

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

6:2 2020

Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzi, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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Published in December 2020
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
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Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzi
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CHIARA CARMEN SCORDARI*

Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena's Diasporic Tragedy *L'Ester* in Seventeenth-Century Venice

Abstract

Particularly in times of crisis and historical challenges, the biblical figure of Esther has been variously interpreted as a paradigm of resistance and renewal of communitarian bonds. Esther is a creative mediator thanks to her always being the Other: the Other of man (Mordecai and Ahasuerus), of society (Persian court), and of Judaism. This paper focuses on Leon Modena's *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* (1619). Particular attention is given to Modena's anthropological and political reading of *Ester's* characters, including the suicidal queen Vashti, whose impetuosity overshadows the taciturn Esther. The central figure is Mordecai: he typifies the 'wandering Jew' who lives a 'two-hats' existence and strives to find a balance between political realism and messianic expectations. Through its characters, Modena's Purim tragedy unveils paradoxical interlacings between despair and hope; cry of protest and prayer of prophecy; blinding passions and mediation strategies.

KEYWORDS: Leon Modena; Esther; diasporic tragedy

1. Leon Modena's *L'Ester*: A Story of Crisis and Resistance

Leon Modena's *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* was published in Venice on Purim in 1619. The tragedy is a reworking of an earlier play written in 1558 by Modena's maternal uncle, Eleazar Levi (also known as Lazzaro Graziano) and Salomon Usque. Unfortunately, this former text is known today only thanks to Modena's mention in his foreword to the reader.¹

From a cultural standpoint, Modena's *Ester* aims at conveying Judaism to the Christian world, merging Midrashic and Talmudic exegesis with *topoi* of Italian tragedy. Framed in the backdrop of the Persian court, Vashti

¹ "Sessant'anni in circa sono, che un Salomon Uschi, con luce, e aiuto di Lazaro di Gratian Levi mio materno zio, compose questa tragedia" (Modena 1619, *Letter to the readers*; "It was about sixty years ago that a certain Salomon Usque, enlightened and aided by Lazaro di Gratian Levi, my maternal uncle, wrote this tragedy", translation mine); cf. Roth 1943, 65-85, 77-8; Zavan 2004, 120-3.

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and Esther typify models of heroic behaviour equal to countering the social and cultural challenges Judaism had to face. While Esther is the silent and compliant instrument of divine action, thereby saving the covenantal community, Vashti personifies the exile's drama and the female loneliness, hovering between glorious past and present-day distress. From the political-religious standpoint, the play outlines a diasporic Judaism based on principles of tolerance and openness, and in dialogue with other cultures and traditions. Building on Esther's story, Modena sketches his own model for a clever Jewish mode of resistance when facing the religious and political challenges of early modern age.

However, behind Modena's *Ester* lies also a third and more personal reason. The tragedy is dedicated to the Venetian Jewish *salonnière* Sarra Sullam Copio (1592-1641). Modena had known Sarra for many years: he was related to the Copio family through his wife and knew her uncle, Moise Copio (a merchant, as his brother and Sarra's father Simon; Westwater 2020, 24; Modena 2000, 65). The dedication takes its cue from the correspondence between Sarra and the Genoese writer and monk Ansaldo Cebà (1567-1623), which began in 1618 – one year before the publication of Modena's *Ester*. Quite likely, Modena's purpose was to warn Sarra against the risks of her exchange with Cebà. Sarra began her correspondence with Cebà after reading his epic poem *La Reina Esther* (published in Genoa in 1615).² Cebà's portrayal of Esther as a courtly heroine and Vashti as a convert to Judaism seemed to Sarra both a celebration of Jewish national existence and an invitation to cross-faith dialogue (Westwater 2020, 24-30). Cebà's Vashti was a 'double' of Esther: the latter was an exceptional woman, imbued with moral virtues; by epitomizing a God-inspired reason, she foreshadowed true Christianity (Arbib 2003, 104). On the contrary, Vashti was a worldly woman, capable of murder because of her jealousy and vindictive nature. Only by facing up to Esther's moral virtues could she freely accept exile and convert to Judaism. Actually, the Platonic relationship between Sarra Copio Sullam and Ansaldo Cebà revolved around the question of conversion and religious identity: Cebà endeavored to convert Sarra to Christianity. To his eyes she appeared as a veiled matriarch, endowed with the charisma of Esther, whose historical mission was "to leave the Jewish ranks" ("lasciar l'Hebraica schiera", Cebà 1623, 24; translation mine) and become Catholic, accepting Christ's ethos, by turning into "the most just, the most innocent and the most blessed man" ("il più giusto, il più innocente, e il più sant'huomo", Cebà 1623, 7-8; translation mine):

² The exchange between the two began in spring 1618 and went on for four years. Ansaldo Cebà published his letters to Sarra Sullam Copio in 1623 (Cebà 1623). See Veltri 2009, 226-47: 229-33.

Mosse l'antica Esther le voci ardenti,
 Ond'io ritrassi in carte i suoi splendori:
 Movi tu, nova Sarra, i miei fervori
 A farti luminosa in fra le genti.
 Nobil, cred'io, sei tu, tu rappresenti
 De la sposa d'Abramo gli antichi honori

...

Ma tu porti però su gli occhi un velo,
 Che ravvisar ti toglie il gran Pianeta,
 Onde di vero amor ferisce il telo.
 Tu feconda di gratie hai l'alma e lieta;
 Ma non t'avvedi, oime, ch'errante zelo
 Miseramente il passo al Ciel ti vieta
 (Cebà 1623, 3-4)

[Ancient Esther roused burning voices,
 Whence I portrayed her splendor on paper;
 May you, new Sarra, rouse my fervors
 To make you gleam midst the nations.
 Noble you are, I believe; you represent
 The ancient honors of Abraham's wife

...

But over your eyes you carry a veil
 Preventing you from seeing the Great Planet,
 From which the lance of true love strikes.
 You have a soul fruitful and fertile with graces,
 But alas! You do not notice how an erroneous zeal
 Meanly denies you the passage to heaven.
 (translation in Harrán 2009, 120-1, with minor changes)]

Despite Cebà's numerous requests of conversion, Sarra stood firm in her Jewish faith. For Cebà, "Reina Esther" was, after all, "a Christian because she believed in Christ, who one day is going to come". Therefore, he wrote to Sarra: "You are, I don't mean Jewish, but pertinacious, because you don't believe in Christ who came" ("La Reina Esther, se nol sapete, fù Christiana, perche credette in Christo venturo; e voi siete, non voglio dir hebrea, ma pertinace, perche non credete in Cristo venuto", Cebà 1623, 90-1; translation mine). In other words, what in Cebà's poem appeared to be an endorsement of Judaism and of female heroism, eventually turns out to be a pattern of Christianity and a type of Christ's coming.

Against this backdrop of intellectual liaisons, Sarra Copio Sullam emerges as a "very peculiar woman", who felt more comfortable with the male models of virtues, such as the Abrahamitic one (Arbib 1999, 146). Further evidence comes from Sarra's *Manifesto* (1621), a letter in which she

confuted the indictment of the archdeacon of Treviso Baldassare Bonifacio who accused her of denying the immortality of the soul. She declared that she followed Abraham's example of behaviour, and challenged her accuser "without arms" using only her "firmness of mind" and the "religious feeling" (translation in Harrán 2009, 316): "the deed itself [i.e. the false accusations] did not require any other learning than the firmness of my mind and of that religious feeling that I owe to God and to the law that He gave me" (translation in Harrán 2009 312-13). It is not surprising that, in his *Ester*, Modena offers Sarra Copio Sullam a "deflationary" model of female heroism (Fortis 2003, 31-2). He emphasizes the dialectical relation between "our two ancient mothers, Sarah and Esther". While the matriarch Sarah, endowed with saint-like traits, generated Jewish lineage, the pious queen Esther regenerated it, saving it from death: Sarra Copio Sullam is urged to imitate the kindness, the virtue, and the greatness of the two biblical women.³

2. Who Hides Behind Vashti?

Those who expect to find in Modena's play an exaltation of Esther's personality will be disappointed. In the *Megillah*, Esther stands at the centre of the story. Unlike Vashti, a static character, unwilling to accept a subordinate role within the courtly environment, Esther appears as a creative and dynamic person: she emerges from her initial concealment, characterized by submissiveness, and weakness, finally becoming the authoritative leader who saves her own community from annihilation. On the contrary, in Modena's play, Esther is almost overshadowed by Vashti. The latter enters in 1.4: the scene takes place in an atmosphere full of bad omens. In the prologue, the shadow of Amelek – probably an adaptation of Vashti's shadow in Vincenzo Gramigna's tragedy *Amano* (1614) – comes back from hell to mourn the loss of his beloved son Haman; and in 1.2, Mordecai charges Vashti to hinder Jewish redemption. Only the Eunuch Zethar shows a sympathetic concern for Vashti, who manifested a "virile" and "great spirit" ("con animo virile, animo grande", Modena 1619, 1.3; translation mine) by refusing to obey to Ahasuerus and display her beauty to Persian officials.

Modena's approach to Vashti is, therefore, ambiguous. In 1.2 Mordecai

³ "E certo, che si come è corrispondenza tra queste nostre antiche madri Sarra, et Ester, che quella generò la stirpe nostra, e questa la regenerò, salvandola da morte; il nome di Sarra vuol dir Principessa, et Ester fù Regina, quella santa, e virtuosa, questa pia, e da bene; così V.S. cerca quella, e questa nella bontà, nella virtù, e nella grandezza dell'animo imitare. Piaccia al Signore concederle sempre prosperità, e bene, perche possi avanzarsi tuttavia di bene in meglio con vita felice." (Modena 1619, *Dedication to Sarra Copio*)

portrays her as the “iniquitous” enemy of Israel, the worthy descend of Nebuchadnezzar, because she influenced Ahasuerus’ decision to stop the reconstruction of the Temple allowed by Cyrus (Modena 1619, 1.2). In this, he agrees with the rabbinical tradition. While the Babylonian Rabbis refer to Vashti as a Babylonian Jewish-hater and a wanton woman who must be punished, the Jerusalem Rabbis describe her as a wise queen, whose only mistake was agreeing to the destruction of the Temple (Kadari 2009). But Modena, like Zethar, appears to be sympathetic with Vashti’s suffering. In 1.4, indeed, she is no longer the guilty queen who must be rightly punished, but an innocent victim, whose only fault was to have been born female. In 2.1, Mordecai, then, employs tragic irony, providing a further image of Vashti:

qual peccato,
 Enorme, qual delitto, ho mai commesso?
 . . .
 Io per usar tropp’honestà punita,
 E di qual pena atroce? e qual severo
 Castigo, che il privarmi della vita,
 Nulla stato sarebbe, al par di questa,
 O Vasti, è ver, che non sei più Regina?
 Donna volgar, donna, donna più vil che serva
 ...
 Irato certo [i.e. il cielo], e la cagione ignoro
 (Modena 1619, 2.1)

[What terrible sin, what crime, have I ever committed? . . . I was punished for being too honest. But how terrible is my pain, how severe my punishment! Taking life away from me would have been nothing when compared to this. Oh Vashti, truly you are no longer Queen? A vulgar woman, a woman viler than a servant . . . Of course, the heaven is angry, but the reason I ignore. (translation mine)]

Vashti is ready to leave the Palace with her foster-mother and complains of her misfortune: “O come male il piè si move, quando / Il cuor, ad altra parte è volto” (Modena 1619, 2.1; “How feet move badly, when heart is turned elsewhere”, translation mine). Her complaint echoes the lines from the poem *Libi beMizrah* (*My Heart in the East*) of the Hebrew poet, Yehudah Ha-Lewi (1086-1141): “My heart in the East but the rest of me in the West” (Halkin 2011, 21), as if Modena were transfiguring her misfortune and suffering within the perennial Jewish drama of expulsion and loneliness.

In portraying Vashti, Modena interweaves Jewish sources (Midraš Esther Rabbah, Babylonian- and Jerusalem-Talmud, and, probably, also Yehudah Ha-Lewi) and sixteenth-century Italian tragedy. Not surprisingly,

then, his Vashti has an irresolute and multifaceted character. On the one hand, she is a tragic persona, whose sorrow (for a deliverance that never took place) and distress (for a lost past) exemplifies the destiny of women and the destiny of Jewish people in exile. On the other hand, she is an ambiguous character embodying both the status of the guilty enemy and the innocent victim.

In 1.4 Vashti expresses the status of woman, by saying: “rinchiusa / In casa, ò d’alte mura circondata” (Modena 1619, 1.4; “locked inside the house, or surrounded by high walls”, translation mine). Similarly, Israel is confined to the ghettos. Modena recognizes in the character of Vashti the Jewish people, as the ‘woman’ of the world: victim, vulnerable, and vehicle for divine (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 337). The image of ‘Israelite-woman’ thrown among strangers or hostile male powers recalls a passage in Yehudah Ha-Lewi’s *Sefer ha-Kuzari* (*The Book of the Khazar King*),⁴ in which the Rabbi (or *Haver* in the Hebrew translation) points out to the king of the Khazars:

אמר החבר: ישראל באמות כלב באברים, הוא רב חליים מכלם ורב בריאות מכלם.

[The *Haver* said: “Israel amidst the nations is like the heart amidst the organs of the body: the sickest and the healthiest of them”. (*Sefer ha-Kuzari* 2.36; cf. Yehudah Ha-Lewi 1905. Translation mine)]

It is not my aim here to deal with the influence of Yehudah Ha-Lewi in Modena’s work. Leon Modena knew the *Kuzari* well: he compiled a stand-alone index to the *Kuzari*, and he borrowed its language and arguments in his attack against *Qol Šakhal’s* author (Shear 2008, 100-1, 173). What is noteworthy is the fact that Modena’s use of *Kuzari* suggests the compatibility between “participation in general humanist discourse and polemical defence of Judaism” (Shear 2008, 103).

Modena made an extensive use of non-Jewish sources to describe the tragic nature of Vashti. In 1.4, for example, Vashti’s lamenting her misfortune is imbued with references to Italian tragedy and pastoral poetry, such as Giovan Battista Giraldi’s *Orbecche* (1541) and Torquato Tasso’s pastoral play, *Aminta* (1573). And yet, Modena borrows his idea of female beauty as a harmful gift from Tasso’s tragedy *Il re Torrismondo* (*King Torrismondo*) (1587). Like Rosmonda, Vashti laments:

Perche, lassa, non nacqui maschio anch’io?

⁴ Originally written in Judeo-Arabic at the end of 1130s, the work circulated among Jewish in Latin Christendom in the Hebrew translation by Yehudah Ibn Tibbon (1120-1190), under the title *Sefer ha-Kuzari* or *Sefer ha-Kuzar* (*The Book of the Khazar*). Cf. Shear 2008, 21-54.

...
 M'havessi, almeno la Natura dato
 ...
 ... la sembianza infin di un mostro horréndo,
 Che così la beltà, la beltà frale,
 Dono infelice, à donna saggia, e casta,
 Non havrebbe hora mosso, il Rè marito
 (Se marito da me deve chiamarsi)
 A si illecita cosa, commandarmi
 (Modena 1619, 1.4)

[Oh miserable, why wasn't I born male too . . . If nature had at least given me . . . finally, the appearance of a hideous monster, so that the beauty, the ephemeral beauty – a wretched gift, for a wise and chaste woman – would never have moved the King, my husband (if I have still to call him a husband) to command me a so illicit thing. (translation mine)]

Supposedly, Vashti's 'suicide' is Modena's invention: there is no mention of Vashti's suicide in rabbinic literature (at least, in the midrashim, Vashti dies at the hands of Ahasuerus who had drunk so much that he could not separate good and bad, life and death; cf. Kadari 2009). In fact, suicide is a recurrent motif of Italian Renaissance tragedy (Bianchi 2014, 199-214; cf. Carta 2018). But what is peculiar to Modena's *Ester* is that it opens with the suicide of Vashti. As if her death were a reminder that too uncompromising a personality (both individual and collective) is destined to self-destruction. One may construe Vashti's suicide as a warning both to Sarra Copio Sullam and to Jewish people "to cultivate a realistic perception of the world" (Arbib 2003, 130). Similarly, the foster-mother recommends to Vashti:

Cara Regina mia, meglio era forse
 Ubidir, che del Prencipe, e marito,
 Ò giusta, ò ingiusta, che la voglia sia,
 Si dee seguir.
 (Modena 1619, 1.4)

[My dear queen, perhaps it would have been better to obey, since the will of a sovereign and husband, whether right or wrong, must be followed. (translation mine)]

"Vashti's foster-mother represents popular wisdom, which is accustomed to the injustice of power" (Arbib 2003, 127). Her words echo the prejudice, according to which nature has predisposed woman to obey because of her inferiority to man. It should be added that some twenty years before Modena's *Ester*, Giuseppe Passi had published in Venice his misogynistic catalogue *I donneschi difetti* (*The Defects of Woman*) (1599). He deemed Vashti

an arrogant woman, who was repudiated for disobeying her husband; her punishment was meant as a warning to all married women.⁵ In this framework, Modena's Vashti purports both to open "Sarra Copio Sullam's eyes" to women's actual condition (Arbib 2012) and to warn the Jews (particularly the Venetian Jews) against the risks of a Judaism that remains poorly integrated in Christendom. Vashti serves as an instrument of denunciation, thereby drawing attention both to the female and to the Jewish condition. On the contrary, Esther appears as a 'creative mediator', capable of offering a deflationary model of female heroism and covenantal Judaism. Indeed, unlike Vashti, the pious and taciturn Esther willingly assents to hide her true nature (i.e. her Jewishness) and to obey another's will.

3. Redemption Behind Multiple Masks

In *L'Esther* Leon Modena introduces male characters (Mordecai, Ahasuerus and his two ministers, Memucan and Carshena) as the protagonists of a multi-voiced debate on theologico-political issues, such as the limits of the human ruler, the Jewish otherness and chosenness, and the messianic redemption. The background for this debate is the weakness of courtly power. The first thing that catches the eye is that Ahasuerus is portrayed in a negative light. Zethar, the eunuch, includes Ahasuerus among those princes "who, being lords, believe that anything benefits them, that it is right and proper to force it on others, and expect it done" ("... Che perche Signor sono, gli par che tutto / Convenevol gli sia, lecito, e giusto, / Imponer ad altrui, ...", Modena 1619, 1.3; translation in Arbib 2003, 123); Vashti says that he is unworthy of the crown he wears (Modena 1619, 1.4);⁶ the manservants describe him as a dishonest and arrogant tyrant who should be put to death (Modena 1619, 2.6);⁷ Haman ascribes to him a mercurial and capricious na-

⁵ "... la regina Vasti, essendo stata chiamata dal marito Assuero, acciò che fusse veduta bella, com'era con la corona Regale in capo da tutti i popoli, e da li Primati suoi, et havendo lei ruscato di venire, fù col consiglio dei savi rifiutata dal marito . . . Con questo esempio dovrebbero tutte le donne maritate imparare ad ubidire ai consorti loro, et à portargli quella riverenza, e quel onore, che ragionevolmente gli debbono" (Passi 1618, 20. Published for the first time in 1599, Passi's work went through three additional editions in 1601, 1605, and 1618). Cf. Passi 1602, 158; Malpezzi Price-Ristaino 2008, 105-19.

⁶ "Dario . . . A questo Assuero, suo figliuol, mi diede / Per moglie, indegno di corona, e scettro / Che sol per me, tien hor l'imperio in mano / De Medi, e non pel padre, et hà acquistato / Per essermi marito, anco la Persia, / Più che per suo valore, ò per sua forza".

⁷ "Perche quest'insolente, hora accecato / Dal fumo della sua superbia immensa, / E divenuto insopportabil troppo"; "dar la morte ad un simil tiranno, / E chi lo potrà far meglio di noi?".

ture, deeming him a haughty and bed-tempered king (Modena 1619, 3.2);⁸ in the minister Memucham's words, Ahasuerus' choice to exterminate an innocent people is "an unjust and unworthy deed" ("atto ingiusto, e indegno", Modena 1619, 3.5; translation mine).⁹ The remark of the minister Carshena is noteworthy in this regard. In 3.5 Carshena defines Ahasuerus as a "foolish lord" (ibid.): by placing Haman's desire to exterminate the Jews before the 'reason of state', he shows little consideration for the Persian people. In other words, Ahasuerus made the mistake of not looking at the cultural and political interest of the Empire (Syros 2005, 157-82. Cf. Botero 2017). Similarly, a few years later, in his *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia (Discourse on the State of the Jews)* (1638), Simone Luzzatto would outline the crucial role of the Jews in preserving social stability. They are to be tolerated for their being "submissive, humble, and pliable to the will of *their* prince" (italics mine):¹⁰

Ma la nazione hebrea dispersa, e disseminata per il mondo, priva d'alcun capo di protetione, con pronta flessibilità si dispone sempre in conformità de pubblici comandi, onde si pratica bene spesso ch'essendo imposti agravii particolari alla nazione non si sente da essi spirare, et esprimere in semplice ramarico. (Luzzatto 1638, 22r)

[The Jews, however, were always willing to obey public commands with swift compliance, for they are dispersed and scattered all over the world and deprived of any source of protection, so that when particular taxes were imposed on them, they never dared to utter or formulate so much as a simple complaint. (translation in Veltri-Lissa 2019, 57)]

Carshena examines at least four reasons why Jews' presence should be tolerated within the Persian empire. The first reason is that misfortune has always fallen upon the enemies of Israel (ranging from Pharaoh to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar): "L'esperienza hà dimostrato sempre / Pessimo fine a chi l'offese, o punse" (Modena 1619, 3.5; "Experience has always punished those who have offended or tested it", translation mine). The second is that "quel ch'il tempo ha lungamente al mondo / Conservato . . . Non

⁸ "Poscia, che'l nostro Rè deve uscir fuori, / A far ch'allegro di vederlo, sia / Il popol, che sia hora è stato mesto, / Siche hor c'ha preso moglie, e c'ha quietata / La travagliata mente, hor che sta lieto, / Vuol far mille esentioni, e mille gratie".

⁹ "Ma chi non sà che atto ingiusto, e indegno, / E di qual si sia Prencipe, a richiesta, / Ad appetito d'un, dieci, nè venti, / Esterminare un popolo innocente, / chi verso la corona errore alcuno / Non hà commesso ò da gli Dei, ò'l fato, / Mandato, a ricovrarsi, a l'ali, a l'ombra / De l'imperio di quello, e ritrovarsi / Da la fede regal, traditi, a fraude?".

¹⁰ "La nazione hebrea è per se stessa sommessa, sogetta, e pieghevole, all'ubbidienza del suo Prencipe" (Luzzatto 1638, 31v; "The Jewish Nation is by itself submissive, humble, and pliable to the will of its prince", translation in Veltri-Lissa 2019, 83).

si deve gettar” (ibid.; “What has been preserved in the earth for a long time . . . should not be thrown away, translation mine), namely Israel has been preserved throughout history, therefore has to be protected. The third is a more politico-utilitarian reason: a people who increase the king’s renown and reputation must be welcomed into a pluralistic society such as the Persian empire (Modena 1619, 3.5).¹¹ Finally, anticipating Luzzatto’s utilitarian argument for Jewish toleration, Carshena adds that the Jews are to be accepted because they are a humble and obedient people who never rise against their rulers:

Si trovarono mai forse gli Hebrei
 In lor captivitati, e soggettioni,
 Seditiosi, e traditor, rubelli,
 C’habbiano fatto Capo, e sollevati
 Si sian contro il lor Prencipe, ò Signore?
 Questo non già, ma pecorelle humili,
 Viver ubidienti
 (Modena 1619, 3.5)

[Have there ever been Jews who, in captivity and submission, have become seditious, traitors, rebels, or who turned against their prince or lord? This never happened. Rather they are humble sheep who live obediently. (translation mine)]

Carshena is not endorsing the Jewish people. While he admits to hating them because of their religion and rites, he has reservations about Ahasuerus’ choice to pander to Haman’s will, thus decreeing the Jews’ annihilation. Their presence in Persia does not conflict with the *raison d’état*, which must be always followed “Quand’habbia fondamento, e non ripugni / Alle divine, alle celesti leggi” (ibid.; “when it is well founded and does not offend the divine, heavenly laws”; translation in Arbib 2003, 134).

Unlike Ahasuerus, Mordecai is portrayed in a positive light: he is a pious Jew whose main concern is to ensure the well-being and the survival of the Jewish people. Mordecai agrees that a faithful servant like Esther is entrusted to the hands of the foreign and idolatrous Ahasuerus, as long as she will continue to observe all the precepts while hiding her Jewishness from her husband and courtiers. He has full confidence in God’s providence and strongly supports the eternity of Israel. Thus, in 2.5 he concludes his speech with the hope that everything turns out well for the Jewish people: “Fa che

¹¹ “Sia quanto vil una nation si voglia, / Sia quanto bassa, apporta al Re grandezza, / Magnificenza, è gran decor, tenerla / Ne le cittadi sue, che varie genti, / Popoli varij, e varie lingue havesse / Per suoi vassalli, e beneficio, e honore, / E tanto grande più, quanto più sono”.

per ben del popolo tutto sia" (Modena 1619, 2.5; "Let everything be for the well-being of the people", translation mine).

At the Persian court, however, Mordecai appears as an obedient and cunning courtier, whose immediate concern is to guarantee social peace and harmony, and to prevent seditious conspiracies, both inside and outside the Persian palace. In some cases, Modena's Mordecai epitomizes two Jewish characteristics that, a few years later, Simone Luzzatto would outline in his *Discorso*: obedience and submission. Thanks to Esther's mediation, indeed, Mordecai denounces the conspiracy against the King, plotted by two manservants. He is interested in showing himself a loyal courtier, hoping that, by doing so, Ahasuerus would be more tolerant of the Jews.

Modena's Mordecai moves between opposite poles: obedience and disobedience; political realism and utopian vision of the future; strategy and prayer of prophecy. He symbolizes the 'wandering Jew' who lives a 'two-hats' existence, as both a cunning courtier and a devoted Jew. One example may explain his twofold nature. In 4.1 Mordecai's soliloquy conveys the impression that he is translating his political realism and foresight into an intimate prayer addressed to God. It is noteworthy that the prayer takes up some traits of the Septuagint version of Esther, particularly, addition C, which follows 4:17 (Vulgate 13:8-18) and tells the prayer of Mordecai and the prayer of Esther, asking for the safety of the Jews. Nevertheless, Modena gives his peculiar Jewish twist to the prayer. First, he reminds God of the promise He made to the prophet Jeremiah, namely that a freed Israel will return to Jerusalem.¹² Second, he questions Israel's loneliness and suffering, and appeals to God's providence and omnipotence (thanks to which the Jew have survived the flood, the slavery, and the wandering through the desert).¹³ Finally, Mordecai gives the reason for his refusal of *proskynesis* before Haman (*Esth* 3:2). His explanation is similar, in some respects, to the one given in LXX. Whereas the Masoretic text is laconic, LXX's Addition C (also mirrored in the Vulgate) provides a key of interpretation:¹⁴

¹² "O gran Monarca, ò Dio verace, ò sommo / Rè del Mondo, non hai tu per la bocca / Promesso già, di Gieremia Profeta, / Ch'al fin di settant'anni il popol tuo / Susciterai, da l'esser sottoposto / A l'empia Babilonia, e che farai, / Ch'anco a Gierusalem facci ritorno / Redificando ancora il sacro Tempio?" (Modena 1619, 4.1).

¹³ "Son queste le promesse? è questo il tempio? / Tu non sei già Signor, un'huom mortale, / Le cui parole possan venir meno, / E debbo creder io, che tu abbandoni / E lasci affatto questo popol tuo? / Popolo eletto sol da te fra gl'altri, / Per cui tanti miracoli hai già fatto . . . Tu che Noè da l'acque sol servasti . . . Tu ch' Abram, da Nembrot posto nel foco / Rendesti salvo... Partisti il rubeo mar per farci varco, / Perche i corpi divisi hora da l'alme / Passar dovesser crudelmente a morte? Dov'è quando di manna nel deserto / Li pascesti, e dal duro sasso l'acqua / Facesti scaturir per essi, ch'ora / Debban così finire il cibo, e'l bere?" (Modena 1619, 4.1).

¹⁴ Cf. Fox 2010, 41-6; Berlin 2001, 32-6; Levenson 1997, 66-9.

Cuncta nosti, et scis quia non pro superbia et contumelia, et aliqua gloriae cupiditate, fecerim hoc, ut non adorarem Aman superbissimum . . . sed timui ne honorem Dei mei transferrem ad hominem, et ne quemquam adorarem, excepto Deo meo.

(Vulgate 13:12-14)

[You know all things. You know, Lord, that it was not out of insolence or arrogance or desire for glory that I acted thus in not bowing down to the arrogant Haman . . . But I acted as I did so as not to place the honor of a mortal above that of God. I will not bow down to anyone but you, my Lord. (New American Bible: chap. C, 5-7)]

Similarly, Modena's Mordecai specifies that his refusal of *proskynesis* was not the consequence of his "pride" and "ambition". Rather, he refuses to bow to Haman because of the idols that hung around Haman's neck.¹⁵ Quite likely, Mordecai's explanation is based on Esther Rabbah (as well as on Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Book of Esther),¹⁶ where it is said that Haman had an image "embroidered on his clothing and on his chest, so that anyone who bowed to him effectively bowed to his idol" (Esth. Rabbah 7:5; cf. Walfish 1989, 337; 1993, 179; Fox 2010, 43; Ginzberg 2003, 1148-50).

Therefore, Mordecai refused to bow to Haman to avoid paying to a man the tribute due to God. In this regard, Abraham Ibn Ezra, while agreeing with the rabbinic viewpoint, emphasized Mordecai's pride and religious intransigence:

היה ראוי שידבר לאסתר ותסירנו משער המלך ולא יכעיס את המן אחר שראה|שהשעה משחקת לו?

[He should have requested that Esther have him removed from the palace gate so that he would not irritate Haman who was enjoying a rise in his fortunes at the time. (translation mine)]¹⁷

Anyway, it is noteworthy that Modena's Mordecai concludes his prayer with a reminder of Abraham's questioning God's attribute of justice. The patriarch criticized God's right to destruct Sodom and Gomorrah, killing the righteous along with wicked people: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Should not the judge of all the world act

¹⁵ " . . . ch'il ricusare / Io d'inchinarmi a Aman, e riverirlo, / Non da superbia, ò ambition è nato / . . . Ma perche di richiamo nel vestito, / E al collo appesi gl'Idoli suoi porta, / A quai sotto pretesto alcun vietasti / À noi, mai dar d'honor minimo segno" (Modena 1619, 4.1).

¹⁶ Comm. A, 3:2-3, comm. B, 3:4. Cf. Gomez Aranda 2007, 42 (Hebr. 14), 136 (Hebr. 49).

¹⁷ Comm. A, 3:4. In Gomez Aranda 2007, Hebr. 14.

with justice?" (*Gen* 18:25). Abraham's challenging God may be considered a "prayer", a righteous act (for which the patriarch will be rewarded), because it aims at confirming the divine justice (Weiss 2017, 89-93; cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 49:9). The same thing applies to Mordecai's speech in 5.2. By giving expression to the shared suffering of the Jewish people, he warns God that, if He does not intercede, a radical new exile could begin:

Affanno sopra affanno, . . .
 . . .
 . . . essend'anco distrutta
 La gran Città de nostri Padri antichi,
 E calpestato, e rovinato il Tempio.
 Hora di novo Aman cerca ad un tratto
 Farne uccidere a tutti, e sradicare
 Dal mondo . . .
 . . .
 A che tardi, Signore, dunque a che tardi?
 (Modena 1619, 5.2)

[How many troubles . . . the great City of our ancient fathers is destroyed, the Temple is trampled and wrecked . . . Now Haman tries again to kill us all and to eradicate us from the world . . . Why do you hesitate, oh Lord, why do you hesitate? (translation mine)]

Mordecai's speech is suddenly interrupted by an angel, as if he were living an experience of prophecy. Turning to him, the angel says:

Raffrena il tuo dolore,
 Ch'avanti il gran Motore
 Son giunt'i prieghi tuoi, et ei concessa
 T'ha hor hor la tua dimanda,
 E sol per consolarti a te mi manda,
 E a dirti, ch'egli con la sua clemenza
 Hor hà quella sentenza
 Rivocat'aspra, e forte,
 Che minacciava a te col popol morte.
 (Modena 1619, 5.2)

[Restrain your grief, since the great Mover has heard and accepted your prayers. He sent me only to reassure you and tell you that, thanks to His mercy, He revoked the harsh and severe sentence, which threatened to exterminate you and your people. (translation mine)]

Once again, Abraham seems to be hidden behind Mordecai. The passage echoes the episode of the binding of Isaac of *Gen* 22: at the very last moment, God sends an angel to interrupt Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his

son. Two things stand out here. The first is that Mordecai epitomizes the incessant tension between an obedient, submissive nature and the impulse to dispute and disobey (bequeathed by Abraham). The second thing is the focus on the ‘urgency of the moment’ – as if, at the very last moment, God would intercede to save His people, whose loyalty has been severely tested.

Modena’s *Ester* appears as a ‘diasporic’ tragedy that focuses on the present, providing lessons on how to survive in one’s own time and place. Political realism is preferred to utopian redemption. However, in 3.1 one possibly finds a slight hint that a ‘Jewish’ redemption will take place in the future. Here Mordecai gives voice to the hope that, as soon as the exile ends, a period of peace and abundance will begin. The Jews will return to their ‘ancient empire’, in which they will be concerned only with the observance of the Torah’s precepts. By living in such way, they will be able to achieve the union with the “higher mover”.¹⁸ Apparently, Modena incorporates mystical, Neoplatonic elements (namely the conjunction with the “One” as the highest good) into his political realism. He borrows his view of redemption from Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), who pointed out that:

לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח. לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם. ולא כדי שירדו בעכו"ם. ולא כדי שינשארו אותם העמים. ולא כדי לאכל ולשתות ולשמח. אלא כדי שיהיו פנויין בתורה וחכמתה.

[The Sages and the Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah because they wanted to rule the world or because they wanted to have dominion over the non-Jews or because they wanted the nations to exalt them or because they wanted to eat, drink and be merry. Rather, they desired this so that they would have time for Torah and its Wisdom. (*Mišneh Torah, Sefer Šofetim, Melakhim u-Milḥamot* 12.4. Translation in Mošeh ben Maymon 2012)]

Predominantly, Maimonides focused on the ‘restorative’ aspects of the messianic era: the *return* of the kingdom of David to its former glory, the *re-building* of the Temple in Jerusalem and, finally, the *gathering* of the dispersed people of Israel. It should be also added that, for Maimonides, the messiah will establish a sort of *Pax Judaica* – but only as long as the nations will recognize Israel’s sovereignty and further the spread of universal monotheism. In the wake of Maimonides, Modena confines his idea of

¹⁸ “E spero in breve, che potremo ancora / Alla patria tornar, poi che passati / Son quegl’anni, che prescritti furo, / Della captività, di Babilonia . . . Fà che le pure vittime, e holocausti, / Possiamo riofferirti, et i comandi / Tutti osserrar della tua santa legge, / Che’l desiderio intento, ch’in noi vive, / Di ritornare al nostro imperio antico, / Non è per dominar temporalmente, / Ove il padron è più del servo, servo, / Ma solo per poter liberi, all’hora, / Dalle occupation, che n’interrompono / Compita osservation, dar à precetti / Tutti quanti, e con cuor sincero, e chiaro, / Congiungerci con tè, motor soprano” (Modena 1619, 3.1).

redemption to a more ethical-cultural sphere – partly also inspired by certain Italian Jewish writers, such as Ovadia Sforno (1475-1550).¹⁹ Indeed, for Modena, the Jews will return to the Land of Israel, not to dominate over the non-Jewish nations, but to achieve their own moral and intellectual perfection (Guetta 2014, 150). Therefore, his longing for Jerusalem appears to be nothing more than a private outburst against any religious and political restlessness.

Modena's 'diasporic' tragedy *Ester* serves several purposes: it provides lessons on how to survive in one's time and place; it teaches political realism, while conveying an inclusive and pluralistic view of society; it warns Sarra Sullam Copio against the risks of her correspondence with Cebà and her feisty 'feminism'. However, what strikes most is that *Ester* is a multi-voiced play, which is looking for a balance between opposite polarities: submissiveness and moral resistance; political despair and unrealistic redemption; covenantal pragmatism and Abrahamitic religiousness. Most conspicuous in this regard is Modena's Mordecai, who has inherited his moral resistance and religiosity from the patriarch Abraham. He typifies the 'wandering Jew' who lives a 'two-hats' existence, for his capacity to move between opposite poles: obedience and disobedience; political realism and messianic expectations; strategic cunning and prayer of prophecy. The figure of Vashti, on the other hand, stands out from the immorality of the court. Unlike Mordecai who acts as a figure of mediation, Vashti is an instrument of denunciation, thereby expressing the suffering of women and Jews, both confined to a secondary role in the society. Esther remains in the background. She is Vashti's double: the veiled and taciturn instrument of another's will, urged to complete and strengthen the legacy of the matriarch Sarah.

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¹⁹ Cf. Guetta 2015; Fishman 2003, 183-94.

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