto Delgado, Antonio Enríquez Gómez, and Miguel de Barrios* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Press, 1982), 221-222.

Soneto.—A la gloriosa constancia del bien aventurado Tomás Tremiño de Sobremonte (alias Isaac Israel) natural de Rioseco que después de catorce años de dura prisión, padeció martirio de fuego en la Ciudad de México por santificar el nombre de Dios. (Sonnet to the glorious steadfastness of the blessed Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte [alias Isaac Israel], born in Rioseco, who after 14 years of harsh imprisonment, suffered martyrdom by fire in Mexico City to sanctify the name of God.)

Años catorce en cárcel rigurosa  
 por defender de Dios la verdad pura  
 Tremiño arrastra a la cadena dura  
 que le da el ser la sacra Ley su esposa:

Tolera Job segundo ira engañosa,  
 con gran constancia en la miseria obscura:  
 porque la luz que al cielo le apresura  
 guía su aliento en senda tenebrosa:

El fuego a que le arrojan no le espanta,  
 con la leña que Isaac lleva en su celo  
 por seguir del gran Padre la Ley santa.

Ya Indiano Elías, por subir al cielo  
 en el carro voraz que le levanta,  
 deja la capa de su polvo al suelo.

(Fourteen years in rigorous prison  
 for defending God's pure truth,  
 Tremiño drags the harsh chain,  
 his burden for having the sacred Law as his wife.

A second Job, he endures deceitful anger,

with great constancy in dark misery,  
 because the light that hastens him to heaven  
 guides his life along a murky path.

The fire they're throwing him on doesn't scare him,  
 with the wood that Isaac carries in his zeal  
 to follow the great Father's holy Law.

Now this Elijah of the Indies, to ascend to heaven  
 in the consuming chariot that bears him up,  
 leaves the cloak of his dust on the ground).<sup>43</sup>

The poem reflects Barrios' own experiences as a secret Jew during part of his life by its glorification of a martyr to the Jewish faith without a direct, open mention of Judaism in the text itself. While the story Barrios narrates would have held special resonance for Amsterdam's Sephardic population, the poem also demonstrates his ability to appeal to a wider audience. Even the fact that he confuses the 14 years of imprisonment endured by Maldonado de Silva in Peru with Treviño's experience (the latter's incarcerations totaled about seven years) is significant, because it shows that the suffering of crypto-Jews in the Americas was newsworthy to readers in Europe. The reference to "su esposa" (his wife) does not describe María Gómez but rather the Judaism that Treviño regarded as the source and inspiration of his being. This Judaism caused him to suffer the "harsh chain" of Inquisitorial persecution. The description of "the sacred

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<sup>43</sup> Miguel de Barrios, *La poesía religiosa*, ed. Kenneth Scholberg (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1962), 249. I thank Lisa Vollendorf, Stacey Schlau, and Michael McGaha for their considerable assistance with the translation of the sonnet and suggestions for how to interpret it, particularly the description of "the sacred Law as his wife" (l. 4); and also the Reference Desk of the Knight Library at the University of Oregon for its help finding Barrios' text.

Law as his wife” likely alludes to the character of the Beloved as the recipient of God’s love in the Song of Songs. In the second stanza it is not surprising that the poet describes Treviño with the reference to Job, a figure of frequent inspiration to *converso* authors due to his personifying the sufferer who nevertheless maintained spiritual constancy in the face of apparent divine abandonment. The “deceitful anger” that Treviño endures quite possibly describes the emotions of the increasingly exasperated priests who tried to convince him to renounce his Judaism during his last hours, or to the jeering masses who hurled insults at him as he was led from the *auto* to the burning ground. Barrios also avoids dwelling on the more gruesome aspect of Treviño’s fiery death by contrasting the flames with a different kind of light, one that guides the martyr to heaven. In an ironic demonstration of the syncretism that informed the poet’s worldview, the second stanza uses Christian imagery to describe a haven for someone persecuted due to crypto-Judaism.

The representation in this poem of Treviño as a sacrificial offering to God’s will, like Isaac carrying the wood for his sacrifice at the hands of Abraham, heightened the drama of Treviño’s immolation for Barrios’ readers, regardless of their beliefs. Isaac was also Treviño’s Hebrew name, so the poem’s reference to this fact conflates the biblical and historical characters. A second example of Barrios’ use of Treviño’s martyrdom as a way to connect Treviño with biblical figures specially esteemed by God is the epithet “Elijah of the Indies.” Just as God separated Elijah from his son Elisha by sweeping him to heaven in a chariot and horses made of fire, so Treviño ascends to heaven in a great

conflagration.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, just as Elijah's cloak then fell back to the ground invested with the godly ability to part the waters of the Jordan River, the cloak of Treviño's ashes settles on the *quemadero* (burning ground) as symbolic proof of the arrival of his soul into the celestial sphere.

The story of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte became a topic in Mexican historical and poetic texts dramatizing his life in a style that aimed to edify and entertain simultaneously. These texts appealed to readers by emphasizing the eccentricities and singularities of famous and infamous people, places, and institutions in Mexican history. Two works in which authors exploited Treviño's notoriety as a heretic are the prose account "La casa del judío" ("The Jew's House") of Luis González de Obregón (1865-1938) and the narrative poem "El cacahuatal de San Pablo" ("The Peanut Field of Saint Paul") of Juan de Dios Peza (1852-1910). Both authors depict Treviño as a larger-than-life character whose appeal stems from his ability to transcend time. In "La casa del judío," González Obregón suggests that Treviño's conspicuously large former house has a life of its own precisely because of its dilapidated, abandoned state:

Carcomida por la humedad y el salitre, llena de hierbas que han nacido entre las cuarteaduras y de sus ennegrecidos muros, destechada, con maderos hendidos y apollilados, que han dejado vacíos los claros de puertas y ventanas; aquella casa próxima a derrumbarse es fea, triste, melancólica, por una soledad solo interrumpida en las noches sin luz de aquel barrio por el chirrido de los repugnantes murciélagos que azotan las paredes, o por el canto de uno que otro

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<sup>44</sup> II Kings 2:11-12.

desvelado tecolote que abandona las torres viejas para ir a visitar este sepulcro falto hasta de cadaveres.

La casa, por lo demás, no releva restos de belleza alguna; pertenece al orden usado entonces, y por las cruces, emblemas, letras, grifos y adornos que casi borrados contiene su fachada, más parece haber sido la tranquila mansión de un obispo o de un solitario religioso que huye del bullicio de la ciudad, que la morada de un judío, que quiere la tradición...

¿Pero quién fue este célebre personaje? ¿Qué delitos enormes cometió para incurrir en esa horrible pena, cuya sola mención hace estremecer de espanto?

(Rotted by dampness and saltpeter, full of weeds that have sprouted up between the cracks of its blackened walls, with cracked and moth-eaten wood, which has left empty the openings of doors and windows; that house, so near to falling down, is ugly, sad, melancholy, due to a solitude only interrupted during the nights without light in that neighborhood by the screeching of repugnant bats who beat the walls, or by the song of one or another sleepless owl that that leaves the old towers in order to visit that tomb devoid even of corpses.

The house, moreover, does not manifest remains of any beauty; it pertains to the style used at that time, and because of the nearly worn-away crosses, emblems, letters, faucets, and adornments that its façade contains, appears to have been the tranquil mansion of a bishop or a solitary monk

fleeing the hubbub of the city, [rather] than the dwelling place of a Jew, as tradition says...

But who was this famous person? What enormous crimes did he commit in order to incur that horrible torment, whose mere mention makes one shudder with fright?)<sup>45</sup>

The decay colorfully described here that should have relegated Treviño's mansion to oblivion instead gains a place for it in Mexican popular imagination because González Obregón creates a parallel between such disrepair and the fate of the home's former owner. The memory of unrepentant, larger-than-life heresy becomes indelible, just like a rotting edifice that now serves as a home for moths, bats, and owls.

The title of Juan de Dios Peza's *romance* (ballad), "El cacahuatal de San Pablo," refers to the fact that this particular home of Treviño in Mexico City was located near a peanut field. Like "La casa del judío," this narrative poem popularized Treviño's fame by attributing to him an apocryphal phrase he supposedly exclaimed on the pyre but which is found nowhere in documentary evidence: "echen más leña, que mi dinero me cuesta" (throw on more wood, it costs me my money [i.e., I am paying for it]).<sup>46</sup> Peza also romanticized the home by repeating a legend that within it was a store at which Treviño supposedly gave discounts to crypto-Jewish customers who knew to tread upon a crucifix as they entered through a particular door. The poem's dramatic, excited tone ignores the nuanced crypto-Judaism of Treviño and his circle in its quest to represent Treviño as an

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<sup>45</sup> Luis González Obregón, *México Viejo, 1521-1821 (época colonial): noticias históricas, tradiciones, leyendas y costumbres* (Mexico City: Editorial Patria, 1966), 241-242.

<sup>46</sup> Juan de Dios Peza, "El cacahuatal de San Pablo," in *Leyendas históricas, tradicionales y fantásticas de las calles de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1992), 64.

object of fascination as much as of disdain. The text commences proclaiming ominously how more than 100 *penitenciados* (penanced individuals) were to be burned at the stake in 1649 (in truth there were 14 capital cases) to serve a didactic purpose as

una sagrada enseñanza,  
 prueba, verdad y escarmiento  
 de que los hijos del diablo  
 deben morir en el fuego.  
 (a sacred teaching,  
 proof, truth, and warning  
 that the children of the devil  
 ought to die in flames).<sup>47</sup>

It then describes how inquisitors first ordered residents living along the route to the burning ground to decorate their balconies with gloomy looking objects, and then warned them not to show kindness towards the victims; otherwise “a las terribles hogueras / fuera arrojado con éstos” (“[such a resident] would be hurled into the terrible bonfires with the culprits”). Turning its attention to Treviño, the poem narrates in lurid detail how an anonymous female servant, “astuta y maliciosa, / y fanática en extremo” (astute and malicious, / and fanatic to the extreme) witnessed irrefutable acts of her master’s Judaizing heresy. The poem carefully explains how all efforts were made to eliminate signs of Treviño’s existence: his ashes were scattered to the winds, the walls and foundations of his home were covered with salt and flames, and his children were

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 61.

condemned to life imprisonment.<sup>48</sup> These examples demonstrate that much of the poem consists of fanciful claims and false exaggerations regarding Treviño's Judaizing and the events of his life. Inquisitors did not have the authority to threaten bystanders with arbitrary death; 35 witnesses testified against Treviño, including his eldest son; and as the discussion of "La casa del judío" showed, his house was still standing hundreds of years after the *auto de fé*. Peza is most truthful writing measuredly and reflectively, as when, in the ballad's final stanza, realizing that Treviño's misfortune was not in vain, he comments,

Y se encomia y se bendice  
y se aplaude con anhelo  
la dicha de haber nacido  
con la razón y el derecho  
y sin hogueras que forjen  
los grillos del pensamiento.  
(And the good fortune of having been born with  
reason and right  
and without the bonfires  
that forge the shackles of thought  
is to be praised and blessed and  
applauded with eagerness).<sup>49</sup>

With this conclusion Peza ceases to perpetuate unverified stories about Treviño and the Inquisition. Instead he uses Treviño's case more meaningfully, as a way to deplore "the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 62-63 (for the preceding two citations as well).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 64.

shackles of thought” that occur when fearful societies create inquisitions to police and extirpate beliefs held to be different from the acceptable ideology.

The appeal of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte to a public largely uninformed about Jewish traditions stemmed in part from the manner of his uncompromising devotion to this tradition. All three women whose practices this essay discussed could have been represented interchangeably with Treviño in prose and poetry for their equal dedication to crypto-Judaism. The fact that his last moments were more dramatic and anomalous than those of his mother (death in prison, then burning in effigy), wife (garrote, then the stake), and probable ex-lover (exile) helps explain his appeal as a topic of popular literature in Europe and Mexico. He became an attractive subject because writers could highlight and even exaggerate his passions, larger-than-life personality, and seeming indifference to the threats that constrained most people’s choices at the time. Nevertheless, as this article has shown, Leonor Núñez, María Gómez, and Margarita de Rivera were no less worthy of popular attention than Treviño, especially given the stealth, eccentricity, and brazenness of their crypto-Judaism. After all, the women whipped crucifixes, fasted weekly, and maintained all-night prayer vigils. These actions, undertaken with as much frequency and fervor as any rite Treviño practiced, show that “crypto-Jewish women were also engaged in subversion of the [Catholic] faith to which they openly adhered... and such work was perceived as acts of heresy by the Catholic Church.”<sup>50</sup> How then can one explain the inclusion of Treviño’s name in cultural memory and the relative exclusion or marginalization of women equally observant as he? The

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<sup>50</sup> Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel?*, 170-171.

answer would seem to lie in the fact that women were usually less visible to the world beyond the home than men; had fewer educational opportunities, and hence did not produce as many or as scholarly defenses of their beliefs; and generally—although not always—were more circumspect than the handful of outspoken male crypto-Jews such as Treviño and Luis de Carvajal the Younger in Mexico and Francisco Maldonado de Silva in Peru. However, given the fact that González Obregón and Peza for the most part ignored Treviño's actual adherence to Judaism, it is safe to surmise that the women in his life would have preferred their relative anonymity to the half-truths and legends characteristic of the literary portrayals of Treviño. Certainly these women would have been surprised at the irony that Treviño's and, by extension, their stubborn adherence to socially marginalizing practices was most compelling to later authors dramatizing the crypto-Jewish experience in colonial Mexico. They would likewise be surprised at the fact that literary representations of Judaizers, no matter how distorted, in a way stymied the Inquisition's efforts to obliterate the memory of those brave individuals who tried to maintain a connection to formal Judaism.