

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

9:1 2023

Performing *The Book of Esther* in
Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

<i>Executive Editor</i>	Guido Avezù.
<i>General Editors</i>	Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi.
<i>Editorial Board</i>	Chiara Battisti, Simona Brunetti, Sidia Fiorato, Felice Gambin, Alessandro Grilli, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Susan Payne, Cristiano Ragni, Emanuel Stelzer, Gherardo Ugolini.
<i>Managing Editors</i>	Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer.
<i>Assistant Managing Editor</i>	Roberta Zanoni, Marco Duranti.
<i>Book Review Editors</i>	Chiara Battisti, Sidia Fiorato.
<i>Staff</i>	Petra Bjelica, Francesco Dall'Olio, Bianca Del Villano, Serena Demichelis, Marco Duranti, Carina Louise Fernandes, Sara Fontana, Leonardo Mancini, Antonietta Provenza, Savina Stevanato, Carla Suthren.
<i>Typesetters</i>	Lorenza Baglieri, Veronica Buccino, Marianna Cadarin, Alda Maria Colella, Cristiano Ragni.
<i>Advisory Board</i>	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Richard Allen Cave, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Rosy Colombo, Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith, Daniela Guardamagna, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2023 S K E N È.
The Journal is a CC-BY 4.0 publication
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
info@skeneproject.it

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com

Distribuzione
Messagerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

Contents

Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

CHANITA GOODBLATT – <i>Introduction</i>	5
SUSAN PAYNE – <i>The Genesis of Modena’s L’Ester: Sources and Paratext</i>	13
CHANITA GOODBLATT – <i>Modena’s L’Ester: a Venetian-Jewish Play in Early Modern Europe</i>	37
VERED TOHAR – <i>Reading L’Ester by Leon Modena in the Context of His Other Writings</i>	63
NIRIT BEN-ARYEH DEBBY – <i>Queen Esther in Venice: Art and Drama</i>	81
TOVI BIBRING – <i>Vashti on the French Stage</i>	105
CORA DIETL – <i>The Feast of Performance: Esther in Sixteenth-Century German Plays</i>	121
WIM HÜSKEN – <i>Esther in the Drama of the Early Modern Low Countries</i>	141

Miscellany

LUCA FIAMINGO – “ <i>Becoming as savage as a bull because of penalties not to be paid with money</i> ”: <i>Orestes’ Revenge and the Ethics of Retaliatory Violence</i>	165
VASILIKI KOUSOULINI – <i>Cassandra as a False Chorus and Her Skeuê in Euripides’ Trojan Women</i>	187

Special Section

GHERARDO UGOLINI – Vayos Liapis, Avra Sidiropoulou, eds. <i>Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN 9781107155701, pp. 436	203
ERIC NICHOLSON – William N. West. <i>Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion: Playhouses and Playgoers in Elizabethan England</i> . Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. ISBN 9780226808840, pp. 326	211
YVONNE BEZRUCKA – <i>Catharsis at the BeKKa</i> . Mariacristina Cavecchi, Lisa Mazzoni, Margaret Rose, and Giuseppe Scutellà’s <i>SceKspir al BeKKa</i> . Milano: Edizioni Clichy, 2020. ISBN 9788867997077, pp. 216	221
PETRA BJELICA – <i>The Role of Digital Storytelling in Educational Uses When Staging Shakespeare: a Case Study of a Lecture Performance – Gamlet (Hamlet)</i>	225

TOVI BIBRING*

Vashti on the French Stage

Abstract

This essay offers a preliminary survey of an ongoing research dedicated to Queen Vashti, the dethroned wife from the *Book of Esther*. It presents three overlooked theatre plays written in France in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, in which the figure of Queen Vashti is featured as a prominent protagonist who rebelled against the political and marital conventions of the time. The plays examined in this paper include an anonymous mystery play and two tragedies by Pierre Matthieu, all of which present Vashti as a self-aware, powerful and reasonable figure on the one hand, but bold and daring on the other. Two main examples are discussed. First, the notion that Vashti's tragedy was the result of Ahasuerus' insobriety, which is presented as the comical intermission in the Mystery but is addressed in a more serious manner in Matthieu's tragedies. Second, the analogies that the king establishes in Matthieu's plays between his marriage to Vashti and those of Adam and Eve or Jupiter and Juno.

KEYWORDS: *Book of Esther*; Vashti; *Le mystère du viel testament*; mystery plays; Pierre Matthieu; *Tragédie d'Esther*

1. Introduction¹

The first chapter of the *Book of Esther* is dedicated to King Ahasuerus's lavish demonstration of power. For 180 days, diplomats and generals from his 127 realms were welcomed to Susa to admire its wealth, and a week-long feast in the king's private garden at the palace marked the event's climax. No expenses were spared: wine flowed, food was abundant, the cutlery extravagant and the decorations sumptuous. All bore witness to the glory of the king. Inebriated from wine, the king ordered Vashti, the queen, to be brought to him. Perhaps he considered her to be his ultimate treasure and wished to boast of her, as she was, like his other riches, extremely beautiful.² Vashti, however, who at the same time was hosting a feast for the women in her quarters at the palace, declined the royal order. Ahasuerus

¹ The research presented in this article was carried out thanks to a research grant by the Israel Science Foundation (n. 2366/22).

² Note that the same verb, show, is used in verses 4 "when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom" and 11 "to show to the peoples and the princes her beauty".

* Bar-Illan University - tovibibring@gmail.com

became furious and consulted his sages, versed with the laws of the land and those of religion, as to the appropriate course of action. His closest advisor, Memucan, theorized that Vashti's behaviour could be perceived as a threat to all men. He suggested that Vashti's queenship be taken from her and given to a more deserving woman and that news of this punishment for Vashti's noncompliance be disseminated throughout the kingdom. The king approved, and Vashti was punished accordingly. The chapter ends as Memucan "sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people" (*Esther* 1:22).³ The second chapter opens with a nostalgic moment, as King Ahasuerus ponders on what he has done to Vashti. This short-lived memory dissipates as the search for a new wife is immediately launched, and will culminate with Esther becoming the second queen and eventually the saviour of the Jews of Susa.

In the scriptures, Vashti's story is narrated entirely from the king's perspective. The narrator shares bits and pieces from the king's emotional world, even if somewhat laconically: the king is merry, fascinated, angry, vengeful, and remorseful. Vashti's reaction, however, to her dethroning is a mystery to us and raises many questions. Was she offended? Angry? Humiliated by the king's order? Was there a logical reason behind her insubordination or was it a mere provocation? Did she regret her behaviour once she was removed from her position, or did she stand by her refusal to appear before the king? Of less importance to the biblical narrator, Vashti's is an anecdotal experience, only preparing the ground for Esther's entry. One thing we do know about Vashti, though, is the grandeur of her queenship. She is identified with and defined by her royalty, as if the concept of sovereignty and the sovereign herself are assimilated, one and the same. She is referred to as the queen eight times in ten verses: "Vashti the queen" (9, 11, 16, 17), "Queen Vashti" (12, 15), "the queen's word" (17, 18). Yet beginning at verse 19, in which Memucan discloses his plans for her impeachment, symbolically she is no longer a queen and is referred to only as Vashti. The royal title has already been "unto another that is better than she" (*Esther* 1:19).

Esther has received significant attention in literary and theatrical works as the foreign orphan, the saviour of her nation, Virtue incarnated, the one who had sprung forth from the ruin of the fallen queen and came to be perceived as the epitome of the loyal wife, the good queen, the harbinger of Christianity. Vashti remained, in most minds, not merely the symbol of disobedience but also the demagogic punishment awaiting recalcitrant wives and women, and her presence was commonly marginalized (Thérel

³ All Biblical quotes in English are from the JPS Tanakh.

1971; Bibring 2021). Yet, the endless speculations about the motivation and emotional state of a woman who challenged the foundations of monarchical hierarchy on her own and rocked the solid pillar of patriarchy, aroused the imagination of writers, moralists, poets, and dramaturges who, starting at the end of the Middle Ages, were eager to give her a voice.

As part of an ongoing research project on the medieval and early modern reception of Vashti in devotional and literary French narratives, the present article will provide a first glimpse of three unique instances, neglected by scholars to date, in which Vashti was given the spotlight on the French stage. As the project is still in its preliminary phase, this paper provides a first sketch of only a few of the scenes devoted to Vashti in three theatre plays from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The Middle Ages saw a flourishing of theatrical adaptations of the *Book of Esther*. Emile Picot has listed more than one hundred theatrical plays dedicated to the story of Esther, written and performed all over Europe from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century (Picot 1891). These plays presented various matrimonial issues, betrayals, executions, exotic feasts, and political thoughts. Interestingly, much of the corpus was written from the seventeenth century onwards. A more limited number of plays were written in the sixteenth century, and Picot's list includes only two versions from the fifteenth century, one Italian from 1490, and a French mystery, *Le Mystere d'Esther*, which was composed around 1450 (and some estimate even earlier), by an anonymous late medieval French playwright.

2. *Le Mystere d'Esther*: a Collision Between Comedy and Tragedy

Jewish exegetics and Midrashim developed the biblical given that the king was merry with wine, suggesting that he was drunk when he ordered Vashti to transgress a fundamental prohibition. Thus, questions were raised regarding the legitimacy of his order, emitted in a state of loss of self-control and social awareness, and Vashti's right to disobey the order was also addressed. Ahasuerus' insobriety may also have been exploited as a comical feature befitting the carnivalesque spirit of the holy day of Purim, when the book of Esther is traditionally read, during which it is customary to drink until one is merry with wine. A fourteenth-century Judaeo-Provençal romance about Esther, composed by Israel Caslari, treats Ahasuerus' insobriety with a great deal of mockery and sarcasm. In this tale, Vashti derides her husband by stating that he is a man unable to hold his liquor and suggesting that this considerably compromises his manhood (Bibring 2021 and 2023).

Medieval Christian narratives perceived this episode in a different manner. Although the Vulgate emphasized the king's inebriated state even

more than the Hebrew scriptures (*itaque die septimo cum rex esset hilarior et post nimiam potionem incaluisset mero*, “Now on the seventh day, when the king was merry, and after very much drinking was well warmed with wine” [King James translation]), medieval Christian moralistic treatises completely omitted any reference to the possibility that the king was to blame for his behaviour. Such a crucial difference was, perhaps, due to the fact that Jews perceived Ahasuerus as a pagan king who could more easily be represented in a caricatural manner, whereas in the Christian discourse he was compared to the Divine King, and in the didactic tradition incarnated the role of the masculine authority of the king or the husband (Bibring 2021). Any criticism directed at him would have imperilled his status as the offended side and would have minimised the negative nature of the queen’s insolent act of incomppliance. Along with Eve, Vashti embodied a misogynistic stereotype, the innate female disobedience, executed deliberately and out of spite. As opposed to Eve, however, Vashti was not facing a divine order nor a problematic one, whose fulfilment would have had substantial ramifications. This argument, regarding the king’s role in the unfortunate development of the scene at his feast, began to appear in Christian narratives in the fourteenth century.

The possibility that Ahasuerus’ order might have not been legitimate is first hinted at in Christian narratives in c. 1347, when Geoffroy, the Knight of the castle of La Tour-Landry, compiled a book for the instruction of his young daughters. In this work he teaches them, through moralized fables and anecdotes, how to become good wives. Esther and Vashti, who each have an entire chapter dedicated to them, are presented conventionally as examples of a good wife and a bad wife, respectively.⁴

The chapter on Vashti is based on the main outlines of the Book of Esther. It tells of the two separate feasts, one for the men and the other for the women. Vashti is summoned to appear before the men so that the king may boast about her beauty, and when she refuses an exemplary punishment is administered, therefore advising young girls:

Sy devez ycy prendre bon exemple; car, par especial devant les gens, vous devez faire le conmandement de vostre seigneur et luy obéir et porter honnour et luy monstrier semblant d’onneur se vous voulez avoir l’amour du monde. Mais je ne dy mie que, quant vous serez priveement seul à seul, vous vous povez bien eslargir de dire ou faire plus vostre volenlé, selon ce que vous saurez sa manière.

[By this, you should learn a good example; You must, especially in the presence

⁴ All translations from the French sources are my own, unless stated otherwise.

of other people, execute your husband's command and obey him, honor him and show him respect, if you wish to be loved (by people). Nevertheless, I do not claim that, when you are in the privacy (of your home), one on one, you cannot express or do what you wish, according to what you know would be his reaction.]

Contrarily, the chapter on Esther is completely detached from the biblical Book of Esther – none of the biblical events are narrated, she is never referred to as Ahasuerus's second wife, nor is her role as the saviour of the Jews of Susa mentioned.⁵ Instead, Esther is described as an example of the perfect, humble, obedient, and gentle wife, with the anecdote focusing on the way she trains her servants. Ahasuerus is presented here as the King of Syria, who “moult estoit colorique et hatif” (“was very choleric and quick-tempered”) and as “mal et divers, et lui disoit aucunes foiz moult d'oultraigeuses paroles et vilainnies” (“cruel and hostile, and told her [i.e. Esther] many times very outrageous and obscene words”). By describing Ahasuerus in this manner, Geoffrey aims to emphasize Esther's greatness as a wife who never disobeyed her perverse husband publicly, as opposed to Vashti, who had been married to the same man.

This message resonates with the rigid Christian conception that wives must be submissive to their husbands, which will appear time and again in the French theatre plays as the reason for Vashti's fall. Geoffrey, however, qualifies this conception by stating that disobedient wives will only be punished if “ce feust chose raysonnable” (“it [the husband's command] was reasonable”), reflecting a theological preoccupation with the obligation to obey a command even if it is immoral or contrary to Divine law. Jean Porter has demonstrated that in the thirteenth century, the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure “is not prepared to endorse the idea that obedience requires the complete and unconditional surrender of one's own judgment” (2001, 268). While emphasizing the essential virtue of obedience, Bonaventure specifies that an order “which is contrary to the rule [i.e. divine rule] is in no way, by no consideration bound to be observed through obedience, and similarly, whatever is contrary to the law of God, that is, whatever is prejudicial to our salvation or to the divine honor” (ibid., 283). The debate here refers specifically to vowed obedience, i.e. the vow taken by initiates upon entering a convent, promising to obey their superiors. By extension this can be applied to marital obedience, as it was articulated, for example by the French scholar Jean Gerson (1363-1429): “Doit une femme mariée obeir

⁵ The only echo to the biblical character is extant in chapter 65, “Cy parle de la femme à Aman”, where the events told in the biblical chapters 5 and 6, including a description of how Esther saved her uncle from hanging, are conveyed very freely and quite inaccurately.

a son mary en quelconque chose qui soit contre Dieu? Je di que non” (“Must a married woman obey her husband in something that is contrary to God? I say, no”; Mazour-Matusevich 2006, 350).⁶

Hence, the knight of La Tour-Landry’s statement is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, he indicates several times that the husband’s command must be logical, and that Ahasuerus was unjust in his summons. On the other hand, his tale clearly indicates that Vashti transgressed merely because she disobeyed her husband, putting much emphasis on her reaction to the royal summons. By portraying Ahasuerus negatively and hinting that he might have wronged Vashti, La tour Landry demonstrates a new conception, though he does not completely exonerate Vashti. This tendency to revise the king’s part in the affair also emerges in the following century in *Le Mystere d’Esther*.

The play *Le Mystere d’Esther* is part of a huge compilation (49,386 verses) of biblical “mysteries” written by different playwrights at the end of the Middle Ages. It is based upon the *Hebrew Bible* and was edited in Paris in 1500, 1520 and 1542, under the title *Le mistère du viel testament*. The compilation was re-edited between 1878 and 1891 by Baron James de Rothchild and Emile Picot, who divided the select biblical episodes into forty-five plays, compiled in six volumes. *Le Mistere d’Esther* is comprised of two distinct parts, edited as the forty-third and forty-fourth plays. The play most relevant to our discussion is *De Vasti*, the forty-third mystery, which largely amplifies Vashti’s incident, enhancing it with invented characters and fictitious episodes, some of which are surprisingly comical. This gives rise to the speculation that the dramaturge was inspired, somehow, by the Jewish holiday of Purim. The first four scenes present an almost equal parallel between Ahasuerus and Vashti. Both members of the royal couple, each at their respective feasts, discuss matters of the state with their closest allies: the king with two of his most trusted dukes, Manisha, the Duke of Medes, and Carshena, the Duke of Persia (scene 1); and the queen with the countesses of Alexandria and Syria, who remain unnamed (scene 3). The king boasts of his supremacy, followed by flattering discourses specifically addressing political solidity and the court’s wealth. Vashti’s ladies mostly praise her qualities as a sovereign. Scenes 2 and 4 also share common ground as they are both comical intermissions focusing on the king and queen’s provosts (Haman for the former, Egeus for the latter) and their crews (Tharès and Baratha for the former, Atach for the latter) attending them around the respective feast’s dinner services. Haman is in a panic because of the absence of his attendants, who are in charge of serving the dinner, and upset by the

⁶ Jean Gerson, “Sur l’excellence de la virginité” (On the Excellence of Virginité), qtd in Mazour-Matusevich 2006, 350. Translation is mine.

laziness of Tharès and Baratha (which might be a reference to Bigta, one of the king's eunuchs who is mentioned in the biblical story). The following scene returns to the king and his men, who are no longer discussing political issues. Rather, Ahasuerus is now in the role of the host, wishing to augment the hedonistic aspect of the feast. This scene will lead to his demand to bring in Vashti, but before that, the dramaturge inserted a compressed sub-scene, where for a fraction of a second Baratha and Tharès are heard from their serving positions:

BARATHA Assuaire a ung petit beu

Bien voy; *incaluit vino*.

THARÈS Tay toi, tais.

BARATHA Ou je suis deceu. *Vero hic repletur mero*.

THARÈS Et ho ! de par le dyable, ho !

Telz motz ne sont pas gracieux.

[BARATHA I see very well that Ahasuerus

drank a bit, *incaluit vino* (Wine has warmed him, he has become hot from the wine)

THARÈS Shut up, you!

BARATHA Either I am hallucinating, (or) he really is stuffed with wine (the second part is uttered in Latin)

THARÈS Uh ho! In the name of the devil, ho!

Such words are not gracious!]

Despite its rapidity and farcical nature, this comical digression is an intense moment of exquisite theatre, thanks to different circles of incongruities. The two servants are characterized as comical figures, mainly trying to avoid fulfilling their serving tasks. Their role as waiters in charge of serving and clearing the table, at the time when the text was composed, more than merely hints that these are not extremely educated people. The first dichotomy, then, is that Bartha is fluent at speaking Latin. And not only does he speak Latin, but he borrows his words from the Vulgate, that is, from the Holy Scriptures. Furthermore, he refers to the precise biblical text that describes Ahasuerus exactly in the scene that takes place on the stage in front of Baratha's eyes, thousands of years later. I believe that this is a genius moment of comic theatre, where there is a blurring of boundaries between the biblical drama and the biblical source upon which it is based. In other words, Baratha utilised a literary time machine that merged the historical event with the theatrical event.

Tharès, however, is far from associating the words of his colleague with the text of the biblical narrator. This is where the second dichotomy is apparent, providing a blatant expression of the criticism emerging in the

late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries regarding the distance between Latin as the language of the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament, reflected in the new trends known as reformation and evangelism. Since Tharès does not recognize the biblical narrative, he perceives Baratha words, which were most probably augmented by the performative way in which Baratha uttered them, as mocking the king. He thus treats Baratha as if he were a foolish child, scolding him that the words he has uttered are “not gracious”. This is a somewhat desacralizing statement, as those words are, after all, quoted from the Holy Scriptures. Furthermore, the Latin text cited from the Vulgata is the voice of truth no one dares pronounce, except for a servant speaking Latin, recalling the young boy who publicly yelled that the king had no clothes in the famous folk tale.

The third dichotomy consists of the fact that in the general atmosphere of the scene, it does not seem that Baratha is even aware that he is quoting from the Bible. He is actually depicted as quite tipsy himself, epitomizing the risk that one might lose self-control as a result of consuming too much wine. As much as this scene provokes laughter, it also plants in the audience’s mind the grain of doubt as to whether the king’s order to bring Vashti to him was even legitimate, as it was emitted during an unstable state of mind. We will see that this will also become a major component of Pierre Matthieu’s tragedies, but here, the wine will not be a matter of comedy.

By merely mentioning the practical historical facts and achievements of his government, Vashti reminds the king that he is only human. The entire dialogue consists of Ahasuerus returning to his ideas about how he can be compared to the Gods, and even surpass them, and Vashti refuting these arguments. See, for example:

ASSUERE Quand j’admire le pris du Royal ornement
 Son pouvoir, son plaisir, et son contentement,
 La puissance et l’amour qui des grands Roys se pare,
 Aux immortels le Roy à bon droit j’accompare
 VASHTI On dit tout autrement, les Dieux son immortels,
 Tous bons, tous saints, tous droits, les Roys ne sont pas tels,
 Et jamais on n’a veu, estre exempt un Monarque
 Des injures du sort, du temps et de la Parque.
 Les Dieux aiment la paix, ils donnent le repos,
 Ils ne savent que c’est de tailles, ny d’impos,
 L’avarice de Roys qui jamais n’est contente
 Pour le peuple ronger mille moyens invente.
 Les Dieux sont adorés de celestes esprits.

[AHASUERUS When I admire the merit of the Royal ornament
 His might, His pleasure, and His contentment,

The power and love by which great Kings adorn themselves,
 I rightfully compare the King to the immortals.
 VASHTI It is said quite differently, the Gods are immortal,
 All good, all holy, all just, Kings are not as such,
 And never have we seen a Monarch exempt
 From the offences of fate, of time and of the *Parcae*.
 The Gods love peace, they bestow quietude,
 They know nothing of measures, nor of taxes,
 The avarice of Kings which is never satisfied
 Invents a thousand ways to gnaw the people.
 The Gods are adored by celestial spirits.]

While Vashti's replicas to Ahasuerus' chimeras about his might are the sound of reason, they may seem querulous as she systematically challenges his answers. Her last argument is "Les Dieux sont immortels" (207, "The Gods are immortal"), to which the king answers and thus ends the debate:

Et les Roys les seront,
 Quand chargés de trophés la haut ils monteront.
 Voila comme les Roys sont demi-Dieux en terre,
 Et mignons bien aymés du Dieu lance-tonnerre,
 Mais ils ne peuvent pas obtenir passe-port,
 O, trop cruelle loy, de ne craindre la mort.
 (209-14)

[And the Kings will thus become,
 When, loaded with trophies, they will ascend high above.
 To this extent the Kings are half-Gods on earth
 And well-beloved favourites of the Thunder God (i.e. Jupiter)
 But, they cannot obtain the exemption,
 Alas, too cruel a law! of not fearing death.]

While it is Ahasuerus who has the last word in his debate with Vashti, he ends it by stating that despite their power, until the day when kings become immortal, they too will continue to fear death. In other words, he recognizes the limitation of his might as implied by Vashti. While Vashti represents in this dialogue a reasonable contrariety to the king, she has evolved into a quite daring woman. In *Esther*, one of her arguments for refusing to appear before the king is her rebellion against the expectation that women be submissive:

Celuy qui le premier nomma la femme hommesse,
 Qui d'un ferme lien approuve la promesse
 Du conjugal amour, ne veut pas que soyons
 Esclaves des maris, il veut que nous aions

A leur part, si lon [sic] me vouloit croire
 Des femmes on verroit authorizer la gloire
 (699-704)

[He who first named the woman *hommesse*,⁷
 who accepts the promise of the firm bond of the marital love,
 does not wish that we would be the husbands' slaves.
 He wishes that we'd be their equals.
 If one wishes to believe me,
 We shall see authorized the glory of women.]

In *Vashti*, the queen's brazenness becomes much bolder. First, the scene in which Vashti and the chorus of princesses discuss the matter is dramatically increased, from 93 (scene 4) verses in *Esther*, to 161 (scene 3) in *Vashti*. The arguments are also much more daring. Vashti multiplies her unprecedented affirmations of equality "D'un pareil le pareil ne peut estre le maistre" (1109, "of an equal, the equal cannot be the master"); "Le mariage n'est que tout égalité" (1111, "marriage is nothing but complete equality"); "Ou peu, ou rien Vashti à Assuere cede" (1113, "either slightly or with nothing at all, Vashti surrenders to Ahasuerus"). Most striking is the evolution of her call to women not to be their husbands' slaves. When the chorus tells her "Le mary est le chef, le coronnel, le Roy / De la femme, il la tient aux vouldoirs de sa Loy" (1099-100, "the husband is the head, the coronal, the King of the woman, he behaves with her according to his wishes and his Law"), she answers: "Non, non, mes dames, non, esclaves nous ne sommes, / Ains femmes, le plaisir et le soulas des hommes / Et quoy? permettrons nous le conjugal lien / Estre un joug plus cruel que n'est l'Egyptien?" (1101-4, "No, no, my ladies, no, slaves – we are not, but women, the pleasure and comfort of men. And then what? Shall we allow that the marital bond be a yoke more cruel than that of Pharaoh [lit. the Egyptian]"). Further on she returns to this idea, amending what she said in *Esther* regarding the bond of marital love, as quoted above:

Jupin commant aux Dieux, Le Roy commande aux hommes,
 Et aux Dames Vashti, tous trois egaux, nous sommes.
 Mes princesses, le ciel ne veut pas que soyons

⁷ *Hommesse* is a rare term that was used in the Middle Ages to refer to a woman vassal. It would seem, however, that Mathieu is looking for an equivalent of what appears in Genesis 2:23, as the explanation of Adam's choice to call his helpmate "a woman" since she was made from a man (in Hebrew 'ish' gave 'isha' and in the Vulgata 'viro' gave 'Virago', but the phonetical resemblance is less apparent in the French homme/femme. Note, though, that both in *Esther* and in *Vashti* Matthieu used for the word 'women' the orthography feommes, i.e. he added the 'o' so the word sounds closer to 'hommes').

Esclaves des maris, il veut que nous ayons
 A leur puissance part, franchissons ce passage,
 Et mettons noz maris sous nostre aprentissage,
 Pour vous, pour nostre droit, et pour ma liberté,
 Je braveray tousjours, du Roy l'authorité.
 (1173-80)

[Jupiter commands the Gods, the King commands the men,
 and the Ladies [are commanded by] Vashti, the three of us are equal.
 My princesses, the heavens do not wish us to be husbands' slaves,
 it wishes that we will be their equals in might, let us cross that bridge,
 and put our husbands under our teaching:
 for your sake, for our right, for my liberty
 I will always challenge the authority of the King.]

In *Esther*, Ahasuerus refers to Vashti before her appearance in the play, by weaving a parallel between her marriage to Ahasuerus and the relationship between the first biblical couple, Adam and Eve. "Comme j'heus de Vashti la nopciere alliance / Et comme pour du monde emplir les bastimens / Dieu ensemble lia les deux premiers amans, / Apprenant que les masle à sa partie se tienne / Et que tout ce qui vit par cela s'entrtienne" (476-80, since I received from Vashti the wedding ring, and since God tied together the first two lovers in order to populate the world's edifices, teaching that the male should cling to his partner and that all living creatures should do the same). The chorus of his princes⁸ replies with a detailed account of the Creation inspired by Chapter Two of the *Book of Genesis*, in which Eve was created from Adam's rib ("Quand d'un homme endormi la coste ose entamer / Et deux corps en un corps par une ame animer", 521-2; "when, from a sleeping man, he did such [marvel] as to open the rib and from one body to animate with a soul, two bodies"). The King thereby identifies himself with the only man who was created directly by the divine breath and identifies Vashti with the woman that was made, through godly intervention, from the body of the first man. As such, she is his mate, but subordinate to him.

In *Vashti*, the King refers to the queen, but here Ahasuerus talks to the present Vashti directly, as part of an elevated match, this time invoking the mythological Jupon (i.e. Jupiter) and Juno. "Vashti mon seul soucy, mon ame, mon amour / Tout l'Olympe est jaloux des grandeurs de ma Cour / L'univers nous cherist, et qui nous voit ensemble, / Jupin avec Junon regarder il luy semble" (135-8; "Vashti, my only concern, my soul, my love, / the entire Olympus is envious of the greatness of my Court. / The universe honours us,

⁸ Nevertheless, the chorus, in its classical role, changes the perspective that needs to be developed (they are princes all the time, but what they say varies according to the circumstances).

and whoever sees us together, / it seems to them as if they are gazing upon Jupiter and Juno”).

Analogical to the Greek mythology’s Zeus and Hera, Jupiter and Juno in Roman mythology are married siblings who are considered to be the children of the primary Goddess, Fortuna. The transition from Adam and Eve, who are somewhat siblings and also spouses, since they were both created by God, referred to by Ahasuerus “peres premiers” (*Esther* 576; *Vashti* 2016; primary father), to Jupiter and Juno is strategic. In mythology, neither Zeus and Hera nor Jupiter and Juno are usually seen as harmonious couples, but rather as quarrelsome ones, whose marriages were “stormy and turbulent” (Guttman and Johnson 2004, 108), they represent, by their position as the Gods of all the Gods, the supra-marriage, especially as Hera and Juno are also considered as the goddesses of marriage. It is thus understandable that Ahasuerus would refer to his marriage with Vashti as analogical to that of Jupiter and Juno, whose “relationship is a prototype for the importance that marriage, no matter how turbulent, plays for a highly visible political leader or monarch” (109). Furthermore, with Vashti as Juno, the reference to Eve as the mother of mankind is now available to be used for Esther. In *Vashti*, Matthieu implements the same debate between Ahasuerus and the chorus, mentioning Adam and Eve after Esther is considered to become Ahasuerus’ second wife. Symbolically, then, in the new play Matthieu considers Vashti as the pagan goddess and Esther as the mother of the “monotheistic mankind”. Medieval Christian exegetics saw in Vashti and Esther the embodiment of the humiliated synagogue and the glorious church, accordingly (Bibring 2021). Pierre Matthieu is perhaps less judgmental and avoids entering into deep theological meditations, yet he employs here the idea of the transition toward a new generation, pagan to monotheistic, synagogue to church, perhaps even Lilith (Adam’s first and demonic wife, according to Jewish Midrashic sources) to Eve (Bibring 2023).

My last example in this paper aims to make a connection with the theme of the king’s drinking. The two versions of the tragedy, *Esther and Vashti*, both begin with Ahasuerus’ pompous discourse about the unlimited power given to him by God and the supremacy of his reign, comparing himself to various illustrious mythological figures, animals, and objects. Admiring the eagle as the most superior bird, wheat as the premium grain, and gold as the finest of the metals, Ahasuerus also appraises the virtues of wine: “entre les liqueurs / Le vin a attiré pour le priser noz cueurs. / Vin qui sobrement pris nostre sang purifie: / Mais le sage a Bacchus, n’a Venus ne se fie” (“amongst the liquors / the wine has enticed our hearts to praise it [the most]. / Wine which is moderately consummated purifies our blood: / yet the wise [man] does not trust either Bacchus or Venus”). This temperate approach toward wine dissipates in *Vashti*, as Matthieu replaces his warning of the risks

of imbibing wine excessively (insobriety easily leads to debauchery, as embodied by the allusions to Bacchus and Venus), by contrarily encouraging these consequences. The last line in *Esther*, didactically referring to the God of drinking and the Goddess of Love, is substituted by a positive (in the eyes of a drunk) view of wine, which “Charme noz passions, noz espritz vivifie” (“enchants our passions, our spirits vivifies”).

This modification reveals Matthieu’s fundamental argument, which he had already begun to develop in *Esther* and further elucidated in *Vashti*. Vashti’s tragedy was initiated by the king’s abuse of spirits, and therefore wine is women’s mortal enemy. The destructive power of drinking is clear to Ahasuerus himself: before he became drunk, he himself advocated moderation in drinking. The two versions of the *Tragedy* are almost identical in their treatment of this matter: Ahasuerus declares in both that while his banquet should be splendid (“Je veux que le banquet somptueux se prepare / Tesmoing de la grandeur du sceptre non avaré”; “I demand that the banquet be sumptuous, / a witness to the greatness of the generous sceptre”), drinking should be regulated to avoid nuisances “Mais avant je defens d’un vouloir absolu / Que nul aye en buvant le desir [in *Vashti*: l’appetit] dissoluto / Vin sur vin entassant, et verre dessus verre, / Pour en son chef mouvoir un tout-tournant tonnerre” (“but first I forbid, it is my absolute will, / that anyone, by drinking, by piling up / wine upon wine and glass upon glass, will have his mind⁹ corrupted, / and will put in motion in his head an everlasting thunder”). This statement is followed in both plays by the chorus of princes, who develop a long discourse against wine, considered as “O malle invention de l’yvrasse Semelle” (“oh, atrocious invention of the drunkard Semele [i.e. Dionysus’ mother]”). Their denunciation of drinking, they say, is based on King Solomon’s wisdom:

Sans mesure vin boire aux Rois il n’appartient
 Aux Princes encor moins de boire la cervoise.
 A qui vient le malheur? à qui r’eussit la noise?
 A qui sont les regrets? à qui est la douleur?
 A qui sont les debats d’une traistre couleur?
 Et à qui est des yeux l’escarlante teinture?
 Sinon à celuy-la qui l’Evan a en cure?
 Sinon à celuy-la qui du Bacchique jus,
 Englace son cerveau comme d’un jong de Chus?
 Le vin est aussi fort que la ruante masse
 Car alors que quelqu’un en son piege s’enlasse:
 Il sape sa raison, l’emprisonne et le mort

⁹ The word “desir” in *Esther* corresponds here to the idea of what the mind can desire in the state of intoxication. In *Vashti*, Matthieu replaced it with “appetit”.

Et le fait imiter la somme de la mort.
 Et que pourroit-on veoir plus voisin de la tombe
 Que cil qui au pouvoir du cuiss-né succumbe?
 NOE, LOTH, ESAU, HOLOPHERNE, SANSON,
 Du vin, sang de la terre, ont senty la boisson.
 Par luy jamais de sang Mars de ne se r'assasie,
 Par luy un saint debvoir le sage apostasie;
 Pourtant celuy n'aura vers nous aucun accès,
 Qui beuvotant fera tant de vineux excés:
 Et pour le vin espars en ses bouillantes vaines
 D'un menaçant courroux, il sentira les peines.

[It is not appropriate for Kings to drink wine unmeasurably. Even less, for Princes to drink barely beer. To whom does misfortune come? To whom belongs affliction? Such sorrows - whose are they? This pain - whose is it? the flairs of a treacherous complexion, whose are they? And who dyed his eyes in scarlet? If not to that person who Evanthès [son or grandson of Dionysus] takes under his custody? if not to that person who, with the Bacchanalian juice, freezes his brain like a Kush rush?¹⁰ Wine is as strong as a lashing whip, since, when someone is entangled in his trap, it drains his reason, imprisons him and bites him, and makes him replicate the sleep of death. Can we see anyone closer to the grave than the person who surrenders to the power of the thigh-born [A reference to Bacchus, who was born from Jupiter's thigh]? NOAH, LOTH, ESAU, HOLOFERNES, SAMSON, felt very well the [power] of wine, the blood of the earth. Because of it, Mars is never satiated by blood, because of it the sage deserts his saintly duties, therefore he who will abuse the spirits shall never have his place with us. And once the wine has spread in his boiling veins, with threatening wrath, he shall feel the pains.]

3. Conclusion

In her eye-opening essay, Nicole Hochman has shown that Esther embodied the increasing spirit of queenship, being a plausible model figure for dominant queens such as Anne of Brittany (2010, 757-87). Hochner contextualizes her debate about Esther's queenship in a particular era, from the end of the fourteenth century up until the first half of the sixteenth, in which she sees the "exceptional female presence at court at this period and to the extraordinary literature promoting famous women in France". Hochner emphasizes Esther's uniqueness as a good queen, since she ruled within wedlock and not as a virgin or widowed queen (766), and therefore was "instrumental in the arguments in favor of marriage" (771). Furthermore,

¹⁰ Kush generally refers to a pure or hybrid *Cannabis indica* strain.

Hochner stresses that “the queen shared the same privileges of office as her husband” (768) since “queens and kings could be legally equaled in dignity, honors, and prerogatives” (769).

While the Vashti depicted in the anonymous *Le Mystere d'Esther* (most probably written end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century) suits Hochner's chronology, and those in Pierre Matthieu's *Esther* (1581) and *Vashti* (1589) share many similarities, they are all presented, initially, as beloved companions, political peers, and distinguished queens. In Matthieu's second tragedy, Ahasuerus participates in a long and fierce debate about marriage with the chorus of his princes, who object to the idea that marriage can be a good thing and celebrate women's evilness. He contends that Vashti, like Esther, was “instrumental in the arguments in favour of marriage”. She did disobey the royal edict, but so did Esther, as no one was allowed, by royal decree, to enter the king's garden uninvited. So why was Vashti judged so harshly? According to these sources, there is no obvious reason for this, except perhaps that the king was drunk.

Many important and interesting aspects of these plays, such as Vashti's reaction to her punishment, are unfortunately not within the scope of this paper. While each of the sources discussed here awaits its well-deserved independent and thorough study, the current focus on the dramatic adaptations of the Book of Esther offers a few examples of the depiction of Vashti from a less-common perspective. Three decisive moments consolidated the perception of a self-aware Vashti who relinquished her image of a rebellious woman in order to embrace the consciousness of a solid woman standing alone for her rights. Three momentous plays can be considered as the remote ancestors of the modern feminist thought about Vashti (Stanton 1895; Butting 1999; 239-48; Horowitz 2006). It would be reckless to say that these plays are themselves ‘feminist’, yet they do engage in a less judgmental discourse about the former queen of Persia, while broadening the reflections regarding the psychological and political motivations that led her to her decision. These plays enhance the unsolved and unjustified enigma of the biblical text, futilely attempting to truly understand why Esther was considered a “better” woman than Vashti, and why she succeeded where Vashti had failed.

Works Cited

- Anon. 1891. *Le mystère du viel testament*, edited by le Baron James de Rothschild, 6 vols. Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot.
- Bibring, Tovi. 2023. “The Queen Nudatio, a Romanesque (?) Topos in Israel Caslari's Roman d'Esther”. In *Medieval Jewish Romance*, edited by Caroline Gruenbaum and Annegret Oehme. York: ARC Humanities Press (ebook).

- 2021. “Vashti on Display: Medieval Christian Meditations on a Disobeying Queen.” In *Reading the Bible in the Premodern Free World*, edited by Chanita Goodblatt and Haim Kreisel, 99-131. Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press.
- Butting, Klara. 1999. “Esther: a New Interpretation of the Joseph Story in the Fight Against Anti-Feminism and Sexism”. In *Ruth and Esther, A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, edited by Athalya Brenner, 239-48. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- de la Tour-Landry, Geoffroy. 1854. *Le livre du chevalier de La Tour Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles publié d'après les manuscrits de Paris et de Londres par M. Anatole de Montaiglon*. Paris: Jannet.
- Guttman, Ariel, and Kenneth Johnson, 2004. *Mythic Astrology: Internalizing the Planetary Powers*. St Paul: Lewellyn Publications.
- Hochner, Nicole. 2010. “Imagining Esther in Early Modern France”. *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41 (3): 757-87.
- Horowitz, Elliott. 2006. *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Laniak, Timothy S. 1998. *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Matthieu Pierre. 2007. *Théâtre complet*, edited by Louis Lobbes. Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- Mazour-Matusevich, Yelena. 2006. “La position de Jean Gerson (1363-1429) envers les femmes”. *Le Moyen Âge* 2: 337-53.
- Picot, Emile. 1891. “Notice sur les mystères contenus dans le tome VII”. In *Le mystère du viel testament*, vol.6, edited by le baron James de Rothschild, i-lxxvi. Paris: librairie de Firmin Didot.
- Porter, Jean. 2001. “Natural Equality: Freedom, Authority and Obedience in Two Medieval Thinkers”. *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21: 275-99.
- Stanton, Elizabeth. 1895. *The Woman's Bible: a Classic Feminist Perspective*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Thérel, Marie-Louise. 1971. “L'origine du thème de la synagogue répudiée”. *Scriptorium* 25 (2): 285-90.