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Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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Reading *L'Ester* by Leon of Modena in the Context of His Other Writings

Abstract

The article focuses on the play *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura*, composed in Italian by the Jewish Venetian Rabbi, preacher, and writer, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh (Judah Leon) of Modena and dedicated to his friend Sarra Copio Sullam . The article suggests a reading of the play in the context of other three other works of Modena: his book *Tsemaḥ Tsaddik (Flower of Righteousness*), his essay *Ḥayyey Yehudah* (*Life of Judah*), and his letter "Statement of Defense," which he wrote in defense of a woman suspected of practicing witchcraft. The article suggests that Vashti-Sarra-the witch-Modena are four versions of human beings who will pay the price for their unusual lives.

Keywords: *The Book of Esther*; *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura*; Yehudah Aryeh (Judah Leon) of Modena; Sarra Copio Sullam; *Ḥayyey Yehudah* (*Life of Judah*); *Tsemaḥ Tsaddik* (*Flower of Righteousness*); tragedy; *Musar* literature

1. Preface

The *Book of Esther* [Hebrew: *Megillat Esther*] is one of five Hebrew biblical books, which is customary to read on the holiday of Purim. It relates the story of Haman the Agagite's scheme to destroy all the Jews of Persia and Media, which was thwarted by Mordecai the Jew and his niece Esther. This story is set in Shushan, the capital city of Persia, and most of it takes place inside the palace of King Ahasuerus. This is clearly a political plot that describes palace intrigues and political competition between the king's two advisors. The king himself is presented as capricious and stupid, driven by passions and pleasures as well. Esther is an orphan who rises to greatness thanks to her beauty, enabling her to marry the king and then set a trap for Haman. Mordechai is a reasonable man, who carefully plans his moves, and is driven by his vision to save his People, the Jews. At the end of the plot, he rises to prominence and becomes the King's Chief Advisor, while Haman, the schemer, is executed. In the Hebrew Bible, the story is presented as an etiological story that explains why the holiday of Purim is celebrated, as

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well as explaining the customs of the fast, the feast that follows, and the gifts given to fellowmen and the poor.

The *Book of Esther* inspired two works by Rabbi Leon of Modena (Venice 1571-1648), both written in Italian. The first was a translation of the Hebrew poem *Ester*, written by Moses of Rieti (1388-1467; Heb., Mosheh b. Yitsak) and published by Modena in Venice (1616). The other work, the subject of this article, was Modena's adaptation of an unsuccessful tragedy presented in Venice twice (in 1560 and in 1591), which he was commissioned to rewrite in Italian and that he entitled *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* [Esther: A Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture]. Modena dedicated his adapted play to the Jewish poetess and leader of the local literary salon, Sarra Copia Sullam, born in Venice (fl. 1618-1624), who was his friend, interlocutor, and student. Recently, *L'Ester* has been published in English for the first time, translated by Susan Payne (forthcoming).

The purpose of this article is to provide a reading of Modena's play *L'Ester* within the larger corpus of his work. In particular, I will emphasise the correlations between this play and two additional works by Modena, as three sides of the same triangle: *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura*, a fictional literary work that represents abstract ideas through fictional characters; *Tsemaḥ Tsaddik* (Flower of Righteousness), which was published in Venice in 1600, and is a book about Jewish ethics and human qualities, composed of non-narrative prose segments with interspersed tales; and the autobiographical essay *Ḥayyey Yehudah* (*Life of Judah*), which remained in manuscript until the nineteenth century, and is an autobiographical essay expressing, among other things, Modena's attitude towards his wife and family.

All those three compositions together demonstrate Modena's strong ties to the Jewish canon and heritage, as well as his deep knowledge of Italian literature and culture. The hidden and overt biographical details, which those works reveal, paved the way for his Italian play *L'Ester*. Living in a multilingual and multicultural world, Modena was open to progressive ideas. He was a Renaissance figure and a productive writer, writing successful works, while also being connected to his Jewish heritage. The play *L'Ester* reveals his attitude towards women, as well as stating his opinions as one who breaks conventions.

The question that guides this article is: how do these three genres – drama, ethics literature and autobiography – complement each other, illuminate each other, and express Modena's connection both to the Jewish canon and to gender polemics? Methodologically, I will dwell on two main ideas that emerge from the play. The first deals with the concept of 'tragedy' – the key to the play. Why did Modena turn the story of the *Book of Esther* into a tragedy although the biblical story is, by definition, a tragicomedy? The

second deals with the concept of 'truth'. According to his *Prologue,* Modena puts 'truth' at the heart of the play – both the truth and the search for it . As such, I will analyze the relationship between those two primary concepts – tragedy and truth – as embodied in this play and in his other two works.

2. The Cultural Heritage of Leon of Modena and His Literary Work

Rabbi, preacher, and writer, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh (Judah Leon) of Modena (1571-1648) was a controversial person, possessing a complex personality and a fascinating biography. On the one hand, Modena was an outstanding scholar, well versed in the *Torah* [Hebrew Bible], a leader in his community, with a bright future ahead of him. Yet, on the other hand, he was addicted to gambling, deep in financial debt, and found no satisfaction in his wife and children. He was a member of an Italian-Jewish family with roots in northern France, meaning that the tradition of generations of his ancestors was that of *Ashkenazi* Judaism (Malkiel 1998; Modena 1988, 3-72, 181-294). What is more, Modena was a very prolific author, whose polemic books and sermonic essays earned him great public popularity. His literary work included an abundance of sermonic essays, Ethics literature, and polemic books. Some of them were published during his lifetime and enjoyed a wide dissemination, and most of them are still printed and distributed to this day.[1]

One of the fascinating and special works written by Modena is an autobiography entitled *Life of Judah* – a work which was not published until the twentieth century (Modena 1912 and 1985). This essay, which was an ambitious venture during his time, was a landmark in the field of Hebrew literature. This was the result of Modena's transition to personal writing, a genre in its infancy even in non-Jewish European literature of his time (Olney 1980, 3; Gunn 1982; Lejeune 1989). Contemporary scholars use the term "Egodocuments", coined by Jacques Presser in 1958 to refer to a large category of autobiographical texts, including autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, travel journals, and personal letters (Mascuch, Dekker and Baggerman 2016, 11).

The *Life of Judah* is fascinating, in that it describes the way in which an educated seventeenth-century Jewish resident of the Venice ghetto experienced melancholia, depression, gambling addiction, attempts at rehabilitation, family crises, and the struggle for economic survival as an intellectual. In this respect, the *Life of Judah* is a symbolic road map for 'proper behavior' using reverse psychology – by describing of all manner of

[1] Most of his writings in Hebrew and Italian are still waiting for modern scholarly editions. However, a list of them may be found in the catalogue of the national library of Israel.

'bad behavior' and trying to warn the readers from following this path of life.

First-person autobiographical writers usually state their reasons for writing, as Augustine wrote in his Confessions: "I confess and I know it" (Augustine 1921). In the *Life of Judah,* Modena states that he is writing this book for his children and descendants, because he acknowledges the pleasure of reading about the lives of his ancestors and people more important than himself: "I thought that it would be of great value to my sons, the fruit of my loins, and to their descendants" (Modena 1988, 75). He opens this essay, however, with the statement: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life in this world" (ibid.). Echoing *Genesis* 47:9, making it possible to sense his unstated goals – to vent resentment regarding his troubles and to elicit empathy. See for example: "I foresaw from that day on that it had been determined by the constellations that I would not see any good" (Modena 1988, 90).

Moreover, he wrote this essay to deal with the death of his son, the question of man's transience on Earth, and the personal anxiety regarding his own inevitable death. As he writes:

> In particular, I longed to bequeath it as a gift to my firstborn son, the apple of my eye, the root of my heart, whose bright countenance was similar to mine, a man of wisdom, Mordechai of blessed memory, who was known as Angelo. All my thoughts were of him. I was proud of him, and he was the source of all my joy. But for those twenty-four years up to the present I did not succeed in writing down as a memoir in a book. Now that God has taken away my joy – it being two months since God took him away, leaving me desolate and faint all day long – my soul has refused to be comforted, for all I will go to my grave mourning for my son, waiting for death as for a solemnly appointed time. (Modena 1988, 75-6)

This touching declaration, full of emotions, is quite unusual in the context of Hebrew writings of Modena's time.

It is, indeed, possible to see how Modena's autobiography is bifocal – regarding both family crises and disasters, as well as his own personal troubles and pains: "That summer and the following year there was severe drought and great famine, and we earned nothing, while spending and losing much" (Modena 1988, 92). It is interesting to note how Modena states that it was the awareness of death that had motivated him to begin writing his autobiography (Bar-On 1996).

Unlike the *Life of Judah*, Modena's book *Flower of Righteousness* presents an opposite state of mind. The compilation, containing 40 chapters, belongs to the genre of Jewish Ethics literature (*Musar* literature). A book of Jewish Ethics (a *Musar* book) explains 'good' and 'bad' qualities for its readers, elaborating the vices and virtues of human behavior. The idea behind such

a *Musar* book is that whoever reads and understands it will become a better person and, of course, a better Jew. Being a better person guarantees a life of satisfaction and happiness in this world, as well as eternal life in 'the next world', the afterlife. It is also intended to have a transformative function, uniting in a single group individual readers that share similar behavioral characteristics. For example, by encouraging the giving of charity or honoring one's parents. If a morality book introduces stories amid its sermons, then these stories also share the function of awakening the readers to an ethical awareness, one that will beneficially alter their personalities and behaviors (Veena 2012; Lambek 2010). The idea of essays dealing with vices and virtues, with the support of tales embedded in them, was well-known in the medieval Jewish culture. Those works were written under the influence of Islamic and Christian Ethics literature (Gries 2010 and 2015; Rubin 2013).

Flower of Righteousness was published during Modena's lifetime, and as a bestseller enjoyed wide distribution. This was due to its familiar format, following the well-known model of books on '*middot*' (Jewish virtues and vices), common to Jewish medieval and pre-modern literature in Hebrew (such as the anonymous *Orchot Zaddiqim*, 1581), Arabic (such as *Tiqqun Middot Ha'nefesh* by Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, eleventh century) and Yiddish (such as the *Sefer Lev Tov* by Itzhak ben Elyakum, 1620). As other *musar* books, The *Flower of Righteousness* is not written in a personal tone, but rather in an authoritative, didactic voice, whose purpose is to impart good virtues to the readers and to correct negative behavior.

The inspiration for *Flower of Righteousness* is the popular Italian morality book, *Fiore di Virtù* [*Flower of Virtue*], compiled long before Modena's time, probably as early as the thirteenth century, by a Franciscan friar, Tommaso Gozzadini (1471; 1491; 1856; Steinschneider 1897; Horowitz 1998; Weinberg 2003). As this Italian text gained great popularity, it was copied and distributed throughout Europe, and was also translated, and eventually printed, into other European languages (Schutte 1983, 241). Modena was, of course, familiar with the Italian version. Apparently, he assumed that this European bestseller would also attract Hebrew readers, and, with minor changes, it might be adapted for a Jewish audience.

Although *Flower of Righteousness* was initially intended to be a translation, it has recently been proven that almost half its Hebrew content was, in fact, compiled by Modena, rather than being a pure translation from the original (Tohar 2016). Apparently, Modena had felt it was necessary to replace certain incontrovertibly Christian passages, which did not fit the Jewish worldview. For example, he replaced a tale about a knight who swore to always bow down when he sees a cross with a rabbinic tale of King David found in the *Babylonian Talmud* (*Sanhedrin* 107a). As such, Modena replaced more than half of the original tales with the deeds of sages, taken from Jewish literature

– ultimately making its Hebrew rendition more like an original compilation instead of a strict translation (see Tohar 2016 and 2018). The non-fictional prose was also changed, to deal with ethics that have roots in the Talmud and the Midrash, although Modena does retain some sections from the original compilation. For example, he provides a short synopsis of the plot of the classic tragedy "Medea" when he discusses cruelty.

The *Life of Judah* and the *Flower of Righteousness* reflect two opposite sides of Modena's entire corpus. On the one hand, the *Life of Judah* is a personal essay about himself in the manner of a confession, containing intimate details, some sinful and embarrassing, while generally revealing a bit of the world of the Jews of Venice and Italy during his lifetime. On the other hand, the *Flower of Righteousness* is a didactic composition with an authoritative tone that preaches morality and faith while warning the readers of divine punishment and justice.

In my reading, the play *L'Ester* stands between them. According to the author's implicit perception, the play describes historical events, meanwhile teaching moral behavior. Just as the *Life of Juda*h remains within a historic context and *Flower of Righteousness* teaches morality – the play *L'Ester* is a combination of these two works. Modena's poetic pretension in this play is, however, more complex. Through the character of Vashti, he expresses a subversive position on male hegemony and laments the status of women in actual reality. Ultimately, as I will demonstrate, Modena's Vashti echoes the characters of Sarra Copia Sullam and of Modena himself.

3. Reframing the Play *L'Ester* as a Tragedy

The subversive position expressed by Modena as a biographical persona in the *Life of Judah*, torn between the polar extremes of his life of sin and his involvement in writing Ethics literature, can explain his transformation of *L'Ester* from a biblical tragicomedy into an emphatic tragedy. This is an interesting contrast to the tradition of Jewish *Purim Spiel* and the Purim comedies (Cohen 2022). The essence of ancient Greek tragedy is the rise and fall of the hero, due to a character flaw, a wrong decision made, or a terrible deed committed. Tragedies represented various interactions between humans and gods, dealing with questions of fate and choice, sin and punishment, honor and justice (Baertschi 2015). In medieval times, western Christian tragedy changed its trajectory, and the dramatic plots shifted to revolve around sin, forgiveness, and salvation. These tragedies were associated with religious rituals marking Christian holidays, especially Easter, and often presented biblical plots, taken from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, such as the anonymous fifteenth-century Brome play *Abraham and Isaac*, dealing

with the binding of Isaac (*Genesis* 22: 9), albeit with a Christian orientation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Western tragedy dealt with moral dilemmas and was characterized by complex characters, who debated questions of power, betrayal, love, and free choice, as in the Shakespearian tragedy, as well as the relationship between God's will and the human's faith, as in the Biblical drama. This was, also, a consequence of the struggle between Catholics and Protestants (Connolly 2019). In the Europe of the late-sixteenth-early seventeenth century, 'tragedy' was considered a pinnacle of Western drama. As Northop Frye writes in his seminal discussion of tragedy, it placed individuals, heroes, in the center, standing alone, before themselves and the world: "It is commonplace of criticism that comedy tends to deal with characters in social group, whereas tragedy is more concentrated on a single individual" (1957, 207).

Modena chose to define his play *L'Ester* as a 'tragedy', which is strange and unusual, especially since the Purim holiday is a happy one, commemorating the miraculous salvation of the Jewish communities in Persia and Media. Perhaps he wished his play to join the ranks of the highly regarded tragedies of his period, or to create a surprising version of the well-known biblical plot, with a twist that would make it dramatically and commercially successful. On its most obvious level, *L'Ester* follows the *Book of Esther* in emphasizing Mordechai's wisdom and leadership, as well as Esther's faithful and courageous heart. What is more, its political plot, taken also from the biblical book, echoes the characteristics of the non-Jewish tragedy of Modena's time, precisely from the perspective of gender discrimination. In *Women and Tudor Tragedy*, Allyna Ward observes that in Modena's day it was customary in England, ironically, to give female characters in plays the roles of political advisors. These strong female characters presented in the English theater stood in fascinating contrast to the status of women in actual reality, although this reality was itself facing a great transformation regarding women. As such, historical tension was created between the artistic representation of these strong female characters and women's legal, economic, literate, and political situations in their real, contemporary existence. Ward writes: "I argue that it is the distinct feminization of the rhetoric of counsel necessary to accommodate female regency in England that opens the space for both Iphigenia and Jocasta to be considered suitable for dramatic representations" (2013, 53). This is interesting precisely in discussing *L'Ester*, which is a story of political intrigues in the court of the king's palace, intrigues and events that involve three strong women protagonists (Tohar 2017).

In the case of the *L'Ester* play, those women are Vashti, a self-respecting queen, bold enough to refuse a direct order from her husband the king, on pain of death; Esther, Mordechai's niece, foster-daughter, confident, secret agent, and heroine; and Zeresh, Haman's wife, confident, and co-

conspirator. Like Ward's findings regarding English tragedy in the Tudor period, in Modena's *L'Ester* these three powerful women serve as influential characters that impact the plot. Read, for example, the words of Zethar, the King's Eunuch and Vizier:[2]

E in ver, non ſo ſe non darle raggione,
Ch'vna Regina tal debba a far mostra
Di sè. Venir ſenz' occaſion alcuna?
Non è decoro, nè douer, nè honore.
Ma non è però già, ch'io non preueggia
Quāto mal, quanto ſcōcio, è per ſeguirne,
E pur, ch'hoggi non ſia, l'vltimo giorno
Per tè, Vaſti Regina, ſconſolata.
Che, da iracondo Rè presto à lo ſdegno,
Mai giudicio pietoſo, non ſi ſpera.
E faccia il ciel, che non conturba queſto,
L'hodierne allegrezze, tutte quante.
(1.3.27-38)

[And actually I almost think she is right,
That such a Queen should not be put on display,
Go before them all with no good reason?
This is neither decorous, nor needful, nor right.
But this is not to say I do not foresee
How much evil, how much trouble will ensue,
And even that today will not prove to be
Your last, O Vashti, you unfortunate Queen,
Who shall feel the anger of the wrathful king,
Never hope for a merciful judgment from him.
And Heaven send that this shall not disrupt
This joyful day in its entirely.]

One of the tragedies in this play, to which Modena gives poetic expression, is the tragedy of Vashti. She is a figure representing the fate of females, in general – not necessarily just the specific fate of a woman monarch. Thus, Vashti complains about her fate in a monologue:

DHe, chi prouò giamai, fortuna iniqua,
Che la mia dura ſorte, in parte aguagli?
Quando più mi stimaua eſſer felice
Quando uiuea gioconda in alto stato,
Hauendo l'onde al mio ſolcar tranquille,

[2] All citations in English, as well as the Italian transcription, are from Susan Payne's volume (Modena, forthcoming).

Mi naſce vna tempeſta, una procella,
(1.4.1-6)

[Alas! Who has ever borne in any way
Such evil fortune, such a hard fate, as mine?
Just when I thought that I was happy
To be living blissfully in high state,
And the waves upon my sea of life were calm,
A tempest comes upon me, such a violent one.]

Similarly, Modena bemoans his own fate in the *Life of Judah*, in which he says (cited above): "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life in this world . . . I await death, which does not come (Modena 1988, 75-6)".

Vashti's speech in the play is a feminist speech that raises the problem of being a woman:

Ahi ſeſso feminil, ſeſso infelice,
Nato nel mondo, ſol per ſegno à quante
Saette, di diſgratia, apportar poſsa
Queſta ch'io morte, e uita 'l mōdo chiama,
Seſso, che non riceue altro che pere,
Ɛ miſerie, e ſciagure, in ogni grado,
In ogni condition, ò naſca in baſso
Od in ſublime, et eleuato albergo,
O' rigaurdeuol ſia, ò moſtruoſa,
O' pouera, ò com'io poſseda Regni.
Al naſcer ſuo, s'attriſtano i parenti,
Quaſi nata lor foſse, una nemica,
(1.4.16-27)

[Alas! The female sex is the unhappy sex,
Born into the world only to be that target
Of as many arrows as misfortune can command
This is what I call death, and the world calls life.
A woman is offered nothing else but grief,
And misery, and disaster, to whatever rank,
Or condition she is born, whether to a lowly
Or to an exalted and a high estate,
Whether she is good to look upon or monstrous,
Poor, or instead, like me, possesses kingdoms,
When she is born, her parents feel unhappy
Almost as if a foe is born to them.]

This is a bold and poignant lament about the state of women in the world. Here Modena adopts a compassionate and empathetic stance towards

their existential situation — particularly that of a woman born into a high social class. Indeed, Modena was well aware of the plight of women due to misogynous gender bias. This may have been due to his status as a confident of educated women, such as Sarra Copio Sullam, or due to his being a rabbi and preacher in touch with the community (Arbib 2003).

Subsequently, Vashti describes her political marriage to King Ahasuerus and his power in the empire due only by virtue of her lineage:

> Queſto, ne la famoſa Perſia, e quello
> Ne la gran Media, mi raccolſe all'hora
> Dario, pietoſamente, e poſcia al fine,
> A queſto Aſſuero, ſuo figliuol, mi diede
> Per moglie, indegno di corona, e ſcettro
> Che ſol per me, tien hor l'imperio in mano
> De Medi, e nō pel padre, et hà acquiſtato
> (1.4.104-10)

> [Mercifully took me in, and then at last,
> Married me to his son, Ahasuerus,
> Who is unworthy of both crown and sceptre,
> And now only holds the Median Empire,
> Because of me and not through his own father
> He acquired Persia, too, from being my husband,
> Rather than from his valour or his strength.]

Modena's main innovation in *L'Ester* is providing extensive monologues for Vashti on the status of women and on her own hardships as a queen in a man's world. Thus, Modena frames her refusal to appear before King Ahasuerus from a perspective which considers personal hardships, personal tendencies, self-awareness, and social-class identity (Berlin 2001). Yet he also refers to the Jewish religion as related to the weak chain in the gender hierarchy, as Scordari implies (2020). What is interesting to note is that Vashti as a woman and the Jews as an ethnic minority share the same predestination. These perceptions strengthen Vashti's image as a tragic figure, who is aware of herself and bravely accepts her fate, without forfeiting her dignity or her principles.

Indeed, this overt appreciation of women and their wisdom in *L'Ester* is in line with Modena's attitude towards the women in his life, as reflected in the *Life of Judah*, most particularly his empathy towards intelligent women or women who have been wronged by society. In this autobiography there are mentions made of Modena's appreciation of the women in his life. Thus, he writes about his grandmother: "Rabbi Solomon's wife was Fioretta of blessed memory, a woman very learned in *Torah* and *Talmud* . . . Fioretta went to the Holy Land at the end of her life, and when she passed through Venice, I conversed with her and found her very expert in *Torah*" (Modena 1988, 79).

Modena also found it fitting to refer to the courage that a woman displays: "My mother of blessed memory girded her as to loins like a man, and rode to Ferrara and to Venice in order to speak with noblemen and judges of the land" (ibid., 85). He also wrote about his first daughter-in-law: "Yet her heart was like that of a lion and she was not afraid" (91). Meanwhile, it is also highly interesting that he wrote negatively about his wife and her behavior: "My wife assumed a strange mood, and she began to quarrel with me and make me angry" (154). This pendulum, between admiration and resentment, is also the main theme in the relationship between Vashti and King Ahasuerus.

4. Reading *L'Ester* with Regard to Truth *vs* Deception

The clash between real life, with all its challenges and temptations, and pure moral imperatives is also poetically expressed when shaping the concepts of 'truth' and 'falsehood' in *L'Ester*. This thereby echoes other works by Modena. It is no coincidence that the *Prologue* to the play is a poem in praise of truth. Putting the plot into a philosophical framework of 'truth' vs. 'lies' adds another, moral layer to the interpretation of the play. On the one hand, the play sustains its own conceptual foundation and moral position, by referring (as an example) to the tragedy inherent in the problematic position of women. Yet the play also strengthens the tragic issues of Vashti as a victim of a sociological condition. These two conceptual layers – of the genre 'tragedy' and of the concept 'truth' – make *L'Ester* a sophisticated play and Modena a playwright who knew how to extract an ethical potential of deep philosophical significance from a familiar biblical story, because it demonstrates the awareness of the author and his audience regarding social injustice.

In Chapter 24, titled: "On Truthfulness", of his work the *Flower of Righteousness*, Modena writes about 'truth': "This is, indeed, the truth, that is revealed in the end, as written [*Psalm* 85:12]: 'Truth springs up from the earth'".[3] This chapter presents Modena's worldview, strongly emphasizing the gap between a person's thoughts, intentions, real actions, and what he/she says to others. Yet Modena also claims that it is almost impossible not to lie: "although the virtue of 'truthfulness' or 'honesty' is more precise among the pious". For Modena, therefore, the more a person lies, the greater the gap between his/her true being and his/her pretentious façade. He quotes Aristotle as saying, "that exhausted whoever wants to hide the truth and whoever wants to hide a lie will become". In this chapter of the *Flower of*

[3] Translated from Hebrew into English by Ethelea Katzenell, as well as all the references from *Flower of Righteousness*.

Righteousness, Modena refers to the behavior of partridges as a parable for truthfulness. He writes:

> A parable on the virtue of 'truthfulness' talks about the offspring of a partridge; each time she lays her eggs, another broody *Pirnitso* comes and takes them to her nest, and sits on them, but once they hatch, these hatchlings naturally recognize the voice of their real birth mother and immediately go back to her. This is, indeed, the truth, that is revealed in the end, as written [*Ps.* 85:12]: "Truth springs up from the earth . . ."

This perception is reflected using a metaphoric style, in the *Epilogue* presented by the figure of Truth:

> Ecco leuato à la mia face il velo,
> In quāto à qsta uera Historia, aſpetta,
> Com'ella fù, coſi rappreſentata,
> Da qual può hauer ogni audiéte appreſo.
> (Epilogue 1-4)

> [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.]

In essence, this means that stories are tools of learning, so whoever listens to a fictional tale may indeed learn something about reality from it – all the more so, when the tale is allegedly based on historical facts such in the *Book of Esther*.

This also refers to a tale which Modena combines into his chapter 24 of the *Flower of Righteousness* concerning the virtue of truthfulness:

> A very wealthy man decided to spend all his money on charity. He went into the desert with a group of recluses to worship God there. One day, his friends asked him to go into the city [Jerusalem] to sell two donkeys that had gotten old and had become unfit to carry burdens. So, he entered the city and went to the marketplace. People approached him, wanting to make a purchase and they asked him if the donkeys were good, and he replied: "Do you think that, if they were good, we'd be selling them?" Others asked why they [the donkeys] had hairless patches on their backs, to which he responded: "Because they're old and lay down under their burdens, and we pull their tails and beat their backs, such that they have missing hair. When he returned to his friends with both donkeys, he related to his friend all that had he'd done, and why he hadn't sold them. Then, they shouted at him and asked him: "Why did you do this?" Thus he replied: "This is because, believe it or not, I had left my home and deserted my heritage to seclude myself from deceitful lies—not in order to sell two old donkeys. Then, I had many

> donkeys, many camels, and cattle that I spent in worship of my Master [God] – How, then, can I now be untrue to my own faith by telling lies?" When they heard these words, they were afraid and feared him; they said no more.

This chapter, as well as the other chapters in *Flower of Righteousness*, comprises a literary experiment to deal with vices and virtues through explanation, animal allegorization and storytelling. One might notice how much Modena was occupied with ethical questions, especially with the way in which people are communicating with themselves. He is also concerned with practical ethics, protesting against the evil in the world. The desire of someone to compose a Musar book must be interpreted within his complete cultural enterprise; Modena is full of multicultural knowledge, but he is also very sensitive to social injustice.

In this context, it is highly significant that in 1604 Modena composed the letter "Statement of Defense", to support a woman suspected of practicing witchcraft and who had been banished from the city of Venice in 1600 at the age of seventy-seven. This "Statement of Defense" also deals with 'truth and lies', a motif that regularly appears throughout Modena's writings. It is also closely related to the issue of the status of women and their lack of power in relation to men, another major theme that emerges from *L'Ester*. Below is the text of Modena's "Statement of Defense", originally written in Hebrew (Modena 1906, 132-3):[4]

> Testimony in favor of Mrs. Dianora, held as a witch . . . Wherever this woman was in the past, who now stands with us here, she will come to you today. Her name is Mrs. Dianora, may she be blessed among the women of the tent. We said we would come to inform you regarding her integrity and goodness, because for many days and years her feet led her from afar to live with us and, in her home, her feet rested here among our congregation. For a long time, she has been coming and returning, walking from home and abroad, among us and in the world, and we have never found any wrongdoing in her, nothing that is reprehensible or condemnable, neither evil nor corruption in all our holy congregation. She has walked straight, with integrity, in accordance with the strictures of our kosher women, peacefully. Some have spoken slanderously and lied about her; many times, they have attacked her with scorn, condemning her soul to Hell, speaking evil of her on several occasions. No man has the right to prevent me from speaking the truth. Justice cannot remain silent, but what was said about her is not true. Let her righteousness be known everywhere, and so anyone who hears evil slander against her, will not avoid her or suspect her; we come here to speak the truth on her behalf. Let none who are kosher suspect or judge her. And all

[4] This is the entire letter, translated by Ethelea Katznell for the purpose of this article and edited by myself.

who give her the benefit of the doubt and have faith in our True Judge, who judges our People as one special nation for the good – upon them will come blessings of goodness.

This "Statement of Defense" attests to Modena's being a responsible and compassionate Jewish community leader (Simonson 1987),[5] in particular in his willingness to defend a woman suspected of witchcraft, a very intense issue at the time. Modena's statement demonstrates that he is a person who judges people by their actions, not according to their gender. It also indicates that he is not afraid to intervene in political issues, to voice unpopular opinions, to be controversial, even risking potentially harmful backlash, as could have happened when someone attempted to protect people suspected of witchcraft. The issue of 'truth and lies' that emerges here from this letter, which is obviously trying to confront major forces in the community, brings us back to Modena's preoccupation with truth and falsehood—which also emerges from several other of his other works: *Sur me-ra* (Avoid Wrongdoing, 1595a) – an essay against gambling; 1595. *Sod Yesharim* (The Secret of the Pious, 1595b) – an essay dealing with folk medicine; as well the Italian compilation: *Historia de' riti hebraici* (1638) – which shows his close connection to Italian non-Jewish culture and society.

It is important to note that while the specific connection between the issue of 'truth and falsehood' and the plot of the biblical *Book of Esther* revolve around the confrontations between Haman and Mordecai, it has shifted in Modena's play *L'Ester* onto the relationship between Vashti and Ahasuerus. This can be seen in Modena's expansion of their relationship, through the words of Zethar, the King's Eunuch and Vizier:

Riſoluta riſposta, ella n'ha data,
Che li diciamo, che venir non vuole.
E che reſta, di lui tanto ammirata,
Quanto, ſe fuſſe in ſe, ſcorger potria,
E in ver, non ſo ſe non darle raggione,
Ch'vna Regina tal debba a far mostra
Di sè. Venir ſenz' occaſion alcuna
(1.3.23-9)

[She returned us a resolute answer,
So we must tell him, that she will not come.
And that she is so astonished by him,
That only if he were sober could he realize.
And actually I almost think she is right,

[5] Simonson stresses the ethical and sociological dilemmas of community leaders in the pre-modern world.

That such a Queen should be put on display,
Go before them all with no good reason?]

The unusual empathy towards Vashti, and the declaration of her feelings: "resolute" and "astonished" move the focus to her personality. Vashti is characterized as a smart, bold person with a strong social agenda. She is portrayed as a female heroine.

5. Conclusion

In Greek tragedy, it was common to treat tragedy as a means of revealing human nature, as well as an aid to understanding the human condition and the truth about the world. In fact, tragedy may be read as a format for investigating the world and a human being's place in it. Since tragedy challenges the basic assumptions of the reader, it is a trigger for thinking about dilemmas, paradoxes, and fundamental values. Modena does indeed praise the figure of Esther. Yet, by looking at Modena's various other writings, it is very probable that he himself rather identifies with the sober figure of Vashti – who apparently reflects Sullam's character, who, in turn, reflects the character of the witch from Venice, who reflects his own character. Vashti-Sarra-the witch-Modena are four versions of human beings who will pay the price for their authenticity (Rains 2003, XIX-LIX). The world, according to Modena, is a harsh place for those who do not practice conformism, and Vashti represents disillusionment, followed by the harsh truth.

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