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Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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Abstract

Even though topics from the Hebrew Bible abound in the sixteenth-century drama of the Low Countries written in the vernacular, the character of Esther does not appear on stage in the Dutch language before the start of the seventeenth century. Neo-Latin plays on Esther did, however, precede them. In this article I will concentrate on four plays, written by Dutch and Flemish dramatists. The first is a neo-Latin play: *Tragœdia Esther sive Edissa*, written in 1544 by Petrus Philicinus and printed in 1563. I will subsequently discuss three vernacular plays about Esther: an anonymous play entitled *Hester en Assverus* from the town of Hasselt, probably written before 1615; Nicolaas Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid* from 1637; and Joris Berckmans's "happy-ending tragedy" *Edissa* from 1649. In discussing these plays, I will focus on the way in which the character of Esther was portrayed. In Philicinus's play Esther is depicted as a mediatrix between the Jewish people and the Persians, yet at the same time fully aware of the dangers she may inflict upon herself. The Hasselt play and the play by Berckmans demonstrate Esther's loyalty towards Ahasuerus. These two plays contrast her sweet and obedient character to Vasthi's less sympathetic attitude towards the king. Fonteyn also describes her as a loyal queen to Ahasuerus; her virtue is beyond any doubt. What is more, in all four plays Esther emphatically voices her trust in God.

Keywords: Joris Berckmans; Nicolaas Fonteyn; Petrus Philicinus; Hasselt; rhetoricians; Neo-Latin drama; Dutch and Flemish drama

1. Introduction

Sixteenth-century drama of the Low Countries was dominated by the activities of the rhetoricians, members of so-called *rederijkerskamers* (chambers of rhetoric) who were engaged in writing poetry and performing plays in public in the market squares of towns and villages. They enjoyed generous support from the local authorities who praised their artistic skills and, above all, their educational drive to instruct the spectators how to live a morally-just life. A major subgenre practiced by them was a type of morality play, termed *spel van sinne*,[1] in which the main character is shown the narrow path towards

[1] The word *sin*, of which *sinne* is a derivation, has various meanings in (late) medieval Dutch. It can refer to mankind's ability to think, hence its intellect, as well as to its

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salvation as an alternative for a sinful life of luxury and debauchery, leading to damnation. Other popular types of drama were the genres of farce and biblical drama. As far as the latter is concerned, the authors of the plays on topics taken from the New Testament compared, more often than not, the struggle of the early Christians to practice their new religion to the battle between reformed Christians and the Roman-Catholic clergy. In this respect, the Acts of the Apostles and Saint-Paul's conversion were popular themes.[2] After 1539, when a theatre competition was held in Ghent at which the majority of the competing chambers answered the question to be discussed in their plays ("Welc den mensche stervende meesten troost es"; "What is the dying man's greatest consolation?")[3] in a non-orthodox way, the religious and secular authorities sensed the negative influence rhetoricians' plays could have on the minds of those who were critical of the Catholic faith. The edition of these plays, published in 1539, was even placed on the Index. In 1560, the authorities imposed severe restrictions on performances of plays in which religious topics were discussed, eventually leading to a total ban of staging plays.

In the Low Countries early modern drama comprised both of rhetoricians' drama and fully-fledged Renaissance drama, the former mainly restricted to the sixteenth century and the latter to the seventeenth. Philicinus' Neo-Latin drama *Tragœdia Esther*, dating back to the sixteenth century, was thoroughly inspired by classical drama – in this case we are dealing with a Senecan play – and as such Neo-Latin school drama will have had a distinct effect on the development from rhetoricians' drama to Renaissance drama. The extent to which this influence can be shown is something that still needs to be studied in detail.

Plays dramatizing scenes or staging characters taken from the Hebrew Bible were in vogue with the rhetoricians, writing in the vernacular. In some twenty-eight plays written between the mid-fifteenth and the early-seventeenth centuries, stories from this source were chosen by them for dramatization. Abraham, for example, figures in no less than ten plays, ranging from a fragment of a play probably dating back to the fifteenth century to fully-fledged plays on subjects such as Abraham sacrificing Isaac,

thoughts but also to its senses and its mental disposition. Equally difficult to explain is the exact meaning of the word *sinnekens* which is used to refer to allegorical characters in rhetoricians' plays – they always appear on stage in pairs, seldom with three but, unlike the Vice in English drama, never alone –, acting as seductive or evil forces trying to eventuate man's downfall.

[2] See Ramakers 1991-2, 2011 and 2012.

[3] The English translation of this phrase is from Waite (2000, 147). In general, Waite's book offers a good introduction to early reformation drama in the Low Countries. On the Ghent plays see chapter 6, "Popular Ritual, Social Protest, and the Rhetorician Competition in Ghent, 1539", 134-64.

as well as his dealings with Lot and his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.[4] Trust in God (as opposed to reverently following the clergy), a topic highly debated during the sixteenth century by reformed Christians, may have been the reason why authors and their audiences showed a predilection for this particular character and his story as it was narrated in the Bible. In general, women prominently feature in these biblical plays; the stories of Judith and Susanna figure in four of them. The story of Esther is dealt with in one rhetoricians' play only, the anonymous *Hester en Assverus* from the Hasselt chamber of rhetoric *De Roode Roos* (*The Red Rose*).

Topics from the Hebrew Bible were also staged in Low Countries Renaissance drama. Yet compared to rhetoricians' drama, the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Judith or Susanna are almost completely absent here. Instead, during the heydays of this type of drama, from 1600 to 1650, we find a remarkable number of plays concentrating on the stories of David and Joseph. Perhaps seventeenth-century audiences, experiencing a constant threat by the Spanish-Habsburg armies to wage war against the country (not only in the north but also in the south), were more interested in these emblematic figures, who managed to safeguard themselves against oppression or captivity. Would it be too daring to surmise that the story of Esther, who liberated her people from persecution and capital punishment by the Persians, appealed to Renaissance playwrights and spectators by bringing her particular story to the stage? During the first half of the seventeenth century, three Renaissance plays focus on Esther: Nicolaas Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid*; Joris Berckmans's *Edissa*; and Jacobus Revius's tragedy *Haman*.[5] The latter play was not meant to be staged, its author being mainly known as a poet rather than a dramatist. Since his text was never performed we will not include it in our discussion.

Theoretically, the three vernacular plays discussed in this essay represent different stages in the development of rhetoricians' drama to Renaissance drama.[6] The Hasselt *Hester en Assverus* is a typical rhetoricians' play staging *sinnekens* as allegorical characters – even though they appear on stage relatively late in this play – performed on a stage subdivided into mansions, each of them allocated to one of the main characters, with a neutral proscenium

[4] See *Het spel van Abrahams Offerhande* (The Play of Abraham's Sacrifice) by an unknown author in the Haarlem play collection of the local rhetoricians chamber *Trou Moet Blijcken,* vol. 4, fol. 49v-64v (Dibbets and Hummelen 1993-4), and Franchois Machet's tragedy *Sodoma*, written in 1619, a play kept in a manuscript dating back to 1661, now at Regenstein Library in Chicago. A summary of this play is given by Hüsken (1989, 224-9).

[5] See for a bibliography of Renaissance drama in the Low Countries during the first half of the seventeenth century Meeus 1983.

[6] These stages are not to be seen chronologically. In his introduction to Meeus 1983, 8, Lieven Rens notices the reemerging, during the fourth decade of the seventeenth century

in front of them. Joris Berckmans's *Edissa* represents a relatively rare stage in the development, being a play displaying characteristics of rhetoricians' drama, such as the allegorical *sinnekens*, yet written in alexandrines with acts and scenes, which is typical for the genre of Renaissance tragedy, thus making it a hybrid play. Finally, Nicolaas Fonteyn's play betrays every characteristic of a Renaissance tragicomedy, without allegorical characters yet written in alexandrine verse and with a Chorus of Virgins. It is in this order, rather than chronologically, that we will discuss this play in this essay.

To supplement our information related to medieval and early modern dramatic performances in the Low Countries regarding Esther's heroic act of liberating the Jews from oppression in Persia, we will refer to a few examples of archival and iconographic sources.[7] Evidence regarding the way Esther was depicted on the stage in the Low Countries, as can be deduced from archival sources, is limited. In 1474, a play about *Koning Aszwerus* (*King Ahasuerus*) was staged in Deventer, a Hanseatic town in the north-eastern part of the Low Countries (Hollaar and Van den Elzen 1980, 413). On 25 June 1553, a play about Esther and Ahasuerus was performed in Haarlem. In 1589, a similar play was scheduled in the same town, but the local burgomasters banned its performance because of a conflict with the rhetoricians (Van Boheemen and Van der Heijden 1999, 33; 69). Unfortunately, the texts of these plays have not been preserved.

Tableaux vivants, in which Esther is shown being crowned queen or pleading with Ahasuerus for her people, were part of many Joyous Entries in the Low Countries. Both scenes were incorporated in the procession on the occasion of the entry of Duke Philip the Good into Bruges, on 11 December 1440, when the town submitted to its legal ruler after it had rebelled against him. Esther's crowning by the king was shown in a splendid triumphal arch built over one of Bruges's streets. From within music was played on an organ, a harp and a lute. In a subsequent *tableau vivant* she pleads with the king for the Jews living in exile in Persia.[8] Later in the century, Esther's story was part of Margaret of York's festive entry into Bruges (3 July 1468) on the occasion of her wedding with Charles the Bold, as well as in Joanna of Castile's Joyous Entry in Brussels (9 December 1496).[9]

– a period otherwise characterized by a "classical" type of Renaissance drama following the three unities –, of allegorical plays, including those reminiscent of the "old-fashioned" genre of the *spel van sinne*. Joris Berckmans's *Edissa* (1649), to be discussed further down this essay, bears witness to the latter type of drama.

[7] See for the way Esther was depicted in art, including Dutch art, Goosen 1993.

[8] See Ramakers 2005, 174-6, 183-6 and 194. A short description of the way the two tableaux were executed, including the Latin phrases displayed on scrolls, can be found in *Die Excellente Chronijcke van Vlaenderen* (1531), fol. C.vij*rv*.

[9] Franke (1998) focuses on Low Countries representations of Esther and Ahasuerus

Stage showing Esther in Joanna of Castile's Joyous Entry into Brussels, 1496
(© Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ms 78 D 5)

On a double-sided booth-stage the latter entry included two scenes from Esther's life: her introduction as future spouse to Ahasuerus; and her audacious plea for the king to have mercy on the Jews. The famous *Liber Boonen* from Louvain (1593-1594), delineating the annual procession ("ommeganc") in honour of the Virgin Mary, includes a description of a tableau with Esther as well. She is "costelijck verciert en gecroont als een coninginne, ende zal zijn zeer schoon van aensicht" ("costly adorned and crowned as a queen and her face shall be very beautiful"; Van Even 1880, 251). Seated on her throne, she gracefully entertains Mordecai, dressed in sackcloth, who shows her Haman's ordinance.

In most cases the *tableaux vivants* of Joyous Entries included scenes with Esther for political reasons, for they compared the biblical heroine with a female protagonist, part of the royal company being welcomed, so as to

on tapestries and in tableaux vivants, with a special emphasis on the ones produced on the occasion of Margaret of York's marriage to Duke Charles the Bold in Bruges (1468). For the Joyous Entry of Joanna of Castile in Brussels (1496) see Kipling 2001 and Eichberger, ed. 2023 (in press).

show the influence of women on male rulers.[10] However, there is yet another reason why medieval and early modern authors were interested in Esther. For it is from the thirteenth century onwards that she was regularly seen, together with Judith and Susanna, as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary. In one case we even find this comparison in a *tableaux vivant* in a rhetoricians' play. The Bruges playwright Cornelis Everaert (c.1480-1556) shows her in the prologue to his play *Maria ghecompareirt byde claerheyt* (*Mary compared to clarity*; Hüsken 2005, 747-84; see also Moser 2001, 254-62) as a mediatrix pleading for her people at Ahasuerus' court, thus explicitly establishing a link between Esther and the Virgin Mary. As we will see below, Petrus Philicinus interprets her in his *Tragœdia Esther* also in this way. But the precise way in which Esther behaved, her motives and actions on stage, can only be studied by turning to the few surviving plays themselves.

2. Philicinus' *Tragœdia Esther*

Neo-Latin school drama flourished in the Low Countries during the sixteenth century. As a matter of fact, these plays were known throughout a much larger area than the Dutch-speaking territories. They were used for performances by pupils of Latin schools in much of northern Europe, and collections of neo-Latin school drama written by Low Countries schoolmasters were published throughout Europe, most notably in German-speaking countries (Bloemendal 2003).

One of the first dramas of this kind was Georgius Macropedius's *Asotus*, a play written between 1506 and 1510 and published in a revised version in 1535. Its subject was taken from the New Testament, as it stages the story of the Prodigal Son, one of the parables told by Christ to his disciples (Luke 15:11-32). In 1560, one of Macropedius's pupils, Cornelius Laurimanus, published a play entitled *Esthera regina*. According to Jan Bloemendal (2003, 361 and 336-7; 2008), his plays "were meant to be a bulwark against 'heresy'," while giving his *Esthera*

> a typological-anagogical *exegesis* . . . Ahasveros represents Christ, who repudiated his first wife Vasthi, i.e. the Jewish people, to marry another one, Esthera or the true Catholic Church which God had created for man's salvation.

The prologue of the play highlights Esther's humility as opposed to Vasthi's pride, as a result of which the latter is banned from Ahasuerus' court and

[10] In relation to the French political situation around the turn of the sixteenth century, this hypothesis has been put forward by Hochner (2010), yet mainly focusing on Anne of Brittany's role at the time.

Esther is elevated to a high position. Laurimanus was accused of plagiarism, allegedly having copied Naogeorgus's *Hamanus* (1543), or not having kept sufficient distance between the text of his *Esthera regina* and the play written by the German Protestant minister. This accusation was soon refuted.

Dating from about the same time as Naogeorgus's *Hamanus* is a play named *Tragœdia Esther*, written by Petrus Philicinus, otherwise known as Pierre Campson (Bloemendal and Groenland 2006). By the time Philicinus, born c.1515 in a village near the town of Arras (in French speaking territory yet sharing Flemish culture), composed this play he was a school teacher at the collegiate church of Binche. The play appeared in print only some twenty years later, in 1563. The text shows many characteristics of a Senecan drama with its structure of five acts, choruses, static characters and long monologues. As such Philicinus is a relatively early follower of this Roman author in the Low Countries, the plays of Terence considered as being more suitable for adaptation for the stage than those of Seneca.

Esther's behaviour in Philicinus' play is governed by one major drive: her absolute loyalty to both the Jewish people and Ahasuerus, here named "Assuerus". In addition, apart from depicting her as the epitome of virtue, Philicinus saw her above all as a prefiguration of the Holy Virgin. Similarly, he equated Haman with the Devil and he interpreted Mordechai ("Mardochaeus"), Esther's uncle who took care of the orphaned girl, as an image of Christ:

> Nam ut Aman diaboli typum gerere convenientissime videtur, sic Mardochaeus Christi imaginem adumbrare, ac representare videri potest (Bloemendal and Groenland 2006, 70, 80-2)
>
> [Because just as Aman shows a most striking similarity with the type of the devil, so can Mardochaeus be seen as a prefiguration and image of Christ.][11]

According to Philicinus, Esther is a model of honesty and composure, and the luxury that surrounded her at Assuerus's court did not turn her into a conceited person.

In his first speech King Assuerus compares Esther to Queen Vasthi. Certainly, the latter was a worthy wife but at the same time she was too brazen: "Digna uxor, at nimis insolens" (131). The king sketches Esther's eminence, choosing his words carefully: she is not only extremely beautiful but she is also friendly, possesses a loving character and displays great self-restraint. In this, she reflects his own person because he himself cherishes friendliness and mildness. The Choruses of the Women of Susa and that of the Jewish Women confirm these

[11] All translations into English of quotes from this play have been adapted from the Dutch translations given in this edition.

observations: Vasthi despised the king ("spreverat Regem", 218), which is the reason why she now reaps the bitter fruits of her arrogance ("Fructus amaros arrogantiae metit", 220), whereas Esther is praised for her sweetness ("suavitas", 240) and docility ("submissio", 241).

Philicinus has his characters frequently express themselves in monologues, which affords him the opportunity to sketch their thoughts and emotions in great detail. In her first speech in the play, at the beginning of the third act, Esther voices her feelings. She wonders what is to be expected after three days of praying and fasting which follow the publication of the decree in which her people are threatened with extinction. Even though she does not see any positive signs, it is her innocent trust ("credula", 638) that makes her heart feel optimistic about the future ("ut sim bono et magno in futurum pectore", 640). Trust in God is a major drive for all her thoughts and actions. In her prayer to God – this is an extension of the text as it is given in the Hebrew *Bible* and the Vulgate, only found in the Greek *Septuagint*[12] – she admits the guilt of her people having worshiped false gods, which is the reason why they deserve punishment. Yet it would be unjust, she adds, if a superstitious tribe, the Persians, would destroy God's own people and extinguish the glory of His temple ("atque gloriam temple Eliminare", 652-3). She therefore begs Him to give her faith and perseverance ("fiduciam, et constantiam", 659) and, so as to be able to persuade the king to come to her aid, to effuse gracefulness over her sweet lips ("Infunde gratiam et meis suadam labris", 660). Esther's frequent appeals to God to help her is another element in the play derived from the *Septuagint* version of the Book of Esther. Nicole Hochner (2010, 760) observes in this respect:

> when the persona of Esther is fashioned according to the Septuagint version of predestination, her distinctive features are often blurred as she seems merely to be carrying out a divine project.

Esther's modesty is demonstrated in various ways, not the least in how she regards her own position at the court of King Assuerus. Not once does she refer to herself as queen ("regina"), in contrast to the way Haman views his elevated place, referring to it as his royal dignity ("dignitas per regiae", 327). Indeed, Esther accepts only God as king, not unlike Mardochaeus's ideas, witness the words with which she opens her prayer to God: "Domine Deus, qui singularis noster es / Rex, destitutam omni me ope, adiuva tua" (642-3; God our Lord, being our only King, grant me, being devoid of all aid, Your support). Of course,

[12] Bloemendal and Groenland (2006, 228), annotating lines 642-80. See for the Greek text of Esther's prayer in the *Septuagint* and its English translation [Brenton], 1879, 657. In his play Philicinus made extensive use of this particular version of the biblical story.

she addresses Assuerus as king, yet she does so only because she sees in him almost a heavenly creature:

> Assuere rex, cui maximam
> Mortalium uni debeo reverentiam,
> Te ut conspicata sum, velut Dei angelum,
> Prae gloriae tuae amplitudine inhorrui.
> (785-8)
>
> [King Assuerus, the one and only mortal to whom I owe my deepest respect, when I saw you there, as an angel of God, the majesty of your glory made me tremble.]

What lesson did Philicinus wish his pupils to learn from the story of Esther? It is in the Chorus of Jewish Women at the end of the play that we find this simple advice: pride comes before the fall and virtue conquers all things. In their closing song, the Jewish Women consequently address themselves directly to the audience:

> Proin vos, quibus magnum dedit
> Vitæ necisque ius Deus,
> Ponite superbos spiritus,
> Virtutis artes discite.
> Proflate buccis turgidis,
> Fumos inanis gloriæ,
> Iræ merum amolimini,
> Ferociæ arma pellite.
> (1641-8)
>
> [This is why you, to whom God has given the supreme right of life and death, will have to lay down your haughty pride and learn the principles of virtue. You will have to puff out, with round cheeks, the fumes of vain glory, to remove unadulterated anger, to push away the weapons of ferocity.]

But more importantly, a steadfast faith and trust in God, accompanied by fasting, praying and wheeping prove to be essential in fending off tribulation, the *peroratio* teaches us.

3. The Hasselt Play of *Hester en Assverus*[13]

In the southern Low Countries the majority of rhetoricians chambers were

[13] See for a discussion of this play also Elsa Strietman's essay on the biblical plays in the Hasselt collection (Strietman 2021, 182-6).

located in the county of Flanders and in the duchy of Brabant. East of Brabant there were only a few towns with rhetoricians chambers, among them Hasselt, Tongeren, Sint-Truiden and Borgloon. Some are mentioned as early as 1495 (*De Akelei* [*The Columbine*] and *De Rozenkrans* [*The Rosary*], both in Sint-Truiden), whereas in Borgloon a chamber was established only after 1600. Hasselt had two chambers, *De Roode Roos* (*The Red Rose*) and *Sint-Anna* (*Saint-Anne*), the former being the town's principal chamber. It was first mentioned in archival sources in 1505.[14]

Little would have been known about *De Roode Roos* had not a manuscript survived containing fourteen plays, nine of which were copied out by a certain Rener Comans who began his work as a copyist on 2 March 1611. One of the plays in this collection deals with the history of Esther and Ahasuerus. When precisely it was written is unknown; it was performed, according to a note in a different hand from Comans's, on 22 September 1664. Yet in view of the fact that Comans started copying the plays in 1611, we may assume that *Hester en Assverus* dates back to sometime before c.1615.[15]

In this play the anonymous Hasselt playwright limits himself to the most essential parts in the story of Esther's liberation of the Jews. Without disclosing his plan to hold a magnificent feast in his palace, Assverus visits Vasthi who humbly receives him in her quarters. She thanks him for the great honour of inviting her to come to his quarters should he wish to do so. Yet when she is asked by Egeus and Dathan – the former a servant of the king, the latter one of Aman's confidants – to attend the king's feast she refuses, telling them that she is planning to have her own function with her ladies-in-waiting. She even claims it was the king himself who advised her to celebrate a party by herself:

> Vashti Gaet henen, gesellen, in uwen vreden
> en segt met seden den coninck wert
> – want syn mogenthyt soe hadt begeert –
> dat ick myn feeste alleen soude pleghen.
> (fol. 172*r*)

> [Vashti Go in peace, gentlemen, and mannerly tell the worthy king – since this was his majesty's wish – that I will celebrate my party by myself.]

[14] See for these details maps 1, 2, 3 and 6 in Van Bruaene 2008, (26, 52, 88 and 172), and her online "Repertorium van rederijkerskamers in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en Luik 1400-1650".

[15] In a number of cases Comans gives dates of performances himself. His oldest reference to a performance is 27 September 1565 but the majority relate to performances between 1587 and 1615. The most recent ones are found in connection with plays at the end of the collection, possibly coinciding with the year in which Comans finished his work. *Hester en Assverus* takes position eight in the order of plays.

Upon hearing this, the king feels thoroughly offended and gives the order to expel his wife from the palace.

After this relatively long sequence on Vasthi's disobedient behaviour, Mardocheus speaks to his niece Esther about the king's plan to search a new spouse. In a way, Esther's first appearance mirrors Vasthi's, because she too assures her uncle that she will obey his wishes:

> Hester Wel vader, allen u ordineren
> en u begeren sal ick volbringhen te goede.
> Ick geeff my gans tot uwen gemoede
> en doen als die vroede, dat u dunckt wesen goet.
> (fol. 175*v*)

> [Hester Well, father, I will fulfil all your commands and wishes to the best of my abilities, fully submitting myself to your mind, as a wise person doing everything you deem well.]

Mardocheus and Esther are then visited by Egeus, who invites her to come to the palace. Without any hesitation Esther humbly accepts. In her second appearance on stage, Esther is introduced to the king who instantaneously falls in love with her. Shortly after that, Aman is elevated to the second-highest position in the kingdom, so as to be able to fulfil the role of overseeing that everybody will obey the king's laws. He also expects that everybody will pay him respect by genuflecting. However, Mardocheus refuses to worship anyone but God, denying Aman this token of respect, as a result of which the latter reacts furiously. The man and his people need to be destroyed, thus reads Aman's advice to the king. Upon reading the newly issued law condemning all Jews, Mardocheus realizes that this is Aman's work. Dressed in sackcloth, Mardocheus comes to the palace where his laments are overheard by one of Esther's maidens who reports everything to the queen.[16] While informing Mardocheus about Esther's decision to observe a three-day fast, Atach (Hathach), one of Assverus's princes, praises her for her loyalty towards the Jews:

> O wat werdigher bloemen is Hester, ons vrouwe,
> die uut lieffden toont haer hertte getrouwe,
> soe dat men niet en vint
> haers gelycken die dit avontueren souwe.
> En dees suyver kersouwe, bedruct van rouwe,
> is daer toe gesint.
> (fol. 189*r*)

[16] The biblical sources, including the Hebrew Bible, have Hathach communicate Mordechai's complaints to Esther instead of one of her maidens.

> [Oh, what a worthy flower is Hester, our lady! Out of love she shows her loyal heart, so that one does not find her equal, who would dare this. And this pure, chosen woman, stricken with feelings of mourning, is ready to venture this.]

In her third appearance in the play, Esther prepares herself to visit the king. Without being officially admitted before Assverus' throne, she humbly invites him and Aman to a meal in her quarters. Enjoying Esther's meal and drinking claret, the king asks her about her deepest wish. She answers that she merely wishes to see her people protected, accusing Aman of planning to destroy them, upon which the king decides to punish him. The moment Assverus has withdrawn from her quarters, Aman begs Esther for mercy. While she is lying on her bed, he joins her there which she, understandably, interprets as an act of transgressive behaviour: "Ey, erch bloetsuyper en vrouwen crachtere!" ("Ay, you evil bloodsucker and rapist!", fol. 193*v*). Assverus finds Aman in *flagrante delicto*, which opens his eyes to the man's utter insidiousness. Aman even attempts to kill the king – a detail not found in any of the biblical sources – but Arbona (Harbona), one of the king's chamberlains, and Egeus stop him. The king decides to have Aman hanged from the same gallows he had prepared for Mardocheus. Before being hanged, Aman experiences a moment of anagnorisis (or rather, steps out of his role as a stage character) by addressing the audience, warning them not to follow his example. His final exhortation to them is to live a virtuous life by eschewing evil deeds. In her final appearance on stage, Esther reminds Assverus of Mardocheus's loyalty towards him by reporting Thares and Bagathan's intended assault, asking him, by way of reward, to put her uncle in Aman's place. This is a request Assverus gladly grants.[17] Egeus concludes with a short epilogue, expressing his wish that God and the Virgin Mary – yet without explicitly interpreting Esther (unlike Philicinus and Everaert) as her prefiguration – will bestow their grace upon us.

Throughout the play Esther demonstrates her modesty by humbly obeying the wishes of both her uncle and Assverus. When she needs to take action by visiting the king uninvited, she hesitates for a moment, but knowing that God is on her side she pursues her plan. Trust in a just cause, and even more so, trust in God leads to her heroic act of saving the Jews from extinction.[18]

[17] Perhaps because this matter is raised only here, the Hasselt author may have decided to skip the scene in which the king asks Aman's advice how to reward someone who has proved to be extremely loyal towards him and Aman's misunderstanding of this question, assuming that Assverus is thinking of him.

[18] Van den Daele and Van Veerdeghem (1899, 66) are relatively negative about the biblical characters, including Esther, in the Hasselt play collection: "True action and development, clashes of temperament and passion are found here equally seldom as

"Live your lives as brothers and sisters" reads Egeus's final advice to the spectators and God will bestow His grace on you as a result.

4. Berckmans' *Edissa*

Joris Frans Xaveer Berckmans, born in Lier, a town in the Southern Low Countries halfway between Antwerp and Mechelen, composed some forty plays for the local chamber of rhetoric of which he was a prominent member. In 1639 he is mentioned as a notary public and in 1669 he was one of the town's aldermen. He died on 7 June 1694.[19]

In 1649 Berckmans composed a play entitled *Edissa. Bly-eyndich Truer spel* (*Edissa. Happy-Ending Tragedy*). An alternative title on the first page of the manuscript reads *vande Coninghinne Esther* (*About Queen Hester*). In addition to this manuscript, kept at the Royal Library of Brussels, a synopsis of it, undated but presumably printed in 1649, has also been preserved.[20] Its titlepage mentions the date on which Berckmans's tragedy was performed: 2 June 1649. Furthermore, a handwritten note tells us that the play was staged on 9, 10 and 15 June 1760 as well. With a small number of corrections in a different hand, the play's manuscript attests to these later performances.

Esther's role in Berckmans's play is relatively modest. She seldom expresses herself in a way revealing her inner thoughts or deeper feelings. As can be expected of a play based on the *Septuagint* version of the Hebrew Bible, Berckmans depicts her (in a similar manner to Philicinus's play) rather as a tool in a story which, for the greater part, unfolds around her and in which she has little agency. Instead, it is the remarkable enactment of the history itself, frequently deviating from the biblical source, which makes this play particularly interesting.

After an introductory scene in which the allegorical *sinnekens* present themselves as schemers, Assuerus enters the stage in a melancholy mood; he realizes that greed causes mankind to crave for more goods than it really needs. In order to lift his spirits, Assuerus orders his courtiers to arrange a splendid feast at which he will proudly display his wife in all her beauty,

character study; moreover, it were illogical to demand this from our sixteenth-century moralizing plays", translation mine).

[19] See Frederiks and Van den Branden 1888-91: 55. On 2 February 1608 a certain "Georgius Berckmans" was baptized in Lier's church of Saint-Gommaar and on 2 June 1637 Joris Berckmans, more likely than not our man, married a certain Lisbeth van Everbroeck (See *Regesta Matrimonialia Ecclesiae D. Gummari Lyrae inchoata 17 Maij ao 1620*, fol. 90r, Brussels, State Archives of Belgium). The couple had eight children. After 1655 Joris may have married again, this time to Elisabeth Van der Haeghen or Verhaegen, with whom he had four more children.

[20] See for a digital edition of this synopsis, printed by Jacob Mesens in Antwerp,

ceremonially dressed and regally crowned. He orders one of his princes to command Vasthi to attend. On hearing this Vasthi bursts out:

> Hoe! Hij gebiedt? Wats dat, ben ick dan sijn slavinne?
> Gebieden? Neen, neen, neen! Ick ben een coninghinne
> die geen gebodt en ken. Dus seght hem dat ick niet
> ter feesten comen sal soo langh hij mij ghebiet.
> (fol. 4bis-*v*)
>
> [What! He commands? Well, well, am I his slave then? Command me? No, no, no! I am a queen who does not accept any orders. So tell him that I won't come to this party as long as he orders me to do so.]

Compared to Vasthi's relative gentleness in the Hasselt play, she is depicted here as extremely rude. When the king is informed that Vasthi refuses to attend his party, he is outraged and has her chased away. In the play Vasthi only has a paltry thirty-five lines of text, yet they suffice to show her inflexible character, as opposed to Esther's humility.

At the beginning of the second act Assuerus is shown hunting, a scene not found in any of the biblical sources. Overcome by sleep, he sees Vasthi in his dream crying out for mercy. Assuerus's courtiers advise him to look for a new wife who will help him forget Vasthi. Mardocheus, in his first appearance on stage, is also dreaming.[21] Reporting his dream to Esther, he says he saw a stream growing into a river, and a ferociously growling animal being devoured by another animal. He saw a large number of armed men as well, ready to kill innocent people. Yet, when the oppressed crowd cried for help, the river turned into a flash of lightening, destroying the armed men. Esther, asked by her uncle how to interpret this dream, soothes his mind by saying she is convinced that those who trust in God will not be harmed:

> Den Heer heeft in Sijn hant van allerhande goet.
> Tgen suer en bitter is, maeckt Hij wel saecht en soet.
> In den vuijttersten noot can Godt elck een versaden.
> Godt, voor die goede, is oneijndich in genaden.
>
> [In His hands the Lord carries all sorts of good things. All that is sour and bitter is turned into soft and sweet by Him. When in utter distress, He is able to satisfy each of us. For the good people He is infinitely merciful.]

https://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/Dutch/Ceneton/Facsimiles/BerckmansEdissa1649/ (Accessed 15 March 2023)

[21] Mardocheus's dream, a scene also reported in Philicinus's play, is an element borrowed from the *Septuagint* version of the *Book of Esther*. See Hochner 2010, 760.

A herald announces that all young virgins are being asked to present themselves to the king's court. The fairest of them will become Assuerus's wife and will be crowned queen. Esther pays heed to this invitation; as shown in a *tableau vivant* the king falls instantaneously in love with her. Then Esther is crowned queen. All those present rejoice in her election, among them Aman who – differently from the biblical sources and the other plays discussed so far – is rewarded by the king for his praise of Assuerus's bride. As vice-royal he will henceforth be the second in command in Persia. All inhabitants of Assuerus's realm will be required to curtsy when they see him passing.

At the beginning of act three Aman has been informed that Mardocheus refuses to bend his knee before him and so decides to destroy the entire community of Jews living in Persia. Once Mardocheus learns that the Jews have been condemned to be killed, he falls prey to feelings of despair. His thoughts are externalized through an allegorical character, named *Wanhope* ("Despair"), who tells him that long suffering can be averted by enduring the short pain of taking one's own life. Her words are countered by another allegorical character, *Deucht* ("Virtue"). Eventually Mardocheus, echoing Esther's conviction from act two, concludes that whoever trusts in God will earn His grace.

In front of the palace gates Mardocheus, dressed in sackcloth and his head strewn with ashes, informs one of Assuerus's princes that he is Esther's uncle, relating to him what predicament his people is expecting. Esther is then shown kneeling down in prayer begging God to have mercy on her people. She will pray, fast and stay awake for three nights, begging her people to do the same. At the beginning of act four the king assures Esther, who appears before Assuerus in great distress, that she will not be affected by the new law. She invites him and Aman to enjoy a meal at her quarters. Esther subsequently pleads with the king to save her people from annihilation. Once Assuerus learns that it is Aman who has threatened to kill the Jews, he orders that the man be hanged instead of Mardocheus, who had been previously condemned to hang because of his refusal to bow down before Aman. Aman desperately pleads for mercy with Esther, but she does not yield. A *tableau vivant* shows how he is executed. Mardocheus is rewarded by Assuerus and appointed as his second in command. A final *tableau vivant* shows Esther and Mardocheus celebrating their virtuously gained triumph, while the Jews persecute and kill their enemies.

What is Esther's place in the story enacted in this play? While speaking to Mardocheus, she restricts herself almost completely to telling him to trust in God. The first words she utters in this play – she asks him why he seems so distressed – already reflect this: "Den Godt van Abraham wil u altijt beraeden. / Hoe sijdij soo bedroeft?" ("Abraham's God wll always be with you. Why are you so sad", fol. 11*r*). A moment later she once more soothes

his mind by advising him:

> Betrout in Godt den Heer. Hij siet den dach van morgen.
> Die Godt bewaren wilt en sal geen quaet geschien.
> (fol. 12*r*)
>
> [Trust in the Lord God. He sees tomorrow's day. Whoever God wants to save, will not be harmed.]

As queen, Esther meets Assuerus only twice: when she invites him to attend a meal she has prepared for Aman and the king; and, subsequently, at her dinner table. Here she is the epitome of humility, merely asking whether she may live ("Of ic noch leven mach", fol. 34*r*) now that a decree has been issued announcing the death of all Jews in the country. It is only after the king has assured her that she need not be afraid that she asks the same favour for her people. Her penultimate appearance in the play shows her to be much stronger, when she refuses to pardon Aman for his wicked intent: "Die sond op sonde doen en de goede benijden / Mach een rechtveerdich heer met reden wel castijden" ("They who pile sin on sin and envy the righteous should be chastised, with good reason, by a just lord", fol. 35*r*). Even Aman's last words, "Bermhertich syn wel voecht een groote coninghin" ("Being merciful suits a great queen well", ibid.), do not soften her mood. The last lines of the play, pronounced by the Epilogue, contain a *captatio benevolentiae* addressed to the audience, excusing the local rhetoricians, who performed this play, for having made any possible mistakes. His ultimate advice with which the audience is sent home reads as follows:

> Den hooveerdigen mensch vergaet in eijgen quaet.
> Wel hem die deucht bemint en in Godts paden gaet.
>
> [The arrogant man perishes in his own evil. Blessed is he who loves virtue and follows God's paths.]

5. Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid*

In 1638 a new permanent theatre building was inaugurated in Amsterdam, the so-called *schouwburg*. In the same year, Nicolaas Fonteyn (c.1589-c.1667) published his *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid* (*Esther, or the Image of Obedience*). The dedicatory letter preceding the text of this play is dated 17 March 1637. By profession Fonteyn was a medical doctor and in 1644 he became a personal physician to the Archbishop of Cologne, Ferdinand of Bavaria (1577-1650). Apart from *Esther*, he also wrote medical books as well

as other dramas, among them *Aristobulus*, a play about the Judean king Juda.

Fonteyn's *Esther* does not include a scene showing Vasthi's refusal to attend Assuerus's party. Rather, at the play's beginning Mardochæus informs the audience that his niece has been inside the women's quarters of the palace for twelve months now, waiting for the moment when the king will choose his new wife. He describes her as a God-fearing and virtuous person, already in childhood, and as "De eerbaarst' die de Son heeft konnen oit bestralen" ("The most honourable the sun has ever been able to shine upon"; A5*r*). Referring to the subtitle of the play, he hopes that she will obey both mighty and humble people.

A prophetess, named Sophronia,[22] a character added to the story by Fonteyn, announces that Esther has been elected. And rightly so, she adds, for whoever loves God by living a virtuous life, will be awarded:

> 'T geen eer aan Vasthi bleek die Koninkx wil versmaat.
> Waar omse after land helaas! nu swerven gaat,
> . . .
> Maar Esther als volmaakt haar buyght heel tot de wetten,
> Gehoorsaamt wil, en woord van ons gevreesde Heer.
> (A5*v*)
>
> [Which once happened to Vasthi, who despised the king's wishes. Reason why she now – alas! – wanders around the country . . . But Esther, a perfect woman, fully observes the laws, obeying the will and the words of our feared Lord.]

Subsequently, while a tableau vivant is shown, Sophronia reports how Esther is being dressed as Assuerus's future queen by a Chorus of Virgins:

> Besiet hoe dat het choor der Maagden gaat vercieren
> Haar gout-gekrulde hayr, hoe dat haar frisse leen
> Met purper sijn bekleed. Hoe sy word aangebeen
> Van al den Edeldom van heynd, en ver gekomen.
> (A5*v*-A6*r*)

[22] "Canto Secondo" of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), in which the story of Sophronia and Olindo is told, may have served as the source where Fonteyn found the name of this prophetess. Comparable to the story of Esther, Tasso relates the adventures of a young and beautiful girl named Sophronia who managed to save her fellow Christians from being massacred, in this case by Muslims, by accusing herself of having stolen an image of the Virgin Mary from a mosque, where it had been placed by the sultan who had previously stolen it from one of the altars in a church. In his turn Sophronia's lover Olindo admits to having committed this crime himself. The two are condemned to be burnt at the stake but at the last moment they are saved by the warrior Clorinda. See Tasso 1957, 33-50.

[Behold how a Chorus of Virgins embellishes her golden locks, how her blossoming limbs are covered in purple garment. How she is venerated by the entire nobility, come hither from far and wide.]

Then Sophronia addresses Esther directly – whether or not Esther takes notice of her words is unclear – predicting that she will rescue the Jewish people, save Mardochæus from being hanged by Haman (who will end his life on the gallows himself) and the Jews will go free after having been threatened with extinction. The prophetess also informs Mardochæus that he will be elevated to a high position in Assuerus's empire as a reward for having reported the intentions of Thares and Bagatan to murder the king. On hearing Sophronia's prophecies Mardochæus remains sceptical: "'t Syn woorden, maarse myn / Hart niet ontroeren" ("These are words but they do not move my heart", A6*r*). Leaving nothing to be guessed at by the audience, with these prophecies the play unfolds exactly the way the prophetess (whose role is limited to this one scene) had foretold. In retrospect it may be strange to see Sophronia appear on stage, but the author may have decided to supplement his play with this oracular character in order to provide it with a Senecan flavour.

Assuerus sings Esther's praise, subjecting himself to her will: "Ik blijf uw' dienaar vrou, ghy sijt de Majesteyt. / In u so staat 't gebien, in u bestaet het rechten" ("I will remain your servant, my lady, you are Majesty. For you it is to order, you are the one who decides", A6*v*). On her part, Esther confirms her full submission to the king using words – the first ones spoken by her in this play – recalling those spoken by the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation: "Uw dienstmaaght is bereid. uw wille die geschiede" ("Your handmaiden is prepared. Thy will be done", A7*r*). Esther's obedience being the central point on which the action of the play focuses, the text also implicitly offers the interesting comparison between the Jews in exile and those who, for religious reasons, left the southern Low Countries after the Fall of Antwerp (1585). Then the Spanish-Habsburg rulers regained power, thus making it virtually impossible for the citizens to openly profess their Protestant faith. Mardochæus bewails the fate of the Jews who had to flee from Israel to escape the tyranny of the king ("den Tyrannij des Koninkx", B3*r*) in the following words:

O droevigh ongeval! O lieve Vaderlanden,
Hoe langh sult ghy nog sijn, en wijt van myn gescheen?
Hoort sonder u ik sterf, mits ghy myn sijt gemeen
Door ingeboren aart . . .
(B4*r*)

[Oh, sad misfortune! Oh, dear native countries, for how long will you remain separated from me? Hear me, without you I will die, since you are dear to me by innate disposition . . .]

Once Esther is informed of Haman's plans to destroy the Jewish people, and Mardochæus begs her to help him stop Haman's evil plan, she expresses her excitement in staccato-like verses:

> Mard. Ghy moet het doen Princes, of dood sijn al de Joon.
> Esther Hoe Mardochee dus? Mard. De Koningh heeft 't geboon.
> Esther Wat doch? Mard. Eerst mijn. Esther. En dan? Mard. Ons Joden om te brengen.
> Esther Door wien? Mard. Door Haman vrou, die met ons bloet sal plengen.
> (B6*v*).

> [Mard. You will have to do it, Princess, or else all Jews will die. / Esther How come, Mardochee? Mard. The king has ordered it. / Esther What? Mard. First me. Esther And then? Mard. To kill us, Jews. / Esther By whom? Mard. By Haman, my lady, who will spill our blood.]

Esther is shown to be extremely cautious, fearing Assuerus's wrath, not unlike the way she is portrayed in Philicinus's play. Thus, for example, when she prepares herself to enter the king's quarters to invite him and Aman for a meal:

> Ik tree, maar hoe? met schrik; mits myn komt in gedachten,
> Dat hy bevolen heeft aan laagh en hooghe wachten
> Wie binnens Kamers komt, en geen gena ontvanght
> Sijn Scepters, dat sijn lijf aan d'wil der Soljers hangt.
> (B7*r*)

> [I tread, but how? Fearful. For it dawns on me that he has ordered his guards, both the low and the grand ones, that, whoever enters his quarters, not receiving grace from his sceptre, his life will depend on the soldiers' mercy.]

She realises, however, that she has no reason for this feeling since the king is always most indulgent towards her.

When the king eventually convicts him, Haman implores Esther to have mercy. However, she does not even glance at him and remains silent. The play ends in three *tableaux vivants* depicting Mardochæus elevation; Haman's execution; and Esther with a Chorus of Jewish Women and their infants, thanking Assuerus who himself – according to the stanza explaining this scene to the audience – longs for peace.[23]

Esther's behaviour in Fonteyn's play resembles the way in which she is described in both Philicinus's play and in the Hasselt *Hester en Assverus*.

[23] In 1637, the year in which this play was composed, the Netherlands were still at war with the Spanish-Habsburg armies, until in 1648 the peace treaty of Münster made an end to the Eighty-Years' War.

Fonteyn, however, does not compare Esther to Vasthi, rather concentrates on Esther's obedience, as indicated in the play's subtitle. The beginning of the play already sets the tone for the audience, concerning how to view the character of Esther. Mardochæus is about to visit Esther in the women's quarters of the palace, awaiting the moment when she will be chosen as Assuerus's future spouse. His very first words describe Esther as follows:

> Dit is de twaalfde maand dat Esther heeft geseten,
> In't vrouw getimmer, ben nieusgierigh, om te weten
> Hoe oft met haar sal gaan, met haar! *die Gode vreest*
> En *deughdigh* van haar kindsche jaren is geweest . . .
>
> [This is the twelfth month that Esther has been sitting in the women's quarters, [I] am curious to find out how she is doing, she! *who fears God* and has been *virtuous* from childhood on . . . (emphasis mine)]

Fonteyn thereby entrusts his audience with the message that Esther's virtue and fear of God, as well as her trust in Him, will serve her as a permanent guide.

6. Conclusion

Compared with the three plays in the vernacular, the earlier neo-Latin play written by Philicinus is much more explicit in describing Esther as a person. Thus, the Chorus of Jewish Women describe her as sweet and docile, as opposed to the character of Vasthi who is depicted by the Chorus of Women of Susa as the epitome of arrogance. What is more, Esther is shown here to be a mediatrix – in all plays she is, implicitly or explicitly, compared with the Virgin Mary – between the Jewish people and the Persians, while at the same time being fully aware of the dangers she may bring upon herself.

The Hasselt rhetoricians' play, written in the vernacular, also compares the two women in their attitude towards the king, stressing Esther's loyalty towards Ahasuerus. Yet whereas Philicinus sees Vasthi as a vixen, the Hasselt playwright shows her softer side, almost condoning her decision to refuse Assverus's invitation to attend his party. After all, Vasthi says, it was the king himself (true or not?) who advised her to celebrate a party by herself. In the two Renaissance plays, written in the vernacular (by Berckmans and Fonteyn), Esther is described as a loyal queen to Assuerus, with her virtue beyond any doubt. However, Berckmans stages an impolite Vasthi who is downright rude in her behaviour towards one of Assuerus's princes.

In all plays Esther is depicted as an exemplary figure possessing modesty and great virtue; in the way she approaches the king she is extremely submissive, more often than not fearing his temper. Nowhere – and this is

highly interesting – is there any sign of an attempt by Assuerus/Assverus to dominate or oppress Esther, let alone threaten her with capital punishment for having approached him uninvited. The only person for whom Esther does not show any compassion is, understandably, Aman. All four playwrights seem to have delighted in creating such an evil character, contrasting him to a benign and utterly devout Esther. As does Mardoch(a)eus, she trusts in God, expecting that He will eventually save her people. Finally, it is important to note that in this way Esther mirrors Abraham in the earlier sixteenth-century rhetoricians' plays. For Abraham, much like Esther, demonstrates his blind faith in God by invariably obeying His commands. At the same time, Esther ultimately personifies a heroine liberating her people from oppression and eventually releasing them from captivity. As such she resembles the characters of David and Joseph in Renaissance Low Countries drama.[24]

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