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Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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Abstract

The *Book of Esther* was extremely popular as a dramatic subject in the German speaking countries in sixteenth and early seventeenth century, especially in Protestant regions. The several feasts mentioned in the biblical book gave the opportunity to draw connecting links between festive contexts of the performances of these plays, and to consider and display the effect of performative presentations. The chapter chooses three out of twenty preserved texts (by Valten Voith, Hans Sachs, and Jos Murer) and analyzes the significance of the feast and banquet scenes in these plays. These scenes reveal to be essential for the political, religious, and moral interpretation of the biblical book in each play.

Keywords: Valten Voith; Hans Sachs; Jos Murer; feast; performance; politics; Protestantism; groups

1. Introduction

When in 1536 the Meistersinger Valten Voith staged *Ein seer schön, lieblich, nützlich und tröstlich Spiel, aus der heiligen schrifft und dem buch Esther* at Magdeburg, he could not imagine how popular the topic would become in German Early modern drama. In the same year as Voith, Nuremberg's famous poet, *Meistersinger*, and playwright Hans Sachs finished his *Comedia. Die gantze hystori der Hester*. Sachs was fascinated by the topic and wrote two plays (Sachs 1536 and 1559) and four *Meisterlieder* about the *Book of Esther*, dated between 1529 and 1555 (Brunner 1994-2002, S/334, S/977, S/1337, S/4631). Both Lutheran authors disregarded Martin Luther's ambiguous assessment concerning the book, which he criticizes as overly Jewish (Luther 1533-1912, 208) while generally praising Esther and Mardachai as positive examples (see Kalimi 2019; Washof 2007, 119). In 1543, the Swabian Lutheran Theologian Johannes Brenz published a commentary on the Book of Esther, stressing its exemplary character (Brenz 1543).[1] In the same year, Thomas Kirchmaier

[1] Johannes Spangenberg published a German translation of it in 1551, see Washof 2007, 120f.

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alias Naogeorg, a Protestant Priest in Kahla/Saale, with close connections to the Elector's court in Saxony (Janning 2015, 564), published a Latin drama *Hamanus*, which was extremely influential in the German speaking countries.[2] Until 1627, at least twenty German and Latin language Esther dramas were written in the German speaking countries (Schwartz 1894; Washof 2007, 122f.), most of them either rewriting Naogeorg's or Sachs's plays, or Andreas Pfeilschmidt's *Esther*, staged at Korbach in 1555 (Fasbender 2016). Most German dramatizations of the Esther story present it from a Lutheran perspective (Wolffgang Kuntzel, Jena, 1564; Johannes Mercurius and Johannes Postius, Heidelberg, c. 1570; Georg Mauricius, Leipzig, 1607; Damian Lindtner, s.l., 1607; Marcus Pfeffer, Brunswick, 1621) or a Reformed perspective (Jos Murer, Zurich, 1567; *Berner Hester*, 1567; Christoph Thomas Walliser, Strasbourg, 1568; Hermann Fabronius, Kassel, 1600; Caspar Wolf, Zurich, 1601).[3] We also know of three Roman Catholic plays (anonymous Jesuit drama, Munich, 1576-9; Johannes Fridolin Lautenschlager, Fribourg, 1587; Joseph Baumann, Ingolstadt, 1627) plus the scene about Judith and Esther added to the Catholic *Lucerne Easter Play* in 1597, and a play by the English Comedians, printed in German language in 1620.

Washof notes three general tendencies of German Esther plays: the moralization of the figure of Esther as an exemplary wife, the critical depiction of court politics or moralization of the king, and the typological interpretation of Esther as *typus Mariae* (Washof 2007, 126-39). A further noteworthy tendency is confessional polemics – though Schwartz (1894) denies it for most plays. Little attention has yet been given to the description of feasts in these plays, even though the biblical plot describing four banquets and the foundation of the feast of Purim could suggest it. In the following, I will demonstrate the importance given to the festival scenes analysing three exemplary plays: the two earliest German plays, by Valten Voith and Hans Sachs, and the earliest Swiss play, by Jos Murer.

2. The King's Banquet: Allegory, Parable or Mirror

The 1537 print of Valten Voith's *Esther* is dated 15 May 1536, fourty-three years after the Jews had been expelled from town (Rogge 2002, 46). Voith, who had studied in Wittenberg and was employed by the city of Magdeburg's tax office by 1541 (Seidel 2017), dedicates the print to Georg Major. He claims that

[2] For a discussion of its confessional, political or moral orientation that might have influenced its reception see Schwartz 1894, 96; Michael 1984, 85; Könneker 1992, 143; Washof 2007, 132; Dietl 2023.

[3] For a reflection why Esther was especially popular in Protestant drama, see Lehnardt 2021, 20f.

Major, director of the gymnasium of Magdeburg, greatly supported theatre performances (Holstein 1884, 148). The tradition of school plays seems to have started during his period of office, with the performance of Joachim Greff's *Jacob* in 1534 (Nahrendorf 2015, 345). Voith claims to contribute to it, inspired by the reaction of a pious woman among the spectators in 1534. As Voith explains, the woman wished to see more performances of biblical plays, and especially valuated the story of Esther, due to the exemplarity of the female hero (Holstein 1884, 148). Indeed, the prologue of his play supports the reading of the text as a presentation of exemplary female – and male – behavior (Voith 1537, 77-128). Thereby, however, it closely links moral and religious instruction, reacting to a situation when "God's word is disrespected" in many places ("man aber Gottes wort / veracht", 11f.). The play intends to display the difference between the two queens, of whom only one "has God's word" (59) and therefore enjoys God's support. It also wants to confirm men that "God's word grants you power and strength" ("Gottes wort gibt euch sterck und macht", 120). The prologue ends with a variation of the Lutheran motto *verbum Domini manet in aeternum*, here: "His name will never cease" ("Sein nam auch ewig nicht vergeht", 130), and the epilogue ends with a variation of the Lutheran hymn, "Keep us, Lord, faithful to your word" (1563f.). These near-citations mark the play as clearly Lutheran.

We do not know anything about the concrete context, timing or space of its performance. Holstein (1884, 145f.) refers to Johann Baumgart, who in 1561 claimed that future performances of the school in Magdeburg should, because they have become so popular, be done in public, open air. These words suggest that earlier performances, including Voith's *Esther*, took place indoors, possibly in the school's aula or inner courtyard. In 1553, the headmaster of the Magdeburg gymnasium Abdias Prätorius fixed the rules of the school, expanding and codifying the earlier rules established by Major (Nahrendorf 2015, 94). According to the new rules, German language plays had to be staged on Sunday Septuagesimae (Nahrendorf 2015, 100), i.e. at the beginning of the carnival time, 70 days before Easter. If the rule had already been in use in 1536 and if the date of the dedication is later than the date of the staging, the performance of Voith's *Esther* took place on 13 February, in a festive atmosphere. An indoor performance might be more plausible at that time of the year. In general, school performances serve the presentation of pupils' rhetoric skills, or, according to Prätorius, their *iusta audacia* (Nahrendorf 2015, 99), and of the common moral and religious conviction (344), here obviously the Lutheran faith as a matter of identification for the school.

The play starts with Ahasveros's self-presentation as a famous king, who has been ruling over 127 countries for the third year ("das dritte jar", 139; *Esther* 1:3). He plans a feast celebrating the anniversary of his rule,

Das man auch sehe mein herligkeit,
Ein mahl zu machen bin ich bereit
Allen mein Fürsten und Knechten,
Gwaltigen inn Persen und Meden,
Den reichthum meines königreich
Las ich sehen mit pracht, desgleich
Nie ist gehort, wie ich euch sag,
Sol wehren hundert achtzig tag.
(Voith 1537, 141-8)

[In order to expose my glory, I am willing to organize a meal for all my princes and vassals, who have power in Persia and Media. I will also in splendour display the wealth of my kingdom, which is incomparable with anything people have heard of yet – I tell you. The feast will last 180 days.]

Voith strictly follows the Bible (Esther 1:1-4), but stresses that the king's wealth and power are hitherto unheard. The formula "I tell you" (147), addressing the audience, could either serve as an extrapolation of his pride, or as a confirmation of his true glory. After the 180 days of courtly feast, the feast is expanded to the simple people, who are invited to eat and drink as much as they wish in the inner courtyard of the castle (149-68; *Esther* 1:5-8). Here again, Ahasveros asks the audience to listen to him (165) and realize his generosity. The audience obviously should identify with the invited guests; the courtyard could reflect the hall where the performance took place, celebrating the third year of school performances in Magdeburg. The audience clearly is part of the feast and could also participate in the king's pride and joy.

Queen Vasthi's parallel feast for the women at court, which is also mentioned in the Bible (Esther 1:9), appears as a concurring event and an expression of female pride:

Das jeder spür und merck dabey,
Ich nicht geringer denn mein man sey.
Ich hab so wol als er gewalt,
Allzeit zu thun, was mir gefalt.
(173-6)

[So that everybody will see and realize that I am not inferior to my husband and that I have the same power as he has, to always do as it pleases me.]

When the king, after seven days of feasting with the "people", claims that his company is now merry enough to see the queen (184-96, *Esther* 1:10f.) – Voith adds that the cheerfulness comes from the wine (185) – the conflict between the joyous king and the haughty queen is unavoidable. "The king may well be merry without me" ("Der König on mich mag frölich sein", 210), she explains,

and the women have enough wine to drink (225f.). She does not care about the king's will, and does whatever pleases her ("Ich thu doch itzt, was mir gefelt", 235). The more intensive the servants admonish her to follow the king's order, the more decided she is to resist and claims that she does not fear him. She mocks the servants as prophets (242), who think that they could predict her future hardship. Her refusal to come abruptly ends the feast. The message that Vasthi "disrespects the king's word" ("veracht des Königes wort", 264), and even more, that she laughs at his word (289f.) enrages the king. Ahasveros has to expel her in order to avoid that other women could follow her example (326-32, *Esther* 1:20).

Reflecting his own deed, the king realizes that God has the power to raise and to degrade men (399f.). Vasthi has justly been punished, because "she has indeed openly committed a sin, against God" ("Sie hat gsündiget, das ist war, / Wider Gott und mich offenbar", 403f.). Her "sin" consisted of disrespecting the "word" of the lord. Since God's "word" has already been stressed as a key notion of the play's message in the prologue, the king's identification of his penalty with God's punishment suggests an allegorical or typological reading of the king as representing God. The feast presenting his glory would thus not be a presentation of human pride, but a just performance of his perfection. The epilogue finally articulates such an interpretation of the feast:

> Als nu die mahlzeit war bereit,
> Gefordert wert an unterscheit
> Ein ider, wer nu komen wil,
> Doch sünderlich das volck, ich zil,
> Das sich Gott allzeit hat erwelt,
> Die Jüden hier auf dieser welt.
> . . .
> Mit glauben sie das fassen nicht,
> Sunder meinens bald zurlangen
> Alles durch ihr herlich prangen
> Der eusserlichen werck und krafft,
> Ceremonien der Jüdenschafft,
> Dorzu sie stoltz und prechtig ist,
> Vorachtet Gott zu aller frist,
> Dorzu sein wort, das herlich mahl,
> Derhalb sie kompt inn ewig qual,
> Wie hie die soltze Köngin thut.
> O mensch, hut dich vor ubermut
> Und auch allzeit vor eigen wil
> (1368-87)

> [When the meal was prepared, people were invited without any difference, everybody, whoever liked to come, but especially the people, I tell you, that

> God had always chosen as his own in this world: the Jews . . . They do not accept it in faith, but think they can gain everything by their magnificent splendour, their outward works and deeds, the Jewish ceremonies. In addition, they are proud and arrogant, and they always despise God, his word, and the supper of the Lord. Therefore, they will be punished eternally, likewise as it happens to the haughty queen here. Mankind, always refrain from pride and from stubbornness!]

Here, Voith follows the *Glossa ordinaria*, reading Ahasveros's feast as a parallel to the parable of the royal wedding in *Matthew* 22:1-14, and as a prefiguration of Christ's Last Supper (*Biblia* 1481, 180*v*). With Brenz's commentary (1543) this kind of typological reading of the *Book of Esther* disappeared from Protestant literature. Voith's play, however, by far does not support pre-Reformation theology. Stressing the "word" of the lord that Vasthi, i.e. the Jews disrespect(s) (264-89, 1407), and underlining the Jews' "justification by their own deeds" ("eigen werck gerechtigkeit", 1404), Voith transfers the Lutheran objection against the Roman Catholic church onto the Jews, and identifies the two "old confessions". They do not listen to the Lords' prophets, who are represented by the seven servants (1406), and who in Protestant understanding include the contemporary prophet Martin Luther.

In Voith's drama thus the king's meal, where he spends wine and reveals his glory to everybody who is willing to follow his word, including the audience, celebrating the visible success of the Lutheran school, carries the main confessional message of the play. The Protestant audience celebrates itself as an in-group. There is no chance to identify with the disobedient ones who refuse to listen to the Lord's word. Turning the story of Esther, which Luther regarded as overtly Jewish into an anti-Jewish parable, and suggesting a parallel between the Jews with the Catholics, Voith could suggest that the Catholics should be expelled from the Imperial City Magdeburg in the same way as the Jews had been done forty-three years ago. The feast on stage or the festive event of the performance could serve as a persuasive act of self-confirmation in Protestant faith, listening to the "word".

In this respect, the Esther play by Hans Sachs is rather different. Here, Ahasveros's feast does not suggest a confessional, but rather a political interpretation. Hans Sachs's *Comedia* was finished on 8 October 1536, a week after the Lutheran princes had signed the renewed Treaty of Schmalkalden, defending Lutheran Protestantism against the emperor's politics, excluding countries of the Swiss Reform (ThHStAW, 1722). Negotiations for a separate treaty of the Protestant Imperial Cities failed, not at least due to Charles V's threats that he would punish the disloyalty of the Imperial Cities (Lau 2022, 241). Several cities, including Magdeburg, joined the princes' treaty (Fabian 1960, 20). Nuremberg, however, kept warning the others, and finally did not

sign the document, fearing both political and economic consequences of a conflict with the emperor (Lau 2022, 243-5), and claimed that according to Lutheran teaching there is no justification for a violent resistance against the emperor (Schmidt 1989, 36). Sachs's choice of the topic of Esther, discussing the proper ways of defending the people's religion, might be a reaction to these recent developments in German confessional history.

Again, the direct circumstances of the performance are not known. Sachs's comedies and tragedies seem to be written for a simple indoor stage. The secularised Church of St Martha in Nuremberg is only documented as site of *Meistersinger* song performances from 1578 (Dehnert 2017, 120), and as a requested site for play performances in 1560 and 1561 (Holzberg/Brunner 2020, 976 and 988). In the 1530s, the *Meistersinger* had their song contests in the hospital of the Holy Spirit, which also served as the treasure house of the empire (Dehnert 2017, 120). The play could have possibly be staged there.

The opening words of Sachs's herald clearly indicate that the matters treated in the following directly concern the audience. He welcomes the noble assembly at Ahasveros's hall in Susan: "God has rightly assembled you" ("Gott hat euch wol zusamen bracht", 111, 8). His majesty the king has invited the highest esteemed princes to come "here to the royal hall" ("her in den köstlichen sal", 111, 18). Using deictica he indicates that the royal hall should be identified with the room in which Sachs's play was staged. There is no distinction between the feast for the nobility and the feast for the simple people; all the audience rather seems to be treated as noblemen. When the king enters, he invites his loyal vassals ("getrewen", 111, 26), well including the audience, to join him in the feast which, after the meal will include a dance and a knightly combat (112, 3). Obviously, this is not a biblical event, but rather a contemporary courtly feast, similar to those organized on the events of the emperor's visits to the Nuremberg, which were well familiar to the audience. The focus is not on the meal with merry wine drinking, but rather on the performative aspects of the royal celebration. As in the biblical book, the feast's purpose is celebrating the king's glory, whose kingdom reaches from India to "Ethiopia" (111, 12f.). Unlike Voith, Sachs does not follow Luther's translation, who has "von India bis an Moren" (Luther 1534, 207*v*), but the *Vulgata*. Using the traditional proper names of the countries Sachs might remind his audience of the fact that Ahasveros's empire covered similar extensions as the Hapsburg Empire under the rule of Charles V, whose crown and treasure was kept in Nuremberg, possibly in the same building where the performance took place.

> Got hat mir geben gwalt und ehr
> Und reichthumb wie der sand am meer,
> Darzu das allerschönest weib,

> Englisch gegliedmasirt von leib,
> In schön fürtreffend alle frawen
> (112, 18-22)
>
> [God has given me power and honour, and immeasurable wealth, and the most beautiful wife, with an angelic body, who surpasses all women in beauty.]

Against the biblical source, the beauty of his wife is an essential part of the king's pride, which takes more lines in his self-description than his power and wealth. The beautiful queen certainly is a topos in courtly literature, confirming a ruler's perfection. During the feast, the king does not send seven, but only two servants and the fool to the queen. Vasti is not present on stage; we only hear about her refusal to come, and that she has many women around her. The fool gives a short and very explicit explanation of her reaction: "She doesn't care at all about you, like disobedient women do" ("Umb dich gebs nit ein byren-stil, / Nach unghorsamer weyber sitt", 113, 10f.). Her disobedience is a threat both to the feast's purpose and to societal order, because it could kindle a general revolt (113, 26-8). The empire is in disorder, until the king has found a new queen.

The whole scene is extremely short; Sachs expanded it in his later version of the play (Sachs 1559, 87-96). Here, however, the brevity has a powerful effect, because all the weight remains on the strict refusal of the queen and the affront to the king. There is no mention of a sin, of God's justice, or of the "word" of the lord. In the epilogue, Vasti is interpreted as a warning example for women who should obey their husbands (131, 32-132, 4). We do not find any suggestion of an allegorical or typological meaning of the figure or the meal. The merely didactic scene rather serves as a prologue to the main part of the play, displaying the fragile character of court celebrations, which are designed to theatrically expose the king's power, but can so easily be broken. A disturbed feast could reveal that the king's authority is at disposition.

Both Voith and Sachs avoid to describe the wedding between Ahasveros and Esther, which could quickly correct the image of the ungrateful wife and people (Voith) or of the endangered authority of the king (Sachs). Both plays rather follow the Bible and only briefly note that the king organized a feast and displayed his generosity (Esther 2:18; Voith 1537, 587-94; Sachs 1536, 117, 35f.). Thereby they keep the tension until the decisive banquets that expose Esther as a great director of history.

3. The Queen's Banquets: Purposeful Performance

Jos Murer's *Hester* does not depict the first two feasts at all. Its main emphasis is on Queen Esther's banquet(s): According to the biblical account, Esther

invites Ahasveros and Haman twice for a banquet until she dares to ask her husband for grace for her people whom Haman intends to destroy (Esther 5-7). Murer unites the two banquets to one single event, which he elaborates broadly, glancing to the circumstances under which his play was presented: Murer, glass painter and dramatist at Winterthur and Zurich, was asked to contribute to the wedding of Heinrich Krieg von Bellikon, a patrician from Zurich, 11 February 1567. Based on the Zurich Bible, Pfeilschmidt and Naogeorg (Schiendorfer 2015, 409), he designed a play that, apt to a wedding ceremony, refrains from any critique against women. As a play dedicated to a nobleman with leading influence in town, it rather focusses the question of good government and vituperates any misuse of power, both in government, in the city council, and in juridical courts (Murer 1567, 1259-61).

After the prologues by the fool (who stresses the fact that the time of performance was the time of carnival), by a herald (who dedicates the play to the bride and bridegroom), and by the argumentator (who tells the contents of the whole book of Esther, including the story of Vasthi), the action begins with the announcement of the king's mandate. Everybody should honour Haman, the new reeve, with genuflection. Just four years earlier, a re-print of the old play of Wilhelm Tell had been published in Zurich. After the prologues it starts with the emperor's reeve Gessler announcing that everybody should bow in front of his hat (*Tellenspiel* 1563, C*v*). Tell's resistance against the emperor's reeve had developed to a foundation myth of the Swiss Confederation. Starting a play with a call for subjugation under a king's reeve would clearly secure a Swiss audience's sympathy for the hero resisting that call. Thus Mardachai, Esther's foster father, could appear as a second Wilhelm Tell, Haman as a second Gessler, and the Jews as a mirror of the Swiss.

When Queen Esther has prepared the banquet for Haman and her Husband, Haman does not only have to be reminded of the banquet (Esther 6:14), but after he has had to honour Mardachai (Esther 6:10f.), he does not want to go to the banquet anymore and seems to have a premonition about its outcome. He pretends to be sick (763) and claims that does not want to merry but rather stay at home (766). His resistance against the invitation to the feast very much resembles the traditional depiction of Vasthi's refusal, and the messenger's warning that the king will not show any grace if he refuses to come is similarly clear (769-73).

In Murer's play, Esther's banquet is not a private invitation. The cook's wife rather regards it as a major courtly event: "Whenever we have many guests at court" ("So offt man zhoff vil gest han wil", 778), she complains, her husband is drunk and lets her do all the work. A trumpet signalling the beginning of the banquet finally clearly marks its public character (820a), and the queen appears as the director of a well-planned manipulating event. At its opening, she falls on her knees to welcome the king (830b), and thanks

him for his grace to come to her "poor maid" (829). She thereby suggests to the king that he is in control of the banquet and the events to come, which he certainly is not. Esther's servant Hetach now informs the king and asks for his permission that his daughters have been asked to dance before the dinner, for the king's delight ("mit inen sond ir üch ergetzen", 837). The motif of the king's daughter(s) dancing at table before the queen articulates her plea certainly alludes to the story of John the Baptist; Ahasveros is parallelized with King Herod, celebrating himself, not knowing how much his wife and his daughter(s) manipulate him. Here, however, the audience knows and expects that it is not a saint who will come to death, but a tyrant.

The king quickly agrees to join the dance, with the queen. A dance on stage, performed during a wedding, with the queen and the king leading the dance, could well have integrative potential to the audience. Here, the king, however, asks for a Chaldean dance (836), which is remarkably different from any contemporary courtly dance, and is normally danced in a circle. In medieval and early modern literature, circular dances are often connoted as devilish or as dances of death (Dietl 2010, 31). Indeed, once the dance has started, two devils appear on stage and rejoice: "The dance is not totally in vain for us, because we have a candidate in this round dance" ("Der tantz ist uns nit gar vergeben / Wir hand ouch einen an dem reyen", 848f.). They are sure that he will soon join them, and happily return to hell (852-4a). The devils make clear that the dance is not critical as such (the wedding guests might feel relieved), but the connotation of a devilish dance or dance of death only applies to one person – to Haman.

Now Hetach leads the king and the queen to the table, as well as Haman, and invites all the others to take any seat they please ("Ein yeder sitze wies im gfelt", 860). The festive audience again might feel invited to join the festive meal – though knowing that one of the banqueting people will soon come to death. The king's words soon remind of the king's banquet at the beginning of the *Book of Esther*, leading to Vasthi's downfall. Ahasveros himself points at the difference between the two feasts:

> Drumb ich dich nit unghorsam nenn
> Wie Vasthin gsyn uß stoltzem můt
> Das kompt ir niemermer zů gůt
> Kein platz in minem rych sy hatt
> Hester du bist an irer statt
> Ghorsam erzeig dich wie bißhar
> So wirt min gnad dir offenbar
> (864-70)
>
> [Therefore, I do not call you disobedient, as Vasthi was in all her pride. She will never profit from it. There is no place for her in my kingdom. Esther, you

replace her. Remain obedient as you have been so far, and you will experience my grace.]

When Esther insures him of her obedience, he expresses his love to her, and he offers her his cup of wine with the words: "With this cup accept my heart" ("Mit disem gschir empfach min hertz", 889). Possible associations of the Lord's Supper are quickly wiped away when he promises to love her all his life, and offers her a ring (895f.). Esther in turn promises her loyalty and offers a pledge for it – obviously a ring as well (899f.). This is a wedding promise, far too late in the plot of the *Book of Esther*, but well fitting for the situation of the performance. For the wedding guests watching the play, the borderlines between performance and the actual feast dissolve. When the king now asks everybody to be merry and drink wine (902), the audience might well feel addressed. All drink, except for Haman. The fool is happy to drink his wine instead (912f.). With his refusal to drink, Haman singles himself out of the feast – and of the wedding community around, who from the very beginning had no sympathy with him.

While the minstrels sing and try to strengthen the group's cheerfulness (921-6), instructed by Esther, she, the director of the whole event, takes the chance to leave the room and to pray to the Lord. She explains and excuses her luxurious outfit as an adaptation to the court's customs, which should not be understood as an expression of her pride (942-5). It rather becomes visible as a clever costuming for a purposeful performance.

After further merry feasting finally the king asks for Esther's request (978-84), and she carefully explains what her desire is. The servants have to calm down Ahasveros's raging wrath when he hears about the Haman's "treason" ("verrätterey", 1005). When Haman, after his unsuccessful attempt to ask Esther for grace, the feast's purpose is fulfilled, and may end. Esther's personnel removes the tables (1070b).

Even though Murer does not depict Vasthi's pride and repudiation, Haman's disloyalty clearly reflects it: He refuses to celebrate with the king, since he is aware of his own sin. The broadly extended feast illustrates the difference between the ideal loving couple, the loyal members of court who join the celebration, and the traitor whose pride and misuse of his power must fall – welcomed by the devils. The feast is openly shown as a purposeful performance organized and directed by Esther. It leads the king's and the guests' emotions and thereby mirrors both the feast during which the performance takes place and the performance of the play itself. The feast and the play illustrate the values of loyalty and the idea of a perfectly functioning society – grounded on loyalty to God. The very controlled directing figure of Esther thereby opens the sight onto the meta-level of the play, reflecting the function of performative acts such as feasts, or theatre.

In contrary to Murer, Voith mentions both of Esther's banquets. He refers to the first meal briefly (984-1004 and 1030-2), while he slightly elaborates the second banquet. As the turning point of the dramatic action it is placed at the beginning of Act 5. Haman and the king encourage each other to drink more wine. "Drink for having God's everlasting blessing" ("Trinckt, das Gott gesegen stetiglich", 1130), Haman asks the king, nearly quoting the words of the Eucharist. As in the opening royal banquet, Voith here again alludes to the *Glossa ordinaria*'s interpretation of the scene, were we can read:

> Prandium praesens tempus ecclesię designat. cęna autem ęternum et vltimum conuiuium. Unde. Malis separatis in perpetuum lętantur boni.
> (*Biblia* 1481, 183*v*)
>
> [The meal designates the present time of the church, but the banquet means the eternal and ultimate feast, where, when the evil will be expelled, the good will everlastingly rejoice.]

Haman does not realize that the second invitation differs from the first (the prandium) and that he has now entered the ultimate banquet. The epilogue interprets Haman as the "Jewish people of the Old Testament" ("Jüdensch[e] volck der alten eh", 1450), who are proud of their service, which is superior to the cult of the pagan people (1451f.). Here again, the Jews seem to stand for the Catholic Church and its high valuation of the Mass. Haman, who in Act 4 expects everybody to greet him with genuflection, rather seems to represent the pope than the Jewish people. Both 'old churches' are surprised by the sudden approach of the Last Judgement, which conceals their end.

The merry atmosphere of the banquet quickly dissolves, when Esther reveals Haman's plans of a genocide. When the king leaves the room, the banquet ends, and when he returns and sees Haman pressuring Esther to help him, Ahasveros has Haman arrested – and immediately sentenced to death. Very quickly the idea of handling God's grace with wine has revealed to be an illusion. Esther's banquet mirrors the royal banquet in Act 1. Both end quickly when the king learns about the disloyalty of his closest surrounding. In both cases, he reveals to be a strict and just judge. The audience participating in the feasts – as invited guests, or as secret spectators, experience the lord's authority, which is for their own protection, since he protects the "true confession".

Likewise Murer, Hans Sachs reduces Esther's two invitations to one. He takes care to underline the differences between the king's feast in act I and Esther's banquet in Act 3. When Esther brings her invitation forward, the fool's comment is remarkable:

> Essen, drincken und panckatirn
> Lob ich für rennen und thrunirn,

> Für dantzen und für sayten-spil.
> Der keines frewet mich als vil.
> (123, 10-13)
>
> [Eating, drinking, and banquetting I clearly prefer to races and tournaments, to dancing and music. None of these activities pleases me as much.]

With this comment, the fool makes clear that Esther's banquet is not a public court festival. Hans Sachs contrasts the music and the public performative character of the king's feast with the silent, rather private meal. The queen does not want to present her glory; there is no risk that she could repeat Vasthi's fault. On the other hand, Sachs stresses Esther's care for an adequate noble setting. She asks her maidens to prepare the hall properly (125, 28-35). The atmosphere suggests a courtly perfection, not directed towards a public performance, but as an expression of inner value. The king immediately reacts to it, praising his beautiful wife: "I glorify your praise above that of all women" ("Dein lob für alle weib ich krön", 126, 5), and asking her directly for her wishes. There is no time to start a banquet, or to drink wine. When Ahasveros hears about Haman's plans, he angrily leaves the room, returns and finds Hamon kneeling in front of Esther, has him arrested and quickly sentences him to death. The king remains in the same room, gives Haman's house and possessions to Esther, and when Mardachai enters, transfers Haman's position to him, and finally he allows Esther and Mardachai to change Haman' mandate. Since other than in Voith's or Murer's plays the king remains in Esther's festively decorated room, the feast is not interrupted, but it is transferred into a different kind of feast, without the banquet, but worthwhile celebrating.

In Sachs's play, the king's interrupted feast in Ahasveros's rooms demonstrates the broken authority of the king, which fails to be convincingly performed in front of the masses. The action in Esther's rooms in the contrary reveals a perfect cooperation between queen and king, which starts as a private event, illustrating the queen's inner perfection. It manages to reveal hidden intrigues, and communication problems between the king and his reeve, and ends with public acts of justice and the announcement of a new rule. Here, the king advances to an exemplary ruler that the epilogue praises worth to be remembered in historical writing (133, 8). If the first act was read as an allusion to the contemporary weakness of the emperor, the last act could communicate the hope of the emperor's conversion and a new form of politics. The audience as "secret observers" of the private acts in Esther's rooms could proof that this kind of hope wasn't totally illusory. Esther, who has organized the private performance might reveal how effective theatre could be.

4. The Feast of the People

In Jos Murer's play there is no clear reference to Purim or to any other feast that could surpass the banquet presented on stage and mirroring the wedding feast. When the king allows Mardachai to change Haman's mandate, and gives permission that the Jews take revenge on their enemies (1227f.), Mardachai praises him and promises: "We will always thank you for that" ("Das söllend wir zů allen tagen / In ewigkeit dir danck drumb sagen", 1241f.). The Jews, however, do not establish any feast for doing so. This is only consequent considering Murer's interpretation of Haman as any kind of politician misusing his power, or as an unjust reeve reflecting Gessler. The Swiss have their own feast for celebrating their freedom from tyranny. There is no interest in the Jewish feast.

Voith's anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic interpretation would not concord with the establishment of a Jewish feast either. His play ends with the triumphing records of the killing of three hundred enemies in town (1315), and 75,000 enemies in the whole kingdom (1320f.). Mardachai asks Ahasveros to have the events recorded in his chronicle (1325) and to set a day of memorial:

> Das sie gedechten dieser tagen,
> Dorinne sie frewdt empfangen haben,
> Yhr schmertzen und leit ist gar dohin,
> Des müssen sie stetz frölich sein.
> Ein geb dem andern sein geschenckt,
> an diesem tag wenn er gedenckt,
> Und halten sie inn guter acht,
> Esther hat sie zu rüge bracht.
> Des dancken wir dem König schon,
> Zu erst doch Gott im hochsten Thron,
> Hat kein gerechten nie vorlassen,
> Mit lieb und glaub die ihn fassen.
> (1327-38)
>
> [That they may remember these days, in which they have received joy. Their pain and suffering in totally gone. They have to be happy about it forever. Everybody should give a present to others on this day, when they remember and cherish that Esther has brought peace to them. We are thankful to the king, but in the first place to the Lord in the highest throne, who has never deceived a just man, who has been loyal to him in love and faith.]

Voith does not mention the name of the feast that should be established in memory of the event. It is a feast of thanksgiving, with gifts distributed among the people. It is rather indistinct, and could reflect any Christian feast, whether

Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter, proving that God will always stay on the side of the "true" church.

Hans Sachs, in the contrary, makes the foundation of a Jewish feast matter of discussion. Here, Esther and Mardachai thank god, and the latter explains:

> Das wöll wir allen Juden schreiben
> Und sol auch in gedechtnuß bleiben
> Gottes wohlthat, das man als heut
> Forthin jerlichen leb in freud.
> Das soll fürhin genennet sein
> Die faßnacht aller Juden gmein.
> Des wöll wir uns fröich ermeyen.
> Mach auff, spilman, ein züchtig reyen,
> Auff das wir uns alle erfreyen!
> (131, 18-26)
>
> [We will record it for all Jews, and God's graceful deed shall be kept in memory, so that, from now on, one should rejoice every year. It shall be called the carnival of all Jews. Let us be merry about it. Come on, musician, open a respectable dance so that we all may have joy.]

Like in many Nuremberg carnival plays, the action ends with a dance of the actors (131, 27), possibly including the audience, and making the borders between the staged action and the performance event permeable. Calling Purim the "carnival of all Jews", Hans Sachs stresses the similarity between Purim and the Christian carnival, as well as the parallel between *purim spiln* and carnival plays, and places his comedy, which is not a carnival play, somewhere close to these dramatic genres. Fostering the comparison between the Comedia and a carnival play, he also directs the audience's attention to the question of disturbed order, which is essential to carnival plays, and is also expressed in the banquet depicted in the first act. He thereby questions again the solution that he has found in the third act, with Esther's private performance, replacing hallow public performativity by serious inner qualities. Perhaps, his hope that the emperor could be converted is nothing but a carnival play's reversal of truth.

5. Feasts and Theatre

The treated three examples of sixteenth-century German language Esther plays have revealed a close connection between the individual confessional or political interpretation of the *Book of Esther*, and the treatment of feasts or banquets in the plays. None of them highlights all the feasts and banquets

mentioned in the biblical *Book of Esther*, but they concentrate on a few that have some relation to the context of the performance and could thus appeal to the audience, integrating it and revealing to it how performance – court performance, or theatre performance – could direct the spectators' or participants' emotions. Jos Murer's Esther is most explicit, when she excuses her outfit as a necessary costuming, and when she instructs the musicians to foster the merry atmosphere that helps her to secure the king's sympathy needed for her plea. The audience both has insight in her directing strategies, and is involved itself, by the close references to the wedding ceremony during which the play was staged. The performance of out-singling the bad reeve as opposed to a merry and virtuous community strengthens the coherence of the in-group celebrating proper political behaviour in a free Swiss city.

Valten Voith's religious interpretation of the *Book of Esther* also generates an in-group of his spectators, contrasting those who do not listen to the Lord's word (Vasthi, Haman) with those who are obedient to the Lord and trust in his help. For him, the first banquet is more important, because it can easily be paralleled with the parable of the king's wedding in the Gospels, while he treats Esther's banquet as a prefiguration of the Last Judgement. Those who do not accept the Lord's invitation or agitate against the in-group are called "Jews", but seem to mean the Catholics as well, who are treated as opponents to be expelled.

Hans Sachs suggests a political reading of the Book of Esther, and contrasts the king's feast, which tries to display royal power, but proofs to be hallow, with the queen's private meal, which reveals inner virtue and lays intrigues open. He makes his audience, which is openly invited to the first feast, at a place connected to the Holy Roman emperor, to secret observers of the clearly superior private event, and stirs hope of a change in politics. The reference to the "Jewish carnival", however, may question the "theatrical" solution again.

The three treated plays stand at the beginning of a broad tradition of Esther plays in the German speaking countries. The variety of the plays proves the potential of the biblical account that goes far beyond a mere moral example (the reason why Luther accepted the *Book of Esther*), or a history relevant to Jewish communities only (the reason why he had problems with it). These plays clearly deserve further scholarly investigation.[4]

[4] Here I would like to direct warmest thanks to Chanita Goodblatt, who has not only invited me to contribute to this volume, but has initiated a cooperative project between the two of us, about German, English and Yiddish Esther poems, narratives and plays.

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