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Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby*

Queen Esther in Venice: Art and Drama[1]

Abstract

This article looks at the representations of Queen Esther in the Venetian visual tradition from the fourteenth through the seventeenth century by studying contemporaneous art in conjunction with the play by Leon Modena. Venice witnessed the emergence of Queen Esther as a popular subject in Renaissance culture. Artists introduced Esther and her narrative, offering multilayered interpretations of this biblical queen. This article explores the increasing frequency of allusions to Queen Esther in Venetian culture and proposes the reasons for that interest. Esther was seen as an ideal bride, as a court lady, as an oriental figure offering an opportunity for the authors and artists to express the attraction of the East. She was also seen as a prototype of the Virgin Mary, and as a Jewish maiden reflecting issues of toleration and assimilation of the Jews in Venice. Most intriguing is the question of how Venice, a city infamous for its ghetto and anti-Semitic practices, welcomed the Esther cycle of the artist Paolo Veronese in the church of San Sebastiano (1556) as well as the numerous representations of Esther by the celebrated Mannerist artist Tintoretto (1546-7). The article specifically explores the connections between works of art and the religious drama of Leon Modena.

Keywords: Venice; Esther; art; Leon Modena; Veronese; Tintoretto; Pascarol Scrolls

Introduction

The opening lines of Leon Modena's 1619 play about Queen Esther read:

L'Estèr non è del buon Ceba' coteſta,
Signora nò, non è, non v'ingannate,
Quella, ch'ogn'hora, et à ragion lodate,
Ch'ogn'altra dir ſolete, a dietro reſta:

Quì non ſi vede, come là contesta
L'Historia, infila d'or, dilette, e grate,
Ɛ con ſoaue plettro, e stil cantate,
Ch'à le più alt'impreſe ogn'alma deſta.

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Scenico modo, e humil quì ſegue l'orme
Della Tragedia, ma in maniera abietta[1]

[This is not "Esther" by the good CEBÀ
No, my Lady, do not be deceived
It is not the one you always justly praise
Which you say outshines every other poem:
Here you will not see, as you do there, the
The story spun in lines of gold, delightful, pleasing
Celebrating with gentle pen as instrument,
The greatest deeds to rouse up every soul.
The stage, here, follows humbly in the steps of tragedy]

In this passage, Leon Modena (1571-1648) distinguished himself from the tradition embodied in the celebrated poem by Ansaldo Cebà, which was dedicated to the Venetian Jewish poetess Sarra Copia Sullam. Modena explains that while Cebà specifically and the Italian tradition at large was concerned primarily with splendor and magnificence, chivalry and heroic deeds, and jewelry and high fashion, he, in contrast, follows another path and focuses on tragedy (Cebà 1615; Sulam 2009). Clearly, Modena was familiar with the Venetian tradition centered on the Esther story, as well with its numerous artistic representations in Christian and Jewish Venetian art. Indeed, in another section of the play, Modena indicated that a previous version of the play:

> e ben ch'eſſi per douerſi recitar ad Hebrei ſolamente, la faceſſero; fu però in publico alla nobiltà di queſta Città in Venetia pompoſamente rappreſentata, e ne riportarono non poco honore. Già vintiſette anni vn'altra volta ad inſtanza d'vna compagnia de Nobili Signori, fù pur recitata, e riuſcì con grande, e commune applauſo.
>
> [although it should only have been performed before Jews, it was staged publicly and with all ceremony in the presence of the nobility of this city of Venice, bringing no little honour to the authors. Twenty-seven years later it was performed again by a company of Noble Lords, and its success was greatly applauded]

In fact, Modena was functioning in a shared world where Jews and Christians interacted with one another and both were attracted to the Esther story within Venetian culture.

The traditional story in the *Book of Esther* tells the following tale: the Persian king Ahasuerus has deposed Queen Vashti and decides to seek a new consort. A young Jewish girl named Esther wins his favor and becomes the new

[1] All references to this text are from Modena (forthcoming).

queen. Her cousin Mordecai becomes involved in a quarrel with the king's vizier Haman, who then plots to revenge himself against Mordecai and to slaughter all the Jews in the empire. His scheme is discovered, and through Esther's efforts Haman is executed and the enemies of the Jews are destroyed. Mordecai becomes the king's vizier and institutes the festival of Purim to celebrate this great victory. Two additional passages were added in the Septuagint (Greek) version of the story: Esther's prayer to God when she hears about Haman's plot; and her dramatic appearance before Ahasuerus, asking him to intercede and save the Jewish people (Berg 1979; Brenner 1995; Carruthers 2008).

The present article looks at the representations of Queen Esther in the Venetian visual tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so as to place Modena's play *L'Ester, Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* within its wider Venetian setting and within the context of artistic sources that tell the Esther story. Renaissance Venice witnessed the emergence of Queen Esther as a popular subject in contemporary culture (Parma 1993). Authors and artists introduced Esther and her narrative, offering multilayered interpretations of this biblical queen and her story. She was portrayed in Venetian art as a court lady as well as a prototype of the Virgin Mary, as an oriental princess, and as a Jewish maiden reflecting issues of toleration and assimilation of the Jews in Venice. Most intriguing is the question of how Venice, a city infamous for its ghetto and anti-Semitic practices, welcomed Paolo Veronese's (1528–1588) Esther cycle in the Church of San Sebastiano (1556) as well as the reesentations of the scene of the fainting Esther by Veronese and by the celebrated Mannerist artist Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto (1518–1594).

1. Veronese: the Church of San Sebastiano

The most impressive cycle of the Esther story in Venetian art was painted by Paolo Veronese in the Church of San Sebastiano (Chiesa di San Sebastiano), a sixteenth-century church that houses important paintings by Tintoretto and Titian as well as Veronese. The patron of the cycle was the local prior, Brother Bernardo Torlioni. From 1555 to 1570, Veronese decorated various parts of the nave and altar walls, areas of the sacristy and choir, as well as the organ shutters. The ceiling of the nave features three large paintings or panels depicting episodes from the Book of Esther, which Veronese completed in 1556: *The Coronation of Esther* (rectangular in the centre; Fig. 1); *The Banishment of Vashti* (oval; Fig. 2); and *The Triumph of Mordecai* (oval; Fig. 3).

Other areas in the church are devoted to the life of San Sebastian (Kahr 1970; Manieri 2011).

Fig. 1: Veronese, *The Coronation of Esther*, 1566. Church of San Sebastiano, Venice

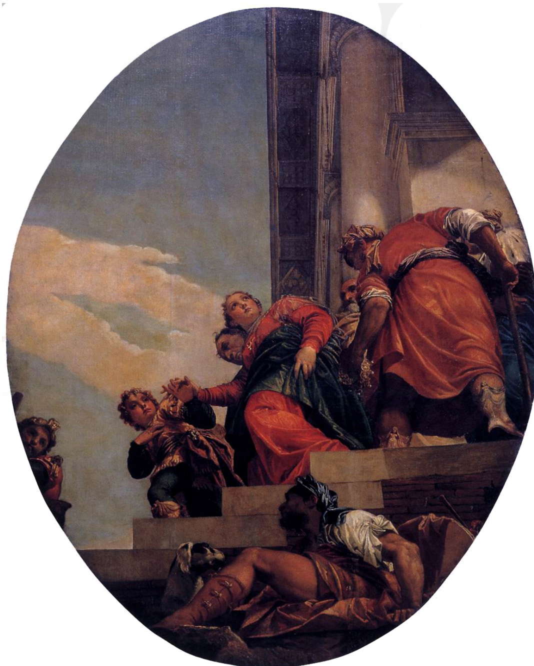

Fig. 2: Veronese, *The Banishment of Vashti,* 1566, Church of San Sebastiano, Venice

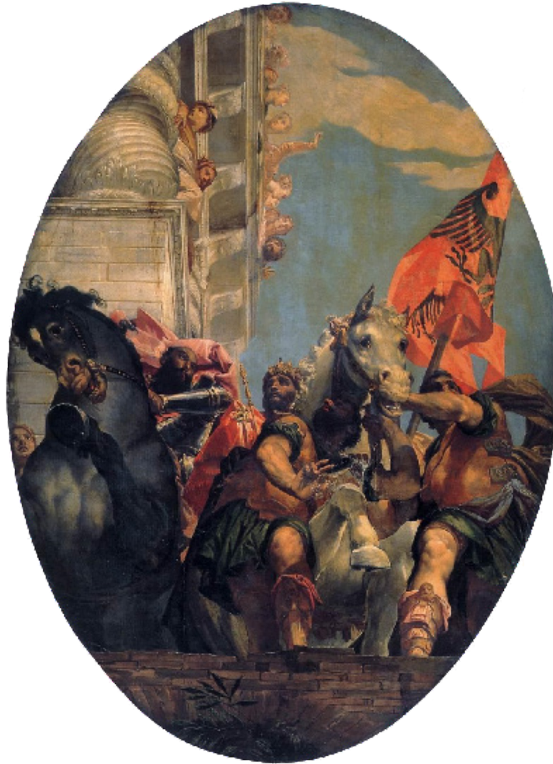

Fig. 3: Veronese, *The Triumph of Mordecai,* 1566, Church of San Sebastiano, Venice

The strict diagonal composition of the three paintings in the cycle offers a wealth of narrative detail and takes into account the di sotto angle of vision, with its foreshortened perspectives that pervade the space. The pictorial architecture provides a formal link among the pictorial fields with columns, cornices, and roof terraces forming an axis that runs through all three. The depicted scenes are characterized by sophisticated magnificent architectural design, perspectival foreshortening, mastery of space, and management of light, color, and brushwork.

The preliminary drawings for *The Triumph of Mordecai* and *The Coronation of Esther* (from 1555-1556), which are preserved in the Louvre, provide clues to the genesis of the pictures. There are studies of the individual figures in Mordecai's retinue and a later sketch showing the coronation of Esther on the right, where King Ahasuerus holds his scepter in his hands and his crown is barely visible. Veronese was originally planning to illustrate the encounter between Esther and the king as he extended his scepter as a sign of mercy and raised her to her feet. He eventually decided, however, to paint the coronation scene instead (Kahr 1970).

The *Coronation of Esther* (1556), executed in a square format, is very vivid and presents a clear narrative. Esther's pose resembles the modest gesture of the Virgin in the *Coronation of the Virgin* in the sacristy of San Sebastiano and emphasizes the typological nature of the three Veronese paintings. *The Banishment of Vashti* (1556), in an oval format, visualizes the moment of Vashti's repudiation. Relieved of her crown, the deposed queen is shown leaving the royal palace with her retinue. *The Triumph of Mordecai* (1556), also in an oval format, illustrates Mordecai's victory over Haman. Above the entrance to the presbytery, the painting conveys a dramatic climax. Haman had tried in vain to persuade the king to execute Mordecai but was instead instructed to lead him in state around the city on horseback. Esther and Ahasuerus watch the triumphal procession from the roof terrace of the royal palace. The portrayals in this church are all in accord with Jewish tradition and highlight her courage and bravery in saving her people (Manieri 2011).

In late medieval theological literature, Esther's heroic action was considered to be a prefiguration of the Virgin's intercession before Christ on behalf of mankind. She is a prototype of the Virgin Mary, traditionally figured by Rabanus Maurus in his eight-century commentary on the Book of Esther and later in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century preaching of St. Bernard and St. Bonaventure. According to these sources, the coronation of Esther was understood as a parallel to Mary's coronation as the Queen of Heaven. Thus, in Veronese's painting, the coronation of Esther is very similar to the iconographic conventions depicting that scene (Daturi 2004; Day 1994; Dorothy 1997; Fox 1991; White 2003).

In Modena's play, the coronation of Esther is not performed on stage but rather is told to Mordecai by a servant named Ada:

Il Rè la vidde d'vna ſua finestra,
E ſi ti piacque per la ſua bellezza,
E leggiadria, che la fece condurre
All'hor', all'hor', alla preſenza ſua,
E rimirata l'honeſtà del uolto,
E gli occhi più lucenti, che le ſtelle
. . .
Ɛ la ſposò per ſua conſorte, e uolſi
Che coronata per Regina fuſſe,
Immediatamente iui in ſecreto
. . .
(2.6.119-29)

[The King caught sight of her from his window
And so much did she please him for her beauty
And her grace, that he caused her to be brought

With With all speed to his presence
And when he beheld the nobility of her face
Again her eyes more brilliant than the stars
. . .
And he took her as his consort and desired her
To be crowned his Queen, immediately there in private]

This is a marked difference between the Veronese cycle, in which the coronation scene is the focal point as it emphasizes the role of Esther as a prefiguration of the Virgin and reinforces the Marian interpretation of the cycle, and Modena's play. In the latter, the coronation scene is marginal, told by a third party. This marginalization, therefore, distances Esther from her affinity with the Virgin, a correspondence that is central to the Christian tradition.

An especially moving contrast is evident between the Esther and the Vashti panels: one shows the beautiful young Queen Esther kneeling and receiving the crown from the king at the steps leading to the entrance to the court, raising her hand as though signifying her rise to power (Fig. 1). The other panel displays the departure of Vashti, an equally handsome maiden, with a grieving lowered face, descending the stairs, with her hand pointing downward suggesting her fall (Fig. 2). These scenes contrasting the virtuous Esther and the disgraced Vashti are visual manifestations of the opposition between these two women: the triumphant Esther arriving at the court and the repudiated Vashti departing for exile with an expression of defeat. Vashti is shown banished from the court in a tragic contrast with the elevation of Esther, but we do not see her punishment after her departure from the court and her eventual fate.

The contrast between the humiliated Vashti and the victorious Esther is also evident in Modena's play, in which Vashti is a tragic figure who is given ample space within the narrative, endowed as well with a strong and independent voice. We hear her monologues in which the emphasis is on the cruelty of the wheel of fortune that has changed the fate of queens: "DHe, chi prouò giamai, fortuna iniqua, / Che la mia dura ſorte, in parte aguagli?" ("Alas! Who else has ever borne in any way / Such evil fortune, such a hard fate, as mine?"). In another section of the play, the sergeant says: "AFretta 'l paſſo, su, non più Regina / Depon la grauità, c'hor qual ogn'altra / Donna priuata ſei, e tanto meno / Quanto, he qual rubella, diſcacciata / Vieni, dall'alto grado, ond'eri prima" ("Hurry, come on, you who are queen no more / Give up your stately ways, for you are now / The same as other women, or maybe worse / Your status is now that of a banished rebel / Cast out from the high rank you held before"); and Vashti answers: "Si ben, il uero dici, ma ſe cuore / Human, nel petto ſerri, pur hauermi / Qualche pietà, douresti, laſcia almeno, / Che uerſo queſte mura, entro me ſteſſa" ("Yes, what you say is true, but if you have / A human heart within

your breast, or even feel / Some pity for me, let me at least / Unburden the pain which is dumb within me"). We hear about Vashti taking her own life in a tragic manner from her maid: "S'è ucciʃa certo, ò Ciel, dinne Nodrice, / Ɛ ʃeguit'à Vasti, fors'altro male'" ("O heavens she has killed herself, for sure / tell us, nurse, has more trouble come to Vashti?"; 2.3.32-3). Vashti's tragic fate and a sense of respect appear in the play as well as on the panel, both of which reflect mercy and compassion toward the unfortunate queen.

The scenes painted by Veronese are characterized by dramatic and theatrical elements. In a sense, they might be seen as a type of visual religious drama narrating the story of Esther. Like any good drama, the dramatic features of the Veronese panels are contingent upon several factors: the setting, the characters, and the action. The influence of the theatre on the narrative scenes is suggestive in that a miniature stage is virtually created within the paintings, as the various scenes feature balconies with figures gazing down on the action below.

The central characters in the Esther's narratives stand out for their dramatic gestures and their emotional involvement in the action. In his innovative work *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, Moshe Barasch explained that there are similarities between wall paintings in churches and plays since neither could be seen in close-up but only viewed from a distance. This fact might also explain why the protagonists' gestures both in a play and on a fresco had to be expressive and dramatic, representing a kind of movement that would be familiar to the beholders. Giotto was the artist, who, inspired by mystery plays, developed the most expressive language (Barasch 1990).

The tendency toward easily recognizable expressions and theatrical gestures is particularly evident in the Veronese Esther's cycle. Keeping in mind the height of the panels as they are on the ceiling of the church, it follows that their iconographic programs would have been clear to the audience. The expressive figures of Vashti and Esther, as well as the gestures of Haman and Mordechai in the panel *The Triumph of Mordecai,* reflect the gestures and expressions of characters in contemporary religious theater, as the influence of sacred drama is evident in their body language and their faces. In some cases, as in the riveting focus of this panel — the figure of Mordechai on the horse riding in a dramatic movement — the theatricality derives from ancient tradition. In other cases, as in the body language of the other riders, the influence of religious theatre is evident. There is also a vivid depiction of the group of spectators leaning out of the balconies above recalling the audience of theatrical performances.

One senses the dramatic moments of Vashti's banishment, Esther's rise to power, and Mordecai's victorious procession. The composition of the panels seen from below adds another layer of drama to the action, and reinforces the experience of the viewer in the church as a witness to the dramatic action. In these spectacular confrontations, the viewer's eye is arrested and his/her mind

is engaged as in a theatrical performance. The division of space draws the eye to the points of conflict, while the depth of the architectural setting enhances the expressive role of space and helps to produce a strong emotional effect.

2. Esther Fainting before King Ahasuerus in Venetian Art and Drama

The most popular scene representing Esther in the Mannerist and Baroque Italian traditions show her fainting before King Ahasuerus. The scene is based on the story that Esther anxiously enters the king's presence uninvited in order to persuade him to counter Haman's scheme to kill the Jews. The original story reads that on the third day, Esther put on royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, where Ahasuerus was sitting on his royal throne facing her. When the king saw her standing in the court, he extended his golden scepter as a sign that she had won his favor, whereupon Esther approached and touched its tip. According to this version, Haman misled the king and caused him to issue an edict commanding the massacre of all Jews in the kingdom. On learning of the decree, Queen Esther realized that she had to try and save her people. Yet one was not allowed to approach the king without permission and violators were condemned to death unless the king extended his scepter as a sign of clemency. According to the Septuagint, however, after fasting for three days, Esther and her two servants enter the room. The king looks at Esther with an angry face and she faints before his throne. He comforts her and extends the scepter as a symbol of good will (Berg 1979; Moore 1971).

Thus, there are two versions of the encounter between Esther and King Ahasuerus: the original one describes Esther kneeling before the king a scene which appears in the Biblical version; and the later version, based on the Greek addition of the external books, which changed her posture from kneeling to fainting. Traditionally, as seen in medieval and early Renaissance art, Esther was depicted as kneeling before the king as a sign of obedience and humility. Yet the sixteenth century saw a shift in depictions of her posture to that described in the second version of the story, where she faints before the king. The portrayal of the fainting queen was adopted by most Baroque artists and closely follows the text of the Septuagint's additions to the original Hebrew biblical narrative, which were adopted by the Council of Trent in 1546 (Bohn 2002; Perlove 1989). The swooning of Esther is associated with the image of Mary collapsing at the foot of the Cross. According to the later version, Esther fasted for three days, so her fainting was probably due to weakness and fatigue. One interpretation might also be that her fasting and fainting expressed her piety and devotion and further strengthened her association with the Virgin Mary (Unglaub 2003).

Tintoretto revolutionized the formula of the kneeling Esther to the posture

of fainting in the painting he executed in ca. 1547-1548, which shows King Ahasuerus rising from his throne and bending toward Queen Esther, who has fainted before him. Several female attendants lean down to help Esther, as others express concern and shock. Behind Ahasuerus, Haman looks on unsympathetically (Fig. 4). Tintoretto's depiction of the encounter exists in two versions: one in Hampton Court shows the fainting Esther, and the other at the Escorial, thought to have been done by a follower, portrays Esther kneeling.

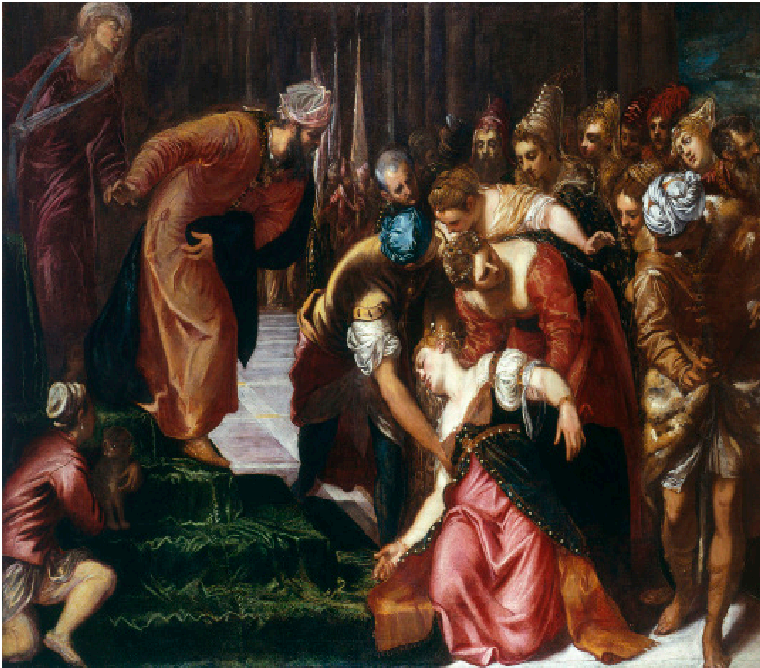

Fig. 4: Tintoretto, *Esther before Ahasuerus,* 1547-1548, Kensington Palace, London

Another example of the Esther theme was provided in another work by Veronese now in the Louvre, which shows Esther fainting before the king (Fig. 5), is considered the prototype for the later Baroque depictions by Gentileschi and Poussin (Unger 2010). Many scholars have attempted to account for the popularity of this scene in Italian art. Some have highlighted its centrality in a particular artistic corpus or have suggested the association between Queen Esther and the Virgin Mary. Others have contended that this theme was in line with the Baroque taste in drama and the expression of emotions (Unger 2010).

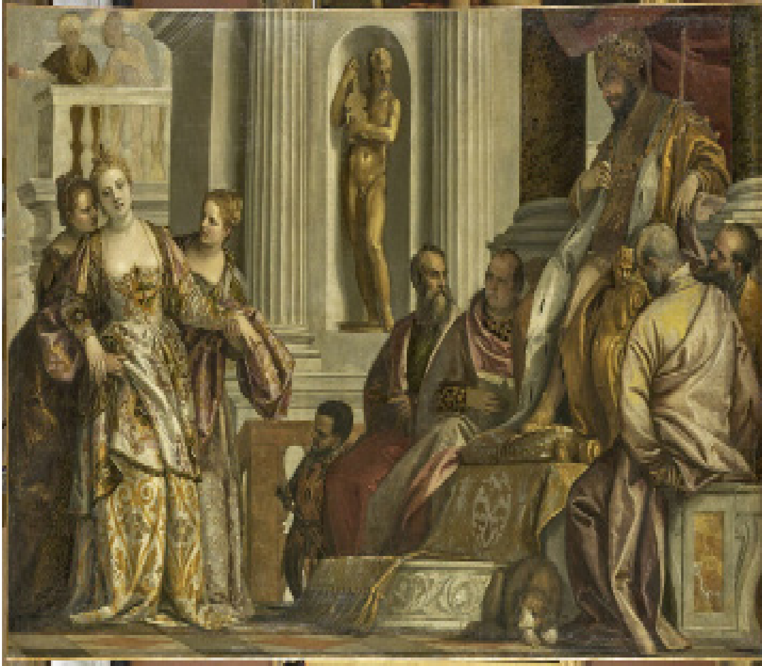

Fig. 5: Veronese, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1575, Louvre, Paris

In Modena's play, the scene of Esther before the king takes place outside of the gates of the city and reads as follows: "King: But does my desire not deceive my eyes / Or is that not she who is coming towards us / Yes, it is she herself – why has she come outside? Ask anything of me/ And even if you ask for half the kingdom / I'll grant your wish immediately, ask with no fear." (4.5.16-23). There is thus a marked difference between the Christian tradition that focuses on the fainting of Esther, a posture that resembles the Virgin at the Cross, and the marginalization of this scene in Modena's play, reflected in its setting at the gate rather than in the court. In the Christian tradition, the posture of Esther's fainting creates a direct parallel with the image of the Virgin and with Marian visual depictions, while the Jewish tradition based on the Bible and not recognizing the later additions favors the posture of Esther kneeling before the King thus creating a more neutral visual vocabulary related to the court rather than to a theological Christian context.

3. The Jewish Interpretation: the Pascarol Scrolls

After reviewing the Venetian works devoted to Esther by Christian artists, I now turn to an example from Venetian Jewish art. The Scroll of Esther was

and is read in synagogues during the Purim festival, and the Renaissance synagogues in Italy were no exception. Along with the public reading, some members of the congregations also followed the text on their own personal scrolls. The two earliest Italian Esther Scrolls were the Estellina and the Castelenuovo scrolls, neither of which was illustrated. The first decorated Italian scrolls were made by the Jewish scribe Moshe Ben Avraham Pascarol (1560-1640) and included narrative scenes; these exceptional works of art reflect a clear association with Modena's play (Tennen 2008; Metzger 1962).

There are three extant copies of the Pascarol scroll: one is held in the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616), another is in the John Reynolds Collection in Manchester (Hebrew Ms. 22, 1618), and the third is in the Gross Family Collection in Tel Aviv (081/012/036). The colophons include the name of the scribe; the city of Ferrara, where the scrolls were copied; and the dates 1616 and 1618, attached to the first and second versions, respectively. Modena was born in Ferrara, but left for Venice with his family when he was still young. The Pascarol scrolls, which include narrative scenes from the *Book of Esther,* and Modena's play consisting of five acts and twenty-nine scenes were created around the same time and in a similar milieu. Modena was very interested in Jewish art created in the Italian Ghetto (Soulam 2006, 8-10). It is likely that Modena and Pascarol knew of one another's works. They were both drawn to the theater and both were influenced by the majority Christian culture: Modena included naked mermaids in his printed edition of the play and Pascarol painted nude allegories inspired by Christian art (Soulam 2006, 10-5).

In general, the narrative scenes in the Pascarol scrolls are highly pictorial and imaginative, painted almost as cartoons, and include many lively and dramatic details. One particularly beautiful scene is *The Feast of Vashti* (Fig. 6), in which she is shown seated at the center of the table with two women on either side. They are holding their hands in various positions and are looking directly at the viewer. A major emphasis is on their dignified dress and jewelry, which was typical of Italian courtly culture at the time. Here Vashti appears as a courtly lady and the inscription reads: Queen Vashti too has made a feast (עשתה משתה נשים גם ושתי המלכה). The scrolls feature several violent scenes such as the hanging of Haman and his sons as well as vivid representations of Italian courtly culture through depictions of lavish feasts and high fashion.

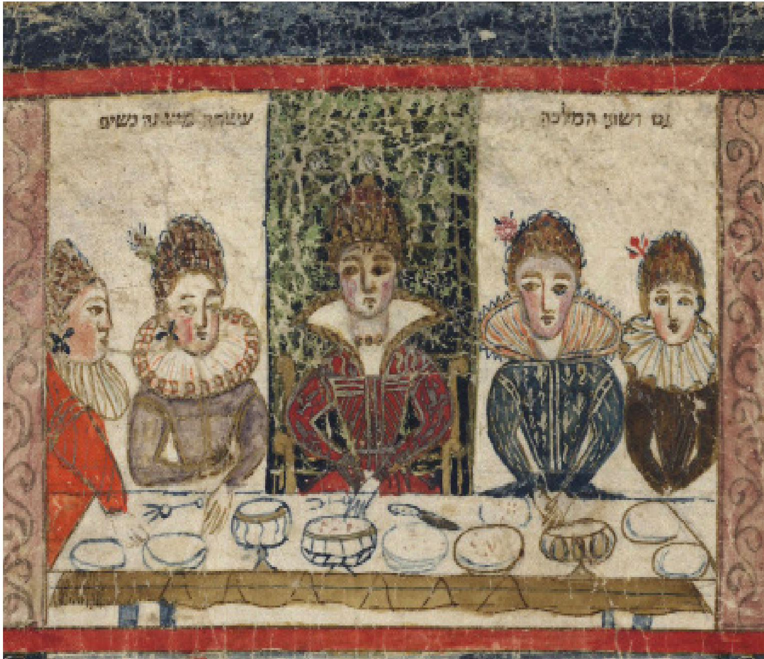

Fig. 6: Pascoral Scroll, *The Feast of Vashti,* 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

One particularly striking scene in the Pascarol scrolls is the beheading of Queen Vashti (Fig. 7). Veronese in San Sebastiano depicted the banishment of Vashti and her fall from grace in a dignified manner, while Modena presented her in a positive light as a tragic heroine worthy of sympathy and pity and suggested that she committed suicide. In contrast, the Pascarol scrolls feature another view and portray severe punishment – her humiliation and decapitation while naked. In the Pascarol scene, on the left side of the image, the king is sitting on his throne watching the beheading; on the right side the executioner is raising a bloody sword. The naked bleeding Vashti is pictured below him, her hands chained together and her head, separated from her body, rolling on the ground. Two witnesses are watching the event and the inscription notes "The king's command" (דבר המלך). This scene is based on the Jewish Midrash, which explains that since Vashti came from noble origins she had to be beheaded, which was considered a style of execution suitable for the nobility (Soulam 2006, 145-50).

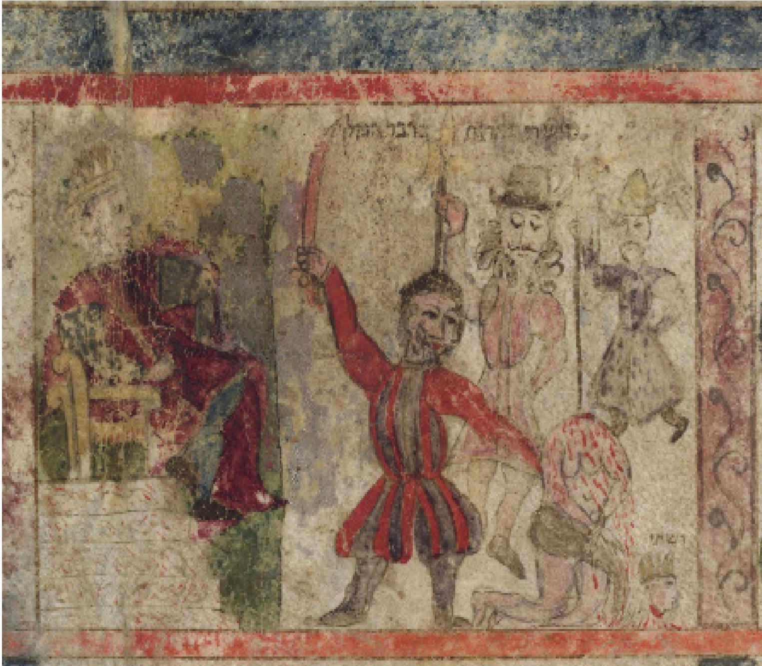

Fig. 7: Pascoral Scroll, *The Punishment of Vashti*, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

The naked Vashti in the Pascarol scroll may also be explained as a punishment, based on another midrash: "This teaches [us] that the wicked Vashti would take the daughters of Israel, and strip them naked, and make them work on Shabbat… The verse states: "But the Queen Vashti refused to come" (Esther 1:12). The Gemara asks: "Since she was immodest, as the Master said above: The two of them had sinful in-tentions; what is the reason that she did not come?" (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 12.2).

Another scene visualizes the coronation of Esther, which is similar to the Christian version of the event as it appears in the San Sebastiano cycle (Fig. 8). The king sitting on his throne under a canopy, manifesting dignified authority. With his golden scepter in one hand, with the other hand he is crowning Esther, who is shown in profile, with her maidens behind her, kneeling before him. The inscription reads: "And he put the crown on her head" (וישם כתר מלכות בראשה).

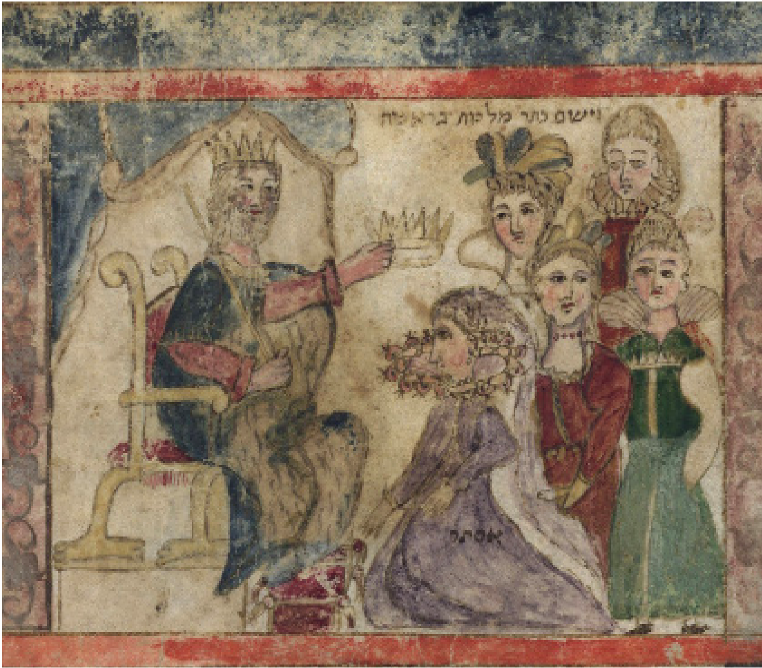

Fig. 8: Pascoral Scroll, *The Coronation of Esther*, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

The Pascarol scrolls reflect a direct opposition between the fates of Vashti and Esther. The punishment of Vashti is followed by the crowning of Esther, thus creating a parallel between the two queens: the downfall of one is followed by the triumph of the other. In this the scribe is in line with the Christian tradition; for example, as in the Veronese depiction, where there is an analogy between Vashti leaving the court and Esther entering it. Yet, Pascarol depicted a terrible ending for Vashti whereas both Veronese and Modena express a much more sympathetic attitude toward the unfortunate deposed queen.

The most celebrated scene in Italian Christian art of the period – Esther before the King – is also to be found in the Pascarol scrolls (Fig. 9). While the Christian works of art, however, emphasize Esther fainting and the king extending the golden scepter, Pascarol returned to the earlier tradition and portrayed her simply kneeling. In the narrative scene in the Pascarol scrolls, we see the king sitting on the left in profile, extending the golden scepter to the kneeling queen while several courtiers witness the event. The inscription reads "Esther is touching the scepter" (ותגע אסתר בראש השרביט). Apparently, Pascarol preferred the posture of kneeling to fainting, presumably because the image

of fainting as argued above was strongly associated with Marian connotation, with the fainting of Mary at the foot of the Cross, and with Christian Lamentation scenes.

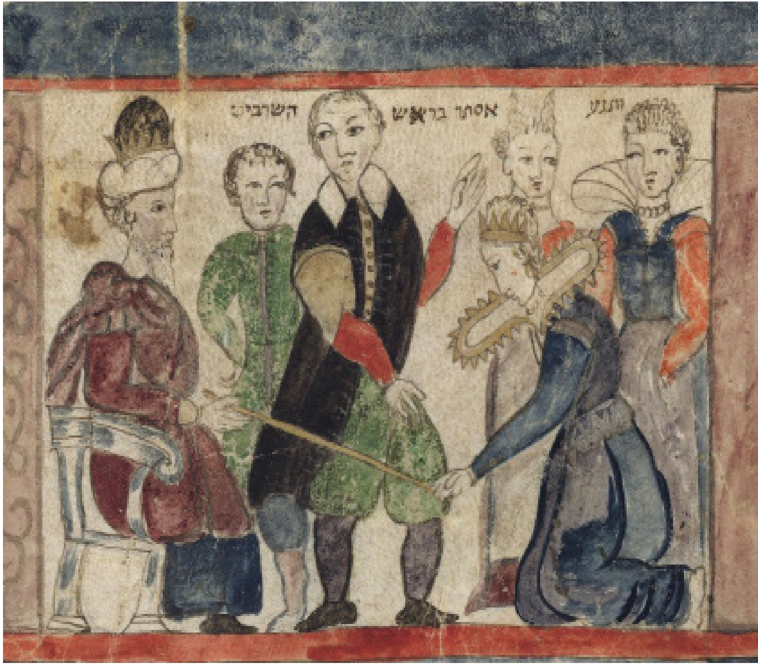

Fig. 9: Pascoral Scroll, Esther before Ahasuerus, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. “Ktiv” Project)

A final example paralleling the Christian examples is the Triumph of Mordecai (Fig. 10). Here we see a humiliated Haman leading Mordecai’s horse with his eyes cast down with several individuals looking on. The inscription reads: And Haman was leading a mounted Mordechai in the streets (וירכב המן את מרדכי ברחוב העיר). Similarly with Veronese, there is an emphasis on the triumphal procession and the various audiences watching the playing out of Haman’s humiliation and Mordecai’s victory.

In the Triumph of Mordecai scene depicted in the Pascarol scroll, it is worth noting that the female figure on the right may be a reference to another midrashic account (Esther Rabba 10.5) concerning Haman’s daughter. According to this midrash, after mistakenly humiliating her father instead of Mordecai, she threw herself out of a window.

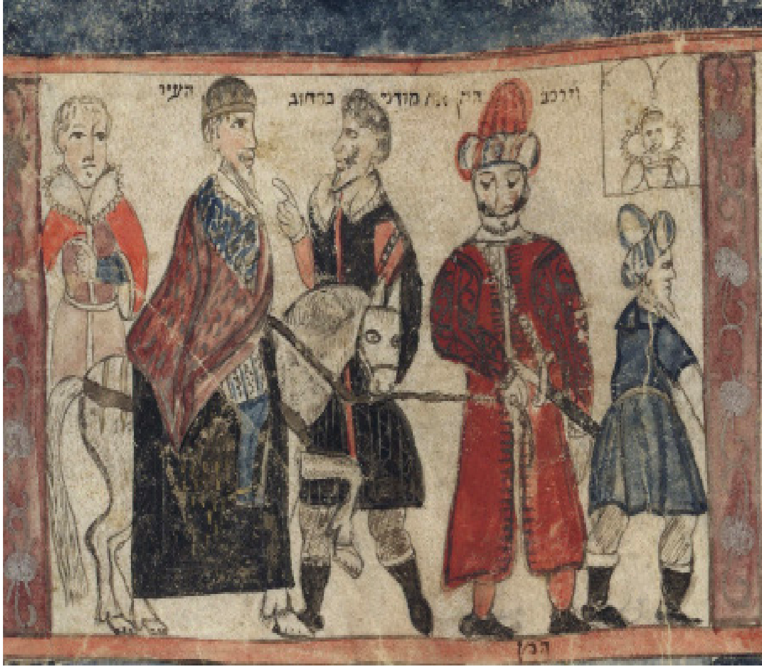

Fig. 10: Pascoral Scroll, *The Triumph of Mordecai,* 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

Conclusion

When writing about Queen Esther and her story, Leon Modena was in dialogue with a rich Italian textual and visual tradition. Venice was a center in which images of Esther were copious and influential; Modena both followed or offered alternative interpretations of the rich culture in which he lived.

Leon Modena portrayed the figures of Queen Esther and Queen Vashti in a unique way. In the play, Queen Vashti is depicted as a strong and independent woman who refuses to obey the king's command to show herself at his feast. Her refusal might be seen as an act of resistance against patriarchal authority and royal oppression. In the play, Queen Vashti is celebrated as a symbol of bravery and independence. Queen Esther, on the other hand, id depicted as a beautiful young woman who uses her wit and charm to save the Jewish people from the malice of Haman. In the play, Esther is also seen in a positive light as a model of strength, wisdom and courage. In her actions she was able to rescue her people. On the whole, in Leon Modena's play, both Queen Vashti and Queen Esther are portrayed as strong and independent woman who using their beauty and wisdom resist oppressive royal authority. Both are seen as

symbols of resistance and female strength.

One should also draw a distinction between the Jewish tradition exemplified in Modena's play and in the Pascarol scroll versus the Christian tradition evident in texts and art. In the Jewish tradition, the story of Esther is celebrated during the festival of Purim. This celebration includes reading the Book of Esther, eating special foods, and giving gifts to one another. In the Christian tradition, while Queen Esther is still regarded as a figure of bravery and faith as in the Jewish tradition, the story of Queen Esther is not as central to worship or celebration as in Judaism. Christians view Esther as an example to God's mercy and the focus is on her faith and trust in God.

In early modern Italy, Queen Esther was depicted in both textual and visual sources as a symbol of beauty, grace, and courage. In Renaissance art, Esther was portrayed as an elegant and charming young woman surrounded by symbols of her royal status and wealth. In texts as well she was seen as a model of virtue and a symbol of moral purity. The story of Esther was also seen as an allegory for the struggles facing Early modern Italian women. In these narratives, Esther was seen as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal authority and oppression.

The most important painted paintings of the Esther story in Venice were the panels on the ceiling of the Church of San Sebastiano. Veronese chose three scenes: *The Coronation of Esther*, *The Banishment of Vashti*, and *The Triumph of Mordecai*. Modena follows Veronese's perspective in many respects: the emphasis on fancy clothing and fine dining in a rich courtly culture, the triumph of Mordecai expressed through the victorious procession, and most notably the contrast between the fate of the two queens – the elevated Esther and the disgraced Vashti – who are juxtaposed as two distinct models. Both Veronese and Modena manifested some mercy toward Vashti, who is described in a rather positive light in both the painting and the play, where her character engenders pity and sympathy.

The most prominent scene in the early modern Venetian tradition is Esther before the king and her posture of fainting before him carries important Marian connotations resembling Lamentation scenes. Here there is a marked difference: the scene is the most popular in Venetian art and was often reproduced, whereas in Modena's play it is rather marginal with Esther approaching the king outside of the court. This staging by Modena might very well have been deliberate, a move to distance Esther from the scene so strongly connected with the Virgin and her iconography.

Finally, it is intriguing to compare the Modena play and the decorated Pascarol scrolls created around the same time. Here again there are both similarities and differences. On the one hand, the depictions in the decorated scrolls of *The Triumph of Mordecai* are somewhat similar to the Venetian tradition. On the one hand, the decorated scrolls show the meeting between

Esther and the king in the more traditional scene with Esther kneeling, thus separating her imagery from that of the Virgin and from Marian iconography. Finally, the most striking divergence between the imagery in the scrolls, the Venetian Christian artistic tradition and Modena's play is the portrayal of the deep humiliation and harsh punishment of Vashti. This severe treatment depicted by Pascarol is remarkably different from the much more sympathetic approach of both Veronese and Modena.

The diverse texts and images depicting Esther in the Venetian tradition offer us a rich panorama. The first and perhaps the most typical of those characterizations is Esther viewed as an ideal spouse. In this, she was contrasted with Vashti juxtaposed as her exact opposite, a disobedient and rebellious wife, who was fittingly punished. In the original biblical story, Esther emerges as an ambivalent figure as she had deceived Ahasuerus by concealing her Jewish identity and by approaching him without being summoned, which was forbidden. This manipulative behavior led to her having a mixed reception among some medieval writers (most famously Chaucer), and it is interesting that despite her deception she became so popular a subject for Venetian artists (Day 1994, 15-20). The complexity of her image as a cunningwife was downplayed in the Venetian tradition, and she was praised for her humbleness. The narrative scenes in the Pascarol scrolls depict her kneeling before Ahasuerus in different episodes: in the procession of young maidens at the beginning of the plot and later when she approaches him to ask that he intercede to save her people. In the Italian view, Esther was a symbol of good manners and wifely submission.

The story of Esther provided authors and artists with an opportunity to depict lavish costumes and exquisite meals typical of patrician life in Venice. In the biblical story, Ahasuerus's feast merits only a few sentences, whereas in Modena's play it is described in several hundred lines with extended accounts of the dress, draperies, gardens, artworks, servants, waiters, and types of food, all of which reflect the luxurious life of the Venetian upper classes (Fortini Brown 2004, 40-55). The scenes imaged in the artworks show a series of sumptuous banquets and courtiers wearing stylish and beautiful clothes. This ideal of splendor is highly reminiscent of the wealth of Venetian patricians and their pursuit of magnificence.

Esther was the subject of much attention in plays and art, where she is portrayed as a very beautiful and elegant court lady with much emphasis placed on her dress, jewelry, and stunning looks. The focus on her attractive appearance in art is rooted in the Italian literary tradition where, for example, in Petrarch's *Triumph of Love*, she emerges as a handsome and magnificent woman with whom Ahasuerus falls madly in love. The primary stress is on her exceptional beauty and charms (Petrarch 1962). Boccaccio also referred to Esther in a compilation that he made of his followers' commentaries on

the *De mulieribus claris* (Jordan 1987). There she is a symbol of refinement. Another source that focused on Esther's exceptional beauty and elegance is the *Sacred Narrative of Esther,* by the celebrated Florentine noblewoman Lucrezia Tornabuoni, wife of Cosimo de' Medici and mother of Lorenzo de' Medici. In her play, Tornabuoni devoted special attention to Esther's ornaments:

> They brought to her the noblest
> Garments that she usually wore
> When she wished to appear every inch a queen; without
> Without delay she dressed herself in her clothes
> And they attired her in her regal insignia
> Draping her in rubies, pearls, and infinite treasures /
> So that anyone who saw her would be thunderstruck. . .
> She had never appeared so beautiful;
> And on this day she seemed to have come
> Truly to this world from paradise.

Or in another description "She wears an elegant garment; at her throat, a precious stone / whose value was impossible to surmise" (Tornabuoni 2001). The same emphasis on tasteful clothes and jewelry is apparent in Venetian Mannerist and Baroque art, where Esther is shown as a stylish court lady. She was pictured as a pretty and chic woman who knew how to dress and wear accessories, a model for high fashion. In courtly circles, clothing was viewed as a status symbol, and dress and props were seen as items that reflected political power. Aristocratic women were considered political and cultural agents, and clothing was thought to be a central element in the court and an important component in a magnificent appearance (Fortini Brown 2004; Griffey 2019).

Portraying the story of Esther gave artists and authors an opportunity to convey their fascination with the East. The action takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, where princes from distant countries came to visit dressed in oriental fashion. The setting is a Persian palace with exotic decorations and foreign guests. In some episodes depicted in the artworks and in the plays, there is an emphasis on the protagonists' exotic dress. Especially noteworthy is the inclusion of the impressive oriental caps and turbans worn by Ahasuerus and the foreign princes. These oriental hats are characteristic of the way that non-Western rulers – Greeks or, especially, Turks – were represented in Renaissance art.

Although Esther herself was a beautiful Persian queen, surrounded by courtiers wearing Eastern dress, in the Venetian artistic and literary traditions, her images reflect the Italian ideals of beauty – white skin, blond hair, radiant blue eyes, red lips, and a high forehead – and she is dressed according to the local contemporary fashion (Eisenblicher 1992). There is no trace of her oriental

origins in these Venetian sources. She was only returned to her Eastern roots in the nineteenth century with the rise of Orientalism and the taste for the exotic advocated by Romanticism. In the paintings of the modern era, she became a prototype for ethnic charm, a seductive Persian queen. One typical example is the painting of Esther by Edwin Long (1878), who drew upon travelogue illustrations of the East in the British Museum in order to produce his vision of Queen Esther in Ahasuerus's palace at Susa. He pictured her as a Persian princess, attended by two black female servants, dressed in an exotic costume and wearing oriental jewelry, with a golden turban adorned with gems, her dark eyes gazing at the beholder.

As I noted earlier, in the Italian Christian tradition, Esther is a prototype of the Virgin Mary, traditionally figured by Rabanus Maurus in his eight-century commentary on the *Book of Esther* and later in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century preaching of St Bernard and St Bonaventure. According to these sources, the coronation of Esther was understood as a parallel to Mary's coronation as the Queen of Heaven. and that scene is found on a panel painted by Veronese and is very similar to the iconographic conventions depicting the coronation of the Virgin.

The scene of Esther pleading with King Ahasuerus was seen by theologians starting with St. Augustine and then with Rabanus Maurus, St Bernard, and St Bonaventure as the prefiguration of the Virgin's role as a mediator at the Last Judgment. One work that explicitly illustrates Esther's role in the Day of Judgment is Michelangelo's fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1511), which shows Haman being crucified. Here in the pendentive next to the images of the prophet Jonah, the depiction of the story of Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman is divided into several episodes: on the right, the king sends Haman to Mordecai, who is sitting at the king's door, and on the left, Esther reveals Haman's plot to Ahasuerus. The whole fresco is dramatically dominated by the central depiction of the punishment of Haman, who is imaged crucified rather than hanged as in the earlier Florentine images. Esther's primary role in Michelangelo's fresco is to reveal Haman's conspiracy to Ahasuerus and in her pleading with the king to save her people, which is why she is considered a prefiguration of the Virgin in her role as intercessor on the Day of Judgment. A later such example can be seen on the dome of Cremona's cathedral, where in a painting by Giulio Campi, Haman is shown crucified in a prominent position and Esther dressed in blue and red is kneeling before Ahasuerus (1567). Depicting Haman as a victim rather than as a villain became typical in the sixteenth century as part of the Catholic Reformation, especially after the Council of Trent and is most often seen in Venetian and Northern Italian art.

Finally , Esther is a Jewish princess and her fate reflects the situation of the Jews in Venetian society (Katz 2017). In Modena's play, only at the very end

does Esther reveal her identity to the king, who replies in surprise:

Re Ma fate ch'ancor io acheti'l cuore
In ſaper il lignaggio, e ſangue voſtro.
Ester Monarca inuitto poi che la mia prole
Volete pur ſaper, io ſono Hebrea,
Ɛ Mordacheo, quello ch'a uoi la uita
Già ſaluò, mio Signor, e di me zio,
E procediamo da la Tribù illuſtre
Di Beniamino, e da la caſa regia
Di Saul primo Rè del popol nostro.
Re Io mi rallegro bella Ester, e godo,
Che di tal gente procediate, et anco
Da regal ſangue, il che dimoſtra bene
La uostr'alma preſentia, e i bei coſtumi,
Et hò piacer, che sì honorato uecchio
Sia uostro zio, e per moſtrarui parte
De l'amor, ch'io ui porto uoglio c'hora
(5.6.111-3)

[King But just ease my heart
And let me know your lineage and your kin.
Ester Victorious King, since you want to know
My ancestry, I am a Jew, and Mordecai
The one who saved your life, my Lord
Is my uncle. We descend from the illustrious tribe
Of Benjamin, and from the royal house
Of Saul, the first King of our people.
King I rejoice beautiful Esther, and I am glad
That you come from such people, and indeed
From royal blood, which your noble appearance
And your virtuous behaviour shows so clearly]

Here Esther does not immediately reveal her Jewish roots. It is only later in the story that she discloses her origins to Ahasuerus and expresses her wish to save the Jews. Thus, Esther's exposure of her Jewish identity was perceived in a positive light.

The success of the integration of Esther, first when she marries a foreign ruler and then when she becomes a devoted citizen of her new nation while at the same time serving her old ties, epitomizes an optimistic view regarding the chances of the assimilation of the Jews within the Italian community (Herzig 2019). The fact that owing to the way she is imaged, Esther appears to be an esteemed member of the court and is fully accepted by Ahasuerus conveyed

the hope that the Jews could acculturate within another alien context – Venetian society. In this context, the positive images of Esther as a benevolent queen who saved her people in drama and visual art served as an encouraging paradigm, illustrating the possible acceptance of Jews and stood in stark contrast to the anti-Jewish policies of the Venetian authorities (Katz 2017).

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