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Performing *The Book of Esther* in  
Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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CHANITA GOODBLATT\*

## Introduction

This special issue, entitled *Performing the Book of Esther in Early Modern Europe*, has its inception in the shared interest of myself and Susan Payne in dramatic adaptations of the biblical *Book of Esther*. It was conceived as comprising a companion to Payne's forthcoming English translation of the 1619 Italian play, *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura (Esther: A Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture)*, written by the Venetian-Jewish scholar, Rabbi and poet Leon Modena (1571-1648). The first three articles of this issue therefore focus on *L'Ester*, while the following four articles complement them by discussing various adaptations in early modern European culture of the figures of Esther and Vashti from the biblical story.

It is therefore highly appropriate to open with a focused look at the *Book of Esther*, from two central perspectives: biblical scholarship; and feminist biblical studies. From the perspective of biblical scholarship, Adele Berlin provides a pivotal analysis of this book, which accompanies her volume in the series *The JPS Bible Commentary* (2001). Berlin proposes that the date of composition of the *Book of Esther* is in the fourth century BCE (2001, xli). She challenges the view of the *Book of Esther* as a historical document, convincingly arguing that it is rather an example of

imaginative storytelling, not unlike others that circulated in the Persian and Hellenistic period among Jews of the Land of Israel and of the Diaspora . . . it provides an optimistic picture of Jewish survival and success in a foreign land . . . Its main concern, the very reason for its existence, is to establish Purim as a holiday for all generations. (xv)

Indeed, in the *Book of Esther*, the name *Purim* for the Jewish holiday is explained as deriving from the word *pur/lot*, which the villain Haman casts to determine the day on which to destroy the Jews (*Book of Esther* 3:7; Alter 2019, 724-5).

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Berlin also designates two additional aspects. The first is the issue of canonisation, both in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Although the *Book of Esther* was ultimately canonised in the Hebrew Bible, in the Jewish tradition there was a concern that it was not “divinely inspired” and several scholars “have suggested that the rejection of the book was based on theological grounds – the absence of the divine name and religious observance, and the marriage of a Jewess to a pagan king” (2001, xliii-iv). What is more, since “the church did not have Purim in its liturgical calendar, Christians did not have the compelling reason that Jews had to accept the book” (xlv). Even though it was ultimately also canonised in the Christian Bible, “Esther was often mentioned in conjunction with the books of the Apocrypha, especially Judith” (ibid.). This aspect of the ambiguous status of the *Book of Esther* certainly connects to the second aspect, which is its definition as Comedy. As Berlin perceptively notes, this book “is the most humorous of the books in the Bible, amusing throughout and at certain points uproariously funny. . . . The largest interpretive problems melt away if the story is taken as a farce or a comedy associated with a carnival-like festival” (xvii).

Athalya Brenner further enriches the study of the *Book of Esther* by looking at it through the perspective of feminist biblical studies. In the introduction to her edited volume *Esther, Judith and Susanna*, part of the series *A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Brenner overturns the boundaries of canon. She does so by discussing the *Book of Esther* in relation to these two apocryphal books, in terms of the development of their respective eponymous heroines. As Brenner insightfully explains, “[a]lthough only the book of Esther is included in the Hebrew Bible, all three books present figurations of Jewish (as distinct from ‘Israelite’ or ‘Judahite’) female protagonists in an environment of dependency on foreign powers. . . . Among other things, these three stories furnish a context for reflecting, once again, on the (in)visibility of women in history and historiographical constructs” (1995, 11). Brenner subsequently writes about these books:

In all three cases, the authority of the males is questioned by the female subjects and their sexuality. The encounter between Jewish females and foreign or Jewish males entails mortal danger for the females, a recurrent biblical motif when a female figure allegedly steps outside the strictures of appropriate female behaviour. The encounter between (Jewish) female and male (doubly-other: socially superior; foreign or elder) sexuality results in the subversion of male power. (12)

In a chapter included in this edited volume Lilian Klein utilizes the concept of “honor/shame codes”, adapted from anthropological and sociological studies, to thoughtfully propose that together they comprise “a definitive

cultural value among the Israelites in the text of Esther” (1995, 149). When discussing the character of Vashti, Klein argues that “the king’s command is contrary to the basic tenets of honor/shame, for he commands his wife to enter masculine space inappropriately, forbidden to a woman who values her sense of shame” (155). Subsequently, in discussing the character of Esther, Klein writes that Esther’s calling attention to her sexual appeal by dressing up in royal clothes for her unexpected visit to the King, in order to save her people, comprises an instance when “individual abuses of honor/shame may be acceptable but communal honor must be maintained. This behavior can be seen as a paradigm for the Jews in exile” (164).

Modena’s play *L’Ester* was published, as stated in the first *Prose Preface*, on “25<sup>th</sup> February the very day of our Purim, that is the feast of Esther. 1618 (*Li 25. Febraro il giorno istesso del nostro Purim, cioè della festa di Ester. 1618*; Modena 2023).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the exact origins of this spring carnivalesque holiday are unclear, and “all reconstructions of the earliest Purim celebrations require speculation” (Craig 1995, 162). The biblical scholar Theodore Gaster has recorded several different proposed solutions, including: the commemoration of the Jewish victory over the Seleucid-Greek general Nicanor in the spring of 161 BCE.; the Judaization of the Greek festival of Pithoigia, or “Opening the Wine Casks”, which takes place in the spring; the Jewish adaptation of the Babylonian New Year’s festival, held at the beginning of spring; or the Jewish interpretation of the Persian festival of Farwadigan, a five-day All Soul’s festival (Gaster 1950, 6-11). Ultimately, however, Gaster argues that Purim “may originally have been the Persian New Year festival held at the time of the vernal equinox” (18). As Carey Moore writes: “Certainly no opprobrium should be attached to the suggestion of a pagan prototype for the festival of Purim . . . Judaism has survived partly because of its ability to adopt pagan ideas and institutions by which it found itself surrounded, and to adapt them to its own distinctive purposes” (1971, xlix).

Comprising a carnivalesque holiday, Purim encompasses numerous forms of celebration: a festive meal, with special pastries and much drinking of wine; the sending of presents and the giving of charity; mummeries and Purim plays; costumes and masquerades; the election of mock kings and rabbis; the burning of effigies of the evil Haman; and boisterous behaviour in the synagogue during the reading of the *Book of Esther*, which includes rattles and feet stamping (Doniach 1933, 93-167; Gaster 1950, 1-82; Pollack 1977). Indeed, the masquerade as a central performative aspect of Purim was “first introduced among the Italian Jews about the close of the fifteenth century under the influence of the Roman [pre-Lenten] carnival” (Kohler and Malter 1901-1906, 277).

<sup>1</sup> As Payne notes in her article (in this issue), Modena is using the Venetian calendar. The more modern dating would be 1619.

Taken in tandem, these discussions of the *Book of Esther* comprise an intriguing and challenging context within which to discuss the articles included in this special issue. Those by Susan Payne, Chanita Goodblatt and Vered Tohar provide new vistas for looking at Modena's play *L'Ester*. Payne and Goodblatt utilize concepts from Gérard Genette's seminal work *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997) to draw attention to several paratexts of *L'Ester*. These include: the *Title-Page*, the *Prose Prefaces*, the *Prefatorial Poem*; the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* declaimed by the figure of Truth; and the *Monologue* declaimed by the "Shade of Amalek". Payne, in "The Genesis of Modena's *L'Ester*: Sources and Paratext", utilizes the discussion of these various paratexts to demonstrate how they allow Modena – confined within the Jewish Ghetto with the members of his community by a Venetian Senatorial decree – to assume his rightful authority as a scholar over Jews and Christians, as well as to sustain a relationship between Jewish and Christian religious doctrines and cultures. Payne also proposes a new timeline for Modena's composition of *L'Ester*. For she writes that the *Prose Prefaces* and the *Prefatorial Poem* (addressed to "The Lady Sarra Copio Sullam Jewess" and to the author's "benevolent Readers") were composed in response to Sullam's literary *affaire* with the Genoese author and monk Ansaldo Cebà, while the play itself (as a revision of an earlier text) was carried out several years previously. In "Modena's *L'Ester*: A Venetian-Jewish Play in Early Modern Europe", Goodblatt focuses on the *Prefatorial Poem*, as well as on the *Prologue* and *Epilogue*. She discusses these paratexts in terms of the play's integration of Jewish and Christian sources, as well as in terms of its use of aspects of figuration and performance. Thus, there are two primary issues of discussion. The first relates to the way Modena utilizes both direct references and recognizable allusions to a variety of Jewish and Christian texts to create dramatic characters and situations. The second issue relates to the way he utilizes various tropes and aspects of performance, which not only connect *L'Ester* to these exegetical and literary texts, but also to European performative traditions. What is more, Goodblatt highlights Modena's adaption and enactment of the "figuration of woman" evident in the biblical *Book of Esther*, focusing on the figure of Vashti. Tohar, in "Reading *L'Ester* by Leon of Modena in the Context of His Other Writings", proposes an understanding of this play in the context of three other works by Modena: *Tsemah Tsaddik (Flower of Righteousness)*, his book about Jewish ethics and human qualities composed of non-narrative prose segments with interspersed tales (1600); *Hayyey Yehudah (Life of Judah)*, his autobiographical essay expressing, among other things, Modena's attitude towards the women in his life (that remained in manuscript until the twentieth century); and his letter "Statement of Defense" (1604; heretofore untranslated), which he wrote in defense of a woman suspected of practicing witchcraft. Within this wider



context, Tohar proposes that it is highly probable that Modena identifies with the related figures of Vashti, Sullam and the witch. Together these comprise four versions of human beings who pay the price for their nonconformity and authenticity.

Ben-Aryeh Debby, in “Queen Esther in Venice: Art and Drama”, provides a transition to early modern European culture. She looks at the representations of Queen Esther in sixteenth-century Venetian visual tradition in conjunction with Modena’s *L’Ester*. Ben-Aryeh Debby examines how Christian and Jewish artists in Venice (Paolo Veronese, Tintoretto, and Moshe Ben Avraham Pascarol) offer multilayered interpretations of this biblical queen; she was seen as an ideal bride, as a court lady, or as an oriental figure. Esther was also seen as a prototype of the Virgin Mary, and as a Jewish maiden reflecting issues of toleration and assimilation of the Jews in Venice. Ben-Aryeh Debby demonstrates that Venice was a center in which images of Esther were copious and influential, thereby illuminating the way in which Modena both follows and offers alternative interpretations of the rich culture in which he lived. Tovi Bibring, in “Vashti on the French Stage”, turns to three plays from the fifteenth and sixteenth century: the anonymous mystery play, *Le Mystere d’Esther* (end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century); and two tragedies written by Pierre Matthieu – *Esther* (1581) and *Vashti* (1589). She examines the way in which these plays present Vashti as a self-aware, powerful and reasonable figure on the one hand, but bold and daring on the other. To this end, Bibring studies two main concepts and their performative examples. The first is the concept that Vashti’s tragedy was the result of Ahasuerus’s insobriety; this is presented as the comical intermission in *Le Mystere d’Esther*, but is addressed in a more serious manner in Matthieu’s tragedies. The second concept focuses on the analogies that the king establishes in Matthieu’s two tragedies, between his marriage to Vashti and those of Adam and Eve or Jupiter and Juno.

Cora Dietl focuses on “The Feast as Performance: Esther in German Sixteenth-Century Plays”. She examines three plays, revealing the close connection between the individual confessional or political interpretation of the *Book of Esther*, and the treatment of feasts and banquets in these plays. The two German dramatists – Volten Voith in *Esther* (1536), and Hans Sachs in *Comedia. Die gantze hystori der Hester* (*Comedy. The whole story of Esther*, 1536) – follow the biblical story and only briefly note that the King organized a feast. They thereby respectively preserve the tension in their plays until Esther’s decisive banquets, which reveal her as a great director of history. In Jos Murer’s play *Hester* (1567), however, the figure of Esther is most explicit, with the audience gaining insight into her directing strategies, and involved itself through the reference to the wedding ceremony during which the play was staged. Wim Hüsken concludes this special issue by discussing “Esther

in the Drama of the Early Modern Low Countries”, concentrating on four plays by Dutch and Flemish dramatists. Petrus Philicinus, in his neo-Latin play *Tragœdia Esther sive Edissa* (1544), depicts Esther as sweet and docile, in contrast to Vashti as the epitome of arrogance. Both the anonymous play *Hester en Assverus* (prior to 1615) and Joris Berckmans’s play *Edissa* (1649) demonstrate Esther’s loyalty towards Ahasuerus, while contrasting her sweet and obedient character to Vashti’s less sympathetic attitude towards the king. Yet in the former, anonymous play Vashti’s refusal to attend the King’s party is somewhat condoned, while Berckman stages an impolite, rude Vashti. Finally, Nicolaas Fonteyn’s *Esther, ofte’t Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid* (*Esther, or the Image of Obedience*; 1637) also describes Esther as a loyal queen to Ahasuerus, with her virtue beyond any doubt.

Read together, these seven articles provide an insightful and fascinating companion to Payne’s translation of Modena’s play *L’Ester*, rightfully bringing to the forefront of scholarly recognition both this Venetian-Jewish work and early modern European adaptations of the intriguing biblical *Book of Esther*.

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