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Performing *The Book of Esther* in
Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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Modena's *L'Esther*: a Venetian-Jewish Play in Early Modern Europe

Abstract

This article discusses Leon Modena's 1619 dramatic adaptation of the biblical *Book of Esther* – *L'Esther: Tragedia Tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura (Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture)* – both in terms of its integration of Jewish and Christian sources, and of the aspects of figuration and performance. It will be shown that Modena comprises an example of a 'skilled cultural intermediary' between Venetian-Jewish culture and the Christian culture of early modern Europe. Thus, there are two primary issues of discussion. The first relates to the way both direct references (Herodotus' *Histories*; the Jewish *Midrash*) and recognizable allusions (the Italian poem *Orlando Furioso*; the Jewish Babylonian *Talmud*) are utilized together in the play to create, and comment on, dramatic characters and situations. The second issue relates to the way Modena utilizes a variety of tropes (simile, metaphor, symbol and allegory) and aspects of performance (language, costume), which not only connect it to these varied exegetical and literary sources, but also to European performative traditions. Finally, attention will be paid to Modena's adaption and enactment of the 'figuration of woman' evident in the biblical *Book of Esther*, with his special focus on the figure of Vashti. Modena's enactment of Vashti will be shown to raise complex issues concerning the inherent danger and compromises of maintaining a woman's pride, independence and wisdom.

KEYWORDS: Leon Modena; *The Book of Esther*; Italian-Jewish Renaissance; *Orlando Furioso*; Herodotus' *Histories*; *Midrash*; *Babylonian Talmud*

1. The Prefatorial Poem

This article takes as its starting point the Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet that prefaces the 1619 biblical drama, *L'Esther: Tragedia Tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura (Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture)*, written by the Venetian-Jewish scholar, Rabbi and author Leon Modena (1571-1648).

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Fig. 1: *L'Ester* (1619), public domain, source: Austrian National Library

Modena addresses this sonnet (as he does the preceding prose preface) to “To My Illustrious / Lady and Patroness / Most worthy of regard / The Lady Sarra Copio / Sullam Jewess” (Preface 1), and concludes with the following sestet (Prefatorial Poem):¹

Scenico modo, e humil quì segue l'orme
 Della Tragedia, ma in maniera abietta,
 Ch'al secol d'hoggi, à Cigno buon disdice:

E pur ben che cotanto sia difforme,
 Pel nome sol voglio sperar ch'accetta
 Vi sia per la Colomba la Cornice.

[The stage, here, follows humbly in the steps
 Of Tragedy, but in an abject way,
 Which especially today is unworthy of the good Swan;

It is well indeed that so much here is distorted,

¹ All citations in English, as well as the Italian transcription, are from Susan Payne's volume (Modena 2023). In the present transcription of the Italian text, the “long s” [ſ] will be written as the modern “s”, and “u” as “v”.

If only for its name I hope and trust
 You will accept the Raven for the Dove]

As befits a sonnet, the formulaic change in the rhyme scheme from octave to sestet highlights a significant transformation of meaning. In the octave, Modena insistingly declares that his dramatisation of the biblical *Book of Esther* is not the “story spun in threads of gold” (“L’Historia, in fila d’or”, “Prefatorial Poem”) – as he describes the poem *La reina Esther (Queen Esther)* by the Genoese author and monk Ansaldo Cebà. This “heroic poem on a sacred theme” (Sarot 1954, 138) was published in 1615, and Sulam wrote to Cebà in 1618 praising this reworking of the *Book of Esther* (Sarot 1954, 139-40; Sulam 2009, 117-18).² The *volta* following the octave in Modena’s sonnet appropriately marks a change in its logic, which is developed through a “structure of complication followed by resolution” (Fussell 1979, 124). Thus, Modena moves from the “complication” of his exaggerated praise of Cebà’s poem in the octave to a “resolution” in the sestet of a belittlement of his own drama. This (speech) act of belittlement – in both its communicative and effective aspects³ – is accomplished through the use of derogatory terms, which depict Modena’s play as being unworthy of the swan as a Classical figure of the poet,⁴ as well through the use of the image of the crow as a creature associated in Jewish sources with death and misfortune (Farbridge 1923, 81).

The conciseness of the sonnet form allows, naturally, for only a hint of the central issues, which will be discussed in the present article. The first issue focuses on the involvement of both Modena and Sulam in what Dvora Bregman and Ann Brener discuss as the “intensive Jewish participation in the culture of the Italian Renaissance” (1991, 234) – and, accordingly, in the culture of early modern Europe; to use Lynn Westwater’s term, Modena and Sulam are examples of a “skilled cultural intermediary” (2020, 22). Modena as a young boy studied Hebrew, Latin and Italian, and was “well versed in non-Jewish books . . . including the Vulgate, the New Testament, works on Latin and Italian grammar and style, Italian poetry” (Adelman 1988, 20 and 44). Moreover, as an extensive letter-writer and teacher he became “the

² This spelling of of Sulam’s name with one “l” follows that used by Don Harrán (Sulam 2009) and Lynn Westwater (2020).

³ These terms refer respectively to the classic definitions of speech acts, set out by Austin (1975) and Searle (1969): illocutionary, the act of accomplishing some communicative purpose; and perlocutionary, the act of accomplishing some effect on the action, thoughts or beliefs of the hearers.

⁴ See for example Plato’s *Phaedo*. The section from *Phaedo* reads: “the swans: for they, when they realise that they have to die, sing more, and sing more sweetly than they have ever sung before, rejoicing at the prospect of going into the presence of that god [Apollo] whose servants they are” (Plato 85b 1955, 95).

recognized representative of Jewish scholarship to the Christian world” (Roth 1924-1927, 207-8). Sulam (ca. 1592-1641) knew Italian, basic Hebrew, possibly Latin, Spanish and French (Sulam 2009, 33). She also founded a literary salon, “which fostered Christian-Jewish intellectual interaction of an intensity and duration unique in early modern Venice” (Westwater 2020, 15). Finally, this issue of Jewish participation in the Italian Renaissance encompasses the aspect of the sonnet’s “monitory” function as an authorial preface (in Gérard Genette’s terms): “this is why and this is how you should read this book” (Genette 1997, 197). In other words, Modena’s purpose in this “Prefatorial Poem” as paratext is to draw both Sulam and the “benevolent Readers/benigni Lettori” addressed in his second “Prose Preface” to *L’Ester* into the intellectual milieu of the Italian-Jewish Renaissance. This milieu appropriately sustains a particular way of reading, which incorporates knowledge of Classical, European and Jewish sources.

The second issue focuses on the aspects of figuration and performance, that is, the various ways in which ideas are transmuted into imagery – through the use of a variety of tropes (simile, metaphor, symbol, allegory) – and enacted particularly through language and costume. Regarding tropes, as Raymond Gibbs writes, “imagery provides a means by which two previously dissimilar domains can be incorporated into one concept” (1994, 133). Tropes will be discussed specifically in relation to the figures of the swan, raven and dove (part 1), as well the allegorical figure of Truth (part 2). Regarding performance, its two aspects will be discussed in relation to the figure of Truth (part 2), as well as (part 3) the “figurations of woman”, to use Athalya Brenner’s term (1995, 63), most particularly enacted in the character of Vashti.

I turn, then, to the figure of the swan as poet. This figure is not present solely in Plato’s *Phaedo*,⁵ but – and for Modena, most accessibly – also in Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, published between 1516-32, and considered “the most famous poem of the Renaissance in Italy” (Ross 2009, ix). Modena was well acquainted with this work, having himself “copied into Hebrew [several stanzas] word for word when I was 12 years old” (Modena 1932, 33).⁶ The figure of the swan appears in Canto 35 of *Orlando Furioso*, in

⁵ Marsilio Ficino “in 1484 put into print the first complete Latin version of Plato’s dialogues and in 1496 published a series of annotations and commentaries on the major dialogues” (Hankins 1990, 5).

⁶ Here is one example of Modena’s translation, in which he skillfully preserves the original ottava rima and the poetic speaker’s entreating voice (Canto 1, Stanza 2, Ariosto 1964, 1; Ariosto 1975, 117; Modena 1932, 33):

Dirò d’Orlando in un medesimo tratto
cosa non detta in prosa mai, né in rima:

which St John the Evangelist describes it to Lord Astolfo (Stanzas 14 and 23. Ariosto, 1964, 1203-6; Ariosto 1977, 339-41):

14

...

Fra tanti augelli son duo cigni soli,
Bianchi, Signor, come èl a vostra insegna,
che vengon lieti riportando in bocca
sicuramente il nome che lor tocca.

[...]

Two birds there are, and only two, which I
Believe can sing the praises of the great:
Two silver swans, as white, my lord, as your
Proud eagle⁷; in their mouths fame is secure.]

23

Son, come i cigni, anco i poeti rari,
poeti che non sian del nome indegni.

[Poets (like swans up here)* are rare on earth;
I mean true poets, who deserve the name.]

* the moon

che per amor venne in furore e matto,
d'uom che sì saggio era stimato prima;
se da colei che tal quasi m'ha fatto,
che 'l poco ingegno ad or ad or mi lima,
me ne sarà però tanto concesso,
che mi basti a finir quanto ho promesso.

[And of Orlando I will also tell
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,
Of the mad frenzy that for love befell
One who so wise was held in former time,
If she who my poor talent by her spell
Has so reduced that I resemble him [Petrarch],
Will grant me now sufficient for my task:
The wit to reach the end is all I ask.]

מאורלנדו אדבר יחד דבר
לא סופר בספור לא ברונה,
כי על חשק לכסילות עבר
מאיש חכם נחשב ראשונה;
אם מאותה אשר ככה כבר
עשתני ומעט שכלי גוררת, נא
תתרצה להריק עד יהי די
השלים אשר הבטחתי בידי.

⁷ A white eagle is displayed on the Coat of Arms of the Italian House of Este.

Invested with sacred authority, St John bestows upon the swan the attributes of song/poetry and praise. Such attributes are consequently transferred through simile to the poet, thereby marking the function and importance of his work. Such significance is intensified through the visual emphasis on colour, as well as on the parallels between the heavenly and earthly realms.

Yet Modena subsequently turns, somewhat enigmatically, to the two figures of the raven and the dove as metaphors of literary creativity. The contrast between them is at first, a visual one: between the raven's black feathers and the white feathers of the dove. This becomes a trope for the recognized contrast in early modern Europe between two natures or personalities; for example, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6), Lysander graphically describes his rejection of Hermia (with her dark hair and skin) and his love for Helena by declaring: "Who will not change a raven for a dove?" (2.2.120). As explained in R.A. Foakes' notes: "[the raven is] Harsh, ominous and black . . . in contrast to the mild nature and whiteness of the dove" (Shakespeare 2003, 85). Such a contrast is also present in Jewish tradition. There is, most evidently, the biblical story of the flood, in which it is the dove – "regarded by the ancient Hebrews as a symbol of purity and innocence" (Farbridge 1923, 80) – and not the raven who returns with a "plucked olive leaf" ("ale zayit țeref", *Genesis* 8.11: Alter 2019, vol. 1, 30; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 1.29). There is also a continued discussion of the contrast between the raven and the dove in Jewish rabbinic sources. A significant example is to be found in the *Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian Talmud), which comprises part of the "great rabbinic corpora" that was created and compiled in the period from the late first to the beginning of the seventh century C. E. (Katz 2007, 1). In the *Tractate Kiddushin* (70b) there is a passage which explains the incompatibilities of marriage between two lineages that are symbolically called "the dove's house" and the "raven's house". This explanation is achieved through the creation of a mnemonic that transforms a ritual, physical impurity into a spiritual impurity that affects marital status: "impure [raven] – impure [unfit for food/flawed], pure [dove] – pure [fit for food/unflawed]" (*Koren Talmud Bavli* 2012-2021, 22.396).⁸ Within this context of the traditional contrast between the raven and dove, what does Modena's elusive metaphoric comparison of himself and his play with the raven accomplish? What is the reason for, and the way of reading, *L'Ester*? In answer, Modena uses this image to visually and metaphorically incorporate the dissimilar semantic domains of bird and literary work (to return to Gibbs's terms), in order to vividly illustrate his rejection of Cebà's poetic aesthetic

⁸ The Soncino Talmud explains the terms "pure/impure" in terms of food that one is permitted/not permitted to eat according to Jewish dietary laws (Soncino Babylonian Talmud 1935-52. Tractate Kiddushin, Book 2, 96n11).

and his threatening influence over Sulam (through his continued attempts to convert her to Christianity; Sulam 2009, 35-8). For Modena's allusion to the raven's blackened appearance and correspondingly flawed character serves, through a recognized European and Jewish trope, to emphasize the aesthetic and thematic contrast between Cebà's poem and his own play. In his "Prose Preface" to Sulam, Modena writes of Cebà's poem *La reina Esther* that it is the "rarest of poems" ("rarissimo Poema"), as well as being "distinguished and important" ("riguardevole, e notabile", Preface 1). Modena transforms these statements in his "Prefatorial Poem" through the metaphor of this poem – a "story spun in threads of gold" ("L'Historia, in fila d'or") – that juxtaposes the act of poetic creation with the craft of spinning thread. This serves to transform the written words into objects of beauty, which also possess qualities of fantasy and seduction. In contrast, the poem as a raven possesses more coarse aesthetic qualities of darkness and impurity, comprising an honest rebuttal to the misleading message of the Christian poem, and serving as an attempt to preserve Sulam's Jewish integrity.

2. The Voice of Truth: Prologue and Epilogue

It is Modena as poet and playwright who introduces *L'Ester*. It is subsequently the allegorical dramatisation of the figure of Truth, as prologue and epilogue, which provides a central meaning and cultural context for the play.⁹ This dramatisation thereby functions as two "framing texts"; the prologue "can immediately engage the spectator in the imaginative theatrical world that the ensuing play inhabits, while the epilogue can both sustain the illusion and then, possibly, return the audience to everyday reality" (Schneider 2016, 6). Cited here are key lines:

Prologue

Già v'è chi dice per vendermi in capo
 La corona d'or fin, ch'io son Regina,
 E per la veste candida, e lucente
 La santa Castità

...

⁹ Scholars have briefly noted Modena's innovation of Jewish biblical drama in his conforming "to the new dramatic conceptions which had arisen" (Roth 1943, 7), his "inculcating of a sort of philosophic moral" (Besso 1938, 38), and his attempt "to revise the drama to make it conform to the changed theatrical taste of the times" (Shulvass 1973, 249). More recently, Arbib notes that Modena's play is "blank-verse tragedy in five acts . . . preceded by a prologue. This format which originated with Seneca, was common in Italian sacred tragedies" (2003, 112).

Il mio vestito è bianco, perch'io sono
 E casta, e pura, il qual esser ben puote
 Tal hor coperto sì, ma mai macchiato.
 Porto quì ne la destra il torcio acceso,
 Con un velo, che copre il suo gran lume.
 (10-13, 33-7)

[Already someone says, seeing upon my head
 A crown of pure gold, that I am a Queen,
 And for my simple gown of shining white
 That I am blessed Chastity

...

My dress is white because I am
 Both chaste and pure: it may sometimes
 Be well concealed, but never stained.
 I carry here in my right hand a fiery torch
 The brightness of whose light is shaded by a veil.]

The Prologue Takes Leave

Ecco levato à la mia face il velo,
 In quāto à qsta vera Historia, aspetta,
 Com'ella fù, cosi rappresentata,
 Da qual può haver ogni audiéte appreso,
 Di non insuperbir per alto stato,
 Ne disperar per infima bassezza
 Poi che gl'Astri infelici, e prosperi hanno
 Rettor ch'à voglia sua le cangia influo.
 (1-8)

[Here I have lifted the veil from my torch
 Inasmuch as this true story waiting
 As it was to be represented thus
 So that all who listen could learn
 Not to grow proud because of high estate
 Nor to despair because of low position
 Since both unhappy and prosperous Stars
 Have a Governor whose will changes their influence.]

What is highly significant is the performative aspect of this figure of Truth. Though Modena attests in his preface to his “benevolent Readers” that his play was never performed,¹⁰ it was actually rewritten from a play that had

¹⁰ Modena writes in his preface to his “benevolent Readers”: “As this task [of writing the play] was not followed by a performance, and having devoted much effort to it, I

been “publicly presented before a select company of Venetian nobility and gentry” (Christian and Jewish) in 1559 and 1592 (Roth 1943, 78). Recognition of the performative aspect of Truth is thus paramount, and is connected, first and foremost, to the Jewish holiday of Purim, or the “feast of Esther” as Modena calls it (Prologue 1). The costumed figure of Truth would readily have been perceived by Jews as ushering them into the carnivalesque atmosphere of this holiday, and into the custom of masquerades that is a central performative aspect (see the *Introduction* to the issue). Modena himself describes Purim’s carnivalesque atmosphere in his book *Historia De Riti Hebraici Vita & Osservanze de gl’Hebrei di questi tempi* (*The History of the Rites, Customs, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews*, Part 3. Chapter 10. 1638, 81; 1650, 166-7): “every one makes as great a Feast, as he is able; eating, and drinking more freely, then at other times. And after supper, they go on visiting one another, entertaining their friends with Banquets, Pastimes, and all manner of Jollities, and Entertainments of mirth [Poi gl’amici vanno a trovarsi l’un l’atro, facendosi ricevimenti, e feste, e bagordi]”.¹¹



Fig. 2: *Historia de Riti Hebraici* 1638, public domain, source: gallica.bnf.fr
Bibliothèque nationale de France

did not wish it to say in my desk, but bring it to light to amuse whoever desires to read it, and to please those who want to stage it” (Preface 2).

¹¹ Modena composed a manuscript version of this book at the request of Sir Henry Wotton, English diplomat and author, to be presented to King James I of England (Roth 1924-1927). The book was first published in France in 1637, and subsequently in a revised edition in Venice in 1638 (Francesconi 2016, 100).

Yet this figure of Truth also ushers Modena's "benevolent Readers" into a fascinating cultural context of biblical interpretation and enactment. As such, this is a unique example of what J. L. Styan terms "visual allegory" (1996, 48), particularly as it relates to the medieval morality play, in which "the actors impersonate characters that are themselves impersonations . . . When he watches the play, the spectator perceives double – he sees both what is in front of his nose and what he is invited by convention to see of significance beyond this" (48-9). Thus, Truth interprets for her audience the various aspects of her costume, noting the golden crown that marks her as a Queen and her white gown as a symbol of chastity and purity, noting as well her use of props (the torch and veil) that symbolize insight and knowledge. Her removal of the veil from her torch at the play's end embodies the revelation of her message concerning restraint from pride and despair, as well as ultimate faith in the "Governor" who controls one's fate.

Attending to this tradition of Christian morality plays is not coincidental. For in the context of Modena's play, the figure of Truth is not solely a representative of specific moral qualities, but also sustains an allegorical reading evident in a rich Jewish and Christian tradition. Most particularly, Modena's figure of Truth makes mention in the Prologue of "my other illustrious sisters" ("Illustri mie sorelle, Prologue, 20), as well as of "noble Justice / The dearest sister that I have on earth" ("l'alma Giustitia, / La più cara sorella, ch'habbia in terra", 59-60). Taken together, these lines comprise a reference to the allegory of the Four Daughters of God – Mercy, Righteousness or Justice, Truth and Peace. An outstanding example of the Christian tradition is the fifteenth-century morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*. The Four Daughters of God appear at the play's beginning, dressed in symbolic colours (though somewhat differently than in Modena's play).¹² In the course of the play, the figure of Veritas/Truth says (*Castle of Perseverance* 2010, 3181-93; 1999, 3025-37):

I am Veritas and trew wyl be
 In word and werke to olde and newe.
 Was nevere man in fawte of me
 Dampnyd nor savyd, but it were dew.

¹² The stage plan that precedes the play includes the following comment: "The iiij dowterys schul be clad in mentelys, Mercy in wyth, Rythwysnesse in red altogedyr, Trewthe in sad (somber) grene, and Pes al in blake, and thei schulpleye in the place altogedyr tyl they brynge up the sowle" (*Castle of Perseverance* 2010). In his *Explanatory Notes*, David N. Klausner writes: "The Four Daughters of God wear costumes in traditionally symbolic colors: white is a standard symbol for Mercy, Peace's black is the color of mourning, Justice wears the red of a judge, and Truth's green symbolizes eternity" (2010, *Stage Plan*).

...

For I am Trewthe and trewth the wyl bere,
As grete God hymself us byd.
Ther schal nothyng the sowle dere
But synne that the body dyd.

[I am Veritas and true will be
In word and work, to old and new.
Was never man lacking me
Damned or saved but it was due.

...

For I am Truth and truth will tell
As great God himself us bid.
There shall nothing the soul fell
Except the sin that the body did.]

In the Midrash on the *Book of Genesis*, the four virtues from Psalm 85.11 are personified – “mercy and truth have struggled, justice and peace have armed oneself” (“*hesed- ve-’emet nifgashu, tsedek ye-shalom nashaku*” Alter 2019, 3.206; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 4.79) – as they argue in the presence of God over the advisability of creating humankind (*Genesis* 1.26).¹³ This Midrash reads (*Midrash Rabbah* N.D. Section 8:5; 1.22):¹⁴

אמר רבי סמון, בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לברא את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת
פתים פתים, ונחבורות חבורות, מהם אומרים אל יברא, ומהם אומרים יברא, הדיא הוא דכתיב
[תהלים פ"ה]: חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלום נשקו. חסד אומר יברא, שהוא גומל חסדים.
ואמת אומר אל יברא, שכלו שקרים. צדק אומר יברא, שהוא עושה צדקות. שלום אומר אל
יברא, דכוליה קטטה.

[Said Rabbi Simon, When the Holy One, blessed be He came to create the first man, the ministering angels formed sects and parties, some of whom said “Let him be created,” and some of them said “Let him not be created,” thus it is written [Psalm 85:11]: Mercy and truth fought together, justice and peace warred with each other. Mercy said, “Let him be created, for he will perform acts of righteousness.” Truth said, “Let him not be created, for he is all lies.” Justice said, ‘Let him be created, for he will perform acts of justice’. Peace said, “Let him not be created, for he is all strife.]

¹³ *Genesis* 1.26: “And God said, ‘Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness’” (“*Va-yomer ’Elohim, ‘Na’aseh ’adam be-tsalmenu, kidmutenu*”, Alter 2019, 1.12; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 1.15-16).

¹⁴ My translation integrates two translations: *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 1985, 78-9; *Midrash Rabbah* 1939, 58.

Jewish scholars would have been familiar with such a Midrash. In his Preface addressed to his “benevolent Readers”, Modena notes that “some glosses of the Rabbis, whom the Jews term the Midrashim have been inserted both for the greater interest of the scholars and to validate the facts of the case” (“come anco l’hà causato l’havervi inserto alcune glose de Rabini, detti da gli Hebrei Midrassim, per maggior gusto dei dotti, e verità del caso”, Preface 2). On their part, Christian readers would have been familiar with the Four Daughters of God through medieval biblical commentaries on *Psalms* 85:11 (such as those by Hugh of St Victor) and through dramatisations in Latin, French and English (Moore 2004; Traver 1907, 1925).

Modena’s use of this allegorical figure of Truth relates it therefore to this intertwined Jewish and Christian tradition. The materiality of her costume is found in both the plays *Castle of Perseverance* and *L’Ester*. There is, however, a meaningful distinction between the green costume of Truth in the Christian text, symbolizing eternity, and that of the white costume of Truth in the Jewish text, symbolizing purity and chastity. Each distinct use of symbolism is therefore appropriate to a particular literary and cultural context; in the Christian morality play it is the endurance of truth despite humankind’s sins, while in *L’Ester* it looks forward to the removal of Vashti as Queen and the crowning of Esther in her stead. For Modena, in his preface addressed to Sulam, describes Esther as “pious and righteous” (Preface 1), while in the play itself she is described as surpassing Vashti “in beauty / In grace, uprightness, virtue, and knowledge” (3.4.58-9). What is more, in the Christian play the message is that ultimately the demands of Truth and Righteousness for God’s judgement will “be tempered by us, Mercy and Peace / May pasc be us, Mercy and Pes” (1999, 3067; 2010, 3223). In contrast, in Modena’s play there is an overwhelming strength to the value of Truth, stated dramatically and explicitly to his readers in the epilogue. In this manner, Truth’s final framing statement in Modena’s *L’Ester* – with its use of spatial imagery representing a fall from power and social status – is both a metaphor of the exilic Jewish situation as expressed throughout the *Book of Esther* and a (speech) act that effectively returns the reader to that “everyday reality” (Schneider 2016, 6) in which faith in God’s will is paramount.

There is, however, an additional aspect to this allegorical enactment of Truth, which can also be read as the figure of a Wise Woman. This figure is very much a part of biblical tradition; as Robert Scott remarks, “there is regular reference to wise women in the Bible” (Scott 2007, 97). As examples he cites Deborah as a “prophet-woman” (“ishah-nevi’ah”, *Judges* 4:4: Alter 2019, 2.94; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 2.67), as well as the Wise Woman of Tekoah (*2 Samuel* 14:2: Alter 2019, 2.364; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 2.224). Furthermore, in the *Book of Proverbs* the quality of Ḥokhmah/Wisdom is allegorized as the figure of a woman (the Hebrew term being a feminine noun), who says: “For

my tongue declares truth” (“Ki-’emet, yehgeh ḥiki”, Proverbs 8:7: Alter 2019, 3.377; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 4.144). As Carol Newsom explains, this figure of *Wisdom* “speaks autonomously. . . [her speech] is ‘straight’ [*meyesharim*], ‘right’ [*tsedek*], and ‘true’ [*’emet*” (Newsom 1999, 95; *Proverbs* 8:6-8; *Biblia Rabbinica* 1972, 4.144). The figure of Truth in both the plays *Castle of Perseverance* and *L'Ester* thus delivers a speech on moral and religious behaviour that demonstrates her consummate wisdom.

3. Figurations of Woman: Wisdom and Voyeurism

What happens, then, in Modena's *L'Ester* to the figurations of woman as Wisdom? In this play the quality of wisdom is highly valued, possessed as it is by the three women from the biblical story, originally portrayed as: “Vashti, a ‘bad’ wife, Esther, a ‘good’ wife, and Zeresh, a model wife, a wise and knowing companion to the wrong husband” (Brenner 1995, 64). The epithet of “wise” is understandably used for Esther and Zeresh:

RE Poi che la nuova sposa, è così saggia,
 E si honesta, e si bella à gli occhi miei,
 Che più bramar, ne più augurar saprei

...

(3.4.41-3)

[KING As my new bride is so full of wisdom,
 And so virtuous and so beautiful to my eyes,
 That I could never wish myself a better.]

ZETHAR Dissi ben'io, Ester è saggia, e senza
 Gran desegni non son questi conviti.

(5.6.57-8)

[ZETHAR Then I was right, Esther is wise and these
 Banquets were not held without important reasons.]

ZERESH I consigli donneschi miei non u'hanno
 Altro apportato, che sodisfattione.

HAMAN Mai cosa u'occultai, che consciuta
 V'hò (ben che dōna) saggia, e affezionata

...

(4.7.15-18)

[ZERESH My womanly advice has brought you
 Nothing but satisfaction.

HAMAN: I have never hidden anything from you,

Since, though a woman, I know you are wise and loving]

Esther's wisdom is acknowledged both by her husband and his Vizier Zethar, particularly as the latter realizes that her banquets are part of a larger plan. On her part, Zeresh as a figure of wisdom echoes the *Midrash Rabbah* on the *Book of Esther* (Section 9:2), which states: "Not one of them could give counsel like his wife Zeresh, though he had three hundred and sixty-five counselors" (*Midrash Rabbah* N.D. 3.128; *Midrash Rabbah* 1977, 110).

Yet in Modena's *L'Ester* the balance between these two characters – and between that of Vashti – is radically changed from what is portrayed in the *Book of Esther*. Dramatized in the first two Acts of this play through extensive monologues and dialogues, Vashti is distinctly not the "bad wife" of the biblical *Book of Esther*. Indeed, Modena's development of Vashti has been highlighted by various scholars, whether it is: Marina Arbib who notes that "Vashti is the only character to display dramatic liveliness" (Arbib 2003, 123); or Fabrizio Lelli, who remarks that the "moral goals of Leone's tragedy appear, for instance, in his sympathetic portrayal of Queen Vashti [and her tragic fate]" (Lelli 2020, 26); or Chiara Carmen Scordari, who writes that Vashti is "an ambiguous character embodying both the status of the guilty enemy and the innocent victim" (Scordari 2020, 58).

It is Vashti's Nurse – a figure "endowed with wisdom and intelligence" in Greek literature (Colombo 2022, 6) – who in Act 1 describes her own love and loyalty for the Queen:

NUTRICE Vasti, à me figlia per il dato latte,
 Ma per grado, Regina, e per amore
 Soprattutto le cose, amata, e cara
 (1.4.72-4)

[NURSE Vashti! I call you daughter as you were my nurseling,
 But rightfully my Queen, beloved by me
 Above all other things, admired and cherished.]

The Nurse subsequently mourns Vashti after the Queen's suicide in Act 2,¹⁵ relating the story of this act to "two women of the court" ("due donne di Corte"):

¹⁵ In the Book of Esther, no mention is made of Vashti's death. In Tractate Megilla of the Babylonian Talmud (16a), Esther is cited as stating: "First he [Haman] was jealous of Vashti and killed her, now he is jealous of me and desires to kill me" (Koren Talmud Bavli 2012-2021, 11A.292).

NUTRICE Eh madre, anzi sì, sono, mi rispose
In termine di morte ch'il suo ufficio
Il già preso veleno ha fatto, ed ecco
Ch'al cuor arriva, voi ui rimanete
In pace viva, ch'io già moro, moro.
Gl'ultimi acenti, questi fur, che fuori
Da quella saggia, ornata, e cara bocca.
(2.3.105-11)

[NURSE "Alas! mother, indeed I am dying," she replied,
"As far as death is concerned, the poison
I have already taken has done its work,
And is now reaching my heart. You must stay here
And live in peace, as I am dying, dying!"
These were the last words that were uttered
By those wise, beautiful and beloved lips.]

The Nurse underlines her own pain, and Vashti's dying desperation, as well as emphasizing Vashti's wisdom in her recognition of her own death and her wish for the Nurse's continued life. This moving of Vashti to center stage (so to speak) through the use of direct speech, is distinctly evident in a previous monologue, in Act 1, in which she says despairingly of herself:

VASTI M'havessi, almeno la Natura dato
Capell' irsuti, e neri, e fronte angusta,
Con ciglia tese, et occhi biechi, e torti,
Ruvide guancie, e labra rilevate,
E la sébianza in fin di vn mostro horrédo
Che cosi la beltà, la beltà srale,
Dono infelice, à donna saggia, e casta,
Non havrebbe hora mosso, il Rè marito
(Se marito da me deve chiamarsi)
A si illecita cosa, commandarmi,
Si che fuori sarei, di tanto affanno.
(1.4.57-67)

[VASHTI If only Nature had thought to give me
Shaggy black hair and narrow forehead,
Frowning brows and dull, squinting eyes,
Rough complexion and protruding lips,
And, finally, all the features of a terrible monster
Since in this way beauty, fragile beauty,
Unlucky gift to a wise and virtuous woman,

Would not now have moved the King, my husband
 (If I indeed may even call him husband)
 To force on me so reprehensible an act,
 And I should be relieved of so much shame.]

Vashti utilizes vivid pictures to express her despair, creating a grotesque image of an ugly woman in the guise of a monstrous animal. This image comprises the sole protection for a “wise and virtuous woman” against the act of male voyeurism ordered by the King in the *Book of Esther*. Indeed, rabbinic pondering of Vashti’s beauty is evident in the *Tractate Megilla* of the *Babylonian Talmud* (15a), in which there is the following discussion: “The Sages taught: There were four women of extraordinary beauty in the world: Sarah, and Abigail, Rahab, and Esther. And according to the one who said Esther was greenish,¹⁶ remove Esther and insert Vashti” (*Koren Talmud Bavli* 2012-2021, 11A.283). Yet this seemingly harmless attribute of beauty ultimately possesses devastating consequences for Vashti. For the *Tractate Megilla* (12b) has previously expanded on the biblical text by explaining that King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti to immodestly display her beauty. Thus, he turns to the men at this feast and says: “Do you wish to see her? They said to him: Yes, provided that she be naked” (*Koren Talmud Bavli* 2012-2021, 11A.266).

The significant connection between wisdom and voyeurism is at the center of a dialogue in Act 1 between Vashti and her Nurse, regarding the King’s demand to appear at his feast:

VASTI Dinanzi forse di lui sol? dinanzi
 Ad infiniti Principi, e Signori,
 A far mostra di me, si come apunto
 Si suol far di destrieri ò palafreni.
 NUTRICE E voi, che rispondeste à quei messaggi?
 VASTI Dissi, ch’io mi stupia del Re, Ch’essendo
 Si prudente signor, tal’ ambasciata
 Mandasse impertiente, à una Regina,
 Che da sì alta prole origin trahe,
 E che ‘n l’imperio, gl’è moglie, e cōpagna,
 E che non era cosa d’essequire.
 NUTRICE Cara Regina mia, meglio era forse

¹⁶ This is a reference to Esther’s “greenish” or pale complexion, because of her other name Hadassah or Myrtle (*Koren Talmud Bavli* 2012-2021. 13a. vol. 11A, 271). This insistence on a connection between name and physical attribute is a recognized format of the Midrash, in which “it is something of a game, where points are gained with textual acumen and interpretive prowess” (Mandel 2017, 12)

Ubidir, che del Prencipe, e marito,
 O' giusta, ò ingiusta, che voglia sia,
 Si dee seguir.

VASTI Ben la dovea esequire,
 E che avuenuto fosse poscia à lui,
 Con più ragion, più degnamente quello
 Ch'avenne, e già nō son cent'anni ancora,
 Al possente Candaule Re di Lidi,
 Che per mostrar à Gigi suo privato
 (Bé che fà per inganno) anch'ei la moglie
 Ella sdegnata in compagnia de Gigi
 L'uccise, e poi per suo marito il tolse.
 (1.4.121-43)

[VASHTI In front of him alone? No, no, before
 A multitude of princes and of nobles
 To put myself on view, as is the custom
 When showing off a palfrey or a mare.
 NURSE So what did you reply to his commands?
 VASHTI I said I was astonished by the King,
 That so wise a sovereign as he could send
 Such an impertinent message to a Queen
 Whose lineage is of the very highest,
 Who shares the realm with him as wife and helpmeet:
 A deed like this should never have been done.
 NURSE My dearest Queen, perhaps it had been better
 To obey, as whether the will of King or husband
 Be just or unjust, we can only submit.
 VASHTI Yes, he should have carried it out, and then
 The next thing to happen should have been,
 And with more reason and more deservedly,
 The same as happened not a hundred years ago
 To the mighty Candaules, King of Lydia,
 Who for having shown his wife to Gyges,
 His bodyguard (although it was by stealth),
 She herself, outraged, together with Gyges,
 Killed him and took Gyges as her husband.]

This exchange is central for understanding *L'Ester* as a Venetian-Jewish play. Vashti's reference to the "palfrey and mare" echoes a passage in the *Midrash Rabbah* on the *Book of Esther* (Section 3:14), thereby attuning *L'Ester* to Jewish scholars. Here Vashti spitefully reminds the King of the issues of social propriety and noble lineage: "She sent and said to him, 'You used to be my father's stable-boy, so you got into the habit of parading before you naked

whores, but now that you have ascended the throne, you still have not given up your vile habits” (*Midrash Rabbah* N.D. 3.106; [*Midrash*] *Esther Rabbah* I 1989, 95). Vashi subsequently demonstrates her knowledge of *The Histories*, written by the Greek historian Herodotus,¹⁷ in which the tale of Candaules appears, thereby attuning *L’Ester* to a wider European context.

What is more, this reference to Herodotus’s tale highlights an important and interesting connection with the *Book of Esther* itself; as Ivan Cohen writes, the two authors of *The Histories* (fifth century BCE; Berlin 2001, xxx) and the *Book of Esther* (fourth century BCE; Berlin 2001, xli) “who wrote about Persian subjects drew on a similar collection of narrative motifs, which present a conventional picture of Persian life that includes drinking parties, voyeurism, improper sexual advances, and general licentiousness” (2004, 59). This shared emphasis on the forbidden aspect of voyeurism, within the context of social propriety and noble lineage, is evident in both the Greek text and the “embellishment” of the *Book of Esther* in *Targum Sheni* (*Second Targum*) (Ivan Cohen 2004, 58), the Aramaic interpretive translation of the Hebrew Bible (fifth century C.E.; Grossfeld and Sperling, 2007). Cited below are selected sections from these two texts:

[8]. . . Gyges cried out and said, ‘Master, what a perverse thing to say! How can you tell me to look at my mistress naked? As soon as a woman sheds her clothes, she sheds her modesty as well. There are long-established truths for us to learn from, and one of them is that everyone should look to his own. I believe you: she is the most beautiful woman in the world. Please don’t ask me to do anything wrong.’

. . .

[10] . . . She realized what her husband had done; despite the fact that she had been humiliated, she did not cry out and she did not let him see that she knew, because she intended to make him pay. The point is that, in Lydia – in fact, more or less throughout the non-Greek world – it is a source of great shame even for a man to be seen naked.

[11] . . . When he [Gyges] arrived she said to him: ‘Gyges, there are now two paths before you: I leave it up to you which one you choose to take. Either you can kill Candaules and have me and the kingdom of Lydia for your own, or you must die yourself right now, so that you will never again do exactly what Candaules wants you to do and see what you should not see. Yes, either he or you must die – either the one whose idea this was or the one who saw me naked when he had no right to do so.’ . . . ‘The place from where he showed me to you naked’, she replied, ‘will be the place from which to launch

¹⁷ The *Histories* was translated into Latin by Lorenzo Valla, “and after 1455 he [Herodotus] was generally read in Valla’s translation” (Foley 2016, 220). It was translated into Italian by Matteo Maria Boiardo, “sometime between 1474 and 1493 . . . [and] published in five editions between 1533 and 1565” (Looney 2016, 232-3).

the attack against him. The attack will happen when he's asleep'.
(*The Histories*, Book I, 1998, 6-7)

So the king's nobles went and told her, but she would not respect them. Rather she said to them: 'Go and tell the foolish king that his ideas are invalid and his decrees not proper. Indeed I am Queen Vashti, daughter of Evil-Merodakh, daughter of the son of Nebukhadnezzar, king of Babylonia. Since I was born until now, no person has ever seen my body except you, O king, alone. If I were to appear before you and before the 127 kings crowned with diadems, they will kill you and take me as a wife.' Whereupon a noble Persian lady replied, saying to Queen Vashti: 'Even if the king should kill you and destroy your beauty from you, you should still not publicly disgrace your name and the name of your ancestors, and not display your body to everyone except to the king alone'.

(*Targum Sheni*, 1.10-12; Grossfeld 1991, 128-9)

It is remarkable that in both these texts the insulted, embattled Queen is provided with such a passionate voice, which she uses to make a determined stand against the breaking of the social norm forbidding voyeurism. Care is also taken in each text to provide a commentary on this norm through additional voices. Thus, in *The Histories* the King's personal guard Gyges adamantly condemns Candaules's request on the basis of "long-established truths", while subsequently the extradiegetic, omniscient narrator provides an explanation "to questions which the narrator assumes the narratees will have . . . [in this instance] answering his narratees' implied question as to why the queen would be upset" (Jong 2004, 110). In the *Targum Sheni*, the significance of the Persian noblewoman should not be underestimated. For she speaks as one of high status openly and directly to Vashti, in order to support the Queen by defending the social propriety of the Persian court and Vashti's own noble lineage. In Modena's *L'Ester*, however, Vashti's attempt to protect her modesty and queenly rights ultimately finds little support. This is quite evident in the words uttered by the Nurse. For she not only does she circumvent the social norm against male voyeurism and replace it with the norm of a wife's obedience, but she does so from the periphery of power and social status that may be perceived as undermining her as a traditional figure of wisdom.

Subsequently, the Nurse's voice is itself cut short. Following her report of Vashti's suicide in Act 2, the Nurse's dialogue with the "two women of the court" ("due donne di Corte") concludes with the following lines:

NUTRICE O me felice, già l'alma leggiera
Mi sento, e abandonar la scorza frale.
DONNE Non esser di te stessa, aspra homicida,

Che convien sopportar gl'avversi casi,
 Chi varcar vuol di questo mond'il calle,
 O suenturata vecchia morrà certo.

(2.3.133-8)

[NURSE Ah, how happy I am, I can already feel
 My soul lighten as it leaves my frail body.
 WOMEN Do not be the bitter murderer of yourself,
 It's always better to endure misfortune
 Everyone who enters the highway of this world
 Will surely die, even you, unfortunate old woman.]

With the deaths of Vashti and her Nurse, and their removal from the play, *L'Esther* returns (regretfully? understandably?) in the subsequent three Acts to the more traditional narrative of the *Book of Esther*.

4. Conclusion

This article opened with a discussion of a paratext, the Prefatorial Poem to Modena's *L'Esther*. It seems appropriate, then, that this article concludes with a discussion of another paratext, specifically the title of the play – *L'Esther: Tragedia Tratta dalls Sacra Scrittura (Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture)*. In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette defines the “descriptive function” of a title (1997, 93):

which is thematic, rhematic, mixed, or ambiguous, depending on which feature or features the sender chooses as the bearer(s) of this description – inevitably always partial and therefore selective – and depending also on the addressee's interpretation, which appears most often as a hypothesis about the motives of the sender, who, for the addressee, is the author.

For the readers/addressees of the play *L'Esther* – be they contemporaneous Jews and Christians, or present-day scholars of early modern European-Jewish culture – this title is certainly “mixed” or “ambiguous”. Thus, members of both groups could rightly question the author's motives, in the entitling of his (partial but crucial) rewriting of the *Book of Esther* as a tragedy rather than as a Jewish celebration. For this biblical book, understood to explain the carnivalesque holiday of Purim (see *Introduction*), is itself considered “an early example of the literary carnivalesque”, with the “turnabouts for Haman (i.e., his fall) and for Esther and Mordechai (i.e., their ascent)” (Craig 1995, 109). To whose tragedy, then, does the title refer? Is it the averted tragedy of the Jews in exile in Persia? Could it be Esther's averted tragedy in the revealing of her foreign, Jewish identity as a Queen in a Persian court?

Or could it be Vashti's actualized tragedy, given that she is so compellingly presented in Modena's play as a "negative example" (to use Micha Lazarus's term), when even a "tragedy's most depraved episodes alert the audience to sins they may thereby avoid" (Lazarus 2017, 43) – in this instance, sins of pride, independence, and a (misguided) wisdom.

Yet these tragedies can also be understood within the wider context of Modena's life and times. Thus, the averted tragedy of the Jewish exiles in Persia is by inference also that of the Venetian Jews restricted to the Ghetto and under threat of expulsion. The Jewish Ghetto in Venice was established in 1516, when a Senatorial decree was issued, stipulating that all the Jews of Venice "shall be obliged to go at once to dwell together in the houses in the court within the Ghetto at San Hieronimo" (translated in Katz 2017, 8). The reason for this restriction was that:

. . . no godfearing subject of our state would have wished them [the Jews], after their arrival, to disperse throughout the city, sharing houses with Christians and going wherever they choose by day and night, perpetrating all those misdemeanours and detestable and abominable acts. (Katz 2017, 2)

As Lynn Westwater explains, the Jews were "free to leave the ghetto during the day but were locked in after sundown behind gates guarded by Christian watchmen whom the Jews were forced to salary" (2020, 6). Moreover, in 1637 the entire Jewish community of Venice was threatened with expulsion, "as a result of a crime committed by two Jews who received stolen goods and hid them in the ghetto"; this near expulsion "is testimony to the tenuous nature of Jewish collective security in Italy" (Cohen and Rabb 1988, 11).

In a more personal context, this averted tragedy could also be that of Modena himself. For Modena records in his *Autobiography* that after Jews from the Ghetto informed on him, the Venetian magistrates closed his printing shop for six months in 1634. Though it was reopened, the shop was sealed off again in 1635, and his grandson who worked there was released from prison after close to three months only after "great labor and effort and great expense" on Modena's part (Mark Cohen 1988, 141). This was because since "1548 Jews had not been allowed to work in publishing houses or to publish books, though this prohibition was not always enforced" (Adelman and Ravid 1988, 246-7). What is more, Modena was again at risk concerning the publication in Italy of his book *Historia De Riti Hebraici Vita & Osservanze de gl'Hebrei di questi tempi* (*The History of the Rites, Customes, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews*). For when he submitted the 1637 edition (printed in France) for scrutiny to the Venetian Inquisitor, "the Dominican friar Marco Ferro recommended the destruction of the work because of two offending passages dealing with the thirteen articles of Maimonides and with the doctrine of transmigration of soul" (Francesconi 2016, 117). Modena

subsequently removed these passages to enable the book's publication in Venice in 1638.

Finally, the title of the play is literally correct; it is the impending tragedy of Esther – and by direct implication, Sulam – who are both being warned not to emulate Vashti. Indeed, Sulam's personal and professional reputations were already precarious when Modena published *L'Esther*. This is evident from her intense epistolary relationship with Cebà (1618-1622), which began about his poem *La reina Esther*, and from its very beginning reveals his desire to convert her to Christianity. Thus his "missionary intent is apparent" when he recommends that Sulam ponder Canto 19 of his poem, which "contains a presentiment of Christ's coming" (Arbib 2003, 107). Subsequently he accuses her of sexual misconduct with the members of her literary salon (Westwater 2020, 15). Sulam was also accused of heresy in 1621 by the "priest and dramatist Baldassare Bonifaccio", who frequented her literary salon, concerning the issue of the immortality of the soul; in that year she courageously published her response to him in her *Manifesto* (Westwood 2020, 4). These vicissitudes certainly had their effect; after 1627 "any trace of her participation in literary society vanished" (Westwater 2020, 4).

To conclude, the biblical *Book of Esther* has raised complex responses from both Jews and Christians. In the *Talmud Bavli* (7a) the Rabbis disagree whether it should actually be "accorded the sanctity of sacred scrolls" (*Koren Talmud Bavli* 2012-2021, 11A.223). On his part Martin Luther responds in his *Tischreden* (*Table Talk*) to the carnivalesque aspect of this book, by categorically stating that it contains "much pagan naughtiness" ("vil heidnische unart", Bornkamm 1969, 189; Luther 1914, 302 [3391a]). Modena's *L'Esther* should continue to be studied within this complex tradition of cross-cultural readings, which can serve to highlight questions and proposals for further consideration.

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