9:1 2023

Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Edizioni ETS

SKENÈ

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 Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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

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

ISSN 2421-4353

Contents

Performing *The Book of Esther* in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

Miscellany

Special Section

Chanita Goodblatt*

Introduction

This special issue, entitled *Performing the* Book of Esther *in Early Modern Europe*, has its inception in the shared interest of myself and Susan Payne in dramatic adaptations of the biblical *Book of Esther*. It was conceived as comprising a companion to Payne's forthcoming English translation of the 1619 Italian play, *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* (*Esther: A Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture*), written by the Venetian-Jewish scholar, Rabbi and poet Leon Modena (1571-1648). The first three articles of this issue therefore focus on *L'Ester*, while the following four articles complement them by discussing various adaptions in early modern European culture of the figures of Esther and Vashti from the biblical story.

It is therefore highly appropriate to open with a focused look at the *Book of Esther*, from two central perspectives: biblical scholarship; and feminist biblical studies. From the perspective of biblical scholarship, Adele Berlin provides a pivotal analysis of this book, which accompanies her volume in the series *The JPS Bible Commentary* (2001). Berlin proposes that the date of composition of the *Book of Esther* is in the fourth century BCE (2001, xli). She challenges the view of the *Book of Esther* as a historical document, convincingly arguing that it is rather an example of

> imaginative storytelling, not unlike others that circulated in the Persian and Hellenistic period among Jews of the Land of Israel and of the Diaspora . . . it provides an optimistic picture of Jewish survival and success in a foreign land . . . Its main concern, the very reason for its existence, is to establish Purim as a holiday for all generations. (xv)

Indeed, in the *Book of Esther*, the name *Purim* for the Jewish holiday is explained as deriving from the word *pur*/*lot*, which the villain Haman casts to determine the day on which to destroy the Jews (*Book of Esther* 3:7; Alter 2019, 724-5).

* Ben-Gurion University of the Negev - chanita@bgu.ac.il

Berlin also designates two additional aspects. The first is the issue of canonisation, both in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Although the *Book of Esther* was ultimately canonised in the Hebrew Bible, in the Jewish tradition there was a concern that it was not "divinely inspired" and several scholars "have suggested that the rejection of the book was based on theological grounds – the absence of the divine name and religious observance, and the marriage of a Jewess to a pagan king" (2001, xliii-iv). What is more, since "the church did not have Purim in is liturgical calendar, Christians did not have the compelling reason that Jews had to accept the book" (xlv). Even though it was ultimately also canonised in the Christian Bible, "Esther was often mentioned in conjunction with the books of the Apocrypha, especially Judith" (ibid.). This aspect of the ambiguous status of the *Book of Esther* certainly connects to the second aspect, which is its definition as Comedy. As Berlin perceptively notes, this book "is the most humorous of the books in the Bible, amusing throughout and at certain points uproariously funny. . . The largest interpretive problems melt away if the story is taken as a farce or a comedy associated with a carnival-like festival" (xvii).

Athalya Brenner further enriches the study of the *Book of Esther* by looking at it through the perspective of feminist biblical studies. In the introduction to her edited volume *Esther, Judith and Susanna*, part of the series *A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Brenner overturns the boundaries of canon. She does so by discussing the *Book of Esther* in relation to these two apocryphal books, in terms of the development of their respective eponymous heroines. As Brenner insightfully explains, "[a]lthough only the book of Esther is included in the Hebrew Bible, all three books present figurations of Jewish (as distinct from 'Israelite' or 'Judahite') female protagonists in an environment of dependency on foreign powers. . . Among other things, these three stories furnish a context for reflecting, once again, on the (in)visibility of women in history and historiographical constructs" (1995, 11). Brenner subsequently writes about these books:

> In all three cases, the authority of the males is questioned by the female subjects and their sexuality. The encounter between Jewish females and foreign or Jewish males entails mortal danger for the females, a recurrent biblical motif when a female figure allegedly steps outside the strictures of appropriate female behaviour. The encounter between (Jewish) female and male (doubly-other: socially superior; foreign or elder) sexuality results in the subversion of male power. (12)

In a chapter included in this edited volume Lilian Klein utilizes the concept of "honor/shame codes", adapted from anthropological and sociological studies, to thoughtfully propose that together they comprise "a definitive

cultural value among the Israelites in the text of Esther" (1995, 149). When discussing the character of Vashti, Klein argues that "the king's command is contrary to the basic tenets of honor/shame, for he commands his wife to enter masculine space inappropriately, forbidden to a woman who values her sense of shame" (155). Subsequently, in discussing the character of Esther, Klein writes that Esther's calling attention to her sexual appeal by dressing up in royal clothes for her unexpected visit to the King, in order to save her people, comprises an instance when "individual abuses of honor/shame may be acceptable but communal honor must be maintained. This behavior can be seen as a paradigm for the Jews in exile" (164).

Modena's play *L'Ester* was published, as stated in the first *Prose Preface*, on "25th February the very day of our Purim, that is the feast of Esther. 1618 (*Li 25. Febraro il giorno istesso del nostro Purim, cioè della festa di Ester. 1618*; Modena 2023).[1] Yet, the exact origins of this spring carnivalesque holiday are unclear, and "all reconstructions of the earliest Purim celebrations require speculation" (Craig 1995, 162). The biblical scholar Theodore Gaster has recorded several different proposed solutions, including: the commemoration of the Jewish victory over the Seleucid-Greek general Nicanor in the spring of 161 BCE.; the Judaization of the Greek festival of of Pithoigia, or "Opening the Wine Casks", which takes place in the spring; the Jewish adaptation of the Babylonian New Year's festival, held at the beginning of spring; or the Jewish interpretation of the Persian festival of Farwadigan, a five-day All Soul's festival (Gaster 1950, 6-11). Ultimately, however, Gaster argues that Purim "may originally have been the Persian New Year festival held at the time of the vernal equinox" (18). As Carey Moore writes: "Certainly no opprobrium should be attached to the suggestion of a pagan prototype for the festival of Purim . . . Judaism has survived partly because of its ability to adopt pagan ideas and institutions by which it found itself surrounded, and to adapt them to its own distinctive purposes" (1971, xlix).

Comprising a carnivalesque holiday, Purim encompasses numerous forms of celebration: a festive meal, with special pastries and much drinking of wine; the sending of presents and the giving of charity; mummeries and Purim plays; costumes and masquerades; the election of mock kings and rabbis; the burning of effigies of the evil Haman; and boisterous behaviour in the synagogue during the reading of the *Book of Esther*, which includes rattles and feet stamping (Doniach 1933, 93-167; Gaster 1950, 1-82; Pollack 1977). Indeed, the masquerade as a central performative aspect of Purim was "first introduced among the Italian Jews about the close of the fifteenth century under the influence of the Roman [pre-Lenten] carnival" (Kohler and Malter 1901-1906, 277).

[1] As Payne notes in her article (in this issue), Modena is using the Venetian calendar. The more modern dating would be 1619.

Taken in tandem, these discussions of the *Book of Esther* comprise an intriguing and challenging context within which to discuss the articles included in this special issue. Those by Susan Payne, Chanita Goodblatt and Vered Tohar provide new vistas for looking at Modena's play *L'Ester*. Payne and Goodblatt utilize concepts from Gérard Genette's seminal work *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997) to draw attention to several paratexts of *L'Ester*. These include: the *Title-Page*, the *Prose Prefaces*, the *Prefatorial Poem*; the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* declaimed by the figure of Truth; and the *Monologue* declaimed by the "Shade of Amalek". Payne, in "The Genesis of Modena's *L'Ester*: Sources and Paratext", utilizes the discussion of these various paratexts to demonstrate how they allow Modena – confined within the Jewish Ghetto with the members of his community by a Venetian Senatorial decree – to assume his rightful authority as a scholar over Jews and Christians, as well as to sustain a relationship between Jewish and Christian religious doctrines and cultures. Payne also proposes a new timeline for Modena's composition of *L'Ester*. For she writes that the *Prose Prefaces* and the *Prefatorial Poem* (addressed to "The Lady Sarra Copio Sullam Jewess" and to the author's "benevolent Readers") were composed in response to Sullam's literary *affaire* with the Genoese author and monk Ansaldo Cebà, while the play itself (as a revision of an earlier text) was carried out several years previously. In "Modena's *L'Ester*: A Venetian-Jewish Play in Early Modern Europe", Goodblatt focuses on the *Prefatorial Poem*, as well as on the *Prologue* and *Epilogue*. She discusses these paratexts in terms of the play's integration of Jewish and Christian sources, as well as in terms of its use of aspects of figuration and performance. Thus, there are two primary issues of discussion. The first relates to the way Modena utilizes both direct references and recognizable allusions to a variety of Jewish and Christian texts to create dramatic characters and situations. The second issue relates to the way he utilizes various tropes and aspects of performance, which not only connect *L'Ester* to these exegetical and literary texts, but also to European performative traditions. What is more, Goodblatt highlights Modena's adaption and enactment of the "figuration of woman" evident in the biblical *Book of Esther*, focusing on the figure of Vashti. Tohar, in "Reading *L'Ester* by Leon of Modena in the Context of His Other Writings", proposes an understanding of this play in the context of three other works by Modena: *Tsemaḥ Tsaddik* (*Flower of Righteousness*), his book about Jewish ethics and human qualities composed of non-narrative prose segments with interspersed tales (1600); *Ḥayyey Yehudah* (*Life of Judah*), his autobiographical essay expressing, among other things, Modena's attitude towards the women in his life (that remained in manuscript until the twentieth century); and his letter "Statement of Defense" (1604; heretofore untranslated), which he wrote in defense of a woman suspected of practicing witchcraft. Within this wider

context, Tohar proposes that it is highly probable that Modena identifies with the related figures of Vashti, Sullam and the witch. Together these comprise four versions of human beings who pay the price for their nonconformity and authenticity.

Ben-Aryeh Debby, in "Queen Esther in Venice: Art and Drama", provides a transition to early modern European culture. She looks at the representations of Queen Esther in sixteenth-century Venetian visual tradition in conjunction with Modena's *L'Ester*. Ben-Aryeh Debby examines how Christian and Jewish artists in Venice (Paolo Veronese, Tintoretto, and Moshe Ben Avraham Pascarol) offer multilayered interpretations of this biblical queen; she was seen as an ideal bride, as a court lady, or as an oriental figure. Esther was also seen as a prototype of the Virgin Mary, and as a Jewish maiden reflecting issues of toleration and assimilation of the Jews in Venice. Ben-Aryeh Debby demonstrates that Venice was a center in which images of Esther were copious and influential, thereby illuminating the way in which Modena both follows and offers alternative interpretations of the rich culture in which he lived. Tovi Bibring, in "Vashti on the French Stage", turns to three plays from the fifteenth and sixteenth century: the anonymous mystery play, *Le Mystere d'Esther* (end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century); and two tragedies written by Pierre Matthieu – *Esther* (1581) and *Vashti* (1589). She examines the way in which these plays present Vashti as a self-aware, powerful and reasonable figure on the one hand, but bold and daring on the other. To this end, Bibring studies two main concepts and their performative examples. The first is the concept that Vashti's tragedy was the result of Ahasuerus's insobriety; this is presented as the comical intermission in *Le Mystere d'Esther*, but is addressed in a more serious manner in Matthieu's tragedies. The second concept focuses on the analogies that the king establishes in Matthieu's two tragedies, between his marriage to Vashti and those of Adam and Eve or Jupiter and Juno.

Cora Dietl focuses on "The Feast as Performance: Esther in German Sixteenth-Century Plays". She examines three plays, revealing the close connection between the individual confessional or political interpretation of the *Book of Esther*, and the treatment of feasts and banquets in these plays. The two German dramatists – Volten Voith in *Esther* (1536), and Hans Sachs in *Comedia. Die gantze hystori der Hester* (*Comedy. The whole story of Esther*; 1536) – follow the biblical story and only briefly note that the King organized a feast. They thereby respectively preserve the tension in their plays until Esther's decisive banquets, which reveal her as a great director of history. In Jos Murer's play *Hester* (1567), however, the figure of Esther is most explicit, with the audience gaining insight into her directing strategies, and involved itself through the reference to the wedding ceremony during which the play was staged. Wim Hüsken concludes this special issue by discussing "Esther

in the Drama of the Early Modern Low Countries", concentrating on four plays by Dutch and Flemish dramatists. Petrus Philicinus, in his neo-Latin play *Tragœdia Esther sive Edissa* (1544), depicts Esther as sweet and docile, in contrast to Vashti as the epitome of arrogance. Both the anonymous play *Hester en Assverus* (prior to 1615) and Joris Berckmans's play *Edissa* (1649) demonstrate Esther's loyalty towards Ahasuerus, while contrasting her sweet and obedient character to Vasthi's less sympathetic attitude towards the king. Yet in the former, anonymous play Vashti's refusal to attend the King's party is somewhat condoned, while Berckman stages an impolite, rude Vashti. Finally, Nicolaas Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid* (*Esther, or the Image of Obedience*; 1637) also describes Esther as a loyal queen to Ahasuerus, with her virtue beyond any doubt.

Read together, these seven articles provide an insightful and fascinating companion to Payne's translation of Modena's play *L'Ester*, rightfully bringing to the forefront of scholarly recognition both this Venetian-Jewish work and early modern European adaptations of the intriguing biblical *Book of Esther*.

Works Cited

Alter, Robert, ed. 2019. *The Hebrew Bible. A Translation with Commentary*. Volume Three. New York: W.W. Norton.

Berlin, Adele. 2001. *The JPS Commentary: Esther*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

Brenner, Athalya. 1995. "Introduction". In *Esther, Judith and Susanna. A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, edited by Athalya Brenner, 11-24. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Craig, Kenneth M., Jr. 1995. *Reading Esther: a Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Doniach, N.S. 1933. *Purim or the Feast of Esther: an Historical Study*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Gaster, Theodor Herzl. 1950. *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition*. New York: Henry Schuman.

Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (*Seuils,* 1987). Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klein, Lillian R. 1995. "Honor and Shame in Esther". In *Esther, Judith and Susanna. A Feminist Companion to the Bible*. First Series, edited by Athalya Brenner, 149-75. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Kohler, Kaufmann, and Herman Malter. 1901-1906. "Purim". *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Volume 10, 247-9, https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5874-esther-feast-of (Accessed 23 February 2023).

Modena, Leon (forthcoming). *Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture,* edited and translated by Susan Payne. Skenè. Texts. Pisa: ETS.

Moore, Carey A., ed. 1971. *Esther: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Pollack, Herman. 1977. "An Historical Inquiry on Concerning Purim Masquerade-Attire". *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies. Volume 4: History of the Jews in Europe*: 217-35.

Susan Payne*

The Genesis of Modena's *L'Ester*: Sources and Paratext

Abstract

Leon Modena's play *L'Ester*, as is evinced by the title page, finds its origin in the 'holy scripture' of the Hebrew Bible, and more particularly in the *Book of Esther*, which constitutes the traditional explanation of the Jewish religious feast of Purim. Modena himself underlines this in the Preface to his play. Also on the title page can be found his recognition of the fact that the play constitutes the revision of a preceding play by Salamon Usque, written sixty or so years before. But it has been claimed that one of the reasons Modena decided to write his version of the story, still in dramatic form, may have been to counteract an attempt to convert his pupil and the play's Dedicatee, Sarra Copio Sullam, to Christianity, on the part of Ansaldo Cebà, a Genoese scholar and monk, who had written a poem on Esther which was greatly admired by Copio Sullam. This poem, in its way, is said to represent a sort of source or 'antitext' against which Modena is reacting. Drawing on Gérard Genette's seminal work on the functions of the paratext, I intend to examine this specific area of *L'Ester*, bearing in mind the factors underlying its creation, its structure and especially the contradictions and paradoxes which will be revealed in a play that above all analyses the position of outsiders within an alien community.

Keywords: Leon Modena; Ansaldo Cebà; *L'Ester*; Sarra Copio Sullam; paratext; Gérard Genette

1. The Three Players in the Paratext of *L'Ester*: Modena, Copio Sullam and Cebà

L'Ester. Tragedia Tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura[1] is first mentioned by its author, Leon Modena (1571-1648), in his own bibliography of his works contained in his autobiography, written in Hebrew, *Life of Judah*, where he records the Preface that will be the object of this study (Cohen 1988, 126). The Preface, together with the frontispiece, prologues and epilogue to the play itself, constitute what Gérard Genette usefully termed and theorized in his volume *Seuils* (1987) as the paratext. These conventions and devices make

[1] Leon Modena, *L'Ester. Tragedia Tratta Dalle Sacre Scritture*, Venezia, per Giacomo Sarzina, 1619. The text and the English translation of this text are from Modena (forthcoming).

* University of Florence - susankpayne1@gmail.com

up the material surrounding the published main text – the "threshold of interpretation" which mediates among book, author, publisher and reader, and which, as Macksey (1987) points out in his introduction to the English translation of Genette's work, form part of the special pragmatic status the paratext lends to a book's private and public history. By the time T. L. Berger and Sonia Massai publish their two-volume compendium of English early modern dramatic paratexts in 2014 they can claim that Genette's term maintains its critical currency and in their edition it refers to "all the extra-dramatic texts such as title pages, dedications, addresses to the reader, lists of dramatis personae, prologues and epilogues, stationers' notes and errata lists, which were prefaced or appended to the English printed drama to 1642". Macksey also interestingly adds that "the terrain of the paratext poses intriguing problems for any speech-act analysis, situated as it is between the first-order illocutionary domain of the public world and that of the second-order speech acts of fiction" (Genette 1997, xix). This comment is of particular interest in the case of Modena's play. For, as is well-known, the polymathic Rabbi is celebrated in the history of early seventeenth-century as a brilliant scholar, linguist, speaker and writer of Latin, a gifted liturgical musician, a revered leader of the Synagogue and an important figure in the Venetian culture of the moment as well as further afield,[2] poet in Hebrew and Italian. We shall see that from the beginning of the paratext that the motivating force behind the composition of the play (and indeed the illocutionary force of the discourse of this liminal area of the work) is that of persuasion.

The paratext is quite obviously intended to be read. The play itself was never to our knowledge staged, and indeed, with its many long speeches and monologues it would be difficult to do so.[3] At the best it has many of the characteristics of a closet drama. The ideal readers of this "threshold" to the play were probably the members of the prestigious intellectual salon hosted by Modena's protégée the 'bella Hebrea' Sarra Copio Sullam, situated in the Venetian Ghetto and frequented by illustrious Christian and Jewish members of the Italian intelligentsia. And it would seem to be in the first

[2] In 1608 in Venice Modena met with English Protestant scholars some of whom were seeking Hebrew instruction relating to James I's authorization in 1604 of a new Bible translation. Adelman informs us that the rabbi "knew Henry Wotton (1569-1639), the English ambassador to Venice; William Bedell (1577-1644), Wotton's chaplain, provost of Trinity College in Dublin . . . and translator of the Bible into Gaelic; Samuel Slade (1568-1612) Oxford graduate, vicar and bibliophile". He also corresponded with David Farar of Amsterdam "who consulted him about his disputations with Hugh Broughton (1549-1612), an English Hebraist and dissenter" (Adelman, "Leon Modena: The Autobiography and the Man" in Cohen 1988: 26).

[3] That is until 17 February, 2022 in Ferrara. See *Qinà Shemor / Ester la Regina del Ghetto*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixfIZAR-wkc (Accessed 30 May 2023).

place, an advertisement of the author's intentions towards his dedicatee, in the second, closely connected, a duel, a literary, very Venetian, 'tenzone' with the Christian monk Antonio Cebà to save Copio Sullam's soul, and in the third, the author's desire to strengthen his already well-established position as an authoritative member of the salon. Whereas, as far as the theatrical text is concerned, the message is sent to unknown readers and/or spectators, in the Dedication and the Preface sender and addressee become personalized and the function is less literary.

Between 1618 and 1626, the meeting-place at the wealthy Sullams' home "fostered Christian-Jewish intellectual interaction of an intensity and duration unique in early modern Venice" (Westwater 2020, 15). The exceptionally learned and beautiful Jewess, Sarra Copio Sullam,[4] founded this cultural community following a correspondence she began in spring 1618 with the elderly Genoese monk, and author of lyric and epic poems, treatises letters and dramas, Ansaldo Cebà (1565-1622). Though she herself, at the probable age of twenty-six, already, as Umberto Fortis points out was certainly very well-known in the Venetian intellectual milieu (Fortis 2003, 30), this prestigious connection was of material use in introducing her to a wider circle of eminent Christian intellectuals (Westwater 2020, 31-5). Copio Sullam's admiration for Cebà's epic poem *La Reina Esther* (Genova, 1613-15), and the letter she sent him telling him of this admiration, was the beginning of a long and complex correspondence between the two which lasted from 1618 to 1622. The Jewish intellectual Copio Sullam regarded the Christian intellectual Cebà's celebration of the revered figure of the Jewish Esther as a cornerstone upon which to build interchange between the Jewish and the Christian cultural worlds. Yet Cebà's interest in Copio Sullam was different. For besides the Platonic and literary "love affair" he was to conduct with Copio Sullam between 1618 and 1621 when his "love" turned to contempt on the failure of his plan, Cebà's major concern was "to win another soul for the church" (Harrán 2009, 43). He actually tells Copio Sullam this in one of his first letters (Cebà 1623, 24):

> La mia fede è tanto vera
> E il mio amor cotanto puro,
> Ch'io ti prego e ti scongiuro
> A lasciar l'ebraica schiera

[4] The name of the "bella Hebrea" is subject to a series of variations wherever else she is mentioned. Sarra becomes 'Sara' or 'Sarah', Copio 'Copia' or 'Coppio/a' and Sullam is also written 'Sulam'. Here, for reasons of homogeneity, I shall maintain Modena's spelling, although on the frontispiece of her own volume Manifesto (1621) where, in its preface, she writes in the first person, her name is spelt Sarra Copia Sulam.

[My faith is so true
And my love is so pure,
That I beg and beseech you
To leave the Hebrew ranks][5]

Scordari makes this plain in her essay on Modena's play and points out that whereas Copio Sullam saw the Genoese monk's poem as "portraying Esther as a courtly heroine and Vashti as a convert to Judaism [thus] both a celebration of Jewish national existence and an invitation to cross-faith dialogue", Cebà's Vashti was a double of Esther who was "an exceptional woman, imbued with moral virtues; by epitomizing a God-inspired reason she foreshadowed true Christianity" (Scordari 2020, 54). By the time Modena presents his play to the salon in March 1619, at the time of its publication, he is obviously concerned about the effect that the relationship between Cebà and Copio Sullam was having within the confines of the salon and beyond, however great the age-gap was between the two correspondents, not to mention the distance between Venice and Genoa. A scandal was brewing as Cebà, disappointed that his project to convert Copio Sullam was having little effect and apparently regretting the fact that their "love" was destined to remain Platonic, began to smear the reputation of the innocent and naïve, however cultured, young woman (Harrán 2009, 30). Copio Sullam eventually became the centre of a polemic on the immortality of the soul and was accused of heresy. She was able to prove her intellectual status by rebutting this accusation in writing when she replied to Baldassare Bonifaccio's publication *Dell'immortalità dell'anima* (1621), by publishing her *Manifesto* immediately afterwards (Fortis 2003, 61-81). Yet the ensuing scandal and the risk of her trial by the Inquisition began the gradual disintegration of the salon and her eventual disappearance from the public scene.

2. The Construction of the Paratext: Sender and Receivers

Adelman (1988, 23) mentions that Modena, who was always in need of money, had been involved in Jewish publishing in Venice as a proof-reader and jobber working with typographers and in touch with authors whom he advised on type fonts, volume size and the nature of the paper used. He also concerned himself with proof-reading, binding and distribution of the texts and wrote dedicatory poems for the books. It does not seem too much to hypothesize that the paratext of *L'Ester* was almost certainly carefully constructed by the author himself. It is a complex piece of work, consisting

[5] Unless otherwise stated, all traslations from Italian are my own.

of a Title-Page; Dedication; Dedicatory Sonnet; Author's Preface to the Play; Dramatis Personae; Prologue; Monologue by Amalek's Ghost, all preceding the first act and an Epilogue at the conclusion of the fifth. Modena, as is the case with most dedicatory paratexts, must have added this one to the completed play. The same is probably true of the prologue and the epilogue. Possibly, ideally, the author imagined it to be perused by the members of Copio Sullam's salon as well as by her, his dedicatee – as we shall see this is made evident from what he himself says in the dedication and the preface. The only textual area that there is evidence of a hand other than the author's own is that of the title-page. Genette includes this part of the text in the area he calls the "publisher's peritext" (1997, 16ff.) and the title-page itself is, as Berger and Massai point out, "probably the most formulaic of all the paratextual materials included in early modern playbooks" (2014, Introduction). That of Modena's play is no exception, but this is not to say that the information it conveys is difficult to interpret, with the possible exception of the title.

The title could have been simply *Ester* but Modena called his play *L'Ester* with a definite article preceding the proper noun. This may be of immediate significance, and could possibly have to do with the motivation lying behind the whole literary project. Although in Italian, the optional placing of a definite article before a given name, especially that of a familiar person, is very common, especially in northern Italy and in Florence, it is less common in book or play (or opera) titles. To hypothesize that that this particularizing of Esther's name, an enduring Latinism (Ester *illa*), may be deliberate on Modena's part, seems quite possible. In her seminal essay Scordari (2020, 54), after mentioning the fact that Modena's play is the reworking of an earlier one and that from a cultural standpoint it aims at conveying Judaism to the Christian world, the drama itself was composed "for a third and more personal reason": that of warning Sara of the risks of her exchange with Cebà. Not *La Reina Ester* then, but "the" Esther whose story is told in the *Book of Esther*, read at the feast of Purim. However, as Genette points out (1997, 75):

> . . . if the addressee of the text is indeed the reader, the addressee of the title is the public . . . The title is directed at many more people than the text, people who by one route or another receive it and transmit it and thereby have a hand in circulating it. For if the text is an object to be read, the title (like, moreover, the name of the author) is an object to be circulated - or, if you prefer, a subject of conversation.

The message to Copio Sullam and to Cebà, if it is one, is thus encrypted within a more generalized reception: the wider public to whom Modena is addressing himself in the paratext, in itself a limited one, being Copio

Sullam's literary salon whose members may or may not pick up the message. In Genette's terms the first function of the title "the only one that is obligatory in the practice and institution of literature [that] of designating, or identifying" could be seen to have been changed by the addition of the definite article before the proper noun 'Ester' from simply being a designative to a connotative one. Here is Genette's opinion (93):

> Third is the connotative function attached (whether or not by authorial intent) to the descriptive function. This connotative function, too, seems to me unavoidable, for every title, like every statement in general, has its own way of being or, if you prefer, its own style - and this is the case even with the most restrained title, which will at least connote restraint (at best; and at worst, the affectation of restraint). But perhaps we go too far in calling a sometimes unintended effect a function, and it would no doubt be better to speak here of connotative value.

As we have seen, Modena also gives the play a classifying subtitle, *Tragedia Tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* (*A Tragedy. Taken from Holy Scripture*), in which he identifies both the genre in which he is writing and the main source of the play's story. We shall see later in the paratext exactly what he means by the term *tragedia* and the truth value he gives to his source material.

Interestingly, the name of the author, the next item to appear on the frontispiece, is, using Genette's paratextual categories, worthy of comment (39):

> Either the author "signs" (despite the above-mentioned reservation, I will use this word to make a long story short) with his legal name: we can plausibly surmise (I am not aware of any statistics on this matter) that this is most commonly the case; or he signs with a false name, borrowed or invented: this is pseudonymity; or he does not sign at all, and this is anonymity. For referring to the first situation, it is fairly tempting to follow the model of the other two and coin the term onymity.

The Rabbi would appear to fit the category of *onymity*, in that "Leon Modena da Venezia" is the Italian name he goes by in the cultured Jewish and Venetian society he frequents. Many of his acquaintances, colleagues and interlocutors were distinguished men. Adelman (1988, 26-7) tells us that the notable English Protestant connections already mentioned here (note 5) were also friends of Fra Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623):[6] when Modena acquired a

[6] See Adelman (26): "the Venetian leader in the controversy with the papacy that culminated in the papal interdict imposed on Venice in 1606. Sarpi – who lived near the ghetto and whose years in Venice coincided with those of Modena – regularly attended gatherings where Jews were present, which was among the reasons given by Pope

copy of Sarpi's *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* (*History of the Council of Trent*) "he copied sections from it and referred to Sarpi as 'my' friar". During 1609, the year Modena spent in Florence as a rabbinic authority on Jewish law, one of his most eminent students was the French Catholic Jean Plantavit de la Pause (1576-1651), to whom he taught Hebrew, Bible and rabbinics. Part of his desire for a constructive dialogue with Christianity is also to be seen in his own *Dizionario hebraico-italiano* published in 1612. What Genette calls his "legal name", the one he signs himself with in Italian, is Leon Modena da Venezia as Adelman and Ravid (Cohen 1988, 187) note:

> From the available sources it appears that Leon Modena had visited the city of Modena once . . . [he] consistently referred to himself in three ways: in Italian as Leon Modena; in Hebrew as Yehudah Aryeh mi-Modena, and in Latin as Leo Mutinensis.

So this would appear to be his formal Italian identity, as the bearer of an Italian given name followed by a toponymic typical in early modern Italy as a last name and the addition of a place name to indicate where he was born and where he worked as an adult. Yet it disguises the fact that his Hebrew name, the one really expressing his *onymity* so to speak, was Yehudah Aryeh *mi-modena*, Modena being one of the cities his ancestors had settled in after migrating from France. Right from the title page the author's condition as an outsider is revealed, though it must not be forgotten that the "pseudonym" Leon Modena is completely transparent – every one of his contemporaries knows anyway that the two names belong to the same person. One who uses the rough translation of his name (*aryeh* means lion, *leone* in Italian) from a language rarely known by the native inhabitants, may be seen to have adopted a pseudonym in spite of himself and thus unconsciously signal the "doubleness" the alterity which as he is an outsider he must live with. This is confirmed by the immediate give-away and officially-approved racial identification below his name "Hebreo da Venetia" (A Jew from Venice).

In Counter-Reformation Italy the most greatly-feared heretics were Protestants, who, notwithstanding the tolerant attitude of the commercially astute Venice of the time, were considered by Rome to be particularly dangerous and censorship was imposed by the Inquisition on their works (Grendler 1975, 49). But it is evident from the frontispieces of the various publications of Modena and his Jewish friends and associates that censorship was also the norm here – every title-page of a Jewish publication carries the word "Ebreo/a". Here the only peculiarity is the fact that Modena, or his printer Giacomo Sarzina (mentioned by Cohen as also being a Jew, though

Clement VIII (1592-1605) for refusing to grant Sarpi a bishopric".

this is very unlikely),[7] has failed to specify the fact that Modena had been awarded the title of Rabbi in 1609. I have not been able to find the decree that Papal censorship imposed on Venetian editors and printers to declare the nationality of Jewish writers on the title-pages of the relatively few books published by them in Italian so that they and the authors were able to claim copyright, the "licence and privilege" granted by the City's officials and counsellors and thus have the exclusive right to sell their volumes. Yet on all the title pages I have seen of books published by Jewish authors this is the case. The copyright declaration, together with the printer's name and ornament, as well as place and year of publication, make up the rest of the exiguous peritext: it is probably Modena himself who added the term "rinovato" (revised), as is discussed by him later in the preface.[8]

3. Dedication and Dedicatee: a Reaction to the "Antitext"?

The Frontispiece is immediately followed by a grandiloquent Dedicatory Epistle to his protégée and host, Copio Sullam. This part of the paratext, as Genette points out, establishes a different relationship between sender and addressee. It is usually almost a private "coded" message (although all coeval readers would have understood it) between a dependent and a hoped-for paymaster. In this case, although her Ladyship is called Modena's "Illustre Signora e Padrona Osservandissima" ("illustrious Lady and patroness most worthy of regard") and her virtue, worth and intelligence are mentioned several times in the dedication, its actual function would seem to be that of parodically deflating both Cebà's poem *La Reina Ester* (considered by several scholars[9] as a sort of "antitext" against which Modena is reacting when he "re"-writes the play *L'Ester*) and Copio Sullam's idolatry of it, warning her, at the same time, of the dangers she is incurring. Genette (1997, 134) comments:

[7] In his detailed 1997 essay reconstructing Sarzina's life and editorial activity, nowhere does Mario Infelise make any mention of the possibility of the printer's Jewish origin (207-23). In fact his career as one of the most highly-regarded printers who was, between the years 1631 and 1641, in charge of the official printing press of the Accademia degli Incogniti, would seem to prove this. It is very probable that Sarzina was able to print Hebrew texts like the two of Modena's mentioned here by employing Jewish workers sub-contracted from Hebrew printing presses.

[8] See Sarnelli 2004, 166-9. Modena had also already revised I Trionfi. Favola Pastorale, a work written in about 1575, influenced by Tasso's poetry, whose author, Angelo Alatini was a Jew from Città di Castello. This had been published in Venice by Modena in 1611 and, although the rabbi denies it, in this case too according to Sarnelli, he had made substantial adaptations to update its language.

[9] See, cited in this essay, Arbib (2003), Adelman (2016), and Scordari (2020).

> Whoever the official addressee, there is always an ambiguity in the destination of a dedication, which is always intended for at least two addressees: the dedicatee, of course, but also the reader, for dedicating a work is a public act that the reader is, as it were, called on to witness. A typically performative act, as I have said, for in itself it *constitutes* the act it is supposed to describe; the formula for it is therefore not only "I dedicate this . . ." but also . . . "I am telling the reader that I am dedicating this . . ."

Modena had been instructed in the "art of poetry and the language of letter-writing" (Cohen1988, 86) from his childhood and had practised this art from then onwards, both writing his own poetry in Italian and Hebrew and translating from Italian into Hebrew and vice versa. He is well able, while appearing to praise Cebà's poetic virtuosity, to exploit and parody a sort of hyperbolic *accumulatio*, and of what Fortis (2003, 70) calls the exaggerations of the rhetoric of baroque poetry and its artificiality:

> . . . nè i suoi giudicii habbiano bisogno di approbatione, nè io sordo possa dar conto delle armoniche consonanze; ma per il vero vi si scorge lo stile Heroico, le inventioni dilettevoli, i concetti in copia, gli episodi possibili, le digressioni non vane, l'incatenatura con ordine, la spiegatura facile, i versi numerosi, le comparationi proprie, le metafore, e il parlar figurato, e in somma tutti quei requisiti, che desiderarsi puonno per render riguardevole, un come quel Poema.
>
> [. . . nor may my dull hearing permit me to pronounce on his harmonious consonances, while, to tell the truth, I recognize the Heroic style, the delightful inventions, the abundant conceits, the realistic events, the justifiable digressions the well-ordered sequence, the effortless narration, the numerous lines, the just comparisons, the metaphors, the figures, indeed, all the prerequisites necessary to render such a Poem remarkable and notable.]

With a nice example of *sprezzatura* Modena dubs himself aesthetically "sordo" ("deaf") while deflating the "requisiti" ("prerequisites") to which Cebà has had recourse in order to render his poem in "stile Heroico" ("Heroic style") – the number of lines ("i versi numerosi") being a particularly shrewd thrust as Cebà's poem is inordinately long. Here are all the prerequisites that one could desire, indeed, Modena goes on, "per rendere riguardevole, e notabile un come quell Poema" ("to render such a poem remarkable and notable"). Beauty and, in particular, truth are not mentioned.

As for the flattering commentary on the "Illustre Signora" the dedication begins in a conventional manner, praising "l'honesta, e gentil sua conversatione, la quale per le sue rare maniere, e molte virtù, e scienze, avanzando e gli anni, e'l sesso di se stessa, diletta" ("your virtuous and courteous conversation, that for its incomparable manner, and its many

qualities and great knowledge [is] delightful beyond your age and sex"). Then, once again, Modena apparently humbles himself, begging his patroness to read his play if only for "la conformità del nome, e dell'Historia" (the similarity of the name, and the Story" to Cebà's poem.

However, in the conclusion to the Dedicatory Epistle, the function of the message and the sender's attitude to the dedicatee would seem to change:

> . . . si come corrispondenza tra queste nostre antiche madri Sarra e Ester, che quella generò la stirpe nostra, e questa la regenerò, salvandola da morte, il nome di Sarra vuol dire Principessa, e Ester fù Regina, quella santa e virtuosa, questa pia, e da bene, così V.S. cerca quella, e questa nella bontà, nella virtù, e nella grandezza dell'animo imitare. Piaccia al Signore concederle sempre prosperità, e bene, perche possi avanzarsi tuttavia di bene in meglio con vita felice.
>
> [. . . since there is this similarity between these two venerable forebears, our mothers, Sara and Esther, the first who engendered our race and the second who restored it by saving it from extinction, the name Sara means Princess, and Esther was a Queen, the first blessed and virtuous, the second pious and righteous; so, may your Ladyship seek to emulate the goodness, the virtue and the greatness of soul of both. May God always grant you prosperity and fortune, so that you may continue in all ways better and better with a happy life.]

The tone becomes didactic, the message contains historical and religious information, the Rabbi blesses his protégée and member of his flock, subtly warning her to emulate the eminent forebears of her race while instructing her to continue to be happy as one of their progeny.

The dating of this epistle, "Li 25. Febraro, il giorno istesso del nostro Purim, cioè della festa di Ester. 1618." ("25th February the very day of our Purim, that is the feast of Esther. 1618."),[10] with its proud affirmation of the Jewish religious meaning of the figure of Esther, is also a significant continuation of the deliberate re-assumption of Modena's "original" identity as Rabbi, teacher and Jew, even though, after the correct rhetorical formality of the salutation "Di V.S. Illustre / Affettionatiss per servirla" ("From your illustrious Ladyship's most affectionate servant") he signs himself "Leon Modena". It should not be forgotten that Purim is also the festival of masks. It could be said that here in the dedication the Rabbi is using the mask of the accepted rhetorical clichés of the dedication (what Genette calls the "well-tested formulae"; 163) to enable himself to criticize Cebà.

What is particularly interesting here is that Modena, the sender of the

[10] Here Modena is using the dating system called stile veneziano, or more commonly "more Veneto" the idiosyncratic calendar used in Venice resulting from the delayed adoption of the Gregorian calendar, whereby the new year began on the first of March. In fact, the more modern dating would already be 1619.

message whose main intention is that of persuading, is using his duplicated authority to do so. Apart from his renowned polymathic intellectual capacity, he exploits the sharpened wits of the successful (masked) outsider, an identity that Jews coming from an unjustly denigrated and persecuted culture have often had to adopt. In order to find success such an individual must not be simply as good as his native-born rivals but better. As "Leon Modena", a fully-recognized member of the Venetian intelligentsia with solid connections to the freethinking members of the nascent Accademia degli Incogniti, he is able to show himself as a feasible critic of Cebà, an Italian scholar poet and Catholic monk on the right side of the religious ravine. Yet he is also, and has been since 1609, Rabbi Judah Aryeh mi-Modena, who cannot, but more importantly does not, and does not desire to deny his identity. His paternal ancestors had come from France to Italy probably in the fourteenth century and had lived in Viterbo, Modena, Bologna and Ferrara before coming to Venice where he was born (Adelman 1988, 20). He is someone who also excels in his religious profession and in his own culture, and in this way may demonstrate the authority of his recognized learning to his fellow Jews and neighbours both in the Ghetto and far beyond. In this guise his duty (and his own function) is to guard the spiritual well-being of Copio Sullam, his protégée and hostess.

4. The Raven *versus* the Dove: a Literary *Tenzone*

Modena's literary duel with Cebà does not, however, end at this point. He continues to challenge his "rival" by contributing a sonnet of his own, as a contrast to the fervent sonneteering continuing between the Genoese monk and the Rabbi's pupil. The dedication, "Alla medesima" ("To the Same") is followed by this sonnet in which Modena, once again abasing himself, compares the ignominious example of versifying he offers in *L'Ester* to Cebà's skill. Here the Rabbi reiterates his pupil's unfailing affirmation that *La Reina Ester* outshines every other poem. Once again he eulogizes the monk's "Historia, in fila d'or, dilette, e grate . . . cantate" ("story spun in threads of gold, delightful, pleasing . . . singing"), written a style that awakens every soul to noble deeds while declaring that "abietto" ("abject") style he adopts in his humble tragedy betrays the Swan, here seen as the symbol of poetry. Yet perhaps, Modena says, the fact that his own work is "difforme" ("ill-made") is an advantage, as it will permit the hope first alluded to in the prose dedication, that his dedicatee will admire his tragedy simply because the name of his heroine is the same as that of Cebà's poem, that "Pel nome sol voglio sperar che accetta / Vi sia per la Colomba la Cornice" ("If only for its name I hope and trust / You will accept the Raven for the Dove").

This last verse presents no little ambiguity. For the first interpretation of the juxtaposition of the Raven and the Dove, the two birds mentioned, immediately calls to mind the book of *Genesis* and the story of Noah, in which the Raven and the Dove are sent out from the ark (*Genesis* 11:4-12). This, however, does not really enlighten one much as to what Modena meant by this metaphor or by any symbolism accruing to the birds in such a context. If anything, the Raven, which would appear to represent Modena and/or his play, is indeed perhaps the more negative of the two, as it does not really help Noah except by showing that it has nowhere to perch. It is also, according to Jewish teaching, an unclean bird in that it is a bird of prey. The Dove, on the other hand, is the creature that shows Noah when he may leave the ark, and linked with the symbolism of the olive leaf, is a sign of the peace restored between God and man. Far too positive a sign, one would imagine, to stand for Cebà and his "golden" but dangerous verses.

If we look more closely at Modena's sonnet, which carries on in the same vein as the prose dedication, Cebà and the Swan are associated within the poem itself, both qualified as "buon[o]" ("good"). Or rather, in the case of Cebà, as "the good" an adjectival phrase which if placed before the noun in Italian, as it is here, often carries with it a condescending tone, rather like that in "buon uomo" (in English "[my] good man"), and has exactly the same patronising effect as Modena is uses in his dedication to demonstrate exactly what he thinks of the high baroque excesses of the Genoese monk's poetry. The image of the "good Swan" as a symbol of poetry – here the adjective "buono" ("good") is in its syntactically usual position in Italian, that is, following the noun and is obviously a sincere evaluation – is the particular one of the bird singing as it dies: the beauty of its voice is the crux. So perhaps both the Raven and the Dove are being used in this way. The harsh crowing of the raven in Modena's "abject" verse "ch[e] à Cigno buon disdice" ("that is unworthy of the good Swan") is perhaps meant to represent the hard, but realistic message that Modena is trying to convey to his protégée, whereas the aesthetically pleasing "Swansong" of high baroque poetry and the sweet, seductive cooing of the dove could signify Cebà's enticing voice.

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that in the penultimate line Modena expresses the hope that Copio Sullam will accept his play "pel nome sol" ("only for its name"). The play itself is so far away in conception, treatment of the subject matter and, as we shall discuss further, period of composition, from what has been considered as the "antitext", that the only way the Rabbi can signal a warning for his pupil is here in the paratext.

To return to the function of the message itself, Genette (1997, 121-3), when discussing the development of the Epistolary Dedication as a separate or sub-genre, mentions the fact that during its life it mutates, and, for example, what I shall term the "flattery function" changes and often becomes criticism

within its own boundaries. Before its disappearance, it at times undergoes what other dying genres experience, a stage of pastiche, and mock-heroic parody. A remark Genette quotes by Montesquieu (1689-1755), who wrote one of its first epitaphs, is worth recalling here. In his *Pensées* (1726-1727) the philosopher comments: "I will not write a dedicatory epistle: those who profess to tell the truth must not be hoping for any protection on this Earth". Further on in the chapter, Genette comments that the two features obviously connected, the most direct (economic) social function of the dedication and its expanded form of laudatory epistle, tend to disappear. Here Modena seems to anticipate this trend, changing the insincerity of the flattery function to a form of truth however much masked by parody and apparent adulation together with an astute employment of the topos of modesty when referring to his own work. What emerges from this message is a challenge to Cebà and a protective warning to Copio Sullam.

5. The Reader's Preface: on the (Back)dating of *L'Ester*

Although Modena had already dropped various hints as to the nature of his play both on the title-page and in the dedication and the appended sonnet, what Genette calls "encroachments on the functions of the preface" (135), the main function of these two latter parts of the paratext is, as we have seen, to save his pupil both from the religious and the worldly snares of Cebà and his ilk, and to save her soul for God. The tone changes completely during what constitutes the prefatory remarks which are headed "L'Autore a' benigni Lettori" ("the Author to his benevolent Readers"). Genette uses the word preface to designate "every type of introductory (preludial or postludial) text, authorial or allographic [Modena is in Genette's terms, both authorial and authentic] here consisting of a discourse produced on the subject of the text that follows or precedes it" (161), and I use the term in the same way. His quotation of Novalis and the commentary on it is particularly cogent:

> "The preface", said Novalis, "provides directions for using the book". The phrase is accurate but stark. The way to guide the reading, to try to get a proper reading, is not only to issue direct orders. The way to get a proper reading is also –and perhaps initially –to put the (definitely assumed) reader in possession of information the author considers necessary for this proper reading. And advice itself benefits from being presented in the light of information: information, for example (in a case in which this might interest you), about the way the author wishes to be read. (209)

The information Modena immediately provides his readers with bears out a further remark of Genette's:

> The original preface may inform the reader about the origin of the work, the circumstances in which it was written, the stages of its creation . . . A special aspect of this genetic information . . . is the indication of sources. This is typical of works of fiction that draw their subjects from history or legend . . . The indication of sources thus appears especially in the prefaces to classical tragedies and historical novels. (210)

Here it is explained in detail why Modena and/or Sarzina specified on the title-page that the play was "rinovato" ("revised"). Modena immediately reveals that his play is the rewritten version of a previous one:

> Sessant'anni in circa sono, che un Salamon Uschi, con luce e aiuto di Lazaro di Gratian Levi mio materno zio, compose questa Tragedia, o Rappresentatione, che dir vogliamo; e ben ch'essi per doversi recitar ad Hebrei solamente, la facessero, fù però in pubblico alla nobiltà di questa città di Venetia pomposamente rappresentata, e ne riportarono non poco honore. Già vintisette anni un'altra volta ad instanza d'una compagnia de Nobili Signori, fù pur recitata, e riuscì con grande, e comune applauso. Hor quasi sei anni sono, che la terza volta era per recitarsi, quando facendo capo meco quelli, che ciò voleano effettuare, io gli ammonii à desistere dall'impresa . . .
>
> [It was almost sixty years ago that a certain Salamon Uschi, with the help and elucidation of Lazarus of Graziano Levi, my maternal uncle, wrote this Tragedy or, if you prefer, Play; and although it was only to have been performed before Jews, it was staged publicly and with all ceremony in the presence of the nobility of this city of Venice, bringing no little honour to the authors. Twenty-seven years later it was performed again at the request of a group of Noble Lords, and its success was greatly applauded. Six years ago, it was about to be put on for the third time when I intervened in what they wanted to do and warned them to desist from their project . . .]

This account has been the subject of much theorizing among scholars, especially concerning the language in which Usque's original play was written and performed, Portuguese and Spanish being suggested as well as Hebrew. Cecil Roth identifies Salomon Usque as being a Portuguese *marrano* (convert) to Christianity from Lisbon, who also worked as a printer and dabbled in literature when his family arrived in Ferrara at some time between 1543 and 1558. Roth (1943, 77-8) writes: "In 1558, when the Usque press at Ferrara was suspended, he removed to Venice and here composed the earliest Jewish dramatic experiment in the vernacular now extant".[11] It

[11] In this fascinating reconstruction of Usque's identity it is "disentangled" from

is obvious to Roth that Usque must have had a good command of Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew and Italian by the time he writes the Purim play on Queen Ester; Roth gives the date for its composition as 1558 and that of the performance as 1559 with a repeat performance in 1592. Piatelli (1968, 165) in his account of the dating of the last attempt to stage Usque's play and Modena's advice to avoid this until it had been rewritten gives an approximate date of 1612, all dates collated from the information Modena provides here. The most interesting point of Roth's account is the suggestion that it was Modena's uncle Lazzaro di Graziano Levi who was responsible for the Italian version, as nowhere does Modena mention having to translate either from Hebrew or from Spanish as other scholars suggest (Lelli 2020, 26n26), and the play would seem, by the Rabbi's description, at all times to have had a cosmopolitan audience.

By now it should not surprise us that Modena very much wants to make sure his "benevolent Readers" know how he wishes to be read. It is at this point that the overriding interest of the Dedicator gives way to the desires of the Author. As we have seen, the paratext was written just before the publication of the play, in 1619. Yet the play itself, that is, the revised version, would seem to have been envisaged in about 1612-1613 and its subject, Queen Esther, had certainly been decided upon more than half a century before the establishment of the salon, and even before the publication of Cebà's poem. Before affirming that the actual play was written in order to flout Cebà's desire to convert Copio Sullam, and to give the lady herself an example of how a good Jewish woman should behave, all this should be carefully considered.

From the title-page on, Modena calls his play a tragedy, and by this he is using the term which in France, a little later, will cause the celebrated *querelle* between the ancients and the moderns. His concept of tragedy by now owes everything to the early modern genre of tragicomedy and its paradigm as will also be seen in the Prologue. Thus, Modena's "rinovamento" is clearly one that changes, as most scholars thought, a typical mid-sixteenth century "Purim play" into something quite different:

> . . . gli dicevo, che da quegli anni in quà lo stile della Poesia Italiana in qual si sia genere, s'era fuor di modo avanzato, si che questo era al presente molto basso, e senza quella gravità, legatura, e sentenze, ch'alle Tragedie, e cose Heroiche, e quanto più sacre, si richiede. Al che rispondevano essi ch'io à ciò rimediar potevo, come quello, che (ingannandosi di lungo però) mi credevano haver un poco di cognitione nella Poesia, con andar accomodando alcuni di

that of another person, Duarte Gomez, whose name is still often seen as a sobriquet of Usque's.

> quei versi così insipidi, e ridurla al meglio. Io non seppi disdirle, e procurai di farlo, e gettandola quasi tutto in fascio, la riformai, e in tutto la rinovai.
>
> [. . . I told them that since the play had been written the style of Italian verse in every genre had changed out of all recognition. By now this play had fallen out of fashion, being without that particular sobriety, unity and wit now required of Tragedy, of the Heroic and of the sacred. To this they replied that I could improve it in that way (and here they were greatly deceiving themselves, however), as they believed I had some little skill with Poetry, and could get to work and mend those insipid verses, and remodel it to the best of my ability. I did not know how to refuse them and managed to accomplish this. Starting almost completely afresh, I restyled and renewed the whole thing.]

It is evident that the original play must have been similar to that described by Capelli (2020, 6) "a farcical celebration of the generally hostile confrontation between the Jews and their pagan neighbours and/or rulers (such is the case, for instance, of the enactment of the Biblical story of Queen Esther"). Early modern Italian Purim plays, given "the osmotic society of sixteenth-century Italy" could often "portray biblical characters as classical or contemporary figures of the *commedia dell'arte*, and in many *Purimspielen*, for instance, King Ahasuerus was represented as a sort of Jewish *Pantalone*" (Lelli 2020, 18). Modena's re-creation seems at this point to be completely different from the source play then, a play in five acts, which are further subdivided into five or more scenes, preceded by a Prologue followed by what could be termed an Induction and concluded by an Epilogue, in formal Italian hendecasyllabic verse. It comes as no surprise that of his two sources, the comic and the sacred, it is the latter which is of greater importance. Indeed, some readers may be surprised when they find that a Rabbi is the author of the play. As Capelli points out "Right at the beginning of the formative period of rabbinic Judaism, the rabbis disavowed theatre as a despicable form of blasphemous admixture of their idea of Judaism with the surrounding dominant pagan cultures of the Hellenistic and Roman period" (2020, 5-6).

Modena , indeed, seems to hold the opinion that fidelity to sources, however appropriate this conduct is, proves more of a drawback than an advantage. In the case of Usque's play, he felt it more fitting to "lasciarvi di quella primiera forma, acciò in certo modo fosse per quella conosciuta" ("to leave there something of the original, so that in some way it could still be recognized") although he had said before he intended to raise the tone. Then he wanted to follow the Holy Scriptures closely, and there too, he says "non s'è alzato lo stile quanto forsi si havrebbe fatto" ("so the style has not been heightened as much as it could have been"). He has also used another source, he informs the reader, which has had the same result "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" ("the same thing has been caused by some glosses of the Rabbis, whom the Jews call the Midrashim have been inserted both for the greater interest of the scholars and to validate the truth of the case").

He then explains why he has decided to publish the play:

> Non seguì poi ultimamente il recitarla, e io trovandomi haver fatto la fatica, non ho volute che la mi resti in cassa, ma darla in luce al mondo, per diletto di chi la vorrà leggere, e chi vorrà recitarla, essendo cosa che à tutti conviene, come opera piacevole e Historia sacra.
>
> [As this task was not followed by a performance, and having devoted much effort to it, I did not wish it to stay in my desk, but bring it to light to amuse whoever desires to read it, and to please those who want to stage it, since it is a thing suitable for everyone, both an enjoyable work and a sacred History.]

It is more than probable that it is the actual publishing of the play, rather than its revision, which was motivated or partly motivated by the Copio Sullam affair, nowhere mentioned after the Dedicatory Sonnet. This would indeed make sense with the dating of its inception – as Modena states here, six years before this (in 1613). At the end of the preface, he adds a note, which reveals the irrepressible teacher and perhaps betrays the covert uncertainty of the outsider, anxious that an incorrect reading of the Jewish names and thus a distortion of the metre on the part of the indigenous Italians will be blamed on his 'ignorance' as a 'foreigner': "i doi nomi Vasti, e Ester, secondo il vero modo del legger Hebraico, si devono proferir con l'accento grave al fine, cioè Vastì, e Estèr; e ciò si dice perché altrimenti leggendoli vi sariano de' versi languidi, o senza il posarsi ove si deve" ("in order to read the two names 'Vasti' and 'Ester', correctly in Hebrew, they must be pronounced with a grave (tonic) accent on the last syllable, that is Vastì and Estèr. I say this as otherwise when you read them the metre of the lines will slide as they will lack the appropriate stress").

6. From Page to Stage Paratextually: Dramatis Personae, Prologue, "Induction", Epilogue

The next page of the paratext is headed "Interlocutori" (who in fact will not exchange a spoken word with one another until the festival of Purim on 17 February 2022 in Ferrara and some of them not then – see my note 7). Genette does not mention them but in her thought-provoking essay Jitka Štollova (2018, 312) states "Early modern character lists, frequently overlooked but vital paratexts, have a manifest ability to shape readers' understandings of the plot

and characters". In our case, besides clarifying the intertextual provenance of the characters, it may possibly shed some light on the amount of "renewal" Modena carried out on the original play by Usque. The first two characters are themselves part of the paratext – at least part of the dramatic area where the paratext is becoming text. Their monologues will be commented on when we come to them: here however it gives rise to a question, the same one for both of them. As the part of the Prologue and of the Induction, which is perhaps the term that could be given to Amalek's speech, were generally taken by one of the actors who had a part in the main action, one wonders which of the actors would have played them. The fact that in such a relatively short play they would have been immediately recognizable would naturally have had the effect of altering or strengthening the audience's perception of the characters themselves: it was surely Esther (who says surprisingly little for the eponymous heroine of the title) who was intended to recite the monologue of Truth and give the Epilogue; and probably Haman was meant for the part of his father's ghost. The full supporting cast of courtiers, servants and the like seems to predict space for uptakes from the source play by Usque, as does the appearance of two children, Danetto and Gadino, and the Angel hints at the sacred theme. The names of the main characters and the courtiers are all of recognizably biblical origin and this also upholds the idea of a liturgical drama.

The Prologue is a moment when the status of the dramatic message is envisaged by the author/sender as being inevitably altered as it is at this point that it is delegated to an actor and received by an audience. How the message is 'sent' is no longer simply in the hands of the sender, and it is not envisaged by the playwright as being 'read' but heard by a series of collectives whose individual reactions can mutually condition one another and vary from performance to performance. In this case, as Modena describes in the preface, his first intention was that his play would have been even more suitable to be staged than the out-of-date original, so a possible state of affairs is that the Prologue was written after the play itself but before the Dedication and Preface, and was written to be performed. Not, then, to persuade Copio Sullam, but to persuade his imagined spectators. Since the soul and the intellect of his pupil, daughter of his late friend and protector Simon Copio, must have been an important facet of the reality of this polymathic internationally-involved and hardworking teacher and preacher. Yet they were just this, a facet. One only has to consult his own record of a day in his life that Modena left in a letter to realise that he would scarcely have found the time for such a roundabout way of persuading his protégée and utilizing something like his already-existing play on Esther as fit for the task seems a more credible alternative strategy. In the account of his overcrowded timetable, after talking about "time which is just not available" he says "Although I am tired and weary, as mentioned, I

find relaxation even if I have but half an hour each week to delight in the love of dear friends and to have pleasing conversations".[12]

To return to the dating of events: Cebà's poem was first published 1615. Modena could possibly have decided, in 1613, to respond to a manuscript form of *La Reina Ester*. Yet in her detailed essay Marina Arbib (2003) maintains that "Modena's decision to compose a tragedy about Esther stemmed from the publication of Cebà's poem". This was three years before the Genoese monk and the "bella Hebrea" began their correspondence in May 1618. Later in the essay Arbib suggests "that he [Modena] wrote *L'Ester* to advise Sullam to take a wiser, more realistic course of action". The only explicit signs of warning are in the Dedication, which was dated by the Rabbi himself as being 1619. The decision to revise the original play, to render greater gravitas to a Purim play in whose composition a relative of Modena's had been concerned was decided in 1613, at a time when circulation in manuscript form was still a commonly followed practice, and publication could follow this after years had passed.

The Prologue moves even further away from the Cebà-Copio Sullam affair than does the Preface to the Reader and segues into the drama and the stage it is performed on. It is recited by the allegorical figure of Truth, and is another moment when Modena's hybrid state between Venetian scholar and Jewish rabbi becomes very evident. The decision to make Truth the speaker does not surprise so much – for as Genette remarks:

> The only aspect of treatment an author can give himself credit for in the preface, undoubtedly because conscience rather than talent is involved, is truthfulness or, at the very least, sincerity – that is, the effort to achieve truthfulness. Taking credit for truthfulness or sincerity has been a commonplace of prefaces to historical works since Herodotus and Thucydides, and of prefaces to autobiographical works, or self-portraits, since Montaigne: "This book was written in good faith, reader". (206)

The truth at this point of the paratext has much to do with the Holy Scripture and, even more so, with the literary devices used there. The symbolic attributes that Truth assigns to herself, as a queen, chastity, light, and time, before revealing her identity, her description of her provenance "Io son colei, d'antichi, e da moderni / Nomata Verità, nata divina, / Nata nel grembo al grande, al vero Dio, / Pria che il ciel fosse il mar, la terra, e il foco" ("I am she, by ancients and by moderns, / Called Truth, engendered as divine, / Born from the womb of the great, the very God, / Before the heavens became sea, earth and fire") are of particular interest. This long monologue is inviting the

[12] See Adelman and Ravid, "Historical Notes" in Cohen (1988, 215).

audience to interpret the play in an allegorical manner, and to find a parallel meaning to their own reality in the story of Ahasuerus, Vashti, Mordecai, Haman and Esther and the diaspora of the Jews. Truth gives a reason for the writing of the play here which is of significance as to what has been said above. She says:

> hor, mercè d'un non esperto Autore,
> Ch'à prieghi d'altri Hebrei fratelli suoi,
> Che vivon sotto à la custodia vera
> Del gran LEON de la città invitta
> Ch'è sol Donna del mar, del mar Regina
> Veng'hora in Scena a dimostrarmi a voi
> In seno a questi miei alti Signori.
>
> [now, thanks to an inexpert Author,
> Acting on the prayers of other Jews, his brothers,
> Who live under the true guardianship
> Of the great LION of that invincible city,
> Sole Lady of the Sea, indeed its Queen;
> I come on stage to show myself to you,
> Surrounded by all these my eminent Lords.]

Modena is reporting in the words of Truth the same story of the play's genesis as he gave in the Preface – the rewriting of Usque's "old-fashioned" *Purimspiel*.

Modena uses the phrase "ancients and moderns" twice in the monologue by Truth, almost as if he is reminding himself of what he wishes to make clear concerning the genre of his play and how he wants it to be understood. Truth says that when the author uses the term Tragedy for the play he is not going to observe "tutti i precetti de lo Stagirita" ("all Aristotle's precepts") because to be able to "trattar varie attioni / E ne lo spattio che di tempi abbraccia" ("treat[ment of] numerous actions, / Neither the allotted space nor time suffices"). Besides not respecting the unities of time, place and action he adds, he is going to "finire in allegrezza" ("end in happiness") because it is not happiness or sadness that determines tragedy, but the treatment of people of high rank and their fall from one destiny to another which engenders pity and terror. It seems that we are in full "querelle des anciens et des modernes" but ante litteram, for what is being described here is – in truth – tragicomedy.

The arrival of the shade of Amalek from hell, which puts an end to the discourse of Truth and sends her off the stage, would seem to constitute an interval in which a figure from the old Purim play is resuscitated and re-invented. There is here a sort of collage of Hebrew history/mythology combined with the mythology of Ancient Greece, as the playwright seems to be conscious that his words are being addressed to a mixed audience

(Christians who may not know the provenance of Haman and Jews who will want to be assured that the happy ending will not be so for everyone). Amalek is the father of Haman the Agagite, the villain of Purim plays (and of the *Book of Esther*), and the personification of evil, whose fate at the end of the play is proleptically described by his father's ghost. The fact that the hell Amalek arrives from is Tartarus, the devil is Pluto, and the torments described are those of various characters from Greek mythology, could be an attempt to underline the Agagite's cultural separation from the Jews, a people he and his ancestors and progeny have always tried to destroy. Interestingly in Aeschylus' play *The Persians* the ghost of Xerxes' (Ahasuerus') father Darius prophesies doom for him. Perhaps Modena had been reminded of this. The Epilogue recited again by Truth is the traditional *captatio benevolentiae* of other early modern epilogues, but it also underlines the role of Providence in human affairs and points the moral of satisfaction with the position God has given one. Once again, no mention is made of the "tenzone" between Modena and Cebà, not even in a figurative way.

7. "Pel nome sol": Just for the Name

In conclusion, it seems to me that the paratext, and more probably only the Dedication and the Dedicatory sonnet were written in response to the *affaire* Cebà/Copio Sullam, and the revision of the play was carried out several years previously and for the motives its writer gives more than once. Perhaps, but not necessarily, some parts may have been altered before presenting the manuscript complete with Dedication to the salon as pointing a possible moral lesson for its *salonnière*, but the rewriting of the play itself must have predated the *affaire* Copio Sullam/Cebà by some years. It is in the Dedication that Modena, the outsider, whose rights to censure an Italian and a Catholic are conventionally very much curtailed, takes his chance to criticize Cebà and to warn Copio Sullam from a perfect forum and behind the mask of a rhetorically correct hypocritical eulogy. In doing so Modena is also aided in his task of rescuing his protégée, who he hopes will use his much earlier retelling of Esther's story simply as an allegory and will set it against Cebà's poem because the two works have the same heroine. His intellectual rights within the salon itself are also not to be underestimated, as there he would be considered if not superior to the Genoese at least on an equal footing. Beginning, perhaps, with the tiny addition of an abbreviated definite article to the title of his work – *L'Ester* and not simply *Ester* – the paratext of his play allows him, an "inferior" inhabitant of Venice, unjustly caged within the Ghetto, to assume his rightful authority as a scholar over Jew and Gentile alike and, if somewhat briefly in this limited literary context, carry out what

he considered one of his vocational tasks, that of maintaining a dialectal relationship between their religious doctrines and bringing closer to one another the two cultures in which he lived.

Works Cited

Adelman, Howard. 2016. "Leone Modena, Sara Copio Sullam and the Accademia degli Incogniti", *Venice, the Jews and Europe.1516-2016*, *Exhibition Catalogue*, 310-3. Venice: Marsilio Editori.

—1988. "Leon Modena: the Autobiography and the Man". In *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi. Leon Modena's* Life of Judah, edited and translated by Mark R. Cohen, 19-49. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Arbib, Marina. 2003. "The Queen Esther Triangle". In *The Lion Shall Roar. Leon Modena and His World*, edited by David Malkiel, 103-35. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press.

Berger, Thomas L. and Massai, Sonia. 2014. *Paratexts in English Printed Drama to 1642*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Calimani, Riccardo. 2017. *Storia del ghetto di Venezia. Gli ebrei e la Serenissima Repubblica*, Milano: Mondadori.

Capelli, Piero ed. 2020. Foreword, *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*, *Jewish Theatres* 6 (2): 5-14.

Cebà, Ansaldo. 1623. *Lettere di Ansaldo Cebà scritte a Sarra Copia e dedicate a Marc'Antonio Doria*, Genova: per Giuseppe Pavoni.

—1615. *La Reina Esther,* Genova: per Giuseppe Pavoni.

Fortis, Umberto. 2003. *La "Bella Hebrea". Poetessa nel ghetto di Venezia del '600*, Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore.

Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987), ed. Richard A. Macksey, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Grendler, Paul F. 1975. "The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540-1605". *The Journal of Modern History* 47 (1): 48-65.

Harrán, Don ed. and trans. 2009. *Sarra Copia Sulam. Jewish Poet and Intellectual in Seventeenth-Century Venice.* Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

Infelise, Mario. 1997. "Ex ignoto notus? Note sul tipografo Sarzina e l'Accademia degli Incogniti". In *Libri, Tipografi, Biblioteche. Ricerche storiche dedicate a Luigi Balsamo*, edited by Arnaldo Ganda, Elisa Grignani, and Albeerto Petrucciani, vol. 1, 207-23. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore.

Lelli, Fabrizio. 2020. "Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy". *Skenè. JTDS* 6 (2): 15-30.

Modena, Leon (forthcoming). *Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture,* edited and translated by Susan Payne. Skenè. Texts. Pisa: ETS.

— 1988. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi. Leon Modena's Life of Judah*, edited and translated by Mark R. Cohen. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—1619. *L'Ester. Tragedia Tratta dale Sacre Scritture*, Venezia: per Giacomo Sarzina.

Piattelli, Abramo A. 1968. "*Ester*: L'unico dramma di Leon da Modena giunto fino a

noi". *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 34 (3): 163-72.
Roth, Cecil. 1943. "'Salusque Lusitano' (An Essay in Disentanglement)". *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 34 (1): 65-85.
Sarnelli, Mauro. 2004. "Presenze della cultura ebraica nella Venezia del primo Seicento". *Studi veneziani* 57: 165-76.
Scordari, Chiara Carmen. 2020. "Behind multiple masks: Leon Modena's diasporic tragedy *L'Ester* in Seventeenth-Century Venice". *Skenè. JTDS* 6 (2): 53-70.
Smith, Helen and Wilson, Louise, eds. 2011. *Renaissance Paratexts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Štollova, Jitka. 2018. "Reading Dramatic Character through *Dramatis Personae* in Early Modern Printed Drama". *Studies in Philology* 115 (2): 312-42.
Westwater, Lynn Lara. 2020. *Sarra Copia Sulam. A Jewish Salonnière and the Press in Counter-Reformation Venice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Chanita Goodblatt*

Modena's *L'Ester*: 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'Ester: 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'Ester: 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).

* Ben-Gurion University of the Negev - chanita@bgu.ac.il

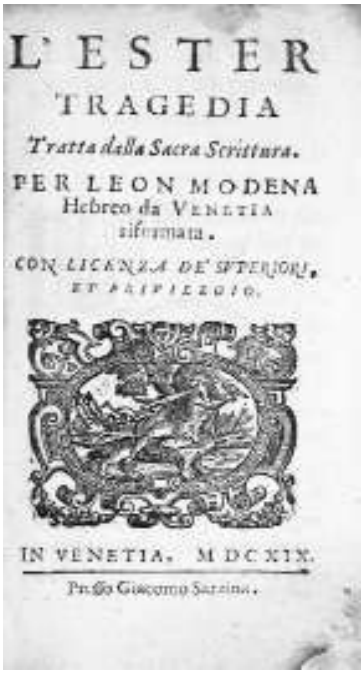

L'ESTER
TRAGEDIA
Tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura.
PER LEON MODENA
Hebreo da VENETIA
rifermata.
CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI,
ET PRIVILEGIO.
IN VENETIA. M DC XIX.
Presso Giacomo Sarzina.

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 are 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 aspects[3] – 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 medesmo 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 eagle[7]; 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; * the moon
I mean true poets, who deserve the name.]

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 ברננה,
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 ṭeref", *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 influsso.
(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, Customes, 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 trouvarsi l'un l'atro, facendosi ricevimenti, e feste, e bagordi]".[11]

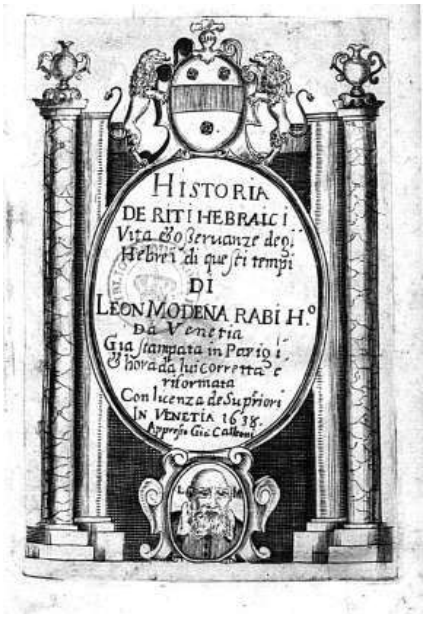


Fig. 2: *Historia de Riti Hebraici* 1638, public domain, source: gallica.bnf.fr Bibliothèque nationale de France

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 trewthe wyl bere,
As grete God hymself us byd.
Ther schal nothynge 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" ("*ḥesed- ve-'emet nifgashu, tsedeḳ ye-shalom nashaḳu*" 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]

אָמַר רַבִּי סִמוֹן, בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁבָּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לִבְרֹא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, נַעֲשׂוּ מַלְאָכֵי הַשָּׁרֶת כִּתִּים כִּתִּים, וְחֲבוּרוֹת חֲבוּרוֹת, מֵהֶם אוֹמְרִים אַל יִבָּרֵא, וּמֵהֶם אוֹמְרִים יִבָּרֵא, הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב [תְּהִלִּים פ"ה]: חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת נִפְגָּשׁוּ צֶדֶק וְשָׁלוֹם נָשָׁקוּ. חֶסֶד אוֹמֵר יִבָּרֵא, שֶׁהוּא גוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים. וֶאֱמֶת אוֹמֵר אַל יִבָּרֵא, שֶׁכֻּלּוֹ שֶׁקָּרִים. צֶדֶק אוֹמֵר יִבָּרֵא, שֶׁהוּא עוֹשֶׂה צְדָקוֹת. שָׁלוֹם אוֹמֵר אַל יִבָּרֵא, דְּכוּלֵּיהּ קְטָטָה.

[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 *Psalm* 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 pase 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' [*tsedeḳ*], 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 cosi saggia,
Ɛ 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 affettionata
. . .
(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
Sopratutte 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,
Frowing 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 forsi di lui sol? dinanzi
Ad infiniti Prencipi, 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 si 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 Herotodus'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'Ester* 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'Ester.* It seems appropriate, then, that this article concludes with a discussion of another paratext, specifically the title of the play – *L'Ester: 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'Ester* – 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 Geto 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'Ester.* 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'Ester* should continue to be studied within this complex tradition of cross-cultural readings, which can serve to highlight questions and proposals for further consideration.

Works Cited

Anon. *The Castle of Perseverance.* 2010. Edited by David N. Klausner. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute. University of Rochester: TEAMS. Middle English Texts Series. https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/klausner-the-castle-of-perseverance (Accessed 24 January 2023).

– *The Castle of Perseverance: A Modernization.* 1999. Trans. Alexandra F. Johnston. Based on an acting edition prepared by David M. Parry. https://ajohnsto.artsci.utoronto.ca/cascomp.html(Accessed 18 January 2023).

Adelman, Howard E. 1988. "Leon Modena: the Autobiography and the Man". In *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah.* Trans. and edited by Mark R. Cohen, 19-49. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Adelman, Howard E. and Benjamin C.I. Ravid. 1988. "Historical Notes." In *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*, trans. and edited by Mark R. Cohen, 181-273. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Alter, Robert. 2019. *The Hebrew Bible. A Translation with Commentary.* 3 vols. New York: W.W. Norton.

Arbib, Marina. 2003. "The Queen Esther Triangle: Leon Modena, Ansaldo Cebà, and Sara Copio Sullam". In *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World,* edited by David Malkiel, 103-35. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press and Ben-Zvi Institute.

Ariosto, Ludovico. 1977. *Orlando Furioso. Part 2*, translated by Barbara Reynolds. London: Penguin.

— 1975. *Orlando Furioso. Part 1,* translated by Barbara Reynolds. London: Penguin.

— 1964. *Orlando Furioso*, a cura di E. Sanguineti e M. Turchi, 2 vols. Milano: Garzanti.

Aristotle. 1997. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Translated and with a Commentary by George Whalley. Edited by John Baxter and Patrick Atherson. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Austin, J.L. 1975. *How To Do Things With Words*. Second Edition. Edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Berlin, Adele. 2001. *The JPS Commentary: Esther*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

Besso, Henri V. 1938. "Dramatic Literature of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam in the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries". *Bulletin Hispanique* 40 (1): 33-47.

Biblia Rabbinica. 1972. A Reprint of the 1525 Venice Edition. 4 vols. Edited by Jacob Ben Hayim Ibn Adoniya. Jerusalem: Maḳor.

Bornkamm, Heinrich. 1969. *Luther and the Old Testament*, translated by Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch, edited by Victor I. Gruhn. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

Bregman, Dvora and Ann Brener. 1991. "The Emergence of the Hebrew Sonnet". *Prooftexts* 11 (3): 231-9.

Brenner, Athalya. 1995. "Some Observations on the Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature". *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*. First Series. Edited by Athalya Brenner, 50-66. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Carruthers, Jo. 2007. "The Liminal Becoming of the Rebel Vashti". In *Mapping Liminalities: Thresholds in Cultural and Literary Texts*, edited by Lucy Kay, Zoë Kinsley, Terry Phillips and Alan Roughley, 91-109. Bern: Peter Lang.

Cohen, Ivan M. 2004. "Herodotus and the Story of Gyges: Traditional Motifs in Historical Narrative". *Fabula* 45 (1/2): 55-68.

Cohen, Mark R., trans. and ed. 1988. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cohen, Mark R., and Theodore K. Rabb. 1988. "The Significance of Leon Modena's Autobiography for Early Modern Jewish and General European History". In *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah,* translated and edited by Mark R. Cohen, 3-18. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Colombo, Rosy. 2022. "Foreword". *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 8 (2): 5-7.

Craig, Kenneth M., Jr. 1995. *Reading Esther: a Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox P.

Farbridge, Maurice H. 1923. *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism.* London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber & Co.

Foley, Adam. 2016. "Valla's Herodotean Labours: Towards a New View of Herodotus in the Italian Renaissance". In *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Herodotus in Antiquity and Beyond,* edited by Jessica Priestley and Vasiliki Zali, 213-31. Leiden: Brill.

Francesconi, Federica. 2016. "Illustrious Rabbis Facing the Italian Inquisition: Accommodating Censorship in Seventeenth-Century Italy". In *Jewish Books and their Readers: Aspects of the Intellectual Life of Christians and Jews in Early Modern Europe,* edited by Scott Mandelbrote and Joanna Weinberg, 100-21. Leiden: Brill.

Fussell, Paul. 1979. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form.* New York: Random House.

Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation.* Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gibbs, Raymond W., Jr. 1994. *The Poetics of the Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grossfeld, Bernard. Trans. 1991. *The Two Targums of Esther. The Aramaic Bible*. Vol. 18. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Grossfeld, Bernard and S. David Sperling. 2007. "Bible. Aramaic: The *Targumim".* In *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* second edition, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 3, 588-95. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA.

Hankins, James. 1990. *Plato in the Italian Renaissance. Volume I.* Leiden: Brill.

Herodotus. 1998. *The Histories*. Translated by Robin Waterfield, and edited by Carolyn Dewald. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jong, Irene de. 2004. "Herodotus". In *Narrators, Narratees, and Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature*, edited by Irene de Jon, René Nünlist and Angus Bowie, 101-14. Leiden: Brill.

Katz, Dana. 2017. *The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early Modern Venice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katz, Steven T., ed. 2007. *The Cambridge History of Judaism. Volume IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Koren Talmud Bavli. 2012-2021. Edited by Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, and commentary by Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers.

Lazarus, Micha. 2017. "The Dramatic Prologues of Alexander Nowell: Accommodating the Classics at 1540s Westminster". *The Review of English Studies,* New Series 69 (288): 32-55.

Lelli, Fabrizio. 2020. "Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy". *Skenè: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 6 (2): 15-30.

Looney, Dennis. 2016. "Herodotus and Narrative Art in Renaissance Ferrara: the Translation of Matteo Maria Boiardo". In *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Herodotus in Antiquity and Beyond*, edited by Jessica Priestley and Vasiliki Zali, 232-53. Leiden: Brill.

Luther, Martin. 1914. *Tischreden. 3. Band.* Weimer: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger
Mandel, Paul D. 2017. *The Origins of Midrash: From Teaching to Text.* Leiden: Brill.
[*Midrash*] *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation.* 1989. Translated by Jacob Neusner. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
Midrash Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. 1985. A New American Translation. Vol 1: Parshiyyot One through Thirty-Three on *Genesis* 1-1 to 8:14. Translated by Jacob Neusner. Atlanta, GA: Scholars P.
Midrash Rabbah. 1977. Translated by Ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon. Vol. 4: *Lamentations*, *Ruth*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Esther*, *Song of Songs*. London: Soncino Press.
— 1939. Translated by Ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon. Vol 1: *Genesis*. London: Soncino Press.
Midrash Rabbah on the Pentateuch and Five Megillot. A New Edition [Hebrew]. N.D. Three Volumes. Jerusalem: Eyal Book Marketing and Distribution.
Modena, Leon (forthcoming). *Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture,* edited and translated by Susan Payne. Skenè. Texts. Pisa: ETS.
— 1932. *The Divan of Leo de Modena* [Hebrew]. Edited by Simon Bernstein. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
— 1650. *The History of the Rites, Customes, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews.* Trans. Edmund Chilmead. London: Jo: Martin and Jo: Ridley.
— 1638. *Historia De Riti Hebraici Vita & Osservanze de gl'Hebrei di questi tempi.* Venetia: Appresso Gia Calleoni.
— 1619. *L'Ester: Tragedia Tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura.* Venetia: Presso Giacomo Sarzina.
Moore, Rebecca. 2004. "Jewish Influence on Christian Biblical Interpretation: Hugh of St. Victor and 'The Four Daughters of God'". In *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture. Volume 2: Later Versions and Traditions,* edited by Craig A. Evans, 148-58. London: T&T Clark.
Newsom, Carol A. 1999. "*Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9". In Women in the Hebrew Bible: a Reader*, edited by Alice Bach, 85-98. New York: Routledge.
Plato. 1955. *Plato's Phaedo.* Translated and edited by Reginald Hackforth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Ross, Charles S. 2009. "Introduction". In *Ludovico Ariosto. Orlando Furioso: A New Verse Translation.* Translated by David R. Slavitt, ix-xiv. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
Roth, Cecil. 1943. "Salusque Lusitano' (An Essay in Disentanglement)". The *Jewish Quarterly Review.* New Series 34 (1): 65-85.
— 1924-1927. "Leone de Modena and England". *Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 11: 206-27.
Sarot, Eden. 1954. "Ansaldo Cebà and Sara Copia Sullam". *Italica* 31 (3): 138-50.
Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech Acts: an Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Schneider, Brian W. 2016. *The Framing Text in Early Modern English Drama: 'Whining' Prologues' and 'Armed' Epilogues.* London: Routledge.
Scordari, Chiara Carmen. 2020. "Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena's Diasporic Tragedy". *Skenè: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 6 (2): 53-69.

Scott, Robert B.Y. 2007. "Wisdom; Wisdom Literature." In *Encyclopedia Judaica.* Second edition, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol. 21, 95-9. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA.

Shakespeare. 2003. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Updated Edition, edited by R.A. Foakes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shulvass, Moses. A. 1973. *The Jews in the World of the Renaissance.* Translated by Elvin I. Kosse. Leiden: Brill.

Soncino Babylonian Talmud. 1935-1952, edited by Isidore Epstein. London: the Soncino Press. Reformatted Reuven Brauner. http://www.Halakhah.com (Accessed 23 January 2023).

Styan, J.L. 1996. *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sulam, Sarra Copia. 2009. *Jewish Poet and Intellectual in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Works of Sarra Copia Sulam in Verse and Prose, Along with Writings of Her Contemporaries in Her Praise, Condemnation or Defense.* Edited by Don Harrán. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Traver, Hope. 1925. "The Four Daughters of God: A Mirror of Changing Doctrine". *PMLA* 40 (1): 44–92.

— 1907. *The Four Daughters of God: A Study of the Versions of this Allegory, with Especial Reference to those in Latin, French, and English.* Ph.D. Dissertation, Bryn Mawr College. Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston.

Westwater, Lynn Lara. 2020. *Sarra Copia Sulam: a Jewish Salonnière and the Press in Counter-Reformation Venice.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Vered Tohar*

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

* Bar-Ilan University - vered.tohar@biu.ac.il

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.

Works Cited

Arbib, Marina. 2003. "The Queen Esther Triangle: Leon Modena, Ansaldo Ceba, and Sara Copio Sullam". In *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World*, edited by David Malkiel, 103-35. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press and Ben-Zvi Institute.

Augustine. 1921. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, translated by E.B. Pusey. Weiheke Island: the Floating Press.

Baertschi, Andreas. 2015. "Epic Elements in Senecan tragedy". In *Brill's Companion to Roman Tragedy*, edited by G.W.M. Harrison, 171-95. Leiden: Brill.

Bar-On, Shraga. 1996. "The Jesting Jew: Rabbi Judah Leon Modena". *De'ot* 25: 32-4.

Berlin, Adele. 2001. *JPS Bible Commentary–Esther*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Carpi, Daniel. 1985. *The Book of Judah's Life*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.

Cohen, Roni. 2022. "Parodic Purim Literature in the Early Modern era and the Ban that failed". *Zion* 88 (1): 103-27.

Connolly, Annaliese. 2019. "Biblical Tragedy: George Peele's *David and Bethsabe*". In *The Genre of Renaissance Tragedy*, edited by Daniel Cadman, Andrew Duxfield

and Lisa Hopkins, 29-50. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Das, Veena. 2012. "Ordinary Ethics". In *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin, 133-49. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
Frye, Northrop. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Gozzadini, Tommaso. 1856. *Fiore di Vertù: Testo di Lingua ridotto a Corretta Lezione*, edited by Agenore Gelli. Firenze: F. Le Monnier.
— 1491. *Fiore di Virtù.* Venice.
— 1471. *Fiore di Virtù.* Venice or Milan.
Gries, Zeev. 2015. *The Hebrew Book: An Outline of its History.* Jerusalem: Bialik Institute.
— 2010. *The Book in the Jewish World 1700–1900.* Oxford and Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.
Gunn, Janet. 1982. *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Horwitz, Maryanne C. 1998. *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Jacobson Schutte, Ann. 1983. *Printed Italian Vernacular Religious Books, 1465-1550: A Finding List.* Geneva: Droz.
Lambek, Michael. 2010. "Toward an Ethics of the Act". In *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, edited by Michael Lamberk, 242-66. New York: Fordham University Press.
Lejeune, Philip. 1989. *On Autobiography.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Mascuch, Michael, Rudolf Dekker, Arianne Baggerman. 2016. "Egodocuments and the History: a Short Account of the *Longue Durée*". *The Historian 78* (1): 11-56.
Modena, Leon (forthcoming). *Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture*, edited and translated by Susan Payne. Skenè. Texts. Pisa: ETS.
— 1988. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*, translated and edited by Mark R. Cohen. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
— 1985. *The Book of Judah's Life.* Edited by Daniel Carpi. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
— 1912. *Life of Judah.* Edited by Abraham Kahana. Ktiv: New York.
— 1906. *Selected Works.* Edited and annotated by Yehuda Bloy. Budapest: Avraham Alkalayi.
— 1638. *Historia de' riti hebraici.* Venice: Gio. Calleoni.
— 1612. *Lev Ha'aryeh.* Venice: Giacomo Serezina.
— 1600. *Flower of Righteousness.* Venice: Daniel Zaneti.
— 1595a. *Avoid Wrongdoing.* Venice: Zuan Di Gara.
— 1595b. *The Secret of the Pious.* Venice: Zuan Di Gara.
Olney, James. 1980. "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: a Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction". In *Autobiography: Essays Theorical and Critical*, edited by Olney James, 3-27. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
Piattelli, Adriano A. 1968. "*Ester*: l'unico dramma di Leon da Modena giunto fino a noi". *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 34: 163-72.
Rains, Dorit. 2003. "Judaism in the Eyes of the Venetian Nobility in the Time of R. Yehudah Aryeh of Modena". In *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His*

World, edited by David Malkiel, 17-53. Jerusalem: Magnes Press.

Rubin, Noga. 2013. *Conqueror of Hearts: Sefer Lev Tov by R. Isaac Ben Eliakum of Posen, Prague (1620): a Central Ethical Book in Yiddish*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad.

Scordari, Chiara C. 2020. "Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena's Diasporic Tragedy *L'Ester* in Seventeenth-Century Venice". In *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 6 (2): 53-69.

Simonsohn, Shlomo. 1987. "*Halakha* and Society in the Writings of Leone da Modena". In *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, edited by Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus, 435-45. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Steinschneider, Moses (Moritz). 1897. "Jehuda (Leon) Modena und *Fior di virtù*," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 41 (7): 324-6.

Tohar, Vered. 2018. "The Book *Zemach Zaddik*: Content, Structure, Reception". *Studies in Jewish Narrative,* vol. 4, edited by Avidov Lipsker, 122-44. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press.

— 2017. "Woman Protagonists in the Hebrew Morality Composition *Tzemach Tzaddiq* by Leon Modena". *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 15: 47-71.

— 2016. "The Hebrew Moral Book *Zemach Zaddik*: Between Two Worlds". In *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, edited by Alberdina Houtman et al., 353-75. Leiden: Brill.

Walfish, Barry. 1993. *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of The Book of Esther in the Middle Ages*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ward, Allyna E. 2013. *Women and Tudor Tragedy: Feminizing Counsel and Representing Gender*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Weinberg, Joanna. 2003. "Leon Modena and the *Fiore di Virtu*". In *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World,* edited by David Malkiel, 137-57. Jerusalem: Magnes Press.

Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby*

Queen Esther in Venice: Art and Drama[1]

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

[1] This article was written with the support of the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 442/2021). Unless otherwise stated, all pictures are open-access and have been retrieved from WikiCommons.

* Ben Gurion University - nbad@bgu.ac.il

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Veronese: the Church of San Sebastiano

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

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

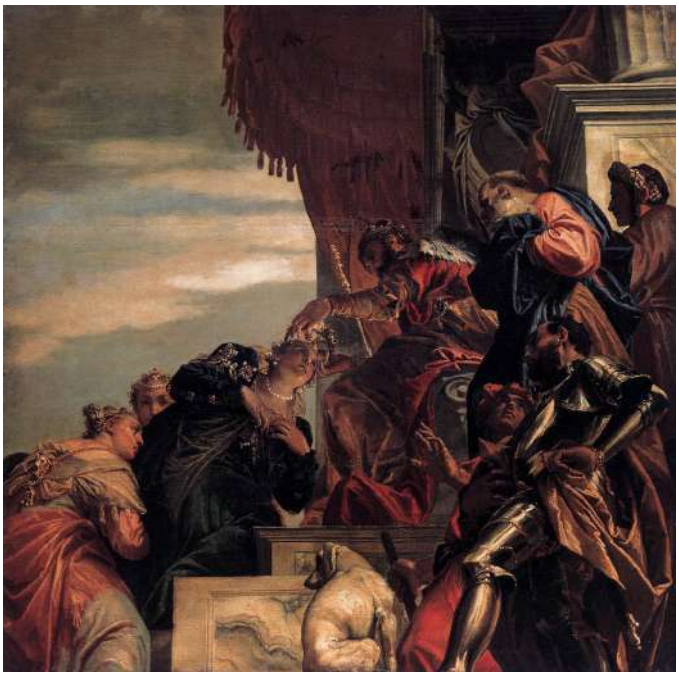


Fig. 1: Veronese, *The Coronation of Esther*, 1566. Church of San Sebastiano, Venice

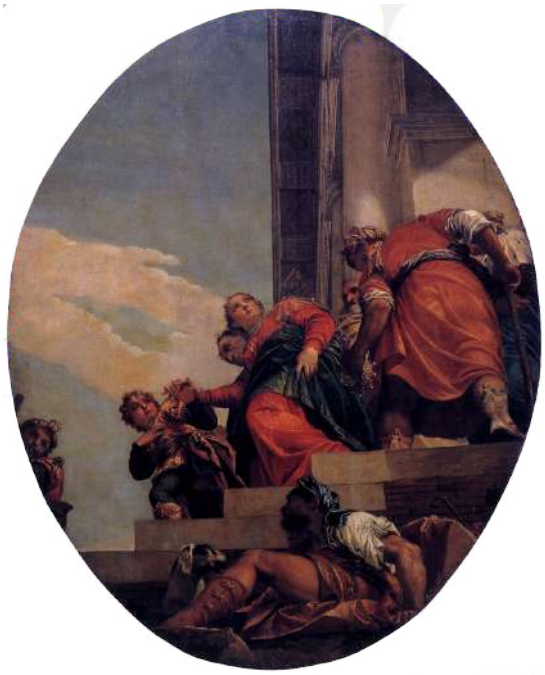


Fig. 2: Veronese, *The Banishment of Vashti,* 1566, Church of San Sebastiano, Venice

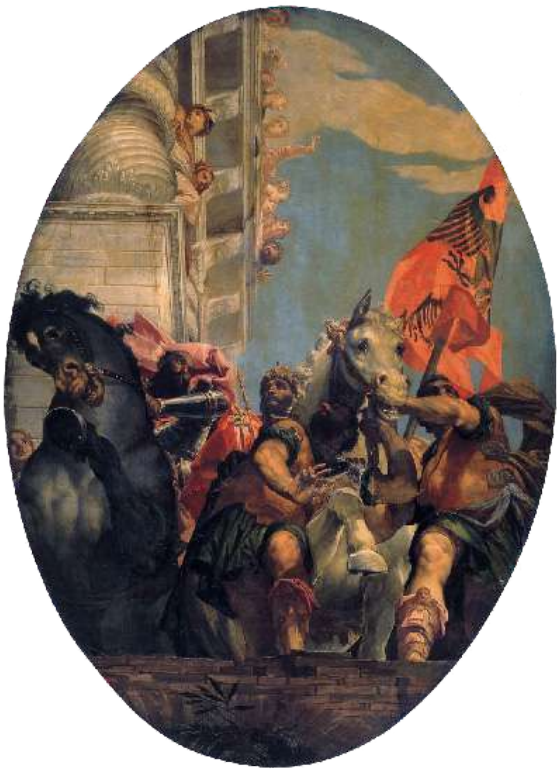


Fig. 3: Veronese, *The Triumph of Mordecai,* 1566, Church of San Sebastiano, Venice

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

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

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

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

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

> Il Rè la vidde d'vna ſua finestra,
> E ſi ti piacque per la ſua bellezza,
> E leggiadria, che la fece condurre
> All'hor', all'hor', alla preſenza ſua,
> E rimirata l'honeſtà del uolto,
> E gli occhi più lucenti, che le ſtelle
> . . .
> Ɛ la ſposò per ſua conſorte, e uolſi
> Che coronata per Regina fuſſe,
> Immediatamente iui in ſecreto
> . . .
> (2.6.119-29)
>
> [The King caught sight of her from his window
> And so much did she please him for her beauty
> And her grace, that he caused her to be brought

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tintoretto revolutionized the formula of the kneeling Esther to the posture

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

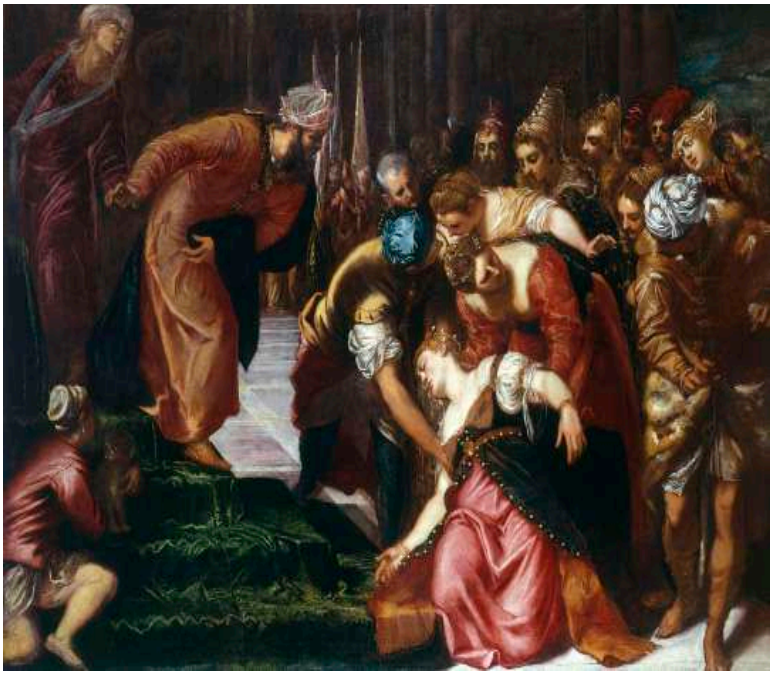


Fig. 4: Tintoretto, *Esther before Ahasuerus,* 1547-1548, Kensington Palace, London

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

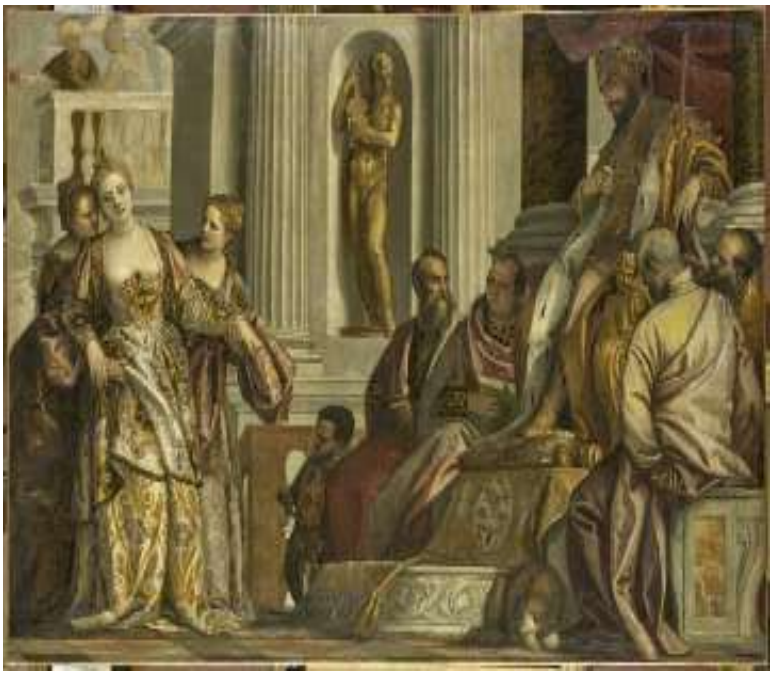


Fig. 5: Veronese, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1575, Louvre, Paris

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

3. The Jewish Interpretation: the Pascarol Scrolls

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

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

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

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

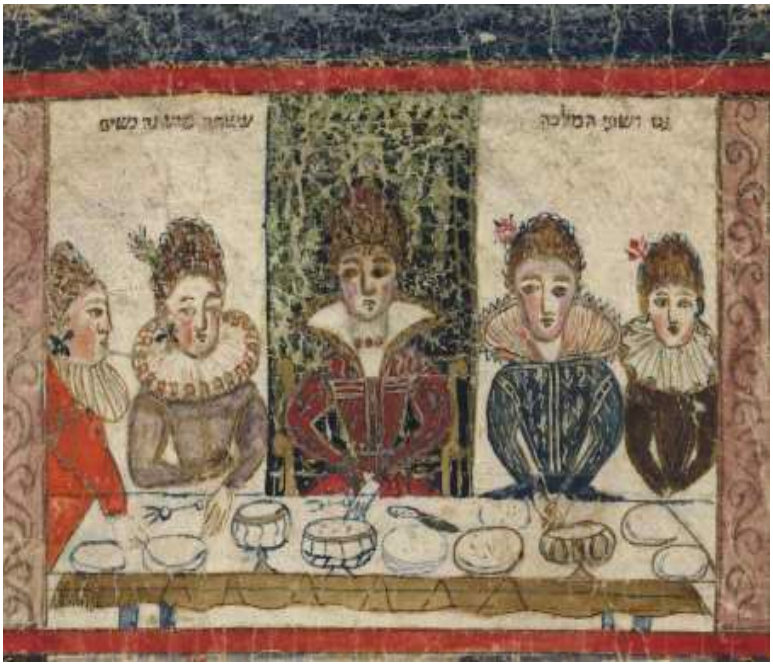


Fig. 6: Pascoral Scroll, *The Feast of Vashti,* 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

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

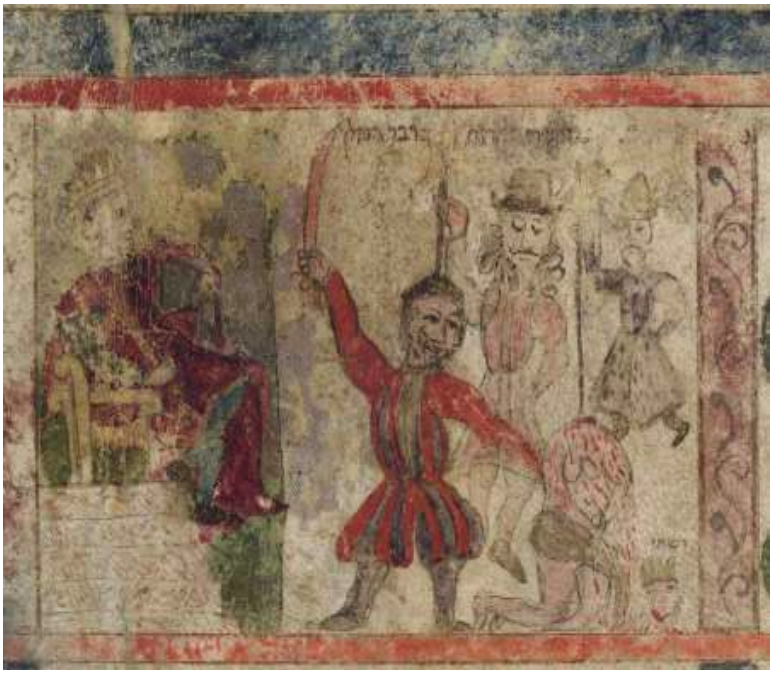


Fig. 7: Pascoral Scroll, *The Punishment of Vashti*, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

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

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

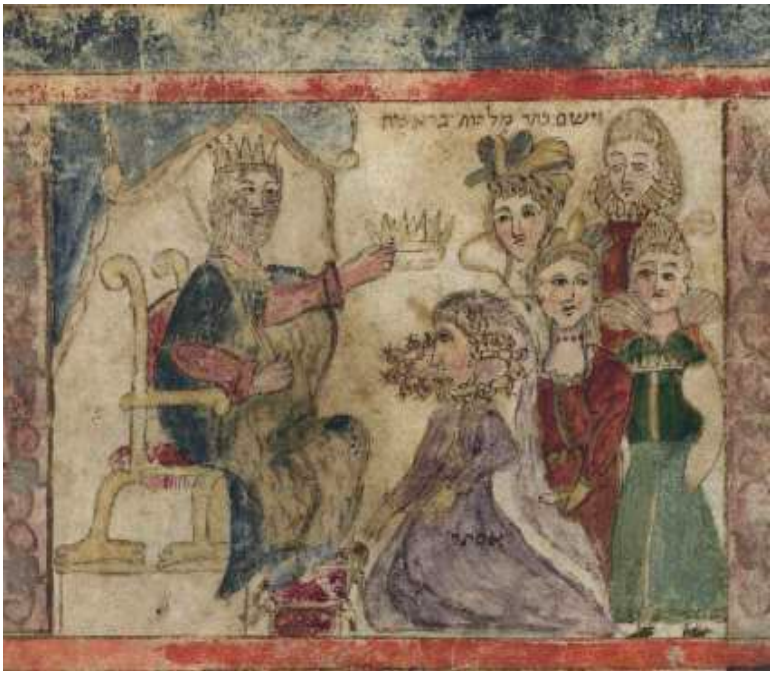


Fig. 8: Pascoral Scroll, *The Coronation of Esther*, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

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

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

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

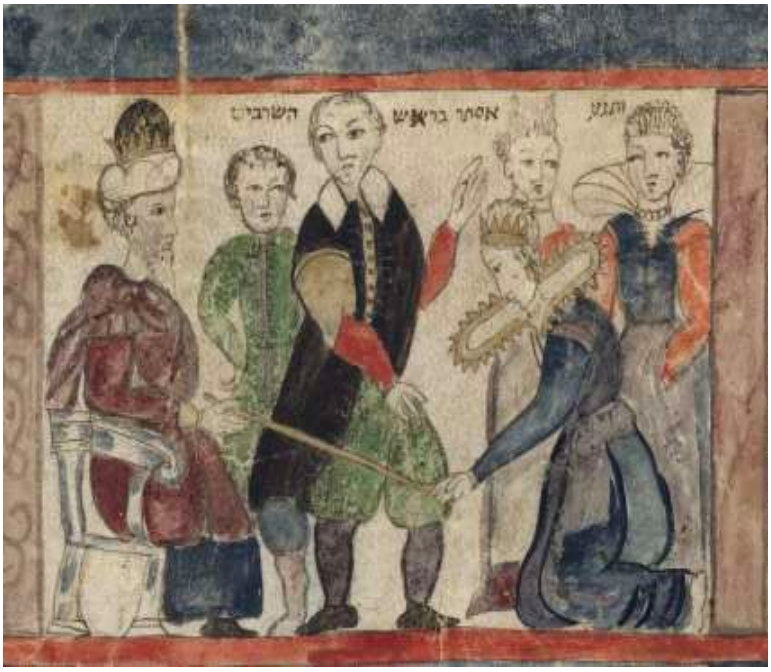


Fig. 9: Pascoral Scroll, Esther before Ahasuerus, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

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

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

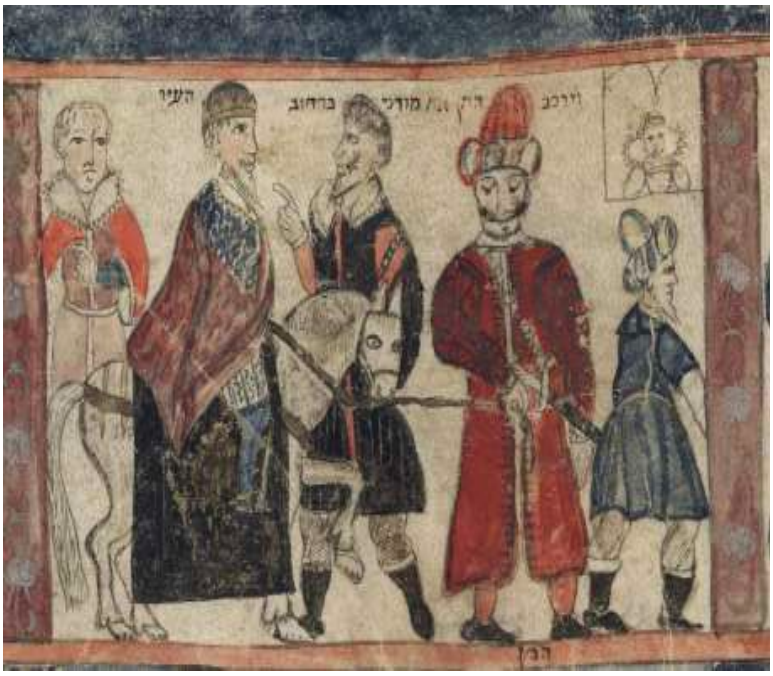


Fig. 10: Pascoral Scroll, *The Triumph of Mordecai*, 1616, Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (MS. 4 197/89, 1616) (The National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project)

Conclusion

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

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

symbols of resistance and female strength.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Works Cited

Barasch, Moshe. 1990. *Giotto and the Language of Gestures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berg, Sandra Beth. 1979. *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure.* Missoula, MT: Scholars Press.

Bohn, Babette. 2002. "Esther as a Model for Female Autonomy in Northern Italian Art"." *Studies in Iconography* 23: 183-201.

Brenner Idan, Athalya. ed. 1995. *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Carruthers, Jo. 2008. *Esther through the Centuries*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cebà, Ansaldo. 1615. *Reina Esther.* Genoa.

Dante Alighieri. 1968. *La Divina Commedia* (1320). Edited by Natalino Sapegno. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

Daturi Limardo, Elisabetta. 2004. *Représentations d'Esther entre écritures at images*. Bern: P. Lang.

Day, Linda. 1994. *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Dorothy, Charles. 1997. *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Eisenblicher, Konrad, and Jacqueline Murray, eds. 1992. *On the Beauty of Women.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fox, Michael. 1991. *The Redaction of the Books of Esther.* Atlanta: Scholars Press.

Fortini Brown, Patricia. 2004. *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture, and the Family.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Griffey Erin, ed. 2019. *Sartorial Politics in Early Modern Europe: Fashioning Women.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Herzig, Tamar. 2019. *A Convert's Tale: Art, Crime, and Jewish Apostasy in Renaissance Italy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jordan, Constance. 1987. "Boccaccio's In-Famous Women: Gender and Civic Virtue in the *De mulieribus Claris.". In Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance,* edited by Carole Levin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Kahr, Madelyn. 1970. "*The Meaning of Veronese's Paintings in the Church of San Sebastiano in Venice.*" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33: 235- 47.

Katz, Dana. 2017. *The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early Modern Venice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Modena, Leon (forthcoming). *Esther: a Tragedy Taken from the Holy Scripture,* edited and translated by Susan Payne. Skenè. Texts. Pisa: ETS.

—1619. *L'Ester tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura. Per Leon Modena hebreo da Venetia riformata*. Venezia: Giacomo Sarzina.

Manieri Elia, Giulio. 2011. *Veronese: le storie di Ester rivelate.* Venezia: Marisilio.

Metzger, Mendel. 1962. "The John Rylands Megillah and Some Other Illustrated Megilloth of the 15th to 17th Centuries." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library,* 45: 148-84.

Moore, Carey A. 1971. *Esther*. New York: Doubleday.

Parma, Elena. 1993. "La rappresentazione della storia biblica di Ester e Assuero tra Cinque e Seicento." *Arte Lombarda* 105: 119-27.

Perlove, Shelley. 1989. "Guercino's 'Esther before Ahasuerus' and Cardinal Lorenzo Magalotti, Bishop of Ferrara." *Artibus et Historiae* 10 (19): 133-47.

Petrarch. 1962. *Triumphs*. Edited by Ernst H. Wilkins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Soulam, Florence Mansano. 2006. "Unveiling the Secrets of the Scrolls of Moshe Pescarolo Scribe and Artist. An Analysis of Pescarolo's Scrolls in the Historical Context of Italy in the Early 17th Century." Ph.D. dissertation. Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Sulam, Sarra Copia. 2009. *Jewish Poet and Intellectual in Seventeenth Century Venice.* , edited by Don Harrán. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Tennen, Deborah. 2008. "Megillat Ester in Ottava Rima: Mordecai Dato's Poetry Regarding Sixteenth- Century Italian Jewish Women." *Renaissance Studies* 22. (4): 507-41.

Tornabuoni Lucrezia. 2001. *Sacred Narratives (15th century),* edited and translated by Jane Tylus. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Unger, Daniel. 2010. *Guercino's Paintings and His Patrons' Politics in Early Modern Italy.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Unglaub, Jonathan. 2003. "Poussin's 'Esther before Ahasuerus': Beauty, Majesty, Bondage.". *The Art Bulletin* 85 (1): 114-36.

White Crawford, Sidnie, and Leonard J. Greenspoon, eds. 2003. *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*. London: Clark.

Tovi Bibring*

Vasthi 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. Introduction[1]

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 incompliance. 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 monstrer 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 extent 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 mistére 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 Virginity), 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 contenetement,
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 saincts, 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 ayment la paix, ils donnent le repos,
Ils ne sçavent que c'est de tailles, ny d'impos,
L'avarice de Roys qui jamais n'est contente
Pour le peuple ronger mile 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 appreuve 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 marriage 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 vouloirs 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 princes[8] 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 avare"; "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 absolut / Que nul aye en buvant le desir [in *Vashti*: l'appetit] dissolute / 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 mind[9] 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 coleur?
> Et à qui est des yeux l'escarlatte 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 sainct debvoir le sage apostasie;
Pourtant celuy n'aura vers nous aucun accés,
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 Evanthes [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: Librarie 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: librarie 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.

Cora Dietl*

The Feast as Performance: Esther in Sixteenth-Century German Plays

Abstract

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

* University of Giessen - cora.dietl@germanistik.uni-giessen.de

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The Queen's Banquets: Purposeful Performance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. The Feast of the People

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Feasts and Theatre

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

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

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

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

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

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

Works Cited

Biblia cum glossa ordinaria. 1481. Pars II. Strasbourg: [s.n.] (GW 4282). https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:urmel-948998bb-64d5-4eea-ae04-9d33957568589 (Accessed 28 December 2022).

Brenz, Johannes. 1551. *Das Buch Eßther von dem Ehrwirdigen Herrn Johann Brentzen in Lateynischer sprach außgelegt. Jetzt verdetutscht Durch M. Ioannem Spangenberg. Der loeblichen Herrschafft Manßfeld Superattendenten.* [s.l.]: [s.n.] (VD16 B 7755).

— 1543. *In Epistolam Pavli Ad Philemonem, Et In Historiam Esther Commentarioli.* Schwäbisch Hall: Pankratius Queck, Peter Braubach (VD16 B 7716).

Brunner, Horst et al., eds. 1994-2002. *Repertorium der Sangsprüche und Meisterlieder des 13. bis 18. Jahrhunderts*, 15 vols. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Dehnert, Uta: Freiheit. 2017. *Freiheit, Ordnung und Gemeinwohl. Reformatorische Einflüsse im Meisterlied von Hans Sachs.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Dietl, Cora. 2023. "Nur eine Übersetzung? Der *Haman* des Johannes Chryseus als Theaterkommentar". *Pirckheimer-Jahrbuch*, forthcoming.

— 2010. "Dancing Devils and Singing Angels. The Disparate Qualities of Dances in Hessian Religious Plays", *European Medieval Drama* 14: 25-45.

Fabian, Ekkehart. 1960. "Einleitung". In *Die Beschlüsse der oberdeutschen schmalkaldischen Städtetage*, edited by Ekkehart Fabian, vol. 3, 17-44. Tübingen: Osiander.

Fasbender, Christoph. 2016. "Pfeilschmidt, Andreas". In Frühe Neuzeit in Deutschland 1520-1620. *Literaturwissenschaftliches Verfasserlexikon*, edited by Wilhelm Kühlmann, vol. 5. Berlin: De Gruyter, https://www-degruyter-com.ezproxy.uni-giessen.de/database/VDBO/entry/vdbo.vl16.0343/html (Accessed 30 December 2022).

Holstein, Hugo. 1884. "Einleitung". In *Dramen von Ackermann und Voith*, edited by Hugo Holstein, 143-54. Tübingen: Litterarischer Verein.

Holzberg, Niklas, and Brunner, Horst. 2020. *Hans Sachs. Ein Handbuch*, vol. 1. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Janning, Volker. 2015. "Naogeorg, Thomas". In *Frühe Neuzeit in Deutschland 1520-1620. Literaturwissenschaftliches Verfasserlexikon*, edited by Wilhelm Kühlmann, vol. 4, 563-72. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Kalimi, Isaac. 2019. "Martin Luther, die Juden und Esther: Bibelinterpretation im Schatten der Judenfeindschaft". *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 71: 357-94.

Könneker, Barbara. 1992. "Zur Intention und Struktur von Thomas Naogeorgs *Tragoedia nova Hamanus*". In *Word and Deed. German Studies in Honor of Wolfgang F. Michael*, edited by Thomas E. Ryan and Denes Monostory, 135-42. New York: Peter Lang.

Landesarchiv Thüringen, ThHStAW, EGA, Urkunde Nr. 1722 (Renewal of the Treaty of Schmalkalden, 29 September 1536), https://staatsarchive.thulb.uni-jena.de/receive/stat_showcase_00000039 (Accessed 27 December 2022).

Lau, Thomas. 2022. "Wer zahlt bestimmt? – Die Reichsstädte und der Schmalkaldische Bund". In *Politik – Religion – Kommunikation. Die schmalkaldischen Bundestage*

als politische Gesprächsplattform, edited by Jan Martin Lies and Stefan Michel, 241-68. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Lehnardt, Andreas. 2021. "Purimspiel – Megillat Ester auf der Bühne". In *Purimspiel und Fastnachtspiel. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Gattungsinterferenz*, edited by Klaus Wolf. Berlin: De Gruyter, 7-26.

Luther, Martin. 1534. *Biblia das ist die gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch*, 2 vols. Wittenberg: Hans Lufft. (VD16 B 2694).

— 1533-1912."Tischreden (Veit Dietrichs Nachschriften)". In *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (WA)*, TR, vol. 1, edited by Joachim K.F. Knaake et al., 1–330. Weimar: Böhlau.

Michael, Wolfgang F. 1984. *Das deutsche Drama der Reformationszeit*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Murer, Jos. 1567-1974. "Hester. Ein nüw Spyl / darinn erzellt wirt / wie Gott sin volck durch Hester / von dem mortlichen vffsatz Hamans erlößt / vnd jn gestürtzt vnd gestrafft hat / zur leer / daß niemand sin gewalt oder wolstand mußbruche / sunder demütig sye / beschriben durch Josen Murer burgern Zürych / vnd daselbst gespylt deß 11. Februarij. M.D. LXVII". In Jos Murer. *Sämtliche Dramen*, edited by Hans-Joachim Adomatis, vol. 1, 539-93. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Nahrendorf, Carsten. 2015. *Humanismus in Magdeburg. Das Altstädtische Gymnasium von seiner Gründung bis zur Zerstörung der Stadt (1524-1631)*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Naogeorg, Thomas. 1546-1983. "*Hamanus* mit der deutschen Übersetzung von Johannes Chryseus". In Thomas Naogeorg. *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Hans-Gert Roloff, vol. 3/2, 294-680. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter.

Pfeilschmidt, Andreas. 1555-1986. *Esther*, edited by Barbara Könnecker and Wolfgang F. Michael. Bern: Peter Lang.

Rogge, Jörg. 2002. "Ernst von Sachsen, Erzbischof von Magdeburg und Administrator von Halberstadt (1476-1513)". In *Mitteldeutsche Lebensbilder. Menschen im späten Mittelalter*, edited by Werner Freitag, 27-68. Köln: Böhlau.

Sachs, Hans. 1559-1870. "Die comedi der königin Hester, gantz durchauß gefast, weitleufftiger mit etlichen actis und personen gemehret, und hat ietzt sieben actus und XXIII person". In *Hans Sachs*, edited by Adelbert von Keller, vol. 15, 87-135. Stuttgart: Litterarischer Verein.

— 1536-1870. "Comedia. Die gantze hystori der Hester zu recedirn, hat xiij person unnd drey actus". In *Hans Sachs*, edited by Adelbert von Keller, vol. 1, 111-33. Stuttgart: Litterarischer Verein.

Schiendorfer, Max. 2015. "Murer, Jos". In *Frühe Neuzeit in Deutschland 1520-1620. Literaturwissenschaftliches Verfasserlexikon*, edited by Wilhelm Kühlmann, vol. 4, 503-11. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Schmidt, Heinrich Richard. 1989. "Der Schmalkaldische Bund und die oberdeutschen Städte bis 1536. Ein Beitrag zur politischen Konfessionalisierung im Protestantismus", *Zwingliana* 18: 36-61.

Schwarz, Rudolf. 1894. *Esther im deutschen und neulateinischen Drama des Reformationszeitalters*. Oldenburg: Schulze.

Seidel, Andrea. 2017. "Voith, Valten". In *Frühe Neuzeit in Deutschland 1520–1620. Literaturwissenschaftliches Verfasserlexikon*, edited by Wilhelm Kühlmann, vol. 6, 406-12. Berlin: De Gruyter.

(*Tellenspiel.*) 1563. *Ein hübsch spyl gehalten zů Vry in der Eidngenoßschafft / von dem*

Wilhelm Thellen / jhrem Landsmann / vnnd ersten Eydtgenossen. Zurich: Tobias Geßner (VD16 B 9633).

Voith, Valten. 1537-1884. "Ein seer schön, lieblich, nützlich und tröstlich Spiel, aus der heiligen schrifft und dem buch Esther, inn kurtze reim gesetzt, darinn angezeigt wird, wie Gott alle zeit die hoffart und den eigenwil, die Demut und Gottfurchtigkeit, der bösen und fromen menner und weiber gestrafft und belonet hat". In *Dramen von Ackermann und Voith*, edited by Hugo Holstein, 155-205. Tübingen: Litterarischer Verein.

Vulgata. 1483-2018, edited and translated by Michael Fieger et al., vol. 2. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Washof, Wolfram. 2007. *Die Bibel auf der Bühne. Exempelfiguren und protestantische Theologie im lateinischen und deutschen Bibeldrama der Reformationszeit.* Münster: Rhema.

Wim Hüsken*

Esther in the Drama of the Early Modern Low Countries

Abstract

Even though topics from the Hebrew Bible abound in the sixteenth-century drama of the Low Countries written in the vernacular, the character of Esther does not appear on stage in the Dutch language before the start of the seventeenth century. Neo-Latin plays on Esther did, however, precede them. In this article I will concentrate on four plays, written by Dutch and Flemish dramatists. The first is a neo-Latin play: *Tragœdia Esther sive Edissa*, written in 1544 by Petrus Philicinus and printed in 1563. I will subsequently discuss three vernacular plays about Esther: an anonymous play entitled *Hester en Assverus* from the town of Hasselt, probably written before 1615; Nicolaas Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid* from 1637; and Joris Berckmans's "happy-ending tragedy" *Edissa* from 1649. In discussing these plays, I will focus on the way in which the character of Esther was portrayed. In Philicinus's play Esther is depicted as a mediatrix between the Jewish people and the Persians, yet at the same time fully aware of the dangers she may inflict upon herself. The Hasselt play and the play by Berckmans demonstrate Esther's loyalty towards Ahasuerus. These two plays contrast her sweet and obedient character to Vasthi's less sympathetic attitude towards the king. Fonteyn also describes her as a loyal queen to Ahasuerus; her virtue is beyond any doubt. What is more, in all four plays Esther emphatically voices her trust in God.

Keywords: Joris Berckmans; Nicolaas Fonteyn; Petrus Philicinus; Hasselt; rhetoricians; Neo-Latin drama; Dutch and Flemish drama

1. Introduction

Sixteenth-century drama of the Low Countries was dominated by the activities of the rhetoricians, members of so-called *rederijkerskamers* (chambers of rhetoric) who were engaged in writing poetry and performing plays in public in the market squares of towns and villages. They enjoyed generous support from the local authorities who praised their artistic skills and, above all, their educational drive to instruct the spectators how to live a morally-just life. A major subgenre practiced by them was a type of morality play, termed *spel van sinne*,[1] in which the main character is shown the narrow path towards

[1] The word *sin*, of which *sinne* is a derivation, has various meanings in (late) medieval Dutch. It can refer to mankind's ability to think, hence its intellect, as well as to its

* Independent - wim.husken@telenet.be

salvation as an alternative for a sinful life of luxury and debauchery, leading to damnation. Other popular types of drama were the genres of farce and biblical drama. As far as the latter is concerned, the authors of the plays on topics taken from the New Testament compared, more often than not, the struggle of the early Christians to practice their new religion to the battle between reformed Christians and the Roman-Catholic clergy. In this respect, the Acts of the Apostles and Saint-Paul's conversion were popular themes.[2] After 1539, when a theatre competition was held in Ghent at which the majority of the competing chambers answered the question to be discussed in their plays ("Welc den mensche stervende meesten troost es"; "What is the dying man's greatest consolation?")[3] in a non-orthodox way, the religious and secular authorities sensed the negative influence rhetoricians' plays could have on the minds of those who were critical of the Catholic faith. The edition of these plays, published in 1539, was even placed on the Index. In 1560, the authorities imposed severe restrictions on performances of plays in which religious topics were discussed, eventually leading to a total ban of staging plays.

In the Low Countries early modern drama comprised both of rhetoricians' drama and fully-fledged Renaissance drama, the former mainly restricted to the sixteenth century and the latter to the seventeenth. Philicinus' Neo-Latin drama *Tragœdia Esther*, dating back to the sixteenth century, was thoroughly inspired by classical drama – in this case we are dealing with a Senecan play – and as such Neo-Latin school drama will have had a distinct effect on the development from rhetoricians' drama to Renaissance drama. The extent to which this influence can be shown is something that still needs to be studied in detail.

Plays dramatizing scenes or staging characters taken from the Hebrew Bible were in vogue with the rhetoricians, writing in the vernacular. In some twenty-eight plays written between the mid-fifteenth and the early-seventeenth centuries, stories from this source were chosen by them for dramatization. Abraham, for example, figures in no less than ten plays, ranging from a fragment of a play probably dating back to the fifteenth century to fully-fledged plays on subjects such as Abraham sacrificing Isaac,

thoughts but also to its senses and its mental disposition. Equally difficult to explain is the exact meaning of the word *sinnekens* which is used to refer to allegorical characters in rhetoricians' plays – they always appear on stage in pairs, seldom with three but, unlike the Vice in English drama, never alone –, acting as seductive or evil forces trying to eventuate man's downfall.

[2] See Ramakers 1991-2, 2011 and 2012.

[3] The English translation of this phrase is from Waite (2000, 147). In general, Waite's book offers a good introduction to early reformation drama in the Low Countries. On the Ghent plays see chapter 6, "Popular Ritual, Social Protest, and the Rhetorician Competition in Ghent, 1539", 134-64.

as well as his dealings with Lot and his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.[4] Trust in God (as opposed to reverently following the clergy), a topic highly debated during the sixteenth century by reformed Christians, may have been the reason why authors and their audiences showed a predilection for this particular character and his story as it was narrated in the Bible. In general, women prominently feature in these biblical plays; the stories of Judith and Susanna figure in four of them. The story of Esther is dealt with in one rhetoricians' play only, the anonymous *Hester en Assverus* from the Hasselt chamber of rhetoric *De Roode Roos* (*The Red Rose*).

Topics from the Hebrew Bible were also staged in Low Countries Renaissance drama. Yet compared to rhetoricians' drama, the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Judith or Susanna are almost completely absent here. Instead, during the heydays of this type of drama, from 1600 to 1650, we find a remarkable number of plays concentrating on the stories of David and Joseph. Perhaps seventeenth-century audiences, experiencing a constant threat by the Spanish-Habsburg armies to wage war against the country (not only in the north but also in the south), were more interested in these emblematic figures, who managed to safeguard themselves against oppression or captivity. Would it be too daring to surmise that the story of Esther, who liberated her people from persecution and capital punishment by the Persians, appealed to Renaissance playwrights and spectators by bringing her particular story to the stage? During the first half of the seventeenth century, three Renaissance plays focus on Esther: Nicolaas Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid*; Joris Berckmans's *Edissa*; and Jacobus Revius's tragedy *Haman*.[5] The latter play was not meant to be staged, its author being mainly known as a poet rather than a dramatist. Since his text was never performed we will not include it in our discussion.

Theoretically, the three vernacular plays discussed in this essay represent different stages in the development of rhetoricians' drama to Renaissance drama.[6] The Hasselt *Hester en Assverus* is a typical rhetoricians' play staging *sinnekens* as allegorical characters – even though they appear on stage relatively late in this play – performed on a stage subdivided into mansions, each of them allocated to one of the main characters, with a neutral proscenium

[4] See *Het spel van Abrahams Offerhande* (The Play of Abraham's Sacrifice) by an unknown author in the Haarlem play collection of the local rhetoricians chamber *Trou Moet Blijcken,* vol. 4, fol. 49v-64v (Dibbets and Hummelen 1993-4), and Franchois Machet's tragedy *Sodoma*, written in 1619, a play kept in a manuscript dating back to 1661, now at Regenstein Library in Chicago. A summary of this play is given by Hüsken (1989, 224-9).

[5] See for a bibliography of Renaissance drama in the Low Countries during the first half of the seventeenth century Meeus 1983.

[6] These stages are not to be seen chronologically. In his introduction to Meeus 1983, 8, Lieven Rens notices the reemerging, during the fourth decade of the seventeenth century

in front of them. Joris Berckmans's *Edissa* represents a relatively rare stage in the development, being a play displaying characteristics of rhetoricians' drama, such as the allegorical *sinnekens*, yet written in alexandrines with acts and scenes, which is typical for the genre of Renaissance tragedy, thus making it a hybrid play. Finally, Nicolaas Fonteyn's play betrays every characteristic of a Renaissance tragicomedy, without allegorical characters yet written in alexandrine verse and with a Chorus of Virgins. It is in this order, rather than chronologically, that we will discuss this play in this essay.

To supplement our information related to medieval and early modern dramatic performances in the Low Countries regarding Esther's heroic act of liberating the Jews from oppression in Persia, we will refer to a few examples of archival and iconographic sources.[7] Evidence regarding the way Esther was depicted on the stage in the Low Countries, as can be deduced from archival sources, is limited. In 1474, a play about *Koning Aszwerus* (*King Ahasuerus*) was staged in Deventer, a Hanseatic town in the north-eastern part of the Low Countries (Hollaar and Van den Elzen 1980, 413). On 25 June 1553, a play about Esther and Ahasuerus was performed in Haarlem. In 1589, a similar play was scheduled in the same town, but the local burgomasters banned its performance because of a conflict with the rhetoricians (Van Boheemen and Van der Heijden 1999, 33; 69). Unfortunately, the texts of these plays have not been preserved.

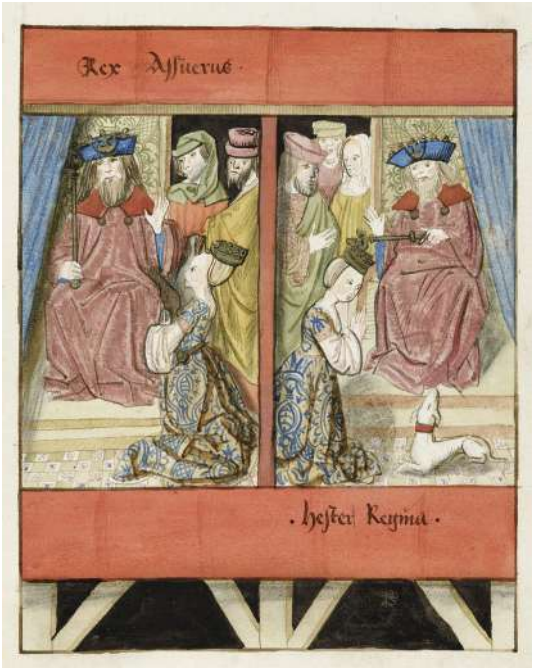
Tableaux vivants, in which Esther is shown being crowned queen or pleading with Ahasuerus for her people, were part of many Joyous Entries in the Low Countries. Both scenes were incorporated in the procession on the occasion of the entry of Duke Philip the Good into Bruges, on 11 December 1440, when the town submitted to its legal ruler after it had rebelled against him. Esther's crowning by the king was shown in a splendid triumphal arch built over one of Bruges's streets. From within music was played on an organ, a harp and a lute. In a subsequent *tableau vivant* she pleads with the king for the Jews living in exile in Persia.[8] Later in the century, Esther's story was part of Margaret of York's festive entry into Bruges (3 July 1468) on the occasion of her wedding with Charles the Bold, as well as in Joanna of Castile's Joyous Entry in Brussels (9 December 1496).[9]

– a period otherwise characterized by a "classical" type of Renaissance drama following the three unities –, of allegorical plays, including those reminiscent of the "old-fashioned" genre of the *spel van sinne*. Joris Berckmans's *Edissa* (1649), to be discussed further down this essay, bears witness to the latter type of drama.

[7] See for the way Esther was depicted in art, including Dutch art, Goosen 1993.

[8] See Ramakers 2005, 174-6, 183-6 and 194. A short description of the way the two tableaux were executed, including the Latin phrases displayed on scrolls, can be found in *Die Excellente Chronijcke van Vlaenderen* (1531), fol. C.vij*rv*.

[9] Franke (1998) focuses on Low Countries representations of Esther and Ahasuerus



Stage showing Esther in Joanna of Castile's Joyous Entry into Brussels, 1496
(© Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ms 78 D 5)

On a double-sided booth-stage the latter entry included two scenes from Esther's life: her introduction as future spouse to Ahasuerus; and her audacious plea for the king to have mercy on the Jews. The famous *Liber Boonen* from Louvain (1593-1594), delineating the annual procession ("ommeganc") in honour of the Virgin Mary, includes a description of a tableau with Esther as well. She is "costelijck verciert en gecroont als een coninginne, ende zal zijn zeer schoon van aensicht" ("costly adorned and crowned as a queen and her face shall be very beautiful"; Van Even 1880, 251). Seated on her throne, she gracefully entertains Mordecai, dressed in sackcloth, who shows her Haman's ordinance.

In most cases the *tableaux vivants* of Joyous Entries included scenes with Esther for political reasons, for they compared the biblical heroine with a female protagonist, part of the royal company being welcomed, so as to

on tapestries and in tableaux vivants, with a special emphasis on the ones produced on the occasion of Margaret of York's marriage to Duke Charles the Bold in Bruges (1468). For the Joyous Entry of Joanna of Castile in Brussels (1496) see Kipling 2001 and Eichberger, ed. 2023 (in press).

show the influence of women on male rulers.[10] However, there is yet another reason why medieval and early modern authors were interested in Esther. For it is from the thirteenth century onwards that she was regularly seen, together with Judith and Susanna, as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary. In one case we even find this comparison in a *tableaux vivant* in a rhetoricians' play. The Bruges playwright Cornelis Everaert (c.1480-1556) shows her in the prologue to his play *Maria ghecompareirt byde claerheyt* (*Mary compared to clarity*; Hüsken 2005, 747-84; see also Moser 2001, 254-62) as a mediatrix pleading for her people at Ahasuerus' court, thus explicitly establishing a link between Esther and the Virgin Mary. As we will see below, Petrus Philicinus interprets her in his *Tragœdia Esther* also in this way. But the precise way in which Esther behaved, her motives and actions on stage, can only be studied by turning to the few surviving plays themselves.

2. Philicinus' *Tragœdia Esther*

Neo-Latin school drama flourished in the Low Countries during the sixteenth century. As a matter of fact, these plays were known throughout a much larger area than the Dutch-speaking territories. They were used for performances by pupils of Latin schools in much of northern Europe, and collections of neo-Latin school drama written by Low Countries schoolmasters were published throughout Europe, most notably in German-speaking countries (Bloemendal 2003).

One of the first dramas of this kind was Georgius Macropedius's *Asotus*, a play written between 1506 and 1510 and published in a revised version in 1535. Its subject was taken from the New Testament, as it stages the story of the Prodigal Son, one of the parables told by Christ to his disciples (Luke 15:11-32). In 1560, one of Macropedius's pupils, Cornelius Laurimanus, published a play entitled *Esthera regina*. According to Jan Bloemendal (2003, 361 and 336-7; 2008), his plays "were meant to be a bulwark against 'heresy'," while giving his *Esthera*

> a typological-anagogical *exegesis* . . . Ahasveros represents Christ, who repudiated his first wife Vasthi, i.e. the Jewish people, to marry another one, Esthera or the true Catholic Church which God had created for man's salvation.

The prologue of the play highlights Esther's humility as opposed to Vasthi's pride, as a result of which the latter is banned from Ahasuerus' court and

[10] In relation to the French political situation around the turn of the sixteenth century, this hypothesis has been put forward by Hochner (2010), yet mainly focusing on Anne of Brittany's role at the time.

Esther is elevated to a high position. Laurimanus was accused of plagiarism, allegedly having copied Naogeorgus's *Hamanus* (1543), or not having kept sufficient distance between the text of his *Esthera regina* and the play written by the German Protestant minister. This accusation was soon refuted.

Dating from about the same time as Naogeorgus's *Hamanus* is a play named *Tragœdia Esther*, written by Petrus Philicinus, otherwise known as Pierre Campson (Bloemendal and Groenland 2006). By the time Philicinus, born c.1515 in a village near the town of Arras (in French speaking territory yet sharing Flemish culture), composed this play he was a school teacher at the collegiate church of Binche. The play appeared in print only some twenty years later, in 1563. The text shows many characteristics of a Senecan drama with its structure of five acts, choruses, static characters and long monologues. As such Philicinus is a relatively early follower of this Roman author in the Low Countries, the plays of Terence considered as being more suitable for adaptation for the stage than those of Seneca.

Esther's behaviour in Philicinus' play is governed by one major drive: her absolute loyalty to both the Jewish people and Ahasuerus, here named "Assuerus". In addition, apart from depicting her as the epitome of virtue, Philicinus saw her above all as a prefiguration of the Holy Virgin. Similarly, he equated Haman with the Devil and he interpreted Mordechai ("Mardochaeus"), Esther's uncle who took care of the orphaned girl, as an image of Christ:

> Nam ut Aman diaboli typum gerere convenientissime videtur, sic Mardochaeus Christi imaginem adumbrare, ac representare videri potest (Bloemendal and Groenland 2006, 70, 80-2)
>
> [Because just as Aman shows a most striking similarity with the type of the devil, so can Mardochaeus be seen as a prefiguration and image of Christ.][11]

According to Philicinus, Esther is a model of honesty and composure, and the luxury that surrounded her at Assuerus's court did not turn her into a conceited person.

In his first speech King Assuerus compares Esther to Queen Vasthi. Certainly, the latter was a worthy wife but at the same time she was too brazen: "Digna uxor, at nimis insolens" (131). The king sketches Esther's eminence, choosing his words carefully: she is not only extremely beautiful but she is also friendly, possesses a loving character and displays great self-restraint. In this, she reflects his own person because he himself cherishes friendliness and mildness. The Choruses of the Women of Susa and that of the Jewish Women confirm these

[11] All translations into English of quotes from this play have been adapted from the Dutch translations given in this edition.

observations: Vasthi despised the king ("spreverat Regem", 218), which is the reason why she now reaps the bitter fruits of her arrogance ("Fructus amaros arrogantiae metit", 220), whereas Esther is praised for her sweetness ("suavitas", 240) and docility ("submissio", 241).

Philicinus has his characters frequently express themselves in monologues, which affords him the opportunity to sketch their thoughts and emotions in great detail. In her first speech in the play, at the beginning of the third act, Esther voices her feelings. She wonders what is to be expected after three days of praying and fasting which follow the publication of the decree in which her people are threatened with extinction. Even though she does not see any positive signs, it is her innocent trust ("credula", 638) that makes her heart feel optimistic about the future ("ut sim bono et magno in futurum pectore", 640). Trust in God is a major drive for all her thoughts and actions. In her prayer to God – this is an extension of the text as it is given in the Hebrew *Bible* and the Vulgate, only found in the Greek *Septuagint*[12] – she admits the guilt of her people having worshiped false gods, which is the reason why they deserve punishment. Yet it would be unjust, she adds, if a superstitious tribe, the Persians, would destroy God's own people and extinguish the glory of His temple ("atque gloriam temple Eliminare", 652-3). She therefore begs Him to give her faith and perseverance ("fiduciam, et constantiam", 659) and, so as to be able to persuade the king to come to her aid, to effuse gracefulness over her sweet lips ("Infunde gratiam et meis suadam labris", 660). Esther's frequent appeals to God to help her is another element in the play derived from the *Septuagint* version of the Book of Esther. Nicole Hochner (2010, 760) observes in this respect:

> when the persona of Esther is fashioned according to the Septuagint version of predestination, her distinctive features are often blurred as she seems merely to be carrying out a divine project.

Esther's modesty is demonstrated in various ways, not the least in how she regards her own position at the court of King Assuerus. Not once does she refer to herself as queen ("regina"), in contrast to the way Haman views his elevated place, referring to it as his royal dignity ("dignitas per regiae", 327). Indeed, Esther accepts only God as king, not unlike Mardochaeus's ideas, witness the words with which she opens her prayer to God: "Domine Deus, qui singularis noster es / Rex, destitutam omni me ope, adiuva tua" (642-3; God our Lord, being our only King, grant me, being devoid of all aid, Your support). Of course,

[12] Bloemendal and Groenland (2006, 228), annotating lines 642-80. See for the Greek text of Esther's prayer in the *Septuagint* and its English translation [Brenton], 1879, 657. In his play Philicinus made extensive use of this particular version of the biblical story.

she addresses Assuerus as king, yet she does so only because she sees in him almost a heavenly creature:

> Assuere rex, cui maximam
> Mortalium uni debeo reverentiam,
> Te ut conspicata sum, velut Dei angelum,
> Prae gloriae tuae amplitudine inhorrui.
> (785-8)
>
> [King Assuerus, the one and only mortal to whom I owe my deepest respect, when I saw you there, as an angel of God, the majesty of your glory made me tremble.]

What lesson did Philicinus wish his pupils to learn from the story of Esther? It is in the Chorus of Jewish Women at the end of the play that we find this simple advice: pride comes before the fall and virtue conquers all things. In their closing song, the Jewish Women consequently address themselves directly to the audience:

> Proin vos, quibus magnum dedit
> Vitæ necisque ius Deus,
> Ponite superbos spiritus,
> Virtutis artes discite.
> Proflate buccis turgidis,
> Fumos inanis gloriæ,
> Iræ merum amolimini,
> Ferociæ arma pellite.
> (1641-8)
>
> [This is why you, to whom God has given the supreme right of life and death, will have to lay down your haughty pride and learn the principles of virtue. You will have to puff out, with round cheeks, the fumes of vain glory, to remove unadulterated anger, to push away the weapons of ferocity.]

But more importantly, a steadfast faith and trust in God, accompanied by fasting, praying and wheeping prove to be essential in fending off tribulation, the *peroratio* teaches us.

3. The Hasselt Play of *Hester en Assverus*[13]

In the southern Low Countries the majority of rhetoricians chambers were

[13] See for a discussion of this play also Elsa Strietman's essay on the biblical plays in the Hasselt collection (Strietman 2021, 182-6).

located in the county of Flanders and in the duchy of Brabant. East of Brabant there were only a few towns with rhetoricians chambers, among them Hasselt, Tongeren, Sint-Truiden and Borgloon. Some are mentioned as early as 1495 (*De Akelei* [*The Columbine*] and *De Rozenkrans* [*The Rosary*], both in Sint-Truiden), whereas in Borgloon a chamber was established only after 1600. Hasselt had two chambers, *De Roode Roos* (*The Red Rose*) and *Sint-Anna* (*Saint-Anne*), the former being the town's principal chamber. It was first mentioned in archival sources in 1505.[14]

Little would have been known about *De Roode Roos* had not a manuscript survived containing fourteen plays, nine of which were copied out by a certain Rener Comans who began his work as a copyist on 2 March 1611. One of the plays in this collection deals with the history of Esther and Ahasuerus. When precisely it was written is unknown; it was performed, according to a note in a different hand from Comans's, on 22 September 1664. Yet in view of the fact that Comans started copying the plays in 1611, we may assume that *Hester en Assverus* dates back to sometime before c.1615.[15]

In this play the anonymous Hasselt playwright limits himself to the most essential parts in the story of Esther's liberation of the Jews. Without disclosing his plan to hold a magnificent feast in his palace, Assverus visits Vasthi who humbly receives him in her quarters. She thanks him for the great honour of inviting her to come to his quarters should he wish to do so. Yet when she is asked by Egeus and Dathan – the former a servant of the king, the latter one of Aman's confidants – to attend the king's feast she refuses, telling them that she is planning to have her own function with her ladies-in-waiting. She even claims it was the king himself who advised her to celebrate a party by herself:

> Vashti Gaet henen, gesellen, in uwen vreden
> en segt met seden den coninck wert
> – want syn mogenthyt soe hadt begeert –
> dat ick myn feeste alleen soude pleghen.
> (fol. 172*r*)

> [Vashti Go in peace, gentlemen, and mannerly tell the worthy king – since this was his majesty's wish – that I will celebrate my party by myself.]

[14] See for these details maps 1, 2, 3 and 6 in Van Bruaene 2008, (26, 52, 88 and 172), and her online "Repertorium van rederijkerskamers in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en Luik 1400-1650".

[15] In a number of cases Comans gives dates of performances himself. His oldest reference to a performance is 27 September 1565 but the majority relate to performances between 1587 and 1615. The most recent ones are found in connection with plays at the end of the collection, possibly coinciding with the year in which Comans finished his work. *Hester en Assverus* takes position eight in the order of plays.

Upon hearing this, the king feels thoroughly offended and gives the order to expel his wife from the palace.

After this relatively long sequence on Vasthi's disobedient behaviour, Mardocheus speaks to his niece Esther about the king's plan to search a new spouse. In a way, Esther's first appearance mirrors Vasthi's, because she too assures her uncle that she will obey his wishes:

> Hester Wel vader, allen u ordineren
> en u begeren sal ick volbringhen te goede.
> Ick geeff my gans tot uwen gemoede
> en doen als die vroede, dat u dunckt wesen goet.
> (fol. 175*v*)

> [Hester Well, father, I will fulfil all your commands and wishes to the best of my abilities, fully submitting myself to your mind, as a wise person doing everything you deem well.]

Mardocheus and Esther are then visited by Egeus, who invites her to come to the palace. Without any hesitation Esther humbly accepts. In her second appearance on stage, Esther is introduced to the king who instantaneously falls in love with her. Shortly after that, Aman is elevated to the second-highest position in the kingdom, so as to be able to fulfil the role of overseeing that everybody will obey the king's laws. He also expects that everybody will pay him respect by genuflecting. However, Mardocheus refuses to worship anyone but God, denying Aman this token of respect, as a result of which the latter reacts furiously. The man and his people need to be destroyed, thus reads Aman's advice to the king. Upon reading the newly issued law condemning all Jews, Mardocheus realizes that this is Aman's work. Dressed in sackcloth, Mardocheus comes to the palace where his laments are overheard by one of Esther's maidens who reports everything to the queen.[16] While informing Mardocheus about Esther's decision to observe a three-day fast, Atach (Hathach), one of Assverus's princes, praises her for her loyalty towards the Jews:

> O wat werdigher bloemen is Hester, ons vrouwe,
> die uut lieffden toont haer hertte getrouwe,
> soe dat men niet en vint
> haers gelycken die dit avontueren souwe.
> En dees suyver kersouwe, bedruct van rouwe,
> is daer toe gesint.
> (fol. 189*r*)

[16] The biblical sources, including the Hebrew Bible, have Hathach communicate Mordechai's complaints to Esther instead of one of her maidens.

> [Oh, what a worthy flower is Hester, our lady! Out of love she shows her loyal heart, so that one does not find her equal, who would dare this. And this pure, chosen woman, stricken with feelings of mourning, is ready to venture this.]

In her third appearance in the play, Esther prepares herself to visit the king. Without being officially admitted before Assverus' throne, she humbly invites him and Aman to a meal in her quarters. Enjoying Esther's meal and drinking claret, the king asks her about her deepest wish. She answers that she merely wishes to see her people protected, accusing Aman of planning to destroy them, upon which the king decides to punish him. The moment Assverus has withdrawn from her quarters, Aman begs Esther for mercy. While she is lying on her bed, he joins her there which she, understandably, interprets as an act of transgressive behaviour: "Ey, erch bloetsuyper en vrouwen crachtere!" ("Ay, you evil bloodsucker and rapist!", fol. 193*v*). Assverus finds Aman in *flagrante delicto*, which opens his eyes to the man's utter insidiousness. Aman even attempts to kill the king – a detail not found in any of the biblical sources – but Arbona (Harbona), one of the king's chamberlains, and Egeus stop him. The king decides to have Aman hanged from the same gallows he had prepared for Mardocheus. Before being hanged, Aman experiences a moment of anagnorisis (or rather, steps out of his role as a stage character) by addressing the audience, warning them not to follow his example. His final exhortation to them is to live a virtuous life by eschewing evil deeds. In her final appearance on stage, Esther reminds Assverus of Mardocheus's loyalty towards him by reporting Thares and Bagathan's intended assault, asking him, by way of reward, to put her uncle in Aman's place. This is a request Assverus gladly grants.[17] Egeus concludes with a short epilogue, expressing his wish that God and the Virgin Mary – yet without explicitly interpreting Esther (unlike Philicinus and Everaert) as her prefiguration – will bestow their grace upon us.

Throughout the play Esther demonstrates her modesty by humbly obeying the wishes of both her uncle and Assverus. When she needs to take action by visiting the king uninvited, she hesitates for a moment, but knowing that God is on her side she pursues her plan. Trust in a just cause, and even more so, trust in God leads to her heroic act of saving the Jews from extinction.[18]

[17] Perhaps because this matter is raised only here, the Hasselt author may have decided to skip the scene in which the king asks Aman's advice how to reward someone who has proved to be extremely loyal towards him and Aman's misunderstanding of this question, assuming that Assverus is thinking of him.

[18] Van den Daele and Van Veerdeghem (1899, 66) are relatively negative about the biblical characters, including Esther, in the Hasselt play collection: "True action and development, clashes of temperament and passion are found here equally seldom as

"Live your lives as brothers and sisters" reads Egeus's final advice to the spectators and God will bestow His grace on you as a result.

4. Berckmans' *Edissa*

Joris Frans Xaveer Berckmans, born in Lier, a town in the Southern Low Countries halfway between Antwerp and Mechelen, composed some forty plays for the local chamber of rhetoric of which he was a prominent member. In 1639 he is mentioned as a notary public and in 1669 he was one of the town's aldermen. He died on 7 June 1694.[19]

In 1649 Berckmans composed a play entitled *Edissa. Bly-eyndich Truer spel* (*Edissa. Happy-Ending Tragedy*). An alternative title on the first page of the manuscript reads *vande Coninghinne Esther* (*About Queen Hester*). In addition to this manuscript, kept at the Royal Library of Brussels, a synopsis of it, undated but presumably printed in 1649, has also been preserved.[20] Its titlepage mentions the date on which Berckmans's tragedy was performed: 2 June 1649. Furthermore, a handwritten note tells us that the play was staged on 9, 10 and 15 June 1760 as well. With a small number of corrections in a different hand, the play's manuscript attests to these later performances.

Esther's role in Berckmans's play is relatively modest. She seldom expresses herself in a way revealing her inner thoughts or deeper feelings. As can be expected of a play based on the *Septuagint* version of the Hebrew Bible, Berckmans depicts her (in a similar manner to Philicinus's play) rather as a tool in a story which, for the greater part, unfolds around her and in which she has little agency. Instead, it is the remarkable enactment of the history itself, frequently deviating from the biblical source, which makes this play particularly interesting.

After an introductory scene in which the allegorical *sinnekens* present themselves as schemers, Assuerus enters the stage in a melancholy mood; he realizes that greed causes mankind to crave for more goods than it really needs. In order to lift his spirits, Assuerus orders his courtiers to arrange a splendid feast at which he will proudly display his wife in all her beauty,

character study; moreover, it were illogical to demand this from our sixteenth-century moralizing plays", translation mine).

[19] See Frederiks and Van den Branden 1888-91: 55. On 2 February 1608 a certain "Georgius Berckmans" was baptized in Lier's church of Saint-Gommaar and on 2 June 1637 Joris Berckmans, more likely than not our man, married a certain Lisbeth van Everbroeck (See *Regesta Matrimonialia Ecclesiae D. Gummari Lyrae inchoata 17 Maij ao 1620*, fol. 90r, Brussels, State Archives of Belgium). The couple had eight children. After 1655 Joris may have married again, this time to Elisabeth Van der Haeghen or Verhaegen, with whom he had four more children.

[20] See for a digital edition of this synopsis, printed by Jacob Mesens in Antwerp,

ceremonially dressed and regally crowned. He orders one of his princes to command Vasthi to attend. On hearing this Vasthi bursts out:

> Hoe! Hij gebiedt? Wats dat, ben ick dan sijn slavinne?
> Gebieden? Neen, neen, neen! Ick ben een coninghinne
> die geen gebodt en ken. Dus seght hem dat ick niet
> ter feesten comen sal soo langh hij mij ghebiet.
> (fol. 4bis-*v*)
>
> [What! He commands? Well, well, am I his slave then? Command me? No, no, no! I am a queen who does not accept any orders. So tell him that I won't come to this party as long as he orders me to do so.]

Compared to Vasthi's relative gentleness in the Hasselt play, she is depicted here as extremely rude. When the king is informed that Vasthi refuses to attend his party, he is outraged and has her chased away. In the play Vasthi only has a paltry thirty-five lines of text, yet they suffice to show her inflexible character, as opposed to Esther's humility.

At the beginning of the second act Assuerus is shown hunting, a scene not found in any of the biblical sources. Overcome by sleep, he sees Vasthi in his dream crying out for mercy. Assuerus's courtiers advise him to look for a new wife who will help him forget Vasthi. Mardocheus, in his first appearance on stage, is also dreaming.[21] Reporting his dream to Esther, he says he saw a stream growing into a river, and a ferociously growling animal being devoured by another animal. He saw a large number of armed men as well, ready to kill innocent people. Yet, when the oppressed crowd cried for help, the river turned into a flash of lightening, destroying the armed men. Esther, asked by her uncle how to interpret this dream, soothes his mind by saying she is convinced that those who trust in God will not be harmed:

> Den Heer heeft in Sijn hant van allerhande goet.
> Tgen suer en bitter is, maeckt Hij wel saecht en soet.
> In den vuijttersten noot can Godt elck een versaden.
> Godt, voor die goede, is oneijndich in genaden.
>
> [In His hands the Lord carries all sorts of good things. All that is sour and bitter is turned into soft and sweet by Him. When in utter distress, He is able to satisfy each of us. For the good people He is infinitely merciful.]

https://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/Dutch/Ceneton/Facsimiles/BerckmansEdissa1649/ (Accessed 15 March 2023)

[21] Mardocheus's dream, a scene also reported in Philicinus's play, is an element borrowed from the *Septuagint* version of the *Book of Esther*. See Hochner 2010, 760.

A herald announces that all young virgins are being asked to present themselves to the king's court. The fairest of them will become Assuerus's wife and will be crowned queen. Esther pays heed to this invitation; as shown in a *tableau vivant* the king falls instantaneously in love with her. Then Esther is crowned queen. All those present rejoice in her election, among them Aman who – differently from the biblical sources and the other plays discussed so far – is rewarded by the king for his praise of Assuerus's bride. As vice-royal he will henceforth be the second in command in Persia. All inhabitants of Assuerus's realm will be required to curtsy when they see him passing.

At the beginning of act three Aman has been informed that Mardocheus refuses to bend his knee before him and so decides to destroy the entire community of Jews living in Persia. Once Mardocheus learns that the Jews have been condemned to be killed, he falls prey to feelings of despair. His thoughts are externalized through an allegorical character, named *Wanhope* ("Despair"), who tells him that long suffering can be averted by enduring the short pain of taking one's own life. Her words are countered by another allegorical character, *Deucht* ("Virtue"). Eventually Mardocheus, echoing Esther's conviction from act two, concludes that whoever trusts in God will earn His grace.

In front of the palace gates Mardocheus, dressed in sackcloth and his head strewn with ashes, informs one of Assuerus's princes that he is Esther's uncle, relating to him what predicament his people is expecting. Esther is then shown kneeling down in prayer begging God to have mercy on her people. She will pray, fast and stay awake for three nights, begging her people to do the same. At the beginning of act four the king assures Esther, who appears before Assuerus in great distress, that she will not be affected by the new law. She invites him and Aman to enjoy a meal at her quarters. Esther subsequently pleads with the king to save her people from annihilation. Once Assuerus learns that it is Aman who has threatened to kill the Jews, he orders that the man be hanged instead of Mardocheus, who had been previously condemned to hang because of his refusal to bow down before Aman. Aman desperately pleads for mercy with Esther, but she does not yield. A *tableau vivant* shows how he is executed. Mardocheus is rewarded by Assuerus and appointed as his second in command. A final *tableau vivant* shows Esther and Mardocheus celebrating their virtuously gained triumph, while the Jews persecute and kill their enemies.

What is Esther's place in the story enacted in this play? While speaking to Mardocheus, she restricts herself almost completely to telling him to trust in God. The first words she utters in this play – she asks him why he seems so distressed – already reflect this: "Den Godt van Abraham wil u altijt beraeden. / Hoe sijdij soo bedroeft?" ("Abraham's God wll always be with you. Why are you so sad", fol. 11*r*). A moment later she once more soothes

his mind by advising him:

> Betrout in Godt den Heer. Hij siet den dach van morgen.
> Die Godt bewaren wilt en sal geen quaet geschien.
> (fol. 12*r*)
>
> [Trust in the Lord God. He sees tomorrow's day. Whoever God wants to save, will not be harmed.]

As queen, Esther meets Assuerus only twice: when she invites him to attend a meal she has prepared for Aman and the king; and, subsequently, at her dinner table. Here she is the epitome of humility, merely asking whether she may live ("Of ic noch leven mach", fol. 34*r*) now that a decree has been issued announcing the death of all Jews in the country. It is only after the king has assured her that she need not be afraid that she asks the same favour for her people. Her penultimate appearance in the play shows her to be much stronger, when she refuses to pardon Aman for his wicked intent: "Die sond op sonde doen en de goede benijden / Mach een rechtveerdich heer met reden wel castijden" ("They who pile sin on sin and envy the righteous should be chastised, with good reason, by a just lord", fol. 35*r*). Even Aman's last words, "Bermhertich syn wel voecht een groote coninghin" ("Being merciful suits a great queen well", ibid.), do not soften her mood. The last lines of the play, pronounced by the Epilogue, contain a *captatio benevolentiae* addressed to the audience, excusing the local rhetoricians, who performed this play, for having made any possible mistakes. His ultimate advice with which the audience is sent home reads as follows:

> Den hooveerdigen mensch vergaet in eijgen quaet.
> Wel hem die deucht bemint en in Godts paden gaet.
>
> [The arrogant man perishes in his own evil. Blessed is he who loves virtue and follows God's paths.]

5. Fonteyn's *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid*

In 1638 a new permanent theatre building was inaugurated in Amsterdam, the so-called *schouwburg*. In the same year, Nicolaas Fonteyn (c.1589-c.1667) published his *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid* (*Esther, or the Image of Obedience*). The dedicatory letter preceding the text of this play is dated 17 March 1637. By profession Fonteyn was a medical doctor and in 1644 he became a personal physician to the Archbishop of Cologne, Ferdinand of Bavaria (1577-1650). Apart from *Esther*, he also wrote medical books as well

as other dramas, among them *Aristobulus*, a play about the Judean king Juda.

Fonteyn's *Esther* does not include a scene showing Vasthi's refusal to attend Assuerus's party. Rather, at the play's beginning Mardochæus informs the audience that his niece has been inside the women's quarters of the palace for twelve months now, waiting for the moment when the king will choose his new wife. He describes her as a God-fearing and virtuous person, already in childhood, and as "De eerbaarst' die de Son heeft konnen oit bestralen" ("The most honourable the sun has ever been able to shine upon"; A5*r*). Referring to the subtitle of the play, he hopes that she will obey both mighty and humble people.

A prophetess, named Sophronia,[22] a character added to the story by Fonteyn, announces that Esther has been elected. And rightly so, she adds, for whoever loves God by living a virtuous life, will be awarded:

> 'T geen eer aan Vasthi bleek die Koninkx wil versmaat.
> Waar omse after land helaas! nu swerven gaat,
> . . .
> Maar Esther als volmaakt haar buyght heel tot de wetten,
> Gehoorsaamt wil, en woord van ons gevreesde Heer.
> (A5*v*)
>
> [Which once happened to Vasthi, who despised the king's wishes. Reason why she now – alas! – wanders around the country . . . But Esther, a perfect woman, fully observes the laws, obeying the will and the words of our feared Lord.]

Subsequently, while a tableau vivant is shown, Sophronia reports how Esther is being dressed as Assuerus's future queen by a Chorus of Virgins:

> Besiet hoe dat het choor der Maagden gaat vercieren
> Haar gout-gekrulde hayr, hoe dat haar frisse leen
> Met purper sijn bekleed. Hoe sy word aangebeen
> Van al den Edeldom van heynd, en ver gekomen.
> (A5*v*-A6*r*)

[22] "Canto Secondo" of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), in which the story of Sophronia and Olindo is told, may have served as the source where Fonteyn found the name of this prophetess. Comparable to the story of Esther, Tasso relates the adventures of a young and beautiful girl named Sophronia who managed to save her fellow Christians from being massacred, in this case by Muslims, by accusing herself of having stolen an image of the Virgin Mary from a mosque, where it had been placed by the sultan who had previously stolen it from one of the altars in a church. In his turn Sophronia's lover Olindo admits to having committed this crime himself. The two are condemned to be burnt at the stake but at the last moment they are saved by the warrior Clorinda. See Tasso 1957, 33-50.

[Behold how a Chorus of Virgins embellishes her golden locks, how her blossoming limbs are covered in purple garment. How she is venerated by the entire nobility, come hither from far and wide.]

Then Sophronia addresses Esther directly – whether or not Esther takes notice of her words is unclear – predicting that she will rescue the Jewish people, save Mardochæus from being hanged by Haman (who will end his life on the gallows himself) and the Jews will go free after having been threatened with extinction. The prophetess also informs Mardochæus that he will be elevated to a high position in Assuerus's empire as a reward for having reported the intentions of Thares and Bagatan to murder the king. On hearing Sophronia's prophecies Mardochæus remains sceptical: "'t Syn woorden, maarse myn / Hart niet ontroeren" ("These are words but they do not move my heart", A6*r*). Leaving nothing to be guessed at by the audience, with these prophecies the play unfolds exactly the way the prophetess (whose role is limited to this one scene) had foretold. In retrospect it may be strange to see Sophronia appear on stage, but the author may have decided to supplement his play with this oracular character in order to provide it with a Senecan flavour.

Assuerus sings Esther's praise, subjecting himself to her will: "Ik blijf uw' dienaar vrou, ghy sijt de Majesteyt. / In u so staat 't gebien, in u bestaet het rechten" ("I will remain your servant, my lady, you are Majesty. For you it is to order, you are the one who decides", A6*v*). On her part, Esther confirms her full submission to the king using words – the first ones spoken by her in this play – recalling those spoken by the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation: "Uw dienstmaaght is bereid. uw wille die geschiede" ("Your handmaiden is prepared. Thy will be done", A7*r*). Esther's obedience being the central point on which the action of the play focuses, the text also implicitly offers the interesting comparison between the Jews in exile and those who, for religious reasons, left the southern Low Countries after the Fall of Antwerp (1585). Then the Spanish-Habsburg rulers regained power, thus making it virtually impossible for the citizens to openly profess their Protestant faith. Mardochæus bewails the fate of the Jews who had to flee from Israel to escape the tyranny of the king ("den Tyrannij des Koninkx", B3*r*) in the following words:

O droevigh ongeval! O lieve Vaderlanden,
Hoe langh sult ghy nog sijn, en wijt van myn gescheen?
Hoort sonder u ik sterf, mits ghy myn sijt gemeen
Door ingeboren aart . . .
(B4*r*)

[Oh, sad misfortune! Oh, dear native countries, for how long will you remain separated from me? Hear me, without you I will die, since you are dear to me by innate disposition . . .]

Once Esther is informed of Haman's plans to destroy the Jewish people, and Mardochæus begs her to help him stop Haman's evil plan, she expresses her excitement in staccato-like verses:

> Mard. Ghy moet het doen Princes, of dood sijn al de Joon.
> Esther Hoe Mardochee dus? Mard. De Koningh heeft 't geboon.
> Esther Wat doch? Mard. Eerst mijn. Esther. En dan? Mard. Ons Joden om te brengen.
> Esther Door wien? Mard. Door Haman vrou, die met ons bloet sal plengen.
> (B6*v*).

> [Mard. You will have to do it, Princess, or else all Jews will die. / Esther How come, Mardochee? Mard. The king has ordered it. / Esther What? Mard. First me. Esther And then? Mard. To kill us, Jews. / Esther By whom? Mard. By Haman, my lady, who will spill our blood.]

Esther is shown to be extremely cautious, fearing Assuerus's wrath, not unlike the way she is portrayed in Philicinus's play. Thus, for example, when she prepares herself to enter the king's quarters to invite him and Aman for a meal:

> Ik tree, maar hoe? met schrik; mits myn komt in gedachten,
> Dat hy bevolen heeft aan laagh en hooghe wachten
> Wie binnens Kamers komt, en geen gena ontvanght
> Sijn Scepters, dat sijn lijf aan d'wil der Soljers hangt.
> (B7*r*)

> [I tread, but how? Fearful. For it dawns on me that he has ordered his guards, both the low and the grand ones, that, whoever enters his quarters, not receiving grace from his sceptre, his life will depend on the soldiers' mercy.]

She realises, however, that she has no reason for this feeling since the king is always most indulgent towards her.

When the king eventually convicts him, Haman implores Esther to have mercy. However, she does not even glance at him and remains silent. The play ends in three *tableaux vivants* depicting Mardochæus elevation; Haman's execution; and Esther with a Chorus of Jewish Women and their infants, thanking Assuerus who himself – according to the stanza explaining this scene to the audience – longs for peace.[23]

Esther's behaviour in Fonteyn's play resembles the way in which she is described in both Philicinus's play and in the Hasselt *Hester en Assverus*.

[23] In 1637, the year in which this play was composed, the Netherlands were still at war with the Spanish-Habsburg armies, until in 1648 the peace treaty of Münster made an end to the Eighty-Years' War.

Fonteyn, however, does not compare Esther to Vasthi, rather concentrates on Esther's obedience, as indicated in the play's subtitle. The beginning of the play already sets the tone for the audience, concerning how to view the character of Esther. Mardochæus is about to visit Esther in the women's quarters of the palace, awaiting the moment when she will be chosen as Assuerus's future spouse. His very first words describe Esther as follows:

> Dit is de twaalfde maand dat Esther heeft geseten,
> In't vrouw getimmer, ben nieusgierigh, om te weten
> Hoe oft met haar sal gaan, met haar! *die Gode vreest*
> En *deughdigh* van haar kindsche jaren is geweest . . .
>
> [This is the twelfth month that Esther has been sitting in the women's quarters, [I] am curious to find out how she is doing, she! *who fears God* and has been *virtuous* from childhood on . . . (emphasis mine)]

Fonteyn thereby entrusts his audience with the message that Esther's virtue and fear of God, as well as her trust in Him, will serve her as a permanent guide.

6. Conclusion

Compared with the three plays in the vernacular, the earlier neo-Latin play written by Philicinus is much more explicit in describing Esther as a person. Thus, the Chorus of Jewish Women describe her as sweet and docile, as opposed to the character of Vasthi who is depicted by the Chorus of Women of Susa as the epitome of arrogance. What is more, Esther is shown here to be a mediatrix – in all plays she is, implicitly or explicitly, compared with the Virgin Mary – between the Jewish people and the Persians, while at the same time being fully aware of the dangers she may bring upon herself.

The Hasselt rhetoricians' play, written in the vernacular, also compares the two women in their attitude towards the king, stressing Esther's loyalty towards Ahasuerus. Yet whereas Philicinus sees Vasthi as a vixen, the Hasselt playwright shows her softer side, almost condoning her decision to refuse Assverus's invitation to attend his party. After all, Vasthi says, it was the king himself (true or not?) who advised her to celebrate a party by herself. In the two Renaissance plays, written in the vernacular (by Berckmans and Fonteyn), Esther is described as a loyal queen to Assuerus, with her virtue beyond any doubt. However, Berckmans stages an impolite Vasthi who is downright rude in her behaviour towards one of Assuerus's princes.

In all plays Esther is depicted as an exemplary figure possessing modesty and great virtue; in the way she approaches the king she is extremely submissive, more often than not fearing his temper. Nowhere – and this is

highly interesting – is there any sign of an attempt by Assuerus/Assverus to dominate or oppress Esther, let alone threaten her with capital punishment for having approached him uninvited. The only person for whom Esther does not show any compassion is, understandably, Aman. All four playwrights seem to have delighted in creating such an evil character, contrasting him to a benign and utterly devout Esther. As does Mardoch(a)eus, she trusts in God, expecting that He will eventually save her people. Finally, it is important to note that in this way Esther mirrors Abraham in the earlier sixteenth-century rhetoricians' plays. For Abraham, much like Esther, demonstrates his blind faith in God by invariably obeying His commands. At the same time, Esther ultimately personifies a heroine liberating her people from oppression and eventually releasing them from captivity. As such she resembles the characters of David and Joseph in Renaissance Low Countries drama.[24]

Works Cited

Anon. S.d. *tSpel van Hester en Assverus den coninck*. Hasselt, Municipal Museum, Ms. 1991.0066, fol. 170*r*-97*v*.

Berckmans, Joris. 1649. *Edissa. Bly-eyndich Truer spel*. Brussels, Royal Library, Ms. 19.346.

Bloemendal, Jan. 2008. "Cornelius Laurimanus als Dramatiker: Theater und Theologie gegen Ketzereien." In *Das lateinische Drama der Frühen Neuzeit. Exemplarische Einsichten in Praxis und Theorie*, edited by Reinhold F. Glei and Robert Seidel, 101-32. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.

– 2003. "The Low Countries as a Historical, Religious and Literary Melting Pot." In *Neo-Latin Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Jan Bloemendal and Howard B. Norland, 293-364. Leiden: Brill.

Bloemendal, Jan, and Juliette Groenland, eds. 2006. *Petrus Philicinus. Esther. Een Neolatijnse tragedie uit 1563*. Amersfoort: Florivallis.

Boheemen, F. C. van, and Th. C. J. Van der Heijden. 1999. *Met Minnen Versaemt. De Hollandse rederijkers vanaf de middeleeuwen tot het begin van de achttiende eeuw. Bronnen en bronnenstudies*. Delft: Eburon.

Brenton, Lancelot, ed. 1879. *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, with an English Translation and with Various Readings and Critical Notes*. London: Samuel Bagster and Sons.

Dibbets, G. R. W., and W. M. H. Hummelen, eds. 1993-94. "Abrahams Offerhande. Tekstuitgave met inleiding en aantekeningen." *Jaarboek [van de] Koninklijke Soevereine Hoofdkamer van Retorica "De Fonteine" te Gent* 43-4: 9-148.

Eichberger, Dagmar H., ed. 2023 (forthcoming). *A Public Spectacle for a Spanish Princess. The Festive Entry of Joanna of Castile into Brussels*. Turnhout: Brepols.

24 I am very grateful to Elsa Strietman (Cambridge) who kindly shared her thoughts with me on an earlier version of this essay and suggested many ways to improve my English.

Fonteyn, Nicolaas. 1638. *Esther, ofte 't Beeldt der Ghehoorsaamheid*. Amsterdam: Balthazar van Dorsten.

Franke, Birgit. 1998. *Assuerus und Esther am Burgunderhof. Zur Rezeption des Buches Esther in den Niederlanden (1450-1530)*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.

Frederiks, J. G., and F. Jos. Van den Branden. 1888-91. *Biographisch woordenboek der Noord- en Zuidnederlandsche letterkunde*. 2nd edition. Amsterdam, L. J. Veen.

Goosen, Louis. 1993. "Ester." In id., *Van Abraham tot Zacharia. Thema's uit het Oude Testament in religie, beeldende kunst, literatuur, muziek en theater*, 82-7. Amsterdam: SUN.

Hochner, Nicole. 2010. "Imagining Esther in Early Modern France." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41: 757-87.

Hollaar, Jeannette M., and E. W. F. Van den Elzen. 1980. "Toneelleven in Deventer in de vijftiende en zestiende eeuw." *De nieuwe taalgids* 73: 412-25.

Hüsken, W. N. M. 1989. "Franchois Machets tragedie *Sodoma*." In *Wat duikers vent is dit! Opstellen voor W. M. H. Hummelen*, edited by G. R. W. Dibbets and P. W. M. Wackers, 219-35. Wijhe: Quarto.

Hüsken, W. N. M., ed. 2005. *De Spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, 2 vols. Hilversum: Verloren.

Kipling, Gordon. 2001. "Brussels, Joanna of Castile, and the Art of Illustration." In *Porci ante Margaritam. Essays in honour of Meg Twycross*, edited by Sarah Carpenter, Pamela King and Peter Meredith, 229-53. Leeds: School of English, University of Leeds.

Meeus, Hubert. 1983. *Repertorium van het ernstige drama in de Nederlanden 1600-1650*. Leuven: Acco.

Moser, Nelleke. 2001. "Maria verklaard. Everaert als exegeet in Maria ghecompareirt byde claerheyt (1511)." In *Spel en spektakel. Middeleeuws toneel in de Lage Landen*, edited by Hans van Dijk, Bart Ramakers et al., 246-62; 374-77. Amsterdam: Promethus.

Ramakers, B. A. M. 2005. "Multifaceted and Ambiguous. The Tableaux Vivants in the Bruges Entry of 1440." In *The Mediation of Symbol in Late medieval and Early Modern Times*, edited by Rudolf Suntrup, Jan R. Veenstra and Anne Mollmann, 163-194. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

— 1991-92. "St. Denis in Antwerp: Hagiographica in a Protestant Play." In *Iconographic and Comparative Studies in Medieval Drama*, edited by Clifford Davidson and John H. Stroupe; introduction by Meg Twycross. *Comparative Drama* 25: 104-18.

Ramakers, Bart. 2012. "Sight and Insight: Paul as a Model of Conversion in Rhetoricians' Drama." In *The Turn of the Soul: Representations of Religious Conversion in Early Modern Art and Literature*, edited by Lieke Stelling, Harald Hendrix and Todd M. Richardson, 339-72. Leiden: Brill.

— 2011. "The Work of a Painter: Willem van Haecht's Apostle Plays, 1563-1565." In *Understanding Art in Antwerp: Classicising the Popular, Popularising the Classic (1540-1580)*, edited by Bart Ramakers, 229-53. Leuven: Peeters.

Strietman, Elsa. 2021. "'An easy commerce of the old and new'. Rhetoricians and the Use of the Past." In *Staging History. Essays in Late Medieval and Humanist Drama*, edited by Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken, 157-91. Leiden-Boston:

Brill-Rodopi.
Tasso, Torquato. 1957. *Gerusalemma liberata*, edited by Lanfranco Caretti. Milano: Mondadori.
Van Bruaene, Anne-Laure. 2008. *Om beters wille. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650).* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
Van den Daele, Osc., and Fr. Van Veerdeghem. 1899. "De Roode Roos. Zinnespelen en andere tooneelstukken der zestiende eeuw." *Mémoires et publications de la Société des Sciences, des Arts et des Lettres du Hainaut*, VIe série 1: 51-328.
Van Even, Edward, ed. 1880. *Willem Boonen. Geschiedenis van Leuven. Geschreven in de jaren 1593 en 1594.* Leuven: H. Vanbiesem and A. Fonteyn.
Waite, Gary K. 2000. *Reformers on Stage. Popular Drama and Religious Propaganda in the Low Countries of Charles V, 1515-1556.* Toronto [etc.]: University of Toronto Press.
Willems, J. F. 1844. "Kronyk der kamers van rhetorica te Lier." *Belgisch Museum* 8: 288-330.

Luca Fiamingo*

"Becoming as savage as a bull because of penalties not to be paid with money": Orestes' Revenge and the Ethics of Retaliatory Violence

Abstract

This article aims to suggest a different interpretation of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* 273-5. The terms and expressions used here and in many other sections of the *Oresteia* may have reminded the Athenian audience of the contemporary homicide laws and legal procedures, where the archaic ethics of revenge was now 'institutionalised' and handled by the *polis*' authority. Moreover, these lines seem to allude to a well-known pre-legal practice whereby the violent retaliation underlying revenge could be extinguished if the offender paid a compensation (ποινή) accepted by the family of the victim. The results of this study will allow, first, to highlight some linguistic intersections and analogies between tragedy and oratory when referring specifically to the notions of justice, guilt, and responsibility in homicide cases. Secondly, the paper will propose an alternative translation for the ambiguous ἀποχρημάτοισι ζημίαις (Ch. 273), after examining the interpretations and hypotheses of leading scholars of this play. Finally, I will try to determine the synonymy of ζημία and ποινή from the perspective of Athenian law, since both these terms might express a variety of related concepts (revenge, money-fine, penalty, and compensation) all inherent in the offender's punishment and the resulting satisfaction of the prosecutors' claims for justice.

Keywords: Greek tragedy; Aeschylus; *Oresteia*; ancient Greek law; revenge; retaliation; retributive justice

1. The *Oresteia*, Revenge, and Ancient Greek Law: a Relationship (Still) to Be Explored

As is well known, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BC) is remarkably significant for the study of Athenian legal and political history, and it has become a constant point of reference both for ancient Greek law scholars and classical philologists.[1]

[1] The wide intersections between the *Oresteia* and Greek law have been studied, among others, by Harris 2010; Williams 2013; Harris 2019; Stolfi 2022, 39n1 (with further bibliography). I would like to thank the two anonymous readers from whose

* University of Verona - luca.fiamingo@univr.it

© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 9:1 (2023), 165-85
https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it

Few other tragedies are so directly constructed as *Agamemnon, Choephoroi* and *Eumenides* around central themes of Greek legal thought, or so explicitly evoke decisive events that occurred in the institutional and political history of classical Athens.[2] The central motif of the *Oresteia* is a widespread theme in Athenian theatre, justice (δίκη), that adapts itself well to the structure of the trilogy, since it allows for the presentation of a legal problem whose resolution clarify the nexus of guilt, punishment, and responsibility (i.e. some of the most important concepts developed by contemporary Attic law) as well as the inexorable action of divine justice.[3] Aeschylus did not simply represent one type of δίκη, but the difficult transition from a previous outdated concept of justice, based on the exercise of revenge and violent retribution, in the Archaic period (traditionally called "pre-law"),[4] to the justice of the Athenian *polis* where, from the seventh to fifth century BC, several legislators took the first steps towards the codification of the law (see Harris 2006, 3-28; Harris 2013, 21-59; Zaccarini 2018). Today, scholars have generally accepted that an effective transition between these two phases of the Greek legal history was never entirely completed.[5] This explains why the "vindictiveness", that is the logic of revenge, and its vocabulary were still enduring in the fourth century BC, as can be noted in forensic speeches where "legal discourse did not even strictly distinguish revenge from punishment on the notional level".[6] Perhaps in reality these two plans were gradually integrated (i.e. "institutionalised") in Athenian legal context as early as the fifth century BC, with law depending on the impulse for revenge in order to operate and converting its violent suppression of particularity into systems of commensurability and compensation which, through the *polis'* penal sanctions, continue to highlight the sense of symmetrical exchange of crime and punishment.[7]

Therefore, to look at revenge *only* as a widespread practice in archaic Greece, a free exercise of physical force and retaliatory violence between

careful remarks and valuable suggestions I have benefited considerably. All mistakes and deficiencies are only mine.

[2] See, among (many) others, Allen 2005, 374-6; Medda 2017, vol. 1, 11-17.

[3] Havelock 1978, 272-95; Penta 2000.

[4] In the words of Louis Gernet, there was a development from *prédroit* to *droit* (cf. Gernet 1968, 175-260).

[5] The relationship between law and "pre-law" in Classical Greece (and specifically Athens), suggested by Gernet 1968 (see above, n4), has been critically discussed by Cantarella 1987; Burchfiel, 1994; Pelloso 2012, 43-8; Stolfi 2022, 85.

[6] Kucharski 2012, 196. The tendency to use traditional vocabulary associated with revenge in the lawcourts indicates that the Athenian laws and legal apparatus grew out of traditional (i.e. pre-legal) practices and norms rather than being a break with them. See also Nichols 2013; Rubinstein 2016.

[7] Cf. Kucharski 2012, 196, "they (*scil.* revenge and rule of law) are in fact seen as synergistic forces in the working of the legal system".

litigants or opposing families, may be reductive just as it would be to assume that the justice of the lawcourts represented the solution devised by the Athenian political community to replace it definitively.[8] In my opinion, law and revenge may have been more frequently at odds with one another: this did not mean mutual exclusion, but rather inclusive coexistence; and the Aeschylean trilogy proves it. The *Oresteia* exploits the myth of the Atreides' cursed household to reflect on the inevitability of punishment for the bloodshed caused by vengeance and retaliatory violence, while also making it an instrument to deter anyone, especially the citizens, from the shedding of blood within the *polis* (*Eum.* 861-6) and at the same time persuading them to obey (without altering) its laws (*Eum.* 693).[9]

Aeschylus and the Athenians were heirs to a culture that for centuries considered revenge not only a right but also a social duty. The fundamental principle was the obligation to react to any offensive behaviour by taking revenge on the offender according to the established procedure of retaliation which reveals the same combination of the ideals of retribution and reciprocity as the concept of justice (δίκη).[10] Indeed, through the symmetrical murders closing the *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* (where the victims are always a man and a woman),[11] 'one' justice is fulfilled inspired by the principle of balance and equivalence, which finds in the trilogy its "most complex and comprehensive presentation in all of Greek literature".[12] Again 'one' δίκη

[8] Understandably, this has been approached with caution and reservations in more recent scholarships; see Herman 2000, 14-5; Harris 2006, 405, 418; Harris 2013, 98. For the opposite view, see McHardy 2013, 2-6; Rubinstein 2016, 60, 68-9.

[9] A thorough analysis of the passages mentioned above is given by Sommerstein 1989, 216-18, 252-4. For the role of the Areopagus in the *Eumenides* and the reforms of Ephialtes, see Zaccarini 2018; Harris 2019, 406ff.

[10] The ambiguous significance of the term δίκη (whose basic meaning in early Greek texts is "settlement"; Gagarin 1974, 186-9) seems to be the result of its prehistory, for the δίκη is apparently a very old institution (Chantraine 1999, 283-4). It is later connected with the concept of "exchange of justice" between the offender and the avenger in phrases such as δίκην λαμβάνειν (lit. "to exact justice") and δίκην διδόναι (lit. "to give justice"). These terms are used equally of violent (so carrying the connotation of revenge) and of legal responses (e.g. Dem. 54. 24 εἰ δὲ μὴ κατὰ τούτους προειλόμεθ' ἡμεῖς δίκην λαμβάνειν, ἡμεῖς μὲν ἀπράγμονες καὶ μέτριοι φαινοίμεθ' ἂν εἰκότως [If I have not chosen to proceed against him according to these laws, that should prove that I am a *peaceful* and *inoffensive* person"]), remaining in the domain of δίκη, that is of balance, order, and (basically) retributive procedures. See also Kucharski 2016, 95; Rubinstein 2016, 58.

[11] Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1318-20.

[12] Gagarin 1976, 59. See also Aesch. *Suppl.* 403-6: Ζεὺς ἑτερορρεπής, νέμων εἰκότως / ἄδικα μὲν κακοῖς, ὅσια δ' ἐννόμοις. / τί τῶνδ' ἐξ ἴσου ῥεπομένων μεταλ- / γὲς τὸ δίκαιον ἔρξαι; ("Zeus surveys both sides alike in this dispute with an impartial scale, apportioning, as is due, to the wicked their wrongdoing and to the godly their works

(that of the *polis*) will be applied by the Areopagus towards Orestes in the *Eumenides*, which is concerned with "the politics in the deeper more profound sense: those shared values and beliefs that helped to maintain *justice* and *order* (emphasis mine) in Athens".[13]

The juxtaposition of the archaic and "political" (in the etymological sense) δίκη is the thread running through the Aeschylean trilogy. The dialectic between several forms of justice is inherent in the historical relationship between the dynamics of revenge and their symbolised reproduction in the Athenian lawcourts (see above). Emblematic, in this sense, is the alternative (or contiguity) between two derivatives of δίκη in *Ch.* 120-1:

{Ηλ.} πότερα δικαστὴν ἢ δικηφόρον λέγεις;
{Χο.} ἁπλωστὶ φράζουσ', ὅστις ἀνταποκτενεῖ.

[Electra Do you mean a judge or an avenger?
Chorus Say simply, one who will kill in return. (Brown 2018, 84-7)]

When asked by the Chorus to pray "for the arrival of a god or mortal" (ἐλθεῖν τιν' αὐτοῖς δαίμον' ἢ βροτῶν τινα) who can punish Agamemnon's murderers (119), Electra wonders which alternative to choose between a judge (δικαστής) or an avenger (δικηφόρος). The Chorus refers to the latter by using the idea of reciprocity supported by it in many other points of the tragedy.[14] Literally, "he who brings justice" (δίκη - φορός) is one who can "give death for death", that is ἀνταποκτενεῖν, the same verb used by Orestes (274) to describe his revenge and express (with ἀντὶ) the urgency of retaliation at any cost, underlying the notion of equal exchange.

However, Aeschylus' main aim was not the exaltation of the *polis'* recent legal system as being able to inhibit violence and "push" it back to an ancient past of "vendettas and controvendettas" (Harris, Leão, Rhodes 2010, 44). On the contrary, the poet was trying to clarify the limits of both these forms of justice and the dangerous dysfunctions to which both risk giving rise[15]. Indeed, the endless cycle of violence and retaliation generated (especially in case of murder) by vengeance – which was not only more than the mere compensation appropriate to other offences, but also a religious duty[16] –

of righteousness. When these things are thus *equally balanced*, why do you fear to act *justly*? [Weir Smith]); Dem. 24. 139-41, discussed by McHardy 2013 (4-5) as example of the underlying desire to achieve balance and equality in legal reciprocity.

[13] Harris 2019, 415; see also 407 ("It is significant that when describing the new court, Athena uses words that are associated with justice and punishment").

[14] See e.g. Aesch. *Ch.* 312-13, 400-2.

[15] Stolfi 2022, 81-4 (with further bibliography).

[16] See MacDowell 1963, 145; Parker 1983, 366-74.

could never ensure a final resolution of the dispute, since the claims of the two litigants are incommensurable and both inspired by the same principle of reciprocity and balance. On the other hand, the formal justice of the lawcourts could subvert any pre-existing order, humiliate ancient deities (the Erinyes) and generate internal conflict (στάσις),[17] which could only be avoided if the *polis'* δίκη achieved a difficult, but essential, balance by preserving a significant part of the ancestral violence (represented by the integration of the Furies in the institutional context of the *polis*) it intended to replace.[18]

From Draco's legislation (seventh century BC), the repression of homicide in Athens was 'public' (i.e. brought under political control), but homicide itself was a private (and family) matter. However, the offender was no longer exposed to the revenge of the victim's relatives, although these latter (and only they) were allowed to act as immediate personal representatives on his behalf through institutions such as the Areopagus.[19] The normal and indeed the ideal procedure in homicide cases was the δίκη φόνου[20] and only the immediate relatives of the victim had the right to bring this action. In other words, the right of prosecution lay only with blood relatives (συγγενεῖς), that is the same group (the family) to whom the right to revenge was previously reserved.[21]

However, it would be erroneous to read this "consonance" of roles in terms of opposition between the ancient ethics of the blood-feud and the public interest of the "State" in punishing wrongdoers. Far from any abolishment, revenge was simply embedded within the penal system of the *polis*. In Classical Athens (as well as in Greece), the secular presence of revenge in customary and social thought is not set aside in the name of more 'civilised' system, but is overcome and preserved together, converted into a mechanism equally capable of satisfying the desire for justice aroused by a crime, but such that it no longer undermines community cohesion and interrupts the potentially endless chain of bloody retaliation. This is the social and legal background presupposed by Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*.

[17] Aesch. *Eum.* 858-66.

[18] Carillo 2014, 15-16; Curi 2019, 157; Stolfi 2022, 102-10. See also Saïd 1984, 54: *"L'Orestie* souligne fortement la continuité des deux systèmes, car la vengeance est déjà une forme de justice et la justice, même administrée par un tribunal, reste vengeresse"

[19] Todd 1993, 271-2. A thorough overview of the controversial (and debated) relationship between Draconian laws and the Areopagus is given by Joyce 2021, who discusses the pre-existence of this court and its original jurisdiction of homicide before the lawgiver (127 ff.).

[20] See Tulin 1996. The alternative to traditional suit for homicide (the δίκη φόνου) was the ἀπαγωγή, the procedure of summary arrest applied in extraordinary circumstances (Antiph. 5; Dem. 23. 80-1). See Todd 1993, 110 (with further bibliography).

[21] Cf. Dem. 37. 59, 47, 69-70; Plato *Euthyph.* 4b; Pollux 8. 188; *scholion* to Dem. 21. 43. See also Todd 1993, 271ff.; Phillips 2008, 64-8; Pepe 2012; McHardy 2017, 71-2.

2. The Language of Orestes' Revenge: Intersections Between Drama, Oratory, and Prose

In archaic Greece, the shedding of blood did not in itself always represent a negative fact, nor did it necessarily give rise to a divine reaction. In the Homeric poems, the killing of a man could be both a social duty and an act of bravery that testified to the valour (ἀρετή) of the true man (ἀνήρ) if directed against someone of equal status.[22] In this context, one cannot consider revenge a penalty, but rather a genuine obligation as well as a right; nor was perfect symmetry between the offence and the reaction required (not always, at least). For example, in the *Odyssey* there is the gap between the offences and guilt of the suitors (liable for ὕβρις and the devastation of Odysseus' household; *Od.* 22. 35-41) and the violent retaliation of Odysseus, which lacks proportionality of his responses. Indeed, not only does he not accept the ransom offered by Eurymachus (one of the suitors; *Od.* 22 55-7, 61-4) but he is also ready to kill the close relatives of the murdered suitors seeking revenge (*Od.* 24. 526 ff.), which Odysseus knew he could only avoid by exile (*Od.* 20. 42-3).[23]

Although reconciliation between the offender and the victim's relatives was not forbidden, the "price of blood" (ποινή) offered by the culprit could operate as a compensation for renouncing revenge much more strongly than compensation for the damage suffered. At the same time, the ποινή served as recognition of the honour (τιμή) of others that was not compromised by the failure to persecute the murderer.[24] As seen above, Athenian law conceived homicide (φόνος) not as an offence against the community (which, however, determined through its institutions what the punishment for the offender should be) but primarily as a wrong committed against the individual victim, which is why it was dealt with by δίκη. For this reason, the sanction of homicide continued to be perceived as a "private" matter,[25] since it mainly concerned not only the interests of two family groups, that of the offender and that of the victim, but also their honour (Harris 2015, 26-7).

We can now turn to Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*. Orestes' matricide could be an act at once terrible, due to the filial relationship with the victim, and necessary, as it was aimed at revenge, so much so that Apollo himself decreed its execution[26] ordering (as I argue below) that it be carried out excluding

[22] Cantarella 2021, 79, 221; 304ff.

[23] For an in-depth discussion of these passages, see Loney 2019, 132-60, 210ff.; Cantarella 2021, 220, 257-8.

[24] McHardy 2013, 85-94; Cantarella 2021, 306-9.

[25] For the difference between "private" (δίκαι) and "public" (γραφαί) ordinary prosecutions in Athenian law, see Todd 1993, 99ff.

[26] Apollo's αἰτία (i.e. "responsibility" and "guilt"; see below 2.2) will be mentioned in

any form of ποινή. Indeed, the contemplated alternatives for Orestes are violation of the filial relationship or the divine command and the consequent contamination (μίασμα) triggered by the killing of the murderous culprits and the failure of the avengers to pursue the offender.[27] Finally, the tragic dilemma: the failure to avenge stains the inert and the possibility of awakening both the father's (*Ch.* 283-4) and the mother's Erinyes (*Eum.* 137-9).

After his recognition with Electra (*Ch.* 225-63), Orestes reveals why he must take revenge on Agamemnon's murderers:

{Op.} εἰ μὴ μέτειμι τοῦ πατρὸς τοὺς αἰτίους
τρόπον τὸν αὐτόν, ἀνταποκτεῖναι λέγων,
ἀποχρημάτοισι ζημίαις ταυρούμενον.
αὐτὸν δ' ἔφασκε τῇ φίλῃ ψυχῇ τάδε
τείσειν μ' ἔχοντα πολλὰ δυστερπῆ κακά.

[Orestes If I do not prosecute those *guilty and responsible* for my father's death in the same manner, saying to kill them in return, *becoming as savage as a bull because of penalties not to be paid with money.* He said I would pay for this in person, with my own life, suffering many ill-pleasing afflictions. (emphasis mine)]

275. *post* 277 *traiecit* Hartung, *post* 272 Rossbach, *post* 285 Klausen / *post* 296 *vel* 301 Battezzato ἀποχρημάτοισι Schütz: ἀπόχρημα τοῖσι M, ἀποχρηματοῖσι Aldina / ταυρούμενον M: μαυρούμενον Hartung, γαυρούμενον Paley.[28]

Before analysing the critical debate generated by 275, it is important to contextualise Orestes' claims from his powerful reply to the Chorus (269-305), where he mentions, in order: a) Apollo's oracle and the prescription of revenge; b) the physical and mental punishments unleashed by the hostile forces beneath the earth (i.e. Erinyes) against those who neglect the duty of family vengeance (278-89); c) the contamination (μίασμα) and social isolation reserved for murders if Orestes does not carry out the revenge (290-6);[29] d) Apollo's orders and the pain for his father's death (299-300).[30] Aeschylus

Aesch. *Eum.* 199-200, 465, 579-80. For the different role of the god in Orestes' matricide cf. Eur. *El.* 1301-6, *Or.* 29-31, 276, 416, 593.

[27] Parker 1983, 115-28 (but also above, n19).

[28] Text and translation (the latter slightly emended) are from Brown 2018 (98-9). For the critical apparatus above, cf. Battezzato 2019, 9. At 275-7, I choose to keep the order of the manuscript M; for the reasons of their transposition, see Citti 1999, 109-13; Brown 2018, 239-40.

[29] See Parker 1983, 257-80; Harris 2018, 428ff.

[30] These "orders" are properly distinct from the god's oracles: cf. Brown 2018, 247; Battezzato 2019, 11, 15.

probably supposed that the myth's legacy would take his spectators back to a pre-legal context, where social norms were believed to derive directly from divine dictates[31], which in turn determined the necessity (and inevitability) for revenge.

2.1 Revenge and Trial: the Use of μέτειμι in Legal and Pre-legal Contexts

Even though the action of Attic tragedy takes place in the heroic past, the characters often allude to contemporary laws or use common legal vocabulary.[32] It should therefore come as a no surprise that legal terms and concepts are frequently found in the *Choephoroi.* For a first example, let us consider the use of the verb μέτειμι (273), which could express two different types of prosecution (or, as we shall see, "pursue") of the wrongdoer depending on legal or pre-legal contexts. This is a clue to understand the choice Aeschylus is making to suggest the ambiguity of Athenian legal language:[33] one might impose a penalty (or justice or punishment) without necessarily taking a person to court. Indeed, in Orestes' view, pursuing those who are guilty and responsible at the same time (αἴτιος; see below) for the death of his father means repairing the damage done to a member of his family and avenging him, re-establishing the principle of equal reciprocity and balance (τρόπον τὸν αὐτόν ἀνταποκτεῖναι, 274) underlying δίκη.[34]

A good parallel reflecting the pre-legal connotation of μέτειμι within a context very similar to that of the Aeschylean scene, is provided by the following passage of Sophocles' *Electra* (476-8):

{Χο.} εἶσιν ἁ πρόμαντις,
Δίκα δίκαια φερομένα χεροῖν κράτη·
μέτεισιν, ὦ τέκνον, οὐ μακροῦ χρόνου.

[31] For the discussed relation between law and religion in ancient Greece, see e.g. Pelloso 2012, 21-70; Stolfi 2020, 84-90.

[32] Harris, Leão, Rhodes 2010; Stolfi 2022.

[33] Todd 1993, 205: "Athenian law never developed a fully technical vocabulary precisely because there was no way for words to be legally defined". For the various ways in which the ambiguity and polysemy of central terms of Athenian legal language were brought out by the tragic poets, cf. Goldhill 1997, 135ff.

[34] See also Orestes' reaction when the Chorus reminds him of Agamemnon's dishonour (*Ch.* 434-5 τὸ πᾶν ἀτίμως ἔλεξας, οἴμοι, / πατρὸς δ' ἀτίμωσιν ἆρα τείσει ["Your tale is one of total dishonour, *oimoi*. For dishonouring my father, then, she will pay"], 497 ἤτοι Δίκην ἴαλλε σύμμαχον φίλοις [(*To his father's spirit*) "Either send *Justice* to be an ally to your friends". Text and translation by Brown 2018 (emphasis mine)].

> [Chorus Justice, who sent us the omen, will come, carrying in her hands power of *justice*. She will *come in pursuit* before long, my child. (Emphasis mine)]

The brief section quoted offers an interesting item for comparison in view of the many analogies with *Choephoroi*. In the Sophoclean tragedy, the Chorus emphasises the concept of retaliatory punishment and vengeance by juxtaposing the divine figure of Δίκη with the arrival of the Erinyes, the goddesses of revenge (489-501). Here, μέτειμι expresses the Chorus' belief in retributive justice, while the notion of revenge (implied in φερομένα κράτη) allows the verb to suggest this more concretely "(Δίκη) will persecute (the murderers)". The result is that Justice somehow seems to be impersonated by Orestes, who becomes the instrument of justice itself (as suggested by the iteration Δίκα δίκαια).

However, in the *Eumenides* (230-1) μέτειμι is significantly used by the Erinyes (i.e. the Chorus) with a different syntactic construction and a further meaning:

> {Χο.} ἐγὼ δ', ἄγει γὰρ αἷμα μητρῷον, δίκας
> μέτειμι τόνδε φῶτα κἀκκυνηγέσω.
>
> [Chorus I will *pursue my case* against this man and, like a dog, I will haunt him down. (emphasis mine)]

In this case, δίκας and τόνδε φῶτα are internal accusatives with μέτειμι. The association of the verb with the polysemic word δίκη is crucial for the poet to bring the audience's attention back to the legal context (and language) of fifth-century Athens.[35] In fact, while Apollo and Athena often use δίκη and its compounds throughout the play as a reference to the trial of Orestes in the Areopagus,[36] for the Furies δίκας still means "revenge", since they have not yet become Orestes' official prosecutors in the court (ὁ διώκων, *Eum.* 583) but are still his "pursuers" (οἱ διώκοντες).[37] It is clear that Aeschylus is exploiting the use (very common in Attic) of verbs connected with pursuit and capture (e.g. διώκειν, φεύγειν) in relation to legal proceedings (Sommerstein 1989, 192). Therefore, it is equally possible, in my opinion, for the poet to use the same metaphor for μέτειμι (literally "to go after") that highlights how "this forensic 'pursuit' of Orestes by the Erinyes is the sequel to a literal, physical, pursuit by them" (i.e. to take revenge for Clytemnestra) "so that the

[35] A thorough analysis of the δίκη's polysemy and its legal meanings is given by Todd 1993, 99-102; Stolfi 2020, 187-91 (with further bibliography).

[36] Cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 468, 472, 573, 581-3.

[37] Cf. *Eum.* 131-2 (the ghost of Clytemnestra to the Erinyes); 226 (Apollo to the Erinyes); 251 (the Erinyes); see also Carillo 2014, 13.

metaphor may draw attention to the way in which the institution of courts of justice turns physical into verbal conflicts" (ibid.).

Moreover, we can assume that the Athenian audience would have easily understood the oscillating meaning of δίκη precisely from this more "technical" sense of μέτειμι. This hypothesis could be confirmed by two specific occurrences of the verb in Thucydides and Plato suggesting a diachronic continuity in the employment of these meanings of μέτειμι.

Let us examine these relevant passages, starting from Thuc. 4. 62. 3-4:

> καὶ εἴ τις βεβαίως τι ἢ τῷ δικαίῳ ἢ βίᾳ πράξειν οἴεται, τῷ παρ᾽ ἐλπίδα μὴ χαλεπῶς σφαλλέσθω, γνοὺς ὅτι πλείους ἤδη καὶ τιμωρίαις μετιόντες τοὺς ἀδικοῦντας . . . οἱ μὲν οὐχ ὅσον οὐκ ἠμύναντο, ἀλλ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἐσώθησαν . . . τιμωρία γὰρ οὐκ εὐτυχεῖ δικαίως, ὅτι καὶ ἀδικεῖται·
>
> [And if anyone believes with certainty that he can do anything either *by right* or by force, let him beware of being harshly deceived by the unforeseen outcome of events. He should realise that, for many others before him, things went wrong, even for those who *pursued their revenge* against those who had committed injustices. Not only *did* they *not take revenge*, but they did not even save themselves. Indeed, revenge has no right to succeed, just because (by pursuing it) one has been wronged. (emphasis mine)]

This section of *The Peloponnesian War* (quoted by Hermocrates' speech to the congress of Gela in 424 BC in which he demands that the Sicilians cease their quarrels and unite against the Athenians,) is very important for the information on the social perception of the concept of revenge in the fifth century. There seems to be no doubt that one immediate effect of the reconciliation agreement was to generate discussion of the expediency of permitting individuals to seek and obtain revenge against the person who had caused them harm. However much such individuals may have been perceived as having a just claim, even justified revenge, Hermocrates says, could represent a serious and destabilising force, which, if unleashed, might even threaten the very survival of the community. This view is expressed by Thucydides through the verb μέτειμι (but also ἀμύνεσθαι)[38], which is perfectly suited to a context that still "oscillates" between a legal and a pre-legal dimension, as confirmed by the use of τιμωρία meaning both "revenge" and "lawful punishment"[39], and (just as we have seen in Aeschylus

[38] The most frequent occurrences of this verb (in the middle form) in the 5th century are in Thucydides, where it often means "to take revenge on someone" (for a wrong); see e.g. Thuc. 1. 96. 1, 4. 63. 2., 5. 69. 1.

[39] Cairns 2015, 44: "There is in fact no real gulf between the pursuit of τιμωρία for the victim and pursuit of τιμωρία for the city or its laws".

and Sophocles) δίκη, which denotes both equal retribution and law itself.[40] Finally, the combination of these terms can be a further clue that vengeance (here τιμωρία) was still at the end of the fifth century BC considered as a "private" matter, achieved only by δίκη, that is through the legal procedures and the lawcourts.[41]

Moreover, in a passage of Plato's *Laws* (6. 754 e) we find the same expression δίκην μέτειμι seen in Aeschylus (*Eum.* 230-1):

> ἐὰν δέ τις ἕτερον φαίνηταί τι παρὰ τὰ γεγραμμένα κεκτημένος δίκην ὑπεχέτω τῷ βουλομένῳ μετιέναι.
>
> [If one seems to possess something other than registered assets, he shall be liable to be brought to trial by anyone who wishes to *prosecute* him. (emphasis mine)]

As suggested in the translation, the correlation between μέτειμι and δίκη is included within a broader expression explicitly inspired by Athenian legal language, as confirmed by the presence of the nexus ὁ βουλόμενος.[42] This means that in Greek the verb continued to express not only the main idea of "bringing someone to trial" (i.e. δίκη) but also the non-secondary idea of "pursuing someone" (with the same metaphorical sense seen in Aeschylus) through the political institutions and legal procedures of the *polis* that still in the fourth-century BC retained some elements of the original logic (and vocabulary) of revenge.[43]

2.2. Some Considerations on αἴτιος and αἰτία in the *Oresteia*: Is a Connection to Guilt and Legal Responsibility Possible?

In the final section of *Agamemnon* (1481-1576), Clytemnestra and the Chorus discussed her role in the murder of her husband. Although Clytemnestra did not deny she killed him (ἐμὸς / πόσις, νεκρὸς δὲ τῆσδε δεξιᾶς χερός; "my husband, a corpse, through this right hand", 1404-5), she ingeniously resumes the Chorus' former argumentation about the power of the daimon

[40] This oscillation is very common in the trilogy; e.g. Aesch. *Ch.* 986-90, where δίκη and its compounds mean: a) "trial" (ἐν δίκῃ, 987); b) "rightfully" or "with (retributive) justice" (ἐνδίκως, 988); c) "punishment" (ἔχει δίκην) in relation to Aegisthus' death "as the law prescribed" (ὡς νόμος, 990), i.e. according to Athenian adultery law (Harris, Leão, Rhodes 2010, 49n43).

[41] Gernet 1917, 138. See also above n7.

[42] In Athenian law, public actions (γραφαί, see above n27) could be brought by "anyone who wishes". See Todd 1993, 100; Harris 2015, 22.

[43] See above 2-5.

of the Atreides' house (1481-3), which exercises its destroying power through women (1468-70). Thus, Clytemnestra can argue that the ἀλάστωρ, in her form and shape, killed Agamemnon (1501-2). However, the Chorus' reply explains that divine participation as "accomplice" (συλλήπτωρ) to a crime is a possibility (1507-8), but this does not imply the de-responsibility of the human agent.[44]

{Χο.} ὡς μὲν ἀναίτιος εἶ
τοῦδε φόνου τίς ὁ μαρτυρήσων;

[Chorus That you are *neither guilty nor responsible* for this murder, who will bear you witness? (emphasis mine)]

In other words, the Chorus takes the same view of legal responsibility for homicide that one finds in Athenian law, and the presence of ἀναίτιος with the allusion to the impossibility of finding a witness in defence of Clytemnestra confirm, once again, that Aeschylus consciously drew on legal language, where αἴτιος and ἀναίτιος can express both the notion of responsibility and guilt as attested by several occurrences in the forensic speeches.[45]

Therefore, when Orestes states that he must pursue "those *guilty* and *responsible* for my father's death" (τοῦ πατρὸς τοὺς αἰτίους, *Ch.* 273), we can admit that the two legal notions expressed by αἴτιος almost converge to the point of merging with each other, precisely as in *Eum.* 467 εἰ μή τι τῶνδ' ἔρξοιμι τοὺς ἐπαιτίους ("If I failed to take this action against those *responsible and guilt*", emphasis mine), when Orestes says the same thing (with ἐπαίτιος) in front of the 'magistrate' Athena during the preliminary hearing (ἀνάκρισις) before the trial.[46] This intersection not only falls within the scheme of familial revenge, but also constitutes an anticipation of the

[44] Aesch. *Ag.* 1505-6. See also Medda 2017 vol. 3, 382-3.

[45] Cf. e.g. Antiph. 2. 1, 2, 11; 5. 19, 66, 71; Dem. 23. 79. On responsibility for homicide in Athenian law, see Harris 2006, 391-404.

[46] For Athena as a βασιλεύς in the *Eumenides*, see Harris 2019, 414-5. *Choephoroi* has the highest presence of αἰτία and αἴτιος expressing (in most cases) guilt and responsibility; cf. e.g. 68 διαλγὴς ἄτα διαφέρει τὸν αἴτιον ["The ruin that brings pain tears the *guilty*", i.e. criminal folly is *responsible*]; 117 τοῖς αἰτίοις νυν τοῦ φόνου (= 273), 836 τὸν αἴτιον (scil. Aegisthus); 873 ὅπως δοκῶμεν τῶνδ' ἀναίτιαι κακῶν [(the Chorus) "So that we can be held not guilty for these evils" - where ἀναίτιος is both an attempt at 'exoneration' and de-responsibility since the Chorus collaborate in Orestes' plan against the regicides; cf. 579-82], 910 ἡ Μοῖρα τούτων, ὦ τέκνον, παραιτία, which Brown 2018 translates "Destiny *bears some of the responsibility* for these things, child", showing the connection with what Clytemnestra said at *Ag.* 1500-4 about her de-responsibility (discussed above). On αἴτιος and αἰτία in Athenian legal language, see also Gernet 1917 368-71; Pepe 2012, 40-6.

legal justification of the killing that Orestes will give in the trial before the Areopagus, when he confesses the homicide (ἔκτεινα τὴν τεκοῦσαν, οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι, *Eum.* 463), though claiming that it was perpetrated with the realm of legality, as a direct mandate of Apollo (*Eum.* 465). However, it seems to me that this justification is already to be found in the end of *Choephoroi* where Orestes, preparing for a future "trial" (ἐν δίκῃ ποτέ, 987), claims twice that he killed his mother "rightfully" (ὡς τόνδ' ἐγὼ μετῆλθον ἐνδίκως φόνον / τὸν μητρός· 988-9) and "not without justice" (κτανεῖν τέ φημι μητέρ' οὐκ ἄνευ δίκης, 1027), that is "with absolute justice" (Brown 2018, 441). It is certain that avenging the death of one's relative was not in fifth-century Athens a lawful excuse for a "justifiable" (that is ἐνδίκως, literally "according to δίκη") homicide; the duty of revenge in such circumstances could be discharged by the litigants bringing a prosecution in a lawcourt. Nevertheless, as we have seen, δίκη has several meanings in legal (and especially) pre-legal language and the audience at the Dionysia were familiar with both the dramatic plots and the vagueness of some terms of Athenian law. So, we can assume that Orestes has already foreseen the trial and is thus moving on to something new, describing Apollo's command not as a moral justification for the matricide, but as the "cause" (αἰτία) behind it, which makes Orestes himself responsible but not culpable (1029-33).

Indeed, in defence of the hypothetical correlation between the concepts of guilt and responsibility in Aeschylus' trilogy, we may recall precisely how the role of Apollo in Orestes' matricide is described in the *Eumenides*. The god is gradually presented as an "accomplice" once by the Furies (μεταίτιος, 199), once by Orestes (ἐπαίτιος, 465), and after an initial accusation by the Erinyes that he is "wholly guilty and responsible" (παναίτιος, 200), Apollo himself recognises that he is more than just a simple legal patron or Orestes' spokesperson and does not deny his own αἰτία (579-80), which, within a lawcourt, must mean that he becomes equally responsible for Orestes' decision to commit the homicide.[47] As discussed above, even though the

[47] From the perspective of Athenian law, Apollo could be accused of βούλευσις, that is of having planned or instigated a homicide perpetrated by another person (MacDowell 1963, 62-3; Todd 1993, 274). Moreover, he combines the distinct roles of the witness and the co-defendant (μαρτυρήσων . . . καὶ ξυνδικήσων, *Eum.* 576-9); Aeschylus' dramatic expedient was highly effective since his audience would have been quite familiar with the juridical tradition and legal procedures. For αἴτιος expressing simultaneous guilt and responsibility in Greek oratory, see e.g. Antiph. 5. 70 οἱ δ' ἄλλοι ἐτέθνασαν οὐδὲν αἴτιοι ὄντες ["The others had already been put to death, though they were not *guilty"* [i.e. *not responsible*] such that they did not deserve to be pursued" (emphasis mine); Lycurg. 1. 93 ὁ δέ γε θεὸς ὀρθῶς ἀπέδωκε τοῖς ἠδικημένοις κολάσαι τὸν αἴτιον ["And thus the god too acted rightly in allowing those who had been wronged to punish the *offender*" (emphasis mine)].

Oresteia is set in an imaginary mythological past that precedes the fifth-century Athenian political context and legal system, Aeschylus does not refrain from reminding the audience of contemporary homicide laws, combining several elements of "pre-law" and law, and inscribing them, respectively, in Orestes' duty of revenge and the more general principle of punishing wrongdoers and criminals underlying the *polis'* statutes (νόμοι) (Harris 2013, 138-74).

2.3 What is the Meaning of ἀποχρημάτοισι ζημίαις (*Ch.* 275)?

A. Brown, in his recent edition of *Choephoroi*, summarises the exegetical questions posed by Orestes' singular expression at 275: "an imposing three-word line but no one has ever been sure what to do with it" (2018, 239-40). In an attempt to resolve the issue, Brown (and other scholars) choose to put lines 276-7 before 275, following Hartung's transposition and accepting the conjecture μαυρούμενον for ταυρούμενον transmitted by M. (ibid., 240).[48] On ἀποχρημάτοισι Brown argues that the common translation "penalties that have nothing to do with money" (i.e. going beyond confiscation) is "a grim understatement" and the choice to preserve this term, however difficult, is unavoidable.[49] Previously, Garvie argued that, if Hartung's transposition is correct, it would be better to translate ἀποχρημάτοισι "which have nothing to do with money", as already suggested by Tucker and Rose.[50] His definitive interpretation of the line is "And, he said I should pay for this in person with my own life, made savage *with loss not merely of property* (emphasis mine)", because, upon his arrival in Argos, Orestes had already lost his property.

In my opinion, the best option is to maintain M's order and consider ζημίαις as the punishment of usurpers (Aegisthus and Clytemnestra) for their actions. In this sense, the αὐτὸν of 276 marks the antithesis between the penalty of Agamemnon's killers and the possible punishment of Orestes if he did not take revenge. Moreover, as Garvie rightly observed, if ζημία were properly used for a "money-fine", the expression ἀποχρημάτοισι ζημίαις "would belong to the common type of oxymoron in which the epithet denies

[48] With μαυρούμενον Sommerstein 2008, 246-7, translates: "Enfeebled by penalties that went beyond loss of property".

[49] Cf. Brown 2018, 247. Reference to the confiscation of Orestes' property is inappropriate here because it is an erroneous "intrusion of personal motivation into description of Apollos' command" (Garvie 1986, 112). However, the materialistic motivation of Orestes and the loss of his possessions, with the need to change the political system of Argos (now a tyranny, cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1355, *Ch.* 973) is an important part of his speech (*Ch.* 300-5).

[50] Cf. Garvie 1986, 112-13, 365 (with bibliographic references to Tucker's and Rose's editions).

the essential meaning of the noun", although it remains to be clarified why Aeschylus preferred this variant to "the metrically more straightforward ἀχρημάτοισι" (Garvie 1986, 113).[51] However, I believe that there are still two fundamental questions that modern scholars have not considered. Firstly, although ἀχρήματος ("without money" or "means") is the only form attested in Greek literature,[52] we should not disregard the possibility that Aeschylus intentionally created the new form ἀποχρήματος to suggest connections with Athenian homicide law and its refusal (which seems more like an aberration and repulsion as expressed by the prefix ἀπο-)[53] of the ancient practice of accepting monetary compensation (ποινή) for the murder of a relative and as an alternative to revenge (itself forbidden by the laws).[54] Secondly, one must focus on the semantics of the term ζημία which, from the perspective of Attic law, denotes "punishment" or "penalty" regulated by the political institutions, and consisting of both money-fines and sanctions such as death, whereas, in the pre-legal context "[ζημία] s'appliquait d'abord à *la réparation privée*, plus exactement même à la *composition*" (emphasis mine)[55].

In this sense, the Aeschylean passage seems to confirm that ζημία originally meant "reparation" or "compensation" for the wrongs suffered by the victim and his family. This hypothesis can be accepted if we observe the progressive evolution of ζημία ("harmful loss" or "payment") in legal language, noting that in Athenian law some cases could be settled by fines or indemnities while in others the penalty had to be inflicted on the person.[56]

[51] A good reply to this is found in Citti 1999, who cites several stylistic reasons to explain this variant, which could have been purposely chosen or formed by the poet to convey more weight to the line ("produrre maggiore ὄγκος", 133).

[52] Cf. e.g. Aesch. *Pers.* 167; Hdt. 1. 89 5; Arist. *Pol.* 1271b 16; Plut. *Cam.* 7, 4; *Br.* 28, 7.

[53] Cf. Citti 1999, 113-14, who translates ἀποχρήματος "that does not allow a ransom in money". However, I am not sure that his interpretation of the nexus ἀποχρημάτοισι ζημίαις is entirely correct; he thinks that Aeschylus has adapted the legal expression χρηματικὴ ζημία, which however is never attested in the fifth century and is very rare in Classical age (e.g. Plat. *Leg.* 847a 8; 855b 5, in the variant with the genitive χρημάτων), but most frequent later (e.g. Plut. *Dem.* 27. 8).

[54] See Harris 2015, 25. There is a difference in Athenian law between intentional killing, punished by death or exile with confiscation (e.g. Dem. 21. 43) and involuntary (or unintentional) killing (cf. Joyce 2021, 132). In this latter, the relatives of the victim as prosecutors (since homicide was a family matter; see above, n27) could grant pardon (αἴδεσις) to the killer. This may have been purely formal, and "it may (even if only surreptitiously) have involved the payment of compensation" (Cairns 2015, 3). This is another clue of the intersections between law and "pre-law" in Classical Athens: the αἴδεσις derived from the ancient rule of material retribution or compensation (ποινή) offered by the offender to the victim's family and attested in Homeric poems (see below).

[55] Gernet 1917, 176. For the legal meaning of ζημία in Athenian law see e.g. Dem. 20. 135, 24. 83.

[56] See also Kucharski 2016, 96-7, 100-1.

Hence, accepting for ἀποχρήματος the rendering "which have nothing to do with money" one could better understand why Aeschylus opted for ζημία to denote Orestes' revenge and the refusal of any compensation for it, because, as prescribed by Apollo's oracle (itself interested in vengeance), the only eligible penalty for Agamemnon's murderers was death.

Therefore, in *Ch.* 273-5 Aeschylus reminded the audience not only that the Athenian homicide laws banned the practice of paying a monetary fine by the offender of a murder, but also that according to the customary of early communities (or of those of the heroic past) illustrated by the Homeric poems[57], Orestes could have accepted compensation. For this reason, his refusal of the money ransom (ἀποχρήματος) can be explained by considering ζημία (like the archaic ποινή) "blood money" which coincides with the death of the murderers. This hypothesis can be confirmed by a comparison with some passages in the *Iliad* where ποινή expresses not only "revenge" but also "compensation", "ransom" or "retribution" for the murdered victim:

a) *Il.* 14. 483-4 ἵνα μή τι κασιγνήτοιό γε ποινὴ / δηρὸν ἄτιτος ἔῃ ("So that my brother's *revenge* does not remain long suspended for" [emphasis mine]). Acamas' revenge (ποινὴ) consists of the murder of Promachus, the companion of Ajax who had killed Antenor, Acamas' brother. So, Acamas managed also to obtain a "bloody ransom" (ποινὴ) for the death of his brother, who is no more "unavenged" (ἄτιτος, 484).

b) *Il.* 16. 398 κτεῖνε μεταΐσσων, πολέων δ' ἀπετίνυτο ποινήν ("He savagely slaughtered them and made many pay the price of blood as *revenge*", emphasis mine). Patroclus, wearing the weapons of Achilles, takes revenge on the Trojans. His action is described with the expression ποινήν ἀποτίνεσθαι. According to LSJ, the verb, in its middle form, means both "to exact / require a penalty" and "to avenge oneself on another" and, sometimes with ζημία, expresses the same ideas.[58]

[57] Cf. Hom. *Il.* 9. 632-6, 18. 497-508. The trial scene represented on Achilles' shield is not concerned with the homicide in and of itself, but rather with the nature of the compensation (εἵνεκα ποινῆς, 498). The exact implications of this passage are disputed among historians of Greek law, who discuss whether in archaic Greece the victim's relatives were able to moderate their first impulse to kill the murder by replacing it with a process of negotiation and compensation; cf. Burchfiel 1994, 92-4; Pelloso 2012, 114-17; Cantarella 2021, 311-16, 339-47. See also Curi 2019, 46, 105-7.

[58] *LSJ*[9] *s.v.* ἀποτίνω and the example of Hdt. 2. 65: Hdt. 2. 65, 5 δ' ἄν τις τῶν θηρίων τούτων ἀποκτείνῃ [...] ἢν δὲ ἀέκων, ἀποτίνει ζημίην τὴν ἂν οἱ ἱρέες τάξωνται ["If someone kills one of these creatures, accidentally, he pays the penalty that the priests appoint"; that is, as if it were a "blood price" to avenge the killing of sacred animals].

c) *Il.* 21. 27-8 ζωοὺς ἐκ ποταμοῖο δυώδεκα λέξατο κούρους / ποινὴν Πατρόκλοιο Μενοιτιάδαο θανόντος· ("He took alive from the river twelve young men as *revenge* [or *ransom*] for the death of Patroclus, son of Menoetius", emphasis mine).

Therefore, since Orestes refuses the alternative to vengeance consisting of ποιναί (as well as the ζημίαι) given by the offender to the victim or his family, he can do no more than carry out a revenge under the sign of retribution and reciprocity, which is precisely what he says he did when questioned by Athena, he claims to have killed his mother "as the ποινή ["penalty", "vengeance" or "bloody compensation"; the term is used here for the first time after *Ch.* 273] in return for the killing of my dearly-loved father" (ἀντικτόνοις ποιναῖσι φιλτάτου πατρός, *Eum.* 464).

However, while the relatives of the deceased were normally free to accept or refuse the compensation and, in case of acceptance, revenge ceased to be the solution, Orestes is obliged to refuse because he must respect divine commands to avoid the terrible consequences of an unfulfilled revenge. Indeed, at the end of the play, Orestes justifies the matricide by once again recalling Apollo's oracle and, as discussed earlier, the guilty responsibility of the god (1030-2):

> τὸν πυθόμαντιν Λοξίαν, χρήσαντ' ἐμοὶ
> πράξαντα μὲν ταῦτ' ἐκτὸς αἰτίας κακῆς
> εἶναι, παρέντα δ' - οὐκ ἐρῶ τὴν ζημίαν·
>
> [Orestes The Pythian oracle of Loxias, who declared to me that, if I did this, I would be exempt from blame, but if I avoided it, I will not speak of the punishment. (Brown 2018, 158-9)]

In these lines, along with an effective use of the term αἰτία ("blame" or "responsibility") to which κακός is added "to make the meaning 'blame' unambiguous, giving the effect of a legal formula",[59] the new occurrence of ζημία (closer to Athenian legal language) explains why Orestes is completely unable to accept "money fines" (i.e. the meaning of ζημία emphasised by

See also Dem. 58. 28 τελευτήσαντος αὐτῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ βιαίῳ θανάτῳ, τοιοῦτος ἐγένετο περὶ αὐτὸν οὗτος, ὥστε ζητήσας τοὺς δράσαντας καὶ πυθόμενος οἵτινες ἦσαν, ἀργύριον λαβὼν ἀπηλλάγη ("When his brother died by a *violent death,* Theocrines showed himself so utterly heartless toward him that, when he had made inquiry *concerning those who had done the deed*, and had learned who they were, he accepted a bribe, and let the matter drop" [i.e. as if he had accepted and not made them pay the "blood-price" by renouncing revenge and bringing the murderers to the *polis*' justice]; W. Rennie, emphasis mine).

[59] Brown 2018, 442.

ἀποχρήματος) from those responsible for his fathers' murder and why he should now punish them through no other "penalties" (another sense of ζημία coherent both here and in 275) than death.

A definitive confirmation of the semantic ambivalence of ζημία can be found in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1372b 10), where he is describing general aspects of human nature and illustrating different reasons for which men commit wrongs (ἀδικήματα). The focus is on men who are aware of their criminal actions and consider their offences as a motive for gain, whereas the resulting punishments (ζημίαι) could only bring blame and dishonour.[60] In this group Aristotle includes those who commit injustice in order to gain "some praise" (εἰς ἔπαινόν τινα) such as "if one avenges one's father or mother" (οἷον εἰ συνέβη ἅμα τιμωρήσασθαι ὑπὲρ πατρὸς ἢ μητρός). The consequence of such actions is that "punishments [or "penalties"] only involve money, exile, or something similar" (αἱ δὲ ζημίαι εἰς χρήματα ἢ φυγὴν ἢ τοιοῦτόν τι). The presence of ζημία related to familial vengeance and the resulting credit (ἔπαινος) for the avenger are in line with *Choephoroi*'s scene and, in general, with Greek social and legal traditions. The ζημίαι mentioned by Aristotle (the loss of money and exile) provided for punishing a man willing and at the same time obliged (by laws and religious beliefs)[61] to take revenge for the death of one of his relatives, either by bringing the culprit to trial or, in pre-legal contexts, by killing him, roughly correspond to the circumstance described in Aeschylus' play.

In conclusion, we can only add that although Orestes' revenge is bound by respect for Apollo's mandate and depends on the fear of mental and bodily illness, with the risk of contamination and alienation from human society (269-98), he nevertheless chooses to act consciously and deliberately in the name of his own legitimate motives (299-304), for which he can be held (legally) responsible. However, at the end of the play, Orestes is left with one last certainty, namely the two punishments (ζημίαι) resulting from family vengeance also mentioned by Aristotle, which involve the loss of money (frequently mentioned in the *Choephoroi*)[62] and exile from the city.[63]

[60] Arist. *Rhet.* 1372b 10 καὶ ὅσοις τὰ μὲν ἀδικήματα λήμματα, αἱ δὲ ζημίαι ὀνείδη μόνον. See also Harris 2013, 63-5.

[61] Sometimes, in the court, the family could remind the judges that if they did not condemn the offender, the wrath of the spirits of the dead would come down on them (Antiph. 3. 3, 11-12; 4. 1, 3-5). See also above, n18.

[62] Cf. *Ch.* 135-6 ἐκ δὲ χρημάτων / φεύγων Ὀρέστης ἐστίν ["Orestes is an exile, parted from his property"], 301 καὶ πρὸς πιέζει χρημάτων ἀχηνία ["And there is pressure also from my lack of possessions". Brown 2018, 101]. Finally, after his acquittal in the trial, Orestes bought back his father's property (*Eum.* 757-8 Ἀργεῖος ἀνὴρ αὖθις ἔν τε χρήμασιν / οἰκεῖ πατρῴοις).

[63] *Ch.* 1038 φεύγων τόδ' αἷμα κοινόν· ["In exile for this blood of my own family"];

Works Cited

Allan, William. 2013. "The Ethics of Retaliatory Violence in Athenian Tragedy". *Mnemosyne* 66: 593-615.

Allen, Danielle S. 2005. "Greek Tragedy and Law". In *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, edited by Michael Gagarin and David Cohen, 374-93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Battezzato, Luigi. 2019. "Oreste nelle *Coefore*: la doppia motivazione da Omero a Eschilo". In *Reinterpretare Eschilo. Verso una nuova edizione dei drammi. Atti del Colloquio internazionale, Accademia Nazionale dei Lince*, Roma 19 e 20 maggio 2016, edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Silvio M. Medaglia, 163-88. Roma: Bardi.

Brown, Andrew, ed. 2018. *Aeschylus. Libation Bearers*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Burchfiel, Kenneth J. 1994. "The Myth of 'Pre-law' in Early Greece". In *Symposion* 1993, edited by Gerard Thür, 79-104. Weimar: Böhlau Verlag.

Cairns, Douglas L. 2015. "Revenge, Punishment, and Justice in Athenian Homicide Law". In *Journal of Value Inquiry* 49: 645–65.

Cantarella, Eva. 2021. *Norma e sanzione in Omero. Contributo alla protostoria del diritto greco* (1979). Roma: Inschibboleth Edizioni.

— 1987. "Tra diritto e prediritto: un problema aperto". In *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 13: 149-60.

Carillo, Gennaro. 2014. "Quando il male si fa spazio". In *La malattia come metafora nelle letterature dell'Occidente,* edited by Stefano Manferlotti, 1-16. Napoli: Liguori.

Chantraine, Paul. 1999. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: histoire des mots* (1968). Paris: Klincksieck.

Citti, Vittorio. 1999. "Considerazioni sul testo delle *Coefore*". In *Lexis* 17: 109-36.

Curi, Umberto. 2019. *Il colore dell'inferno. La pena tra vendetta e giustizia*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Gagarin, Michael. 1976. *Aeschylean Drama*, Berkeley. Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

— 1974. "*Dike* in Greek Thought". *Classical Philology* 69: 186-97.

Garvie, Alex F., ed. 1986. Aeschylus. *Choephori*. Oxford: Clarendon Oxford University Press.

Gernet, Louis. 1968. *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique*. Paris: Maspero.

— 1917. *Recherches sur le développement de la pensée juridique et morale en Grèce. Étude sémantique*. Paris: E. Leroux.

Goldhill, Simon. 1997. "The Language of Tragedy: Rhetoric and Communication". In *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, edited by P.E. Easterling, 127-50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harris, Edward M. 2019. "Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Role of the Areopagus and Political

1043 ἐγὼ δ' ἀλήτης τῆσδε γῆς ἀπόξενος ["I go forth a wanderer, in exile from this land"].

Discourse in Attic Tragedy". In *Poet and Orator: A Symbiotic Relationship in Democratic Athens*, edited by A. Markantonatos, and E. Volonaki, 389-419. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

— 2018. "Pollution for Homicide in Athenian Law and Attic Tragedy: Parallels or Divergences?". In Συναγωνίζεσθαι. *Essays in Honour of Guido Avezzù,* edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, Francesco Lupi, Gherardo Ugolini, 419-54. Verona: *Skenè* (Skenè Studies I - 1).

— 2015. "The Family, the Community and Murder: Role of Pollution in Athenian Homicide Law". In *Public and Private in Ancient Mediterranean Law and Religion*, edited by C. Ando and J. Rüpke, 11-35. Berlin, Munich, Boston: De Gruyter.

— 2013. *The Rule of Law in Action in Democratic Athens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

— 2006. *Democracy and the Rule of Law in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harris, Edward M., Leão, Delfim F., and Rhodes, Peter. J., eds. 2010. *Law and Drama in Ancient Greece.* London: Duckworth.

Havelock, Eric A. 1978. *The Greek Concept of Justice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Herman, Gabriel. 2000. "Athenian Beliefs about Revenge: Problems and Methods". *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 46: 7-27.

Joyce, Christopher. 2021. "The Solonian Amnesty Law (Plu. Sol. 19.3–4) and the Athenian Law on Homicide". *Classical Journal* 117: 125-46.

Kucharski, Janek. 2016. "How to punish in Classical Greek Rhetoric". In "*They called me to destroy the wicked and the evil". Crime and Punishment in Antiquity*, edited by Stefan Nowicki, 93-112. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag.

— 2012. "Vindictive Prosecution in Classical Athens: On Some Recent Theories". *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 52: 167-97.

Loney, Alexander. C. 2019. T*he Ethics of Revenge and the Meanings of the* Odyssey. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDowell, Douglas M. 1963. *Athenian Homicide Law in the Age of Orators,* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

McHardy, Fiona. 2017. "The Role of the Extended Family in Exacting Blood Revenge in Classical Athens". In *Mediterranean Families In Antiquity: Households, Extended Families, and Domestic Space*, edited by Sabine R. Huebner and Nathan S. Geoffrey, 65-78. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

— 2013. *Revenge in Athenian Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.

Medda, Enrico, ed. 2017. *Eschilo. Agamennone*. Bollettino dei Classici. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Supplemento n. 31, 3 vols. Roma: Bardi.

Nichols, Robert J. 2013. "The Rhetoric of Vengeance (*timōria*) in Athenian Forensic Oratory". Ann Arbor: ProQuest LLC.

Parker, Robert. 1983. *Miasma. Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pelloso, Carlo. 2012. *Themis e dike in Omero ai primordi del diritto dei Greci.* Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

Penta, Francesca. 2000. "Da dikē "punizione" a dikē "legalità: la giustizia nell'*Orestea*

di Eschilo". *Apollinaris* 73: 529-36.
Pepe, Laura. 2012. *Phonos. L'omicidio da Draconte all'età degli oratori.* Milano: Giuffrè Editore.
Phillips, David D. 2008. *Avengers of Blood: Homicide in Athenian Homicide Law and Custom from Draco to Demosthenes*. Stuttgart: Steiner.
Rubinstein, Lene. "Communal Revenge and Appeals to Dicastic Emotions". In *Die Athenische Demokratie im 4 Jahrhundert,* edited by Claudia Tiersch, 55-72. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
Saïd, Suzanne. 1984. "La tragédie de la vengeance". In *La Vengeance. Etudes d'ethnologie, d'histoire et de philosophie* vol. IV, edited by Gérard Courtois, 47-90. Paris: Cujas.
Sommerstein, Alan H. 2008. *Oresteia. Agamemnon, Choephoroi, Eumenides*. Loeb Classical Library 146. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
— 1989. Aeschylus. *Eumenides*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
Stolfi, Emanuele. 2022. *La giustizia in scena. Diritto e potere in Eschilo e Sofocle*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
— 2020. *La cultura giuridica dell'antica Grecia*, Roma: Carocci editore.
Todd, Stephen. 1993. *The Shape of Athenian Law.* Oxford: Clarendon Oxford University Press.
Tulin, Alexander. 1996. *Dike Phonou. The Right of Prosecution and Attic Homicide Procedure*. Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner.
Zaccarini, Matteo. 2018. "The Fate of the Lawgiver: Invention of the Reforms of Ephialtes and the *Patrios Politeia". Historia. Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 67: 495-512.

Vasiliki Kousoulini*

Cassandra as a False Chorus and Her *Skeuê* in Euripides' *Trojan Women*

Abstract

Female characters and female choruses seem to have strong bonds in Euripides' plays, there are instances in the Euripidean corpus in which a heroine cannot interact the way she wishes with the chorus. The chorus remains almost unresponsive, despite the heroine's efforts to involve them in a kind of choral activity. Bierl, commenting on this phenomenon, has characterized one of these heroines as a false chorus leader. This essay examines Cassandra in *The Trojan Women* as a false chorus leader of *hymaenaios,* focusing on her *skeuê*. Cassandra attempts to involve a female chorus in the performance of a choral song. She distorts the usual choral form and urges others to join her deviant *choreia*. To mark her choral activity, this solo singer is equipped with objects that reveal her intentions. Parts of her costume reveal Cassandra's identity to other characters, the female chorus, and the audience. This paperfocuses on the verbal descriptions of the parts of the *skeuê* of Cassandra and its functions and argues that her descriptions reveal the character's role as a false chorus leader to the play's internal and external audience.

Keywords: Euripides; *Trojan Women*; objects; Cassandra; chorus leader; tragic *skeuê*

1. Introduction

Female choruses abound in Euripides' plays[1] and tend to develop close ties

[1] There is a female chorus in Euripides' *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, *Suppliant Women*, *Ion*, *Electra*, *Trojan Women*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Helen*, *Phoenician Women*, *Orestes*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Bacchae*. Mastronarde observed that there are fifteen male choruses, sixty-two female choruses, and 105 choruses with undetermined gender in Euripides' corpus. See Mastronarde 2010, 103. According to Calame, the 82% of Euripides' tragic choruses consists of women. See Calame 2020, 776. The chorus of Euripides' *Cresphontes* was thought to belong to the female gender but evidence suggests otherwise. See Lu Hsu 2014, 14-15. For female choruses in classical Athens cf. Budelmann 2015. There is a female chorus in the frr. of Euripides' *Aeolus*, *Alcmeon A*' and *B'*, *Andromeda*, *Danae*, *Ino*, *Hippolytus Veiled*, *Cretan Women*, *Palamedes*, *Peliades*, *Protesilaus*, *Hypsipyle*, and *Phaethon*. See on this Mastronarde 2010, 103, n. 28. Foley's Appendix is slightly different. She adds in the list the choruses of the *Alexander*, *Meleager*, and *Skyrians*, whereas she regards that the *Theseus* has a mixed chorus. See Foley 2003, 26, 32. See also the index entries in Collard and Cropp 2009.

* University of Patras - vasiakous@yahoo.gr

with the female protagonist.[2] These same choruses often engage with the heroine through antiphonal singing.[3] Even though female characters and female choruses seem to have strong bonds in Euripides' plays, there are instances in the Euripidean corpus in which a heroine cannot interact the way she wishes with the chorus. The chorus remains almost unresponsive, despite the heroine's efforts to involve them in a kind of choral activity. Bierl, commenting on this phenomenon, has characterized one of these heroines as a false chorus leader.[4]

This paper proposes that this is not the only appearance of a ''false chorus leader'' in Euripides' plays. Another Euripidean tragic heroine fails to actively involve the female choruses in their singing. That she is denied the chorus' sympathy, at least in the form she wishes, emphasizes her isolation. This paper examines Cassandra in the *Trojan Women* as a false chorus leader of *hymaenaios*, focusing on her *skeuê*.[5]

Cassandra interacts with a family member and attempts to successfully engage with the chorus.[6] Cassandra attempts to involve a female chorus in the performance of a choral song. She distorts the usual choral form and urges others to join her deviant *choreia*.[7] To mark her choral activity, this solo singer is equipped with objects that reveal her intentions. In this paper, it is suggested that parts of her costume reveal Cassandra's identity to other characters,[8] the female chorus, and the audience. However, this is a false

[2] The ties of sympathy between female characters and the members of female choruses, especially in Euripides' plays, have been the object of debate among modern scholars. See Castellani 1989; Pattoni 1989; Hose 1990, 17-20; Mastronarde 1999, 95; Foley 2003, 20, 24; Weiss 2018, 66; Calame 2020, 782.

[3] On this issue see Pattoni 1989, 49-60. Weiss argues that lament, when not in its purely solo form, typically involves a lyric exchange between a female leader and a sympathetic female chorus, as it is seen in some of Euripides' plays. See Weiss 2014, 125. See also Kousoulini 2020a, 3-5.

[4] Bierl discusses Agave in the *Bacchae*. In his words, ''Agaue arrives as a "false," imaginary *choregōs* since she actually does not lead a chorus but comes alone''. See Bierl 2013, 224. I use the notion of "chorus leader" to refer to the protagonist or an individual character of a play as defined in earlier scholarship and not to an actual chorus leader who is a member of the chorus itself.

[5] By the use of the term *skeuê* I mean the actor's costume, mask, and accouterments. On the term *skeuê* as a part of the *opsis*, the spectacle-theatrical performance, see Arist. *Poet.* 1450 b16-20 and 1453 b1-10.

[6] On her attempt to involve the chorus in her performance see Brillet-Dubois 2015, 176.

[7] *Choreia* is first defined by Plato in the *Laws* (654b) as the combination of dance and music (song and accompaniment). Contemporary scholars frequently use this term to describe the performance of a song by a chorus. For the term *choreia* see, for example, Mullen 1982; Nagy 1990, 339-81; Ladianou 2005; Peponi 2007, 351; Weiss 2020b.

[8] On the role that all the parts of an actor's costume play in revealing the identity of an ancient Greek tragic character see Battezzato 1999-2000, 343-44; Wyles 2011, 55-

identity that she constructs for herself.[9] A character's *skeuê* creates meaning through the combination of the actual costume and its description (Wyles 2011, 51). This paper focuses on the verbal descriptions of the parts of the *skeuê* of Cassandra and its functions and argues that her descriptions reveal the character's role as a false chorus leader[10] to the play's internal and external audience.[11]

2. Cassandra, the False Chorus Leader of *Hymenaios*

Cassandra is singing a solo song in a Euripidean tragedy. She should be grief-stricken, since she is a war captive about to be exiled by her country and qualifies as one of Euripides' self-absorbed singers.[12] These Euripidean singers, mention themselves and their dire situations repeatedly,[13] continue their song no matter what, and are unresponsive to other characters or the chorus. The solo songs performed in Euripides' plays usually have many similarities to ritual lament.[14] Cassandra could have been one of Euripides' self-absorbed singers or she could have performed an antiphonal lament along with the female chorus.[15]

6; Skouroumouni-Stavrinou 2016, 2, 4, 10. On the agency of ancient Greek tragic costume in general see also Mueller 2001; Wyles 2010a, 171-80, 2010b; Wyles 2011; Mueller 2010, 2011, 2016a; Skouroumouni-Stavrinou 2015; Petrides 2014 156-281 and the essays in Mueller 2018.

[9] For the power of tragic *skeuê* to construct a false identity see Wyles 2011, 64-5; Mueller 2016b, 63.

[10] I adopt Wyles' arguments that in ancient Greek theater, the playwright and the spectators are conscious that a language of the costume is employed; that is, that the playwright embeds symbolism in the actor's costume and the audience has to decode it. See Wyles 2011, 46-7.

[11] On how a character's perception of a costume manipulates the audience's perception of it see Wyles 2011, 52.

[12] On Euripides' self-absorbed singers see Damen 1990, 34; Chong-Gossard 2003; 2008.

[13] According to Damen, some of Euripides' heroines are "notoriously self-absorbed". See Damen 1990, 34. Chong-Gossard suggests that although these Euripidean singers are in a dreadful situation, they refuse to be comforted. See Chong-Gossard 2003; 2008.

[14] On this issue see Pattoni 1989, 49-60. Weiss argues that lament, when not in its purely solo form, typically involves a lyric exchange between a female leader and a sympathetic female chorus, as it is seen in some of Euripides' plays. See Weiss 2014, 125. See also Kousoulini 2020a. The same songs are also frequently tied with bacchic *choreia*. See on this Dué 2006, 120; Foley 2001, 43; Marinis 2012, 34.

[15] Suter calls Cassandra's song a ''reduced lament''. See Suter 2003, 8-10. I agree that this song bears similarities with ritual lament, as the ones pointed out by Suter, nevertheless, we should take into consideration that tragic lyric is often a mixture of different traditional lyric genres. See Weiss 2020a for the generic hybridity of the tragic evocations of choral genres. Croally also regards that there are similarities between Cassan-

Instead, by choosing to perform a *hymenaios*[16] and attempting to involve others in her performance,[17] Cassandra manages to distort this choral form in almost every possible way.[18]

Cassandra sings a monodic *hymenaios* (308-40)[19] in highly resolved dochmiac-iambic meter. Not only the meter used indicates that Cassandra performs a highly energetic and lyrical song (Weiss 2018, 113) but dochmiac is considered the meter of lament.[20] Cassandra addresses Hymen, the god of marriage, borrowing the typically choral refrain of ''ὦ Ὑμέναιε (ἄναξ)'', which is similar to the repeated cry of ''ὑμήναον'' that we find in Sappho fr. 111 V (Weiss 2018, 114). Cassandra calls on several deities, besides Hymenaeus, addressing a cultic cry of ''εὐὰν εὐοῖ'' in 326 to Dionysus (Papadopoulou 2000, 520; Weiss 2018, 113-14), Hecate (323),[21] and Apollo (329) (Papadopolou 2000, 520-1). She even sings a *makarismos* to herself (312). Not only the *makarismos*, a traditional feature of *hymenaioi*,[22] was usually sang by the chorus to the bridegroom;[23] however, a *makarismos* outside the context of wedding ritual was meant either for the dead or for someone who was about to die (Papadopoulou 2000, 522). Cassandra, as I mentioned above, attempts to

dra's song and ritual lament but is of the opinion that Cassandra is not a lamenter. See Croally 1994, 73. Some of Sappho's wedding songs indicate lamentation, which often includes images of plucking and departure: frr. 104a, 105a, 105b, 107, perhaps 109, and 114 V. I regard that the ancient audience would have recognized and responded intellectually and emotionally to Cassandra's song as a *hymenaios*. On the importance of the ancient audience's contemporary experience for a study whose aim is to explore tragedy's use of ritual song see Wright 1986, 3-6; Swift 2010, 304; Kawalko-Roselli 2011, 19-20.

[16] On Cassandra's song perceived by modern scholars as a *hymenaios* see, for example, Rehm 1994, 129-30; Papadopoulou 2000, 515-21; Weiss 2018, 113-14.

[17] For the association between *hymenaios* and lament in Greek tragedy see Seaford 1984-1985, 227-9; Seaford 1987; Rehm 1994; Hoffmann 1996, 257-62; Margariti 2017, xvii-xxiii. For the relationship between wedding and funerary rituals see Danforth 1982, 74-116; Borghini 1987; Kligman 1988, 215-48; Lawson 2011, 546-61; Margariti 2017.

[18] Webster calls it a ''travesty of wedding songs''. See Webster 1967, 178, n. 9. Foley calls it a mock *epithalamium*. See Foley 1985, 85, 88. On the distortion of the lyric form of *hymenaios* by Cassandra see also Papadopoulou 2000, 520; Swift 2010; Weiss 2018, 113-16.

[19] On the oddity of a *hymenaios* sung as a solo song in this tragedy see Weiss 2018, 113. For the motif of absent *choreia* in the *Trojan Women* see also Weiss 2018, 103-14.

[20] See Suter 2003, 8-9. All three tragedians use dochmiacs to express strong feelings such as grief, fear, despair, horror, excitement, and, occasionally, triumph or joy. See Dale 1968, 110. De Poli also notes that dochmiacs in Greek tragedy express intense emotions, like panic, sorrow, or at least a sort of excitement. See De Poli 2018, 52-3. The only *hymenaioi* that survive are encountered in Sappho's corpus, their meters vary.

[21] Karamanou argues that Cassandra's torches bring to mind death mainly through their association with Hecate. See Karamanou 2015, 392, 395-6.

[22] See Hague 1983, 134, 141, n. 11; Swift 2010, 246-7; Wasdin 2018, 184-94.

[23] See, for example, Sappho's 112 and 113 V.

transmit her distorted, monodic *choreia* and recruit her mother, Hecuba, and the chorus as members of her wedding *pompe*.[24]

Cassandra refers to her *choreia*, throughout her monody. The singer emphasizes the kinetic element of *choreia*, as she constantly refers to her own movement and dancing. In addition to the lines in which Cassandra refers to her torch-carrying (308-10 and 319-24), she also amply describes her dance movements (332-4: ἄναγε, πόδα σὸν ἔλισσε τᾷδ' ἐκεῖσε μετ' ἐμέθεν ποδῶν / φέρουσα φιλτάταν βάσιν, lead off and whirl your foot this way and that, joining with me in the joyful step) and seeks other participants for her song and dance. As Olsen remarks, she seems to imagine herself leading a chorus (326: <ἄναγ'> ἄναγε χορόν, <strike up,> strike up the dance; 328: ὁ χορὸς ὅσιος <ὅσιος>, the dance is holy, <holy>; 332: χόρευε, dance), not a completely fictitious one, but a potentially real combination of the play's actual chorus of Trojan women (338-9: ὦ καλλίπεπλοι Φρυγῶν / κόραι, you daughters of Phrygia, with your lovely gowns) and her mother, Hecuba (332: χόρευε, μᾶτερ, χόρευ', dance, mother, dance) (Olsen 2016, 147). Cassandra prays to Apollo to lead her dance (329-30: ἄγε σύ, Φοῖβε, νῦν· κατὰ σὸν ἐν δάφναις / ἀνάκτορον θυηπολῶ, do you, Phoebus, lead it. For crowded with laurels I serve in your temple). She reproaches Hecuba for her lamentation (315-18: ἐπεὶ σύ, μᾶτερ, <μάται'> / ἐν δάκρυσι καὶ γόοισι τὸν / θανόντα πατέρα πατρίδα τε / φίλαν καταστένουσ' ἔχεις, for you, mother, in tears and groans <foolishly> keep lamenting my dead father and our dear country) and asks her to participate in her performance (325-7: πάλλε πόδα αἰθέριον <ἄναγ'> ἄναγε χορόν· / εὐΐαν, εὐοῖ, / ὡς ἐπὶ πατρὸς ἐμοῦ μακαριωτάταις / τύχαις, lift your foot and shake it, <strike up> strike up the dance (Euhan! Euhoi!) just as in my father's happiest days; 332-3). Cassandra also urges the members of the female chorus to take part in her *choreia* (338-41) and uses a series of choral terms to describe what she is asking her mother to do (325-6; 331-4); the heroine wants everyone to take part in a joyous activity. Through the references to the kinetic part of her *choreia*, she tries not only to express her intense emotions but to convey them to the internal and external audiences of the play by generating kinesthetic empathy.[25] But what does

[24] Processional songs performed at weddings appear in ancient Greek sources as moving feasts that constantly acquire new participants. See, for example, Hom. *Il.* 18.492-3; Hes. [*Sc.*] 273-9; Sappho's 44 V.

[25] The descriptions of dance in choral poetry can generate to the audience kinesthetic empathy. On the term see Olsen 2017, 154; 2020a, 339-40. Other classicists have also adopted it. See Fernández 2015, 312-21; Bierl 2017, 257n95; Curtis 2017, 4. n6; Meineck 2018, 120-53; Kousoulini 2020b. The term is widely used outside the discipline of classics. See, for example, Järvinen 2007; Sklar 2001a; 2001b; Noland 2009; Reason 2010; Foster 2010. Sklar defines this concept as the process of translating from visual to kinesthetic modes which generates the capacity to participate with another's movement or

this imply? According to Olsen, the descriptions of dance in choral poetry can spotlight certain elements of a performance, construct hierarchies of beauty, excitement, or interest, and encourage specific forms of aesthetic response (Olsen 2016, 4-5, 42-7; 2017). The verbal descriptions of movement and dance that accompany the dance itself (in the case of choral performance) might have shaped the visual and kinesthetic experiences of dancing for ancient audiences.[26] According to Meineck, choral self-references can serve as an anchor for the projection of emotions (Meineck 2018, 52-119). More specifically, the actions that take place during the performance of a song, such as gestures, dance, and movement, can involve the audience by making them want to mimic the expressivity of others.[27] Cassandra wishes to share her intense emotions with the internal and the external audience of the *Trojan Women* and spread her deviant chorality.

Cassandra tries to spread her vocabulary of chorality and the chorus seems to catch up with her words (e.g., 343: μὴ κοῦφον ἄρῃ βῆμ᾽ ἐς Ἀργείων στρατόν, before she steps lightly into the Argive army). Nonetheless, the chorus is still not convinced to sing the *hymenaios* with the heroine. The Trojan women ask Hecuba to stop Cassandra's song (342: βασίλεια, βακχεύουσαν οὐ λήψῃ κόρην, my queen, stop your delirious daughter),[28] remaining completely unresponsive to her calls for participation in the *hymenaios*. The song ends with the chorus' command to Hecuba to stop Cassandra's *choreia*. Hecuba not only stops the performance of *hymenaios* but gives orders to the female chorus to begin a new song of lament.[29]

Brillet-Dubois persuasively argues that there is a competition of chorus leaders between Hecuba and Cassandra in the *Trojan Women* (Brillet-Dubois 2015.); Cassandra's distorted *hymenaios* competes with Hecuba's lament (Brillet-Dubois 2015, 176). Earlier in the play, Hecuba became the chorus leader of an ad hoc performance of a lament.[30] Cassandra attempts

another's sensory experience of movement. See Sklar 2001b; 2001a, 199n3.

[26] See Olsen 2016, 6. Olsen uses the term "communal resonance" to refer to the discursive construction of dance and movement in literary sources which can reflect and attempt to affect the embodied experiences and kinetic expressions of its audience. See Olsen 2016, 10. She borrows the term from Albright's work. See Albright 2011, 17.

[27] See Meineck 2018, 120-53. Meineck calls this phenomenon "emotional contagion" (2018, 127). Varakis uses the same term in connection with the emotion of joy in Aristophanic comedy. See Varakis 2018, 312-14 with more bibliography.

[28] Weiss (2018 115-16) has remarked that this phrase works to silence Cassandra, decisively ending her attempt at choral leadership. I agree with Olsen (2016, 147) that this description retains a hint of chorality.

[29] On the agency of tragic mothers and its limitations see Tzanetou 2012. On mothers in Euripides see Zeitlin 2008.

[30] Murnaghan argues that the close identification of chorus and protagonists in Euripidean plays depicting the fall of Troy is a symptom of catastrophe: the fall of Troy

to replace her mother's cries of pain with cries of joy in her *hymenaios*. However, Euripidean female choruses usually only develop close ties and perform songs with one female character: the protagonist. Hecuba is the central character of the play and the leader of chorus of the Trojan women. As other scholars have observed, Cassandra's prophetic powers allow her to have an alternate view of the events preceding the fall of Troy.[31] For her, this is a joyful occasion because she has access to information that the chorus does not. The female chorus shares Hecuba's view and follows the real chorus leader. But does Cassandra's *skeuê* play a role in the construction or revelation of her false identity?

3. Cassandra's Inappropriate Torch-Carrying

Cassandra's performance is completely inappropriate, as she should have been a mourner; she has no right to wish for a wedding celebration, since she is about to become a concubine rather than a wife.[32] Cassandra uses a part of her *skeuê* as a means to distort the wedding ritual. Her torches, the ones she has no right to carry, are usually held by the mother of the bride during the wedding procession.[33]

Cassandra uses the torches to draw the audience's attention to her intense kinetic *choreia* and describes carrying her torch in her song. Cassandra starts to give herself, the sole performer of this *hymenaios*,[34] orders in a self-referential manner (308: ἄνεχε· πάρεχε / φῶς φέρε, raise it, bring it on, bring a light).[35] Her first orders are related to the objects she carries. She

levels the city's social structure so that members of the royal family and their former servants are slaves together, although in peacetime there is a social gap that does not allow them to be closely associated or mourn together. See Murnaghan 2016, 415-16. On Hecuba as a chorus leader of ad hoc lamentations in this play see also Suter 2003, 14-15; Murnaghan 2013, 160, 175-7; Brillet-Dubois 2015, 167-9; Fanfani 2018, 257-8; Weiss 2018, 110-13. On the importance of music in the *Trojan Women* see also Battezzato 2005.

[31] See Papadopoulou 2000, 515-16 with more bibliography; Brillet-Dubois 2015, 176.

[32] On the inappropriateness of Cassandra's *choreia*, see Olsen 2016, 147; 2020b, 142.

[33] Athenian vases frequently depict the mother of the bride bearing the marriage-torch in the wedding procession. See Tufte 1970, 42. For torches and fire used throughout the trilogy (*Alexander*, *Palamedes*, *Trojan Women*) as symbols see Papadopoulou 2000, 519 with more bibliography; Karamanou 2015.

[34] I prefer the term *hymenaios* to the narrower term *epithalamia*. *Epithalamia* were the songs performed outside the house once the bride and groom were inside. The term *hymenaios* encompasses all the songs performed before, during, or right after a wedding ceremony. See Lardinois 1996, 151n3; Swift 2006, 125n2. For more on *hymenaioi* see Tufte 1970; Contiades-Tsitsoni 1990; Horstmann 2004; Wasdin 2018.

[35] On the self-referentiality of Cassandra's song and its plenitude of choral terms see Olsen 2016, 147; Weiss 2018, 115.

tells herself to raise the torches so their light can be seen. She uses *deixis*, urging everyone to look at the light emanating from her torches (309: ἰδοὺ ἰδού, see, see) and sends a marriage cry to Hymenaios, the god of marriage (310-11, λαμπάσι <σοι> τόδ' ἱερόν, / Ὑμέναι' ἄναξ, with torch fire this holy place, Lord Hymeanaeus). She tries to clarify the purpose behind her torch-carrying (319-24: ἐγὼ δ' ἐπὶ γάμοις ἐμοῖς / ἀναφλέγω πυρὸς φῶς / ἐς αὐγάν, ἐς αἴγλαν / διδοῦσ', ὦ Ὑμέναιε, σοί, / διδοῦσ', ὦ Ἑκάτα, φάος, / παρθένων ἐπὶ λέκτροις / ᾗ νόμος ἔχει, but I in my marriage set alight this blaze of fire, giving it for gleam, for glare to you o Hymenaeus, and to you o Hecate, for a maiden's marriage as custom ordains) and seems to want her mother and the chorus to engage in a kinetic activity that will be part of her wedding *choreia*. She waves the torches and points to a wedding procession (Brillet-Dubois 2015, 171), into which she wishes to inveigle the others.[36] Cassandra tries to make her torches a part of her ''plan'' to involve in a choral song the internal and the external audiences of her solo *hymenaios* by creating kinesthetic empathy, that is, Cassandra's torches are used to construct her identity as a chorus leader in the *hymenaios*. But how does the audience of this performance react to her torch-carrying?

Cassandra's torch-carrying is the first thing that Hecuba and the herald, Talthybius, and—we have to suppose—the spectators notice from afar (298-307). Talthybius is the first to try to describe what they see. Judging from the light coming from the tents, he suggests that someone is carrying a torch (298: ἔα· τί πεύκης ἔνδον αἴθεται σέλας; But what is this? Why is the light of a pine torch gleaming inside?). He makes a wrong assumption regarding the holder of the torch and guesses that the Trojan women are setting their tents, or even themselves, on fire (299-305).

Hecuba deems Cassandra's performance unsuitable for the occasion.[37] The first words she utters concern Cassandra's torches. Hecuba calls on Hephaestus and complains about her daughter's *skeuê* (344-6: Ἥφαιστε, δᾳδουχεῖς μὲν ἐν γάμοις βροτῶν, / ἀτὰρ λυγράν γε τήνδ' ἀναιθύσσεις φλόγα / ἔξω τε μεγάλων ἐλπίδων, Hephaestus, you bear the torch when mortals marry, but this gleam you now spread abroad is painful and far removed from our high hopes). According to Hecuba, this torch-carrying *choreia* brings pain (344: λυγράν, painful).

Hecuba, the rightful chorus leader, connects Cassandra's emotional state with her right to carry these torches. According to her mother and the female chorus, Cassandra is almost out of her mind; this is something we

[36] At 455, Cassandra asks her mother to escort her to her destination and uses the verb πέμπω (πέμπε).

[37] On the inappropriateness of Cassandra's song and its dramatic use see also Papadopoulou 2000, 522.

hear long before the heroine's entrance. Hecuba, in her lyric exchange with the chorus, implores the women to keep Cassandra inside a tent, fearing that the Greeks will ridicule Cassandra's state of mind (168-71). Cassandra is described as a maenad (172, μαινάδ', the maenad girl and 307, μαινάς, my mad daughter,[38] 170: ἐκβακχεύουσαν, the maddened) and is a spectacle that Hecuba wishes to avoid.[39] Cassandra is not getting married and thus is not the rightful performer of a *hymenaios*, nor is she in the proper state of mind to perform such a song. Indeed, Hecuba reproaches Cassandra for her performance because she sees that her daughter is not in the right mental state to carry a torch (348-9: οὐ γὰρ ὀρθὰ πυρφορεῖς / μαινὰς θοάζουσ', you are not right to carry a torch, mad and frenzied as you are);[40] Hecuba believes that Cassandra's actions are close to maenadism.[41] Cassandra is a maenad or at least maenad-like[42] (307: μαινὰς, mad). Cassandra uses torches to construct her identity as a chorus leader, but those same torches reveal this false identity to the audience. Cassandra has no right to initiate a choral song to celebrate her union with Agamemnon.

Hecuba takes Cassandra's torches away (348: παράδος ἐμοὶ φῶς, give me the flame!) and orders the chorus to take them indoors (351: ἐσφέρετε πεύκας, take the torches indoors); this is a symbolic gesture. Often in Greek tragedy, when a character removes a part of their costume, they are discarding their identity (Wyles 2011, 56-7). In this case, the chorus leader of this chorus of Trojan captive women removes the symbol of Cassandra's false identity and commands the women to assist her. But this is not the only order that she gives to the chorus. Hecuba orders the female chorus to change its lyric mode. According to her, the Trojan women have to sing a lament in place of Cassandra's *hymenaios* (351-2: δάκρυά τ' ἀνταλλάξατε / τοῖς τῆσδε μέλεσι, Τρῳάδες, γαμηλίοις, Trojan women, in exchange for her wedding songs give her your tears!).

Cassandra stops singing altogether after the torches are removed from

[38] The ancient text and the translation belong to Kovacs.

[39] Karamanou (2015, 392) notes that Cassandra's torch-carrying evokes in the mind of the audience the nocturnal torch-dances of the maenads.

[40] For costumes incompatible with their wearer in Greek tragedy see also Skouroumouni-Stavrinou 2015, 127.

[41] Cassandra is not an actual maenad, but these words used to describe her are borrowed by a relatively unfamiliar realm of experience to describe an unusual degree of emotion. See Segal 1971, 47-8. Karamanou (2015, 393) notes that usually in poetry, maenadic terminology tends to be used to describe an emotionally stricken state of mind and lack of self-control.

[42] According to Seaford (1993, 115), this is not a reference to actual maenadism but a ''Dionysiac metaphor''. Seaford considers a ''Dionysiac metaphor'' any explicit or implicit comparison of behavior to the frenzy inspired by Dionysus. For a narrower definition of the term see Marinis 2012.

her. Song almost disappears from the scene.[43] From this point and on, no one mentions Cassandra's *skeuê*. The heroine enters into a kind of a dialogue with her mother, the chorus, and Talthybius. Cassandra reveals the motive of her joy and the reason that Trojan people have to celebrate. She prophesies Agamemnon's demise and everything else that will happen in Greece after his death. She also allows Talthybius to lead her to her real destination (445: στεῖχ' ὅπως τάχιστ'· ἐς Ἅιδου νυμφίῳ γημώμεθα, Go with all speed! Let me marry my bridegroom in Hades!). The woman who tried to use torches to entangle her mother and the chorus in her mad wedding *choreia* allows herself be led to her marriage to Death.

4. Conclusion

Cassandra's interaction with the female choruses of the *Trojan Women* is not completely successful. The chorus remains almost unresponsive, despite the heroine's efforts to involve them in her delusion. The chorus of the *Trojan Women* does not take part in Cassandra's *hymenaios*. They remain loyal to their chorus leader and protagonist of the play, Hecuba. After Cassandra's performance, they are instructed to perform a lament. The chorus sees the heroine's performance for what it is: a lyric performance of a false chorus leader.

The denial of sympathy in the form the heroine wishes highlights her isolation, as she is unable to effectively share their emotions with the members of the chorus. Cassandra is separated from the other women as she is immediately directed to the Greek ships. Cassandra attempts to perform a joyous choral song along with the chorus, although the song she chooses is not appropriate for the occasion. The heroine is in a mental state that does not allow her to see her situation clearly; Cassandra is mad and she resembles a maenad. She is brought back to reality by the intervention of her mother and is forced to stop her performance. Cassandra is advised by Hecuba or even compelled by reality to begin a lament.

Parts of Cassandra's *skeuê*, which are very obvious to the female chorus and the audience, are used by her to construct her false identity. Cassandra uses torches, one of the most characteristic paraphernalia of the *hymenaioi*, to

[43] Weiss (2018, 116) rightly observes that the immediate effect of the orders given by the chorus seems to be an absence of song altogether, for, in striking contrast with Cassandra's highly lyrical performance, all characters speak predominately in iambic trimeters for the next 170 lines (with the exception of Cassandra's trochaic tetrameters at 444-61). Karamanou (2015, 393) argues that the change of meter from dochmiacs and glyconics (308-40) to iambic trimeters (353-43) and then to trochaic tetrameters (444-61) illustrates Cassandra's shift from delirious mood to mental normality and then to the climax of her highly charged final prophecies.

mark her song as a *hymenaios* and herself as the chorus leader. She describes her own movements and dance; her torch serves as a means to emphasize her kinetic activities. This object is also used to distort a traditional choral form. Cassandra, the ''bride'', should not have carried the torches or had a wedding procession. Her torch-carrying is specifically marked as inappropriate. This part of her *skeuê* signals her distortion of the proper choral form to anyone that can see it.

Cassandra's torches are taken away by her mother with the aid of the female chorus. After her props are gone, the heroine becomes more rational. Cassandra stops singing and tries to explain that her power of prophecy provides her with access to information that the Trojan women and Hecuba do not have. Cassandra's torches do not only reveal her false identity as a chorus leader or signals the distortion of a choral form; they are also used by other characters to strip the heroine of this false identity and compel her to stop her improper performance.

Works Cited

Battezzato, Luigi. 2005. "The New Music of the *Trojan Women*". *Lexis* 23: 73-104.

— 1999-2000. "Dorian Dress in Greek Tragedy". *ICS* 24-25: 343-62.

Bierl, Anton. 2017. "'Hail and Take Pleasure!' Making Gods Present in Narration through Choral Song and other Epiphanic Strategies in the Homeric Hymns to Dionysus and Apollo". In *The Winnowing Oar - New Perspectives in Homeric Studies*, edited by Christos Tsagalis and Andreas Markantonatos, 231-65. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

— 2013. "Maenadism as Self-Referential Chorality in Euripides' *Bacchae*". In *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*, edited by Marianne Govers Hopman and Renaud Gagné, 211-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Borghini, Alberto. 1987. "Consacrazione alla Morte e Ritualità Matrimoniale". *SCO* 36: 113-16.

Brillet-Dubois, Pascale. 2015. "A Competition of 'Choregoi' in Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Dramatic Structure and Intertextuality". *Lexis* 33: 168-80.

Budelmann, Felix and Timothy Power. 2015. "Another Look at Female Choruses in Classical Athens". *ClAnt* 34 (2): 252-95.

Calame, Claude. 2020. "The Chorus in Euripides". In *Brill's Companion to Euripides*, edited by Andreas Markantonatos, 775-96. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Castellani, Victor. 1989. "The Value of a Kindly Chorus: Female Choruses in Attic Tragedy". In *Women in Theatre (Themes in Drama 11)*, edited by James Redmond, 1-18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chong-Gossard, James Harvey Kim On. 2008. *Gender and Communication in Euripides' Plays: Between Song and Silence*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

— 2003. "Song and the Solitary Self: Euripidean Women Who Resist Comfort". *Phoenix* 57 (3/4): 209-31.

Collard, Christopher and Martin Cropp. 2009. *Euripides, Fragments, Oedipus-*

Chrysippus, Other Fragments. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
Contiades-Tsitsoni, Eleni. 1990. *Hymenaios und Epithalamion: Das Hochzeitslied in der frühgriechischen Lyrik*. Stuttgart: Vieweg-Teubner Verlag.
Croally, Neil. 1994. *Euripidean Polemic. The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
Curtis, Lauren. 2017. *Imagining the Chorus in Augustan Poetry*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Dale, Amy Marjorie. 1968. *The Lyric Metres of Greek Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Damen, Mark. 1990. ''Electra's Monody and the Role of the Chorus in Euripides' *Orestes*''. *TAPhA* 120: 133-45.
Danforth, Loring 1982. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
De Poli, Mattia. 2018. "The Metres of Fear in Attic Drama". In *Il Teatro delle Emozioni: la Paura, Atti del 1° Convegno Internazionale di Studi (Padova, 24-25 maggio 2018)*, edited by Mattia de Poli, 41-69. Padova: Padova University Press.
Dué, Casey. 2006. *The Captive Woman's Lament in Greek Tragedy*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
Fanfani, Giovanni. 2018. "What *Melos* for Troy? Blending of Lyric Genres in the First *Stasimon* of Euripides' *Trojan Women*". In *Paths of Song: The Lyric Dimension of Greek Tragedy*, edited by Rosa Andújar, Thomas Coward, and Theodora Hadjimichael, 239-64. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Fernández, Zoa Alonso. 2015. "Docta Saltatrix: Body Knowledge, Culture, and Corporeal Discourse in Female Roman Dance". *Phoenix* 69 (3-4): 304-33.
Foley, Helen. 2003. "Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy". *CPh.* 98 (1): 1-30.
— 2001. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
— 1985. *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
Foster, Susan Leigh. 2010. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. London: Routledge.
Hague, Rebecca 1983. "Ancient Greek Wedding Songs: The Tradition of Praise". *Journal of Folklore Research* 20: 131-43.
Hoffmann, Geneviève. 1996. "Macarie, Polyxène et Iphigénie: les Vierges Héroïques dans le Théâtre d'Euripide". In *Silence et Fureur: la Femme et le Mariage en Grèce*, edited by Odile Cavalier, 249-70. Avignon: Fondation du Muséum Calvet.
Horstmann, Sabine. 2004. *Das Epithalamium in der Lateinischen Literatur der Spätantike*. München and Leipzig: De Gruyter.
Hose, Martin. 1990. *Studien zum Chor bei Euripides*, vol. 1. Stuttgart: De Gruyter.
Järvinen, Hanna. 2007. "Some Steps Towards a Historical Epistemology of Corporeality". In *Rethinking Practice and Theory / Repenser pratique et théorie. Proceedings of the International Symposium on Dance Research (CORD/SDHS), Paris*, 145-8, Paris.
Karamanou, Ioanna. 2015. "Torch Imagery in Euripides' *Alexandros* and *Trojan*

Women". In *Proceedings of the 6th Balkan Light Conference*, 391-7. In *Balkan Light Conference 2015*. Athens: Acropolis Museum.

Kawalko-Roselli, David. 2011. *Theatre of the People: Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Kligman, Gail. 1988. *The Wedding of the Dead: Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Kousoulini, Vasiliki. 2020a. "Female Characters, Female Sympathetic Choruses, and the 'Suppression' of Antiphonal Lament at the Openings of Euripides' *Phaethon*, *Andromeda*, and *Hypsipyle*". *Frammenti Sulla Scena* 1: 1-23.

— 2020b. "*Partheneia*, *Hymenaioi*, Kinetic *Choreia*, and the Transference of Joy in the *Exodoi* of Aristophanes' *Peace*, *Birds*, and *Lysistrata*". *Dionysus ex Machina* 11: 71-106.

Kovacs, David, ed. 1994. *Euripides, Volume IV. Trojan Women. Iphigenia among the Taurians. Ion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ladianou, Katerina. 2005 "The Poetics of 'Choreia': Imitation and Dance in the *Anacreontea*". *QUCC* 80 (2): 47-58.

Lardinois, André. 1996. "Who Sang Sappho's Songs?". In *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, edited by Helen Greene, 150-70. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lawson, John Cuthbert. 2011. *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lu Hsu, Katherine. 2014. ''P. Mich. 6973: The Text of a Ptolemaic Fragment of Euripides' *Cresphontes*''. *ZPE* 190: 13-29.

Margariti, Katia. 2017. *The Death of the Maiden in Classical Athens*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Marinis, Agis. 2012. "Dionysiac Metaphor in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*". *MD* 69: 9-44.

Mastronarde, Donald. 2010. *The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Pres 2010

— 1999. "Knowledge and Authority in the Choral Voice of Euripidean Tragedy". *SyllClass* 10: 87-104.

Meineck, Peter. 2018. *Theatrocracy. Greek Drama, Cognition, and the Imperative for Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mullen, William. 1982. *CHOREIA: Pindar and Dance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mueller, Melissa. 2016a. *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

— 2016b. "Dressing for Dionysus: Statues and Material Mimesis in Euripides' *Bacchae*". In *Gli Oggetti sulla Scena Teatrale Ateniese: Funzione, Rappresentazione, Comunicazione*, edited by Alessandra Coppola, Caterina Barone, and Monica Salvadori, 57-70. Padova: CLEUP.

— 2011. "Phaedra's *Defixio*: Scripting *Sophrosune* in Euripides' *Hippolytus*". *ClAnt* 30 (1): 148-77.

— 2010. "Athens in a Basket: Naming, Objects, and Identity in Euripides' *Ion*". *Arethusa* 43 (3): 365-402.

— 2001. "The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*". *AJPh* 122 (4): 471-504.

Mueller, Melissa and Marco Telò, eds. 2018. *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*. London: Bloomsbury Press.
Murnaghan, Sheila. 2016. "The Euripidean Chorus". In *A Companion to Euripides*, edited by Laura McClure, 412-27. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
— 2013. "The Choral Plot of Euripides' *Helen*". In *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*, edited by Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman, 155-77. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Nagy, Gregory. 1990. *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
Olsen, Sarah. 2020a. ''Pindar, *Paean* 6: Genre as Embodied Cultural Knowledge''. In *Genre in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry: Theories and Models: Studies in Archaic and Classical Greek Song*, edited by Margaret Foster, Leslie Kurke, and Naomi Weiss, 325-46. Leiden and Boston: Brill
— 2020b. *Solo Dance in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature: Representing the Unruly Body*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
— 2017. "Kinesthetic *Choreia*: Empathy, Memory, and Dance in Ancient Greece". *CPh*. 112: 153-74.
— 2016. *Beyond Choreia: Dance in Ancient Greek Literature and Culture*. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley.
Noland, Carrie. 2009. *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures / Producing Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Papadopoulou, Thalia. 2000. "Cassandra's Radiant Vigour and the Ironic Optimism of Euripides' *Troades*". *Mnemosyne* 53 (5): 513-27.
Pattoni, Maria Pia. 1989. "La Sympatheia del Coro nella Parodo dei Tragici Graeci: Motivi e Forme di un Modello Dramatico". *SCO* 39: 33-82.
Peponi, Anastasia Erasmia 2007. "Sparta's Prima Ballerina: *Choreia* in Alcman's Second *Partheneion* (3 *PMGF*)". *CQ* 57 (2): 351-62.
Petrides, Antonis. 2014. *Menander, New Comedy and the Visual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Reason, Matthew and Dee. Reynolds. 2010. ''Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance''. *Dance Research Journal* 42 (2): 49-75.
Rehm, Rush. 1994. *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Seaford, Richard. 1993. "Dionysus as Destroyer of the Household: Homer, Tragedy, and the *Polis*". In *Masks of Dionysus*, edited by Christopher Athanasius Faraone and Thomas Carpenter, 115-46. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
— 1987. "The Tragic Wedding". *JHS* 107:106-30.
— 1984-1985. "L'ultima Canzone Corale delle Supplici di Eschilo". *Dioniso* 55: 221-9.
Segal, Charles. 1971. "Andromache's *Anagnorisis*: Formulaic Artistry in *Iliad* 22.437-476". *HSPh* 75: 33-57.
Sklar, Deindre. 2001a. *Dancing with the Virgin: Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
— 2001b. "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance". In *Moving History / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, edited by Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright, 30-2. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.

Skouroumouni-Stavrinou, Aspasia. 2016. "Hermione's Spartan Costume: The Tragic *Skeuê* in Euripides' *Andromache*". *ICS* 41 (1): 1-20.
— 2015. "The *Opsis* of Helen: Performative Intertextuality in Euripides". *GRBS* 55: 104-32.
Suter, Ann. 2003. "Lament in Euripides' *Trojan Women*". *Mnemosyne* 56 (1): 1-28.
Swift, Laura. 2010. *The Hidden Chorus: Echoes of Genre in Tragic Lyric*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press
— 2006. "Mixed Choruses and Marriage Songs: A New Interpretation of the third Stasimon of the *Hippolytus*". *JHS* 126: 125-40.
Tufte, Virginia. 1970. *The Poetry of Marriage: The Epithalamium in Europe and its Development in England*. Los Angeles: Tinnon-Brown.
Tzanetou, Angeliki. 2012. "Citizen-Mothers on the Tragic Stage". In *Mothering and Motherhood in the Ancient Greece and Rome*, edited by Laura Petersen Hackworth and Patricia Salzman- Mitchell, 97-120. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Wasdin, Katherine. 2018. *Eros at Dusk: Ancient Wedding and Love Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Webster, Thomas Bertram Lonsdale. 1967. *The Tragedies of Euripides*. London: Methuen.
Weiss, Naomi. 2020a. "Generic Hybridity in Greek Tragedy". In *The Genres of Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry: Theories and Models*, edited by Margaret Foster, Leslie Kurke, and Naomi Weiss, 167-90. Leiden and Boston: Brill
— 2020b. "Ancient Greek *Choreia*". In *A Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Music*, edited by Eleonora Rocconi and Tosca Lynch, 161-72. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.
— 2018. *The Music of Tragedy: Performance and Imagination in Euripidean Theater*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
— 2014. "The Antiphonal Ending of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (1475-1532)". *CPh*. 109 (2): 119-29.
Wright, Elinor. 1986. *The Form of Laments in Greek Tragedy*. Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania.
Wyles, Rosie. 2011. *Costume in Greek Tragedy*. London: Bristol Classical Press.
— 2010a. "Towards Theorising the Place of Costume in Performance Reception". In *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, edited by Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop, 171-80. London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
— 2010b. "The Tragic Costumes". In *The Pronomos Vase in its Context*, edited by Oliver Taplin and Rosie Wyles, 231-54. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Zeitlin, Froma. 2008. "Intimate Relations: Children, Childbearing, and Parentage on the Euripidean Stage". In *Performance, Iconography, Reception: Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin*, edited by Martin Revermann and Peter Wilson, 318-32. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gherardo Ugolini*

Vayos Liapis, Avra Sidiropoulou, eds. *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*[1]

Abstract

Since Hellmut Flashar's pioneering book *Inszenierung der Antike* (1991), studies on modern stagings of ancient Greek drama have multiplied along with the proliferation, in a wide variety of cultural and geographical contexts, of performances/plays inspired, more or less directly, by Attic tragedies of the fifth century BC. *Adapting Greek Tragedy*, edited by Vayos Liapis and Avra Sidiropoulou, brings together contributions by specialists who take stock of the current situation, analyse several exemplary case studies, and reflect theoretically on the increasingly dynamic and problematic/problematising way in which adaptations of Greek tragedy today confront the dramatic genre that flourished in Greece some twenty-five centuries ago. At the heart of the volume is the question of what precisely an 'adaptation' is, what its possible modes of realisation are, and how modern adaptations of Greek tragedies can shed new light on the way we understand our relationship to the classical past by highlighting aspects of modern culture's distance from the civilisation of ancient Greece.

Keywords: Greek tragedy; adaptation; translation; myth; drama; classical canon; Hellmut Flashar

The systematic study of the staging of ancient Greek drama in the modern era is a relatively recent field of research. A crucial moment in its development was the publication in 1991 of the pioneering book *Inszenierung der Antike. Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585-1990* by the German scholar of Greek Hellmust Flashar, written at a time when professors of classical philology and Greek literature rarely grappled with modern and contemporary plays. Flashar was not only a competent and meticulous scholar of ancient Greek drama, but also an avid theatregoer, and he was firmly convinced of the need for scholars to engage with directors and producers in order to better understand the objects of their research. *Inszenierung der Antike* immediately became the reference work for this field of study, and in some respects has remained so to this day, especially with

[1] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN 9781107155701, pp. 436

* University of Verona - gherardo.ugolini@univr.it

© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 9:1 (2023), 203-9
https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it

regard to the methodological directions which it opened up: analysis of the content and formal characteristics of individual adaptations; framing them in the modern cultural-historical context and in the light of the artistic theories and ethical-political convictions of their authors; comparison between the dramaturgical styles of adaptations and developments in contemporary philology.[1] Flashar's argument traced a historical trajectory with a precise starting point: the staging of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in 1585 at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, the first attempt to recover the performance practices of ancient theatre, which paved the way for subsequent revivals. He then dealt with the most famous adaptations inspired by Greek tragedy, from classical French theatre to lyric opera, with substantial space given to German culture: Weimar and the 'Greek' performances at the Hoftheater directed by Goethe; the 1841 Potsdam *Antigone*, commissioned by Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm IV and directed by Ludwig Tieck, with music by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, translation by Johann Jakob Christian Donner, and consultation from August Boeckh; the *Musikdramen* of Richard Wagner. It was only in the first decades of the twentieth century that the staging of ancient dramas was able to free itself definitively from any classical indebtedness, thanks above all to Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who translated many texts of Greek tragedies into German with a view to their performance while also actively collaborating in the staging of productions (the Berlin *Oresteia* of 1911-1912, staged by Max Reinhardt, is famous, and marked the rediscovery of Aeschylus for European theatre). In the last chapters of the book, Flashar analysed trends in vogue from the 1930s onwards, such as the tendency towards the decontextualisation and de-historicising of Greek theatre (during the period of Hitler's dictatorship).

Conversely, the political dimension became a basic and unavoidable element in many post-war plays (starting with Bertolt Brecht's *Antigone*), while in the following decades the so-called 'director's theatre' became established, whereby the director is authorised to arbitrarily superimpose his direction on the meaning and values of the text performed.

If we have lingered so long on Flashar's book, it is not only to pay tribute to the German scholar who died in August 2022, but to emphasise the novelty of this monograph, which paved the way for a flood of study and research on the subject. *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for AncientTexts*, edited by Vayos Liapis and Avra Sidiropoulou, both professors at the Open University of Cyprus and specialists in ancient Greek theatre, classical

[1] It is worth mentioning that *Inszenierung der Antike* has undergone a second edition with additions (Flashar 2009) and a series of updates by the same scholar, published in the journal *Gymnasium. Zeitschrift für Kultur der Antike und humanistische Bildung* and subsequently collected in a single volume (Flashar 2018).

reception, and dramatic theory, is the latest important contribution to this long and fascinating history. Those who work on the reception of ancient Greek theatre will find in this book an up-to-date and valuable tool, with the not inconsiderable merit of taking a very broad geographical perspective: in fact, it discusses performances not only produced in the Western cultural contexts we might more traditionally expect, but also from areas such as Japan, China, India, West Africa, South Africa and the Caribbean, where significant adaptations of ancient Greek theatre can also be found.

The first fifty pages of the volume, namely the "Introduction" by Liapis and Sidiropoulou (1-23) and the "Prelude: Adapting the Greek tragic: A Historical Perspective" by Liapis (24-55), are of considerable depth. The effort made by the two editors in their introduction to clarify, from a theoretical point of view, what is meant by 'adaptation' with regard to the texts of classical antiquity seems both lucid and timely. Debate on this subject has been very intense, with a progressive development that has shifted the focus from a purely 'text-centric' vision to a perspective that focuses above all on the dimension of performance, and thus on visual and scenic aspects. No scholar nowadays considers an adaptation as a mere derivation or reduction of the source text; rather, the text on the one hand and the performance on the other are considered complementary elements in a relationship of constant interaction. The dramatic text has performative potential in itself, and each performance realises this potential in different ways. On the other hand, a new performance results in a new conceptualisation of the text itself.

The term adaptation, moreover, implies a vast quantity of variables, ranging from the simple 'abridgement' of the source text as required by the particular needs of the target audience, to ambitious projects that expand and enrich the source text by inserting new characters or themes. 'Adaptation' can also constitute transposition into different medium from that of the original, as in the case of a novel or film derived from an ancient play. In this case, as well as in others, the need for the modern author to re-contextualise the content by transferring it into different cultural contexts is evident. The chapter by Katja Krebs ("Definitions: Adaptation and Related Modalities", 59-76) is devoted precisely to the attempt to understand what is meant by the 'adaptation' of an ancient Greek tragedy in a modern performance, by suggesting an articulated distinction between 'translation', 'version', 'rewriting', 'retelling', 'reinvention', and 're-imagination'. This theoretical discussion is effectively applied to three recent productions of Greek plays, taken as paradigmatic case studies: these are Ben Power's *Medea*, staged at the National Theatre in London in 2014, *Iphigenia Quartet* by Caroline Bird, Suhayla El-Bushra, Lulu Raczka and Chris Thorpe, staged in 2016 at the Gate Theatre in London, and *The Persians*, adapted by Kaite O'Reilly and directed in 2010 by Mike Pearson at the National Theatre of Wales.

Critics have generally spoken of these adaptations now as 'versions', now as 'translations', and now as more or less faithful 'adaptations', with a rather free use of terminology depending on the context. This does not mean that we should give up trying to classify (re)writings or to define the boundaries between adaptation, appropriation, version, etc. But we should be aware that these attempts at definition essentially have to do with modern contexts of reception. It is modern scholars – but also spectators, reviewers, theatre practitioners, etc. – who establish the boundaries between these categories, taking into account the specific relationship each has between source and adaptation: a spectator who is familiar with the source (ancient Greek drama) has a different kind of perspective from that of a spectator who is not familiar with the source. It is important to remember that knowledge of the source text may be of various kinds, especially when canonical works of classical theatre are at stake: it may refer to direct knowledge, based on reading in the original language, but it may also refer to a generally widespread cultural memory, or to other (re)writings of the same source text.

While the purpose of any 'adaptation' can be defined as "to reposition the originating text in a new cultural context" (Bryant 2013, 54), there is no unanimously agreed upon notion of 'adaptation', given the considerable fluidity and variability of the terminology adopted. Certainly, translation is one of the most common and discussed forms of 'adaptation', so Lorna Hardwick's essay on "Translation and/as Adaptation" (110-30), which reflects in theoretical and methodological terms on the topic, finds a fitting place in the volume. Obviously, the translation of a text, however faithful it may be to the original, always consists of a work of 'carrying across' (translation) from one cultural-verbal context to another, and therefore always necessarily involves a certain degree of recodification, becoming a creative work in itself. Anyone who translates the text of a Greek tragedy from the fifth century BC for a modern staging, intended for a modern audience, is obliged to reconfigure the meaning of the original to adapt it to modern attitudes and tastes. In particular, Hardwick analyses the relationship between the target language and the source language from several angles, including formal aspects, differences in socio-cultural context, and the effect of translations on the reading or viewing public.

A number of crucial issues emerge from the various essays collected in the volume and the case studies that are put forwards for analysis. One of these concerns the relationship between the practice of adapting Greek tragedies for the stage and the questioning of the traditional canon. In fact, in many cases, adaptations of ancient Greek dramas prompt both authors (playwrights, directors, etc.) and spectators to reconsider their perception of the source texts, which are often regarded uncritically as timeless 'classics' of immortal value. Indeed, it is precisely adaptation that can contribute to

the discussion and challenging of the cultural and ideological assumptions of the source text, rendering the notion of the 'classic' as an authoritative and unchanging model completely inadequate, while offering a dissonant and alienating view of works that we lazily regard as familiar (on this particular type of 'negotiation' between fidelity to the established canon and the affirmation of alienating points of view, cf. Peter Meineck's essay, "Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: the Application of Adaptation", 77-109). The issue takes on explosive contours when the staging of classical Greek dramas is reconnected to non-Western ethno-cultural contexts. A resounding case in point is that of the Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi, who attempted with some of his epoch-making plays (*The Trojan Women*, *The Bacchae*, *Clytemnestra*) to adapt the ancient Greek tradition to the stylised and ritualised language of traditional Japanese Noh theatre. In a similar vein, mention may be made of *Les Atrides* by Ariane Mnouchkine, in which the saga of Agamemnon and Orestes is saturated with elements typical of oriental dramaturgy (costumes, masks, make-up, gestures and movements), Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's gospel version of *Oedipus at Colonus* (*The Gospel at Colonus*, 1983), in which the Sophoclean drama is presented as a sermon recited by African-American singers, and of course the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka's version of the *Bacchae* (*The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite*) from 1973, in which the Greek tradition is syncretically contaminated with Christian and indigenous Nigerian traditions. The significance of this specific type of adaptation is particularly emphasised in chapters 10 ("Adaptations of Greek Tragedies in Non-Western Performance Cultures" by Erika Fischer-Lichte, 272-98) and 11 ("Culture Identities: Appropriations of Greek Tragedy in Post-Colonial Discourse" by Elke Steinmeyer, 299-328).

Another element worth reflecting on is the process of modernisation that adaptations of ancient plays often entail. This was, of course, already something that ancient playwrights were doing in their stagings (which were in fact 'adaptations' of myth), and it is quite common in modern plays inspired by Greek tragedies: modernisation engages a dialectical dynamic between the context of the ancient myth, perceived as 'original', and contemporary issues, by provoking an interpretative interaction between the text and the modern play, "whereby the modern work is illuminated by ancient myth but also causes us to reinterpret the myth it appropriates" ("Introduction", 9). Two chapters in the volume deal with the issue of modernisation, that of Simon Perris ("Violence in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy", 247-71), and that of Anastasia Bakogianni ("Trapped between Fidelity and Adaptation? On the Reception of Ancient Greek Tragedy in Modern Greece", 329-54). The former shows, through a series of case studies (among others, Steven Berkoff's *Greek* from 1980, and Sarah Kane's 1996 *Phaedra's Love*), how physical violence is often displayed in modern reinterpretations of Greek tragedies, since there

is no prohibitive restraint, as was the case in ancient theatrical practice in the fifth century BC. Often in these cases, violence is an expressive tool that relates to themes of social marginalisation and political and ethnic conflict. Bakogianni's essay is devoted to the reception of ancient Greek drama in modern Greece, a unique kind of reception due to the 'special relationship' between the Greek culture of today and its past, which is characterised by the tension between a more traditional line, attentive to the foundational and formative values of tragedy, and a more modern and experimental one that aims at a 'creative' re-appropriation of Greek drama and does not hesitate to use ancient texts to reflect current issues.

Staging for the theatre constitutes a very particular case of adaptation, because it involves a series of negotiations not only with the original source text, but also with previous performances or adaptations of that text. It is a process of appropriation that often produces more doubt and uncertainty than security. The essays by Sidiropoulou ("Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks", 131-54) and Jane Montgomery Griffiths ("Compromise, Contingency, and Gendered Reception: The Case of the Malthouse's *Antigone*", 206-26) discuss the problem of directorial freedom vis-à-vis the 'classical' text being worked on, highlighting the possibility of a wide range of variables, from absolute fidelity to global re-interpretation. Symptomatic in this respect is the analysis of versions of *Antigone* made in Australia in recent decades in the light of developments in feminist and gender theory and practice.

Finally, a point that is rightly taken into consideration is the growing trend of multimedia stagings of Greek tragedies. This is discussed in depth by Peter A. Campbell in his chapter "Technology, Media, and Intermediality in Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy" (227-46). The presence of video cameras and/or screens on which images and videos are projected is the defining element of productions such as Katie Mitchell's *The Oresteia* (1999), Jan Fabre's *Prometheus – Landscape II* (2011), or Davide Livermore's stagings of Euripides' *Helen* (Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2019) and the *Oresteia* (Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2021 and 2022). The use of technology and the simultaneous presence of theatre and film can, on the one hand, make the performance more stimulating, while on the other it induces the spectator to reflect on the spatio-temporal relations of the story represented.

The quality of the collected contributions, the substantial size of the volume, and the accuracy of the editors, establish *Adapting Greek Tragedy* as a standard text, destined to become a point of reference for the foreseeable future. Among the book's merits, it is also worth mentioning the presence of an "Interlude" (157-81), edited by Sidiropoulou and entitled "Speaking Up: Theatre Practitioners on Adapting the Classics". This is a collection of interviews with three leading directors of the international theatrical

avant-garde (Charles L. Mee, Suzuki Tadashi, Ivo Van Hove), who discuss various issues related to their direct experience of staging Greek tragedies. The voices of the directors are an excellent and effective supplement to the theoretical analyses presented in the chapters of the first and second parts of the book. Above all, however, the editors' effort to arrive at a definition of the concept of 'adaptation', understood as a complex and layered process in which the target text challenges notions of authenticity and authorship by reshaping and transforming the source text, is commendable. This is, of course, a potentially infinite process, since each adaptation can in turn give rise to new adaptations.

Translation by Carla Suthren

Works Cited

Bryant, John. 2013. "Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision: Editing Adaptation as a Fluid Text". In *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, edited by Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Erik Frisvold Hanssen, 46-78. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Flashar, Hellmut. 2018. *Antikes Drama - Moderne Bühne*. Freiburg i.Br., Berlin, Wien: Rombach.

— 2009. *Inszenierung der Antike. Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585-1990*, 2nd edition (1st: 1991). München: Beck.

Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Rodosthenous, George, ed. 2017. *Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy: Auteurship and Directorial Visions*. London: Bloomsbury.

Sanders, Julie. 2016. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Eric Nicholson*

William N. West. *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion: Playhouses and Playgoers in Elizabethan England*[1]

Abstract

William N. West's *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion: Playhouses and Playgoers in Elizabethan England*, suited for specialists and non-specialists alike, is a boldly original and impressively versatile study of the discourses as well as experiences of the participatory entertainment offered at early modern London's commercial playhouses. Deftly coordinating rigorous historical research, analysis of numerous but always salient primary sources, and theoretically informed, convincing interpretation, West opens a variety of fresh perspectives on the topic. Beginning with a demonstration of the aptness of "Playing", rather than Theatre or Drama, as a descriptive and critical designation, he follows a propositional approach in the succeeding chapters on "Occupatio" through "Non Plus", via "Confusion," "Eating," and other common criteria, to articulate a new understanding of how Elizabethans spoke of playgoing, rather than identifying what it meant to them. This lucidly written and truly ground-breaking monograph offers an extraordinarily rich, diverse array of critical insights that promise not only to change and re-direct our knowledge of its subject matter, but also to pave the way for fruitful commentary and enlightened understandings to come.

Keywords: playhouses; playgoing; Elizabethan England; poetic confusion; occupation; reoccupation; forms of life

To a certain extent, the adage "don't judge a book by its cover (or its title)" applies to William N. West's monograph on Elizabethan spaces and experiences of plays and their performances. The book's cover image might at first glance seem incongruous and randomly anachronistic, since it reproduces a detail from an 1860s engraving published in Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke's *Plays of William Shakespeare*: a group of six men and one woman in early modern clothing are seen conversing among themselves, while one of them points towards the feet and cloaked legs of a figure on a stage, next to a pair of ancient Hellenistic masks. What exactly is portrayed here? The back cover explains that this is part of an illustration accompanying the text of *Pericles* 5.3:

[1] Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. ISBN 9780226808840, pp. 326

* New York University Florence - en27@nyu.edu

https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it

pertinent enough, but why use this imaginative reconstruction of playgoing, from neither the Elizabethan nor our contemporary period, to appear beneath the title *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion*? And what is the sense of these four words, and their potential relationship to each other? At least at first glance, is the reader meant to undergo some confusion? Perhaps yes, and if this is the case, it is yet another admirable facet of West's boldly original and thoroughly illuminating study, suited for specialists and non-specialists alike, which lives up to the "exhilarating" and "dazzling" accolades given to it by Tiffany Stern and Jean Howard in their enthusiastic endorsements, quoted on the back cover. For as West demonstrates, "poetic confusion" accurately describes the creative process practiced by Shakespeare, Jonson, and their fellow playmakers in collaboration with their audiences (or "audients", and more on this term below) as a "pouring together" of the diverse elements enabled by the mingling at venues like the Curtain, Swan, and Globe playhouses of a rich, heterogeneous variety of words, gestures, plots, genres, costumes, foods, drinks, and people from nearly all walks of early modern life. This kind of transformative, multifarious collaboration, with its capacity to re-value the negative, primarily political connotations of "confusion" that prevailed outside Elizabethan playhouses, also modifies the usual sense of "common understandings" beyond association with either strictly intellectual-religious insights or punning ridicule of those who literally stand under a raised stage. Thus the cover image and title are themselves ingenious lures, since they show and denote a community of under-standers, as imagined by an artist from a later age, and invite an attentive, open-minded reading of West's book and its refreshingly innovative treatment of its historical subject matter.

In this same vein, employing a piece of a Victorian illustration is also fitting, because as West concedes, the effort to appraise a vanished theatrical culture and transmit a clear understanding of it is inevitably conditioned and limited by the circumstances and attitudes of a later time, be it twentieth century, twenty-first century, etc. A principal merit of the book is its recognition that in the 2020s "theatre", "plays", "acting" and other related terms can signify markedly different things than they did four to five hundred years ago. This awareness calls for interrogating, de-familiarizing, and re-articulating the ways in which Elizabethans likened and linked playhouse experiences to practices of confusion, understanding, occupation, eating, gaming, and competing. As West himself states, his approach does not aim to explain what playgoing and play-understanding exactly meant in late sixteenth-early seventeenth-century London, but rather it favors and respects what people at the time themselves said, and thus it "is also propositional, proposing those ways of speaking I pick out as ones that early modern players and playgoers would have recognized" (16). In this regard, he succeeds admirably, deftly coordinating a wealth of contemporary citations from a myriad of primary

sources including poems (such as satires by John Marston, epigrams by John Davies, and journalistic mini-epics by John Taylor the Water Poet), prose texts (some well-known, like Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, Greene's *Groat's-Worth of Wit* and Heywood's *Apology for Actors*, others less familiar, for instance Robert Crowley's *Waie to Wealth,* and *This World's Folly*, by a certain 'I.H.'), treatises and diatribes (such as anti-theatrical tracts by Stephen Gosson, Philip Stubbes, and John Northbrooke), archival records, diary entries, accounts by visitors to London, language handbooks, and many more. In short, an exceptional range and breadth of research material enriches almost every page with impressively versatile erudition as well as lively and stimulating fascination. For as befits the book's subject, play-texts themselves — again, both well-known and obscure — furnish much of the quoted source material, which West applies to his appraisals with a rare, virtuoso gift for elucidating contextual phenomena through incisive analysis of texts, and vice versa. To offer two examples: citation is made of a dialogue between a player and a jig-maker in Robert Tailor's comedy *The Hogge hath Lost His Pearl* (1613) to ingeniously tease out the revealing popularity as well as pungent notoriety of the lost jig called "Garlic," while Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* and its inventive riffs on "deformed" and the thief named "Deformed" become a compelling demonstration piece for how "the language of information, deformation, reformation, like the practice of spelling by syllables, offers a way of understanding what happens through and during the playmakers' work as the reforming, or deforming, and performing of new forms from the matter of words and gestures" (178). This astute contention regarding Elizabethan players' dynamic capacities of transformation in turn gains support from the ensuing reading of Shakespeare's Richard Gloucester, "an indigested and deformed lumpe" (*Henry VI Part 3*, 5.6) who learns through Protean improvisation to "descant on mine owne Deformity" (*Richard III*, 1.1), and in so doing to change negative qualities into potentially advantageous ones.

Indeed, the question of Form – with the word's multiple senses, figurations, variations, and implications – is at the heart of West's study, pertaining to not only its material and historiographical concerns but also its theoretical approach. As is clearly set forth in the Introduction, the philosophers and social scientists who usefully inform the book are ones who have made the question a major element of their thinking and writing. These include Giambattista Vico, whom West avowedly follows "by seeking new experiences in new ways of speaking of them" (9) with reference to Vico's insights on the evolution of new forms of language; Pierre Bourdieu and his well-known theory of the habitus, aptly inflected here as a realized playing-in on the part of participatory stakeholders, in this case public playgoers and professional playmakers; Hans Blumenberg, with his identification of

absolute metaphors – one of these, crucially, is All the World's a Stage – that do not simply follow thoughts and perceptions but have the ability to orient them, and give shape to human engagements with reality; Raymond Williams, and his structures of feeling formulation, which diagnoses a social historical pattern of how experience shapes such seemingly individual but often shared structures, that in turn enable experience to happen in the ways it does, or at least is felt to happen in certain ways at certain times; and perhaps most importantly of all, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose reflections on and investigations into forms of life, along with his pluralistic, flexible models of kinds of statement, possibilities of phenomena, and ways of speaking (Sprechweisen) are deployed with coherent aptness and precise nuance in many of the book's sections. In recent Shakespearean and early modern literary criticism, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on circulation (of ideas, of forms, of energies, texts, commodities, fabrics, etc.), to the point where the term has risked becoming a buzzword, but West rigorously demonstrates the "circulation in common" (15) of the ways of speaking and forms of life in the specific – neither universal nor particular – circumstances of playing and playgoing, and of both experiencing and commenting on these phenomena, in late sixteenth to early seventeenth century England. Hence the primacy of the term "common," with its connotations both familiar and frequently encountered (as in "commonplace," informed by structures of feeling), and of things collectively shared, recognized, and understood (as in "common grounds" and "common knowledge") by often ephemeral but nonetheless attention-getting communities of players and playgoers. West persuasively asserts, and goes on to show, how experiences of "playgoing v of confusion, of understanding, of dislocation, of appetite and consumption, of contest –were the stuff of which plays were made" (6).

Given this theoretical as well as documentary historiographical perspective, West's field of inquiry and prime term of reference aptly becomes Playing, rather than the more conventional and less dynamic Theatre and/or Drama of previous studies. His approach and tone, however, are never polemical, and in fact he graciously and generously acknowledges the abundant scholarly literature of which he has an extraordinary command (too numerous to cite here, beyond important studies by Gurr, Mullaney, Orgel, Howard, Smith, and Lin). In some sense, then, Playing also becomes the book's protagonist, especially since it tends to be personified, even as it is disavowed as a master discourse and carefully distinguished as something that "sometimes posed as one" (28). West's convincingly argued and scrupulously supported readings, however, mitigate the potential dangers of personification, and justify his ways of using the term. By the end of the book, one does perceive how Playing – encompassing playhouses and playgoers – is the objectively accurate, suitably comprehensive designation for the complex, interwoven

sociological, material, somatic, ecological, culinary, artistic, and practical-ideational phenomena that the author traces. Disciplined thought and fine distinctions also mark West's coinage, or rather resuscitation, of a keyword for characterizing the paying customers/understanders at Elizabethan London's outdoor public performance venues (and it ought to be noted that the book does recognize a major experiential difference between outdoor and indoor playhouses, concentrating attention on the former and deliberately foregoing extended assessment of the latter). The word is "audients," introduced about a third of the way through the book, identified as "a homophone for a collection of individuals," "a dispositive assembly that is both collective and discrete," and explained as "a helpful irritant: it suggests how confounding and difficult it is to reimagine what audients did at a play" (109). The following chapters maintain "audients" as the preferred plural noun for the heterogeneous auditors/spectators of plays performed in public, and again one is persuaded that it is an especially insightful and salient term to use in its multivalent context. "Audients" is thus a dynamic component of the book's critical apparatus, advancing as well as focusing new, subtle, and diversified understandings of the often generic and sometimes trivialized notion of audience participation.

A smartly playful and engagingly interactive spirit pervades the sequence of chapters, from the very outset with a variety-pack preamble of headnote/guideposts, including Wittgenstein's observation that "a good likeness refreshes the understanding . . . A new saying is like a fresh seed which is tossed into the ground of discussion" (vii) and the following all-important exchange from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (to which West returns, and interprets with originality and acumen):

> Balthazar But this will be a mere confusion,
> And hardly shall we all be understood.
> Hieronimo It must be so, for the conclusion
> Shall proove the invention, and all was good.
> (4.1.179-82; viii)

Following the Introduction, with its acknowledgment of new approaches to historical evidence and new discoveries of theatrical documents and archeological sites in London, and then its setting forth of the book's critical agenda and theoretical orientations, Chapter One nimbly visits and comments on a diverse spectrum of sources, including pro- and anti-theatrical ones, to show how Elizabethan Playing was above all an inclusive activity, a strongly physical form of action with the capacity to rouse motions and stimulate the senses. Audients at the playhouses were not passive consumers but active communicants, who in various ways were complicit with and responsible to

the enactments they beheld, heard, and smelled on raised stages. West provides his own new perspectives on the *theatrum mundi* trope, on playmakers' use of the Horatian defense of their practice as a usefully educational form of delight, and on the Puritan critique of playing as not only sinful in and of itself but essentially lacking in any utility at all. As plays like *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Hamlet* themselves evoke, Playing, with its stimulating flood of sensations, could promote *Distraction*, which "is the means through which the play's action takes place: no distraction, no action" (50). Although some reference to Chaucerian *game* vs./and *ernest* tropes, and to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* study could be helpful here, West's pithy assessment directs attention to the interactively ludic quality of Elizabethan Londoners' experiences of the playhouses during a time of rapidly changing economic and institutional practices. This focus distinguishes Chapter Two, entitled *Occupatio*, where West poses and explores the crucial questions of how "did playing call attention to itself among other institutions within which it emerged and toward which it came to seem so irresponsible?", and "How did those other institutions first recognize the practices of playing as an intrusion or, as they often described it, an occupation?" (55). With acute critical skill, he pursues his inquiry through application of Blumenberg's model of *Umbesetzung*, or "reoccupation," as a process in which changed historical circumstances turn old questions and answers into problems that invite a search for solutions, but rather than attaining them keeps the questions open. West thus explains how, even if commercial public performance and its spaces were not actually new in Elizabethan England, the period's culture of playing became aware of itself as a new kind of problem, and strikingly "embraced this startling manifestation of its own novelty" (70). Connecting scripts like *New Custom* and *Sir Thomas More* to a contemporary self-consciousness of temporal as well as spatial *passages* (emphasis mine), he elucidates how a negatively political term like *innovation* could become, in the reoccupations made by Elizabethan playing, a motive and a cue for re-valuations of the past, and plural, suggestively innovative anticipations of the future.

The next two chapters, on "Understanders" and "Confusion," share an agenda of questioning, closely examining, and re-defining the familiar meanings often attached to these terms. Trans-valuation is a key leitmotiv here, as West first convincingly adjusts the usual twentieth-twenty-first century naming and evaluations of Elizabethan playgoers as "groundlings" or "spectators" or "audience members" to a recognition of them as *understanders*, and then unfolds the intricate and revealing implications of this term in its early modern context. For *understanding* meant literally to stand under, to be "physically sub-jected to the stage, thrown under it rather than independent of it" (83). At the same time, the word indicated the cognitive process associated with it today, but often with a connotation of a spiritual or even divinely

given insight. *Understanding* thus could refer to the highest form of cognition, yet it also suggested lapses of thinking into reactive physicality. Making this scenario even more complex and fascinating is the fact that in contrast to the prevalent definition in today's world, intellectual understanding was closely linked with physical experience, in the early modern world. Through judicious and nuanced readings of texts by Shakespeare, Marston, Beaumont, and especially Jonson, West again brilliantly clarifies the dense and intricate meanings of being an *understander* in the world of Elizabethan playing, showing how thought and feeling, cognition and sensation are bound together in their contextual *habitus*, enabling a similar give-and-take interaction between playgoers and players. While contemporary anti-theatricalists saw such circulations of energy in crowded, socially mixed playhouses as occasions for dangerously disordering confusion, the same term, in Chapter 4, takes on a new value as a signifier of the creative pouring together of mingled audients. Applying specific insights into such vivid, revelatory examples as the 1594 Gray's Inn attempted staging of *The Comedy of Errors*, which was interrupted and devolved into a Night of Errors, the book's central chapter demonstrates how this kind of theatrical Confusion can be understood as truly poetic, in the sense that it *makes* something.

West aptly and wittily identifies Shakespeare's Plautine comedy as "confusion's masterpiece" (115), before moving on to tease out the generative confusions in Christopher Sly's "Comontie" spin on comedy: these affirm the contingent and unpredictable qualities of Elizabethan playhouse experience. In a brief "Interlude" on "Playing, Thinking," he identifies such confusions as "a kind of thinking in common" (143), setting up Chapter 5, on "Supposes," which once more uses philological rigor and multi-disciplinary agility to explain how to *suppose* was a top priority task as well as recreational pleasure for audients. Whether playgoers were accused by opponents like Rainoldes, Gosson, and Stubbes of excessively supposing and thus succumbing to ravishment by plays and interludes, or in a kind of fan fiction pastime they acted out snippets of greatest hit speeches and actions of professional London players – as testified by the Cambridge *Parnassus* plays – or they were prompted by the Chorus of *Henry V* to suppose that the girdle of the Globe Theatre's walls confines two mighty monarchies, they continually engaged in a process of transformation. As West shows, this process could involve thorough training and exercise of the senses, carried out in such practices as teaching students to voice Latin by syllables before understanding the language, and then hearing/observing the multiple noises, utterances, and movements of players and fellow audients, ranging from whispering, sighing, weeping, standing still, walking slowly to running quickly, declaiming, bellowing, ranting, fleering, grinning, stamping, swaggering, and more. Also fittingly, this sensory workout was indeed global, as it comprised not only seeing, hearing, and feeling, but

smelling, tasting, and digestion: "Eating" is the title of Chapter 6, which eloquently confirms how "playing and food retailing in early modern London were spheres of activity entwined economically, legally, and (for lack of a clearer word) ideologically" (186). Once more West parses and illuminates the links and likenesses between playing/playgoing and related fields of experience, explaining how significant and signifying foods and drinks –among them nuts, gingerbread, bread, bottle ale, and especially apples – with their capacity to be cracked, guzzled, fizzed, thrown about, etc. could be transformed from objects of consumption to ones of active exchange. As documentary records testify, playgoers were known to use alimentary items in distracting ways – players risked being pippin-pelted – and when they did so they could alter theatre's supposedly moral nutrition by making it an opportunity for aggressive communion, in a material and metaphoric hodge-podge. In both literal and figurative ways, audients *hungered* (emphasis mine) for performances, and West cites references to wide open, gaping mouths as signs of this appetite, which could involve gasping, singing, and devouring, as in a passage from Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London*, and in one of *Tarlton's Jests*. Although the book could devote slightly more attention to music and related musical phenomena, such as the contrast perceived by some civic authorities and anti-theatrical polemicists between desired social harmonies and the cacophony of playhouses, its concluding chapter, "*Non Plus*," resonantly stresses how playing tended to present itself as a contest. To avoid spoiling future readers' learning and enjoyment, here I will limit myself to praising West's outstanding scrutiny of the multi-layered links between bearbaiting and human playing, and his persuasive stress on the playhouse as a site of *encounter*, of in-process, competitive, and exciting acts involving challenges, provocations, and uncertain outcomes.

The book playfully ends by "holding its peace," as the fitting flourish for its "Trying Conclusions" with a concise, magisterial case study of the raucously jesting, singing, caterwauling scene (2.3) of *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. Solidly building on previous scholarship – the nearly sixty small-print pages of meticulous, up-to-date, and exceptionally helpful endnotes could also be published independently, as an optimum guide to research and resources on the subject – this truly ground-breaking monograph offers an extraordinarily rich, diverse banquet of ideas and critical insights that promise not only to change and re-direct our knowledge, but pave the way for fruitful commentary and enlightened understandings to come. As an added bonus, the author writes with lucid precision, appealing wit, and eloquent flair. Well-turned, memorable phrases abound, and inventive humour spices his lively pages: to quote but one of numerous examples, West mentions Bruce Smith's important study of *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, and then posits that we "should attend to the olfactor as well"

(201). In short, it is a pleasure as well as an illumination to read West's book. Wittgenstein proposes that good likenesses refresh the understanding, but the intellectual verve and unique freshness of *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion* go beyond pertinent comparisons. For while its title and topic may involve the common, as a scholarly achievement it is singular, in the best sense of the word.

Works Cited

Gurr, Andrew. 2004. *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howard, Jean. 1993. *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*. London and New York: Routledge.

Huizinga, Johan. 1970. *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture*. London: Paladin.

Kyd, Thomas. 2013. *The Spanish Tragedy*, edited by Michael Neill. New York: Norton.

Lin, Erika. 2012. *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mullaney, Steven. 1988. *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Orgel, Stephen. 2013. *Spectacular Performances: Essays on Theatre, Imagery, Books, ands Selves in Early Modern England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Smith, Bruce. 1999. *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Yvonne Bezrucka*

Catharsis at the Bekka. Mariacristina Cavecchi, Lisa Mazoni, Margaret Rose, and Giuseppe Scutellà's *SceKspir al BeKKa*[1]

Abstract

The book focuses on the use of performing chosen scenes from playwrights of the past – in this specific case William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* – to exteriorise hidden emotional knots – so to compare the effects these produced before, and after being acted out. Love, rage, jealousy, violence, and other offences connected with the topics of the play are thus discussed, examined, and finally performed. The performing part is thus a real cathartic experience, in that the consequences of violence and death are tested via an always unique performance. The actors become the real Kantian 'as if'– via the als ob experiential jump – as if they really were the enacted character. We also, as spectators, cathartically dissect the text via our emotions until our theatrical, hypothetical self – embodying a different other –, is given the possibility of becoming a new, and changed, self.

Keywords: performing arts; benefits of enacting deeply felt experiences; *als ob* Kantian theory; emotional-freeing catharsis; rage let-out; Shakespeare and the law

Talking of catharsis today, and not being an auditor in a class on Ancient Philosophy, is something a bit out of the ordinary, but this is, indeed, the experience that awaits the audience of the *pièce SceKspir at the Bekka*, a happening and a performance that took place at the Cesare Beccaria Minors' Penal Institute in Milan. The enlightened ideas of Cesare Beccaria[2] – a forerunner of Michel Foucault's attack on prisons and their penal code (cf. Foucault 1975) – criticised capital punishment and the law itself in its double-standard of averring and justifying committing murders, paradoxically, with the intent to prevent and stop them. Beccaria saw the prison as a useless institution, incapable,

[1] Milano: Edizioni Clichy, 2020. ISBN 9788867997077, pp. 216

[2] Cesare Beccaria's juridical work, *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) made him one of the most enlightened voices speaking against the death penalty and its effectiveness as a detriment and preventive action. On this see Bezrucka 2008.

* University of Verona- yvonne.bezrucka@univr.it

most of times, of producing remorse for the misdeeds done. The eighteenth-century Italian lawyer and penologist was the first to study the usefulness of death sentences – capital punishment – as a deterrent and its effectiveness in producing doubts and real remorse in the offenders.

These are the right premises through which we should observe the performances being staged at the BeKKa. Romeo Montecchi (Montague), personified by a young convict of the Bekka, becomes Shakespeare's protagonist with Juliet of the eponymous *Romeo and Juliet* play. Romeo is being put under trial via the use of the contemporary laws pertaining minors, with the result of a bold and engaging re–actualisation of the old medieval laws into the prison laws of the present legal system. This is also the frame for a discussion about what is right, and what is not, in the present legal arena. The essays in the book address various topics. Let us summarise what the various contributors have to say.

Elio Franzini, the Rector of the Università Statale di Milano, speaks of the play in the light of the new rational thought of the Enlightenment engaged in trying to stop the internal infernal drives – the focus-theme of the play – depicting individualities living their lives in a new epoch and its still provisional new syntheses.

Francesca Perrini, Director of the Minors' Centre for Juvenile Justice of the Lombardy area, sees the performance at the Bekka as a possibility for the young convicts to examine one's identity via the embodiment and personification with another possible character as to measure their identity into the mirror of the other, generating thus the Aristotelian catharsis that produces change.

As Francesca Perrini did, Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose have followed the development of the *piéce* "Romeo Montecchi: innocent or culpable?". They both believe in the social function of the theatre, for their actors and the spectators as well, who might change their ideas via the performance. They thus decide to conclude the representation with the duel between Romeo and Tybalt, imagining Romeo under a trial via our contemporary Italian Minors' Law. A procedure envisaged by the new law 448, D.P.R: 22.09.1988, which foresees the possibility of using artistic and educational opportunities for the young convicts to revise their deeds via the symbolical screen of theatrical performances. In this spirit, a fake trial has been set up to elaborate events and to see new outcomes via a common effort of the young convicts, followed by all foreseen legal authorities (cf. 20-1). Giving them the possibility to create a space of liberty where all is admitted, actors are, in reality, trying out an opportunity of 'being' different people from whom, at present, they are, so that not only the actors, but also the directors – as a final result – end up being at a loss for justifying both detention and penalty. Mariacristina Cavecchi thus gives her attention at the use of Shakespeare in the IPMs (Istituti Penali Minorili), not only in Italy, but also abroad, relying on the positive outcomes of such performances to induce a revision of one's life now cathartically seen via a different 'bodily' experience, rather than a merely rational one.[3]

Pierangelo Barone finds the resulting positivity of such experience in its

pedagogical dimension. Indeed, actors/convicts are given the possibility of becoming someone else in performing other human beings different from those who we as spectators, and them as actors, are, and different also from those we might find in our usual environment, places, and spaces.

Daniela Carpi studies and illustrates the caesurae between the Middle Age and the Renaissance from a legal point of view. Indeed, Carpi has dedicated great attention to the Critical Legal Studies which she has initiated and spread in Italy via AIDEL (Associazione Italiana Diritto e Letteratura, founded in 2007). She thus sees *Romeo and Juliet* as a paradigmatic upturn of the Medieval private and vindicative justice, that will, from then on, and progressively, change into a public system of judgement, laid in the hands of authorities that study and challenge it, and, that are thus also entitled to change the common law itself. Private vendetta and personalistic law, characterised by corruption, are neither tolerated nor respected anymore. In her essay Daniela Carpi compares *Romeo and Juliet* with *Hamlet,* focussing on their different value systems. In *Hamlet* the two systems come to a final collision when the – up to then – Prince's full authority is challenged and disrespected, whereas in *Romeo and Juliet* the process is ongoing, diffused, and already spread in all layers of society. Equity will thus need to come in, to limit the sharpness of the letter of the law, mitigating it, via the consideration of all circumstances of a crime, that the Common Law foresees. Carpi thus concludes her essay examining the legitimacy of rank created by the link between name, surname, and identity. Duties related to a family name often outreach the will of those in question: Romeo represents thus the ethical reading of a name that is more than a name being connected to an ancestry. Hence, Carpi focusses on the authority of the *patria potestas* towards Juliet which greatly limits her liberty and rights, an outcome Shakespeare contests.

The second part of the book focuses on more technical aspects. Margaret Rose, with Cavecchi, Manzoni, and Scutellà, directed a creative lab to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet*, using the play to focus the audience's attention on the male protagonists, setting the plot in the present time (2018), where the foci of attention are the prison and the court of law. The actors belong thus to different ethnicities and are heterogenous also for class and education. Competing groups react strongly to sexuality. Romeo is prepared to renounce to his name for Juliet and kills Tybalt. Also, as the trial is being debated, the actors discuss with the stage director reflecting on the play to understand their present reality.

Simone Pastorino develops a way of focusing on the law concerning minors which provides opportunities to reflect on events, facts, and their consequences, via the minors' penal law, during their detention and its consequences.

Lucio Camaldo focuses on the possibilities that young convicts have, after taking some personality test, to educate themselves whilst in prison. The performance therefore focuses also on the possibility for young convicts to claim their rights in the suspension of the detention period, and in obtaining

[3] Cf. my encyclopedia reference on 'performing arts': Bezrucka 2011.

thus a minors' probation time. These possibilities are tested out by the Romeo-actor in some specific scenes.

The book ends with Giuseppe Scutellà's theatrical text on Romeo, which is the result of twenty-five years of performing Shakespeare in prison, a proof of the constant value of performance and the performing arts, in its both bodily and mind-changing cathartic overtures.

It is thus this openness of a text that also gives to art its due: 'personalising' a text which talks about the lives of others, into a bodily experience of something that we probably will never live out in real life. Sometimes, it is only via the identification with an intermediary actor, proxy, or an avatar, that the gift of the hermeneutic and cathartic process entailed in art can really start.

The advantage of personifying another human being becomes clear via the programme of the Beccaria minor convicts' theatre group – underage minors who are out of prison only on probation – to permit them to participate in the play as to see whether they can be freed as to re-join the civil society. They are led by a series of experts, some of whom we have already mentioned in their activities in the theatre lab. The Teatro PuntoZero Beccaria lab, BeKKa in short, proposes thus activities that free the convicts from the limits of prisons in that as actors they are invited to free themselves from inhibitions and fears. Actors by magic become thus others evading the person they are in real life. In line with the principles of the Restorative Justice, according to which imprisonment is an *extrema ratio* wherever possible to be avoided.

The activities of PuntoZero comprise also the opportunity of a formative course with external staff to prepare experts to act within prison environments and detention contexts. In this sense, the essay by Simone Pastorino, on the necessity, in the case of minors, of a multidisciplinary intervention is of relevance, as is the legal context of the probation period examined by Lucio Camaldo.

Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose, since 2012, have concentrated their attention on the social evolution of our society and its major changes via courses at the Università Statale of Milan, addressing their students via Shakespeare's theatre, and courses on themes like: immigration, integration in a multi-ethnic society, exactly what is needed to have the right instruments to address our contemporary world. For all these reasons this is a very special book worth reading and studying.

Works Cited

Bezrucka, Yvonne. 2011. "Performing Arts/Performance Art". In *Consumer Culture Encyclopedia*, edited by Dale Southerton, 3 vols., 3.1079-81. Sage: New York and London.

— 2008. "A Tale of Two Cities: Charles Dickens's Political Examination". In *Practising Equity, Addressing Law: Equity in Law and Literature*, edited by Daniela Carpi, 317-33. Heidelberg: Winter.

Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison.* Paris: Gallimard.

Petra Bjelica*

The Role of Digital Storytelling in Educational Uses When Staging Shakespeare: a Case Study of a Lecture Performance – *Gamlet* (*Hamlet*)

Abstract

This paper investigates the utilisation of digital storytelling in theatre, specifically focusing on its application in staging and adapting Shakespearean plays. By examining the definitions of digital storytelling and lecture performance, the paper explores how an autobiographical approach present in both these genres, can be relevant in today's educational contexts and remediation of Shakespeare's works through digitally mediated narratives. The analysis of a lecture performance called *Gamlet* (a Russian name for Hamlet), that incorporates elements of digital storytelling, illustrates their various applications in theatre. Furthermore, the paper presents arguments that can serve as guiding principles for future student work in this field that might enhance the critical abilities and enrich the sense of self of these students, as it constitutes an educational model that goes against the commodification of knowledge.

Keywords: digital storytelling; lecture performance; Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Shakespeare in education

"Who's there?"
(*Hamlet*, 1.1.1)

The narrative that might unfold when we respond to Shakespeare's famous opening line would indeed be relevant to the central inquiry pursued in this paper. However, in this particular paper, the question of 'who is there' is directed not towards the analysis of the text of *Hamlet*, but towards the students engaging with Shakespeare and utilising digital storytelling to convey their own encounters with his works. Specifically, the focus lies on exploring how digital storytelling can serve as an effective and innovative approach to reading and staging Shakespeare. Considering educational practices when it comes to the genre of the lecture performance, this essay will analyse how digital storytelling participates in the process of meaning-making using as a case study *Gamlet*, a lecture performance that I wrote, performed in, and co-directed.

* University of Verona - petra.bjelica@univr.it

© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 9:1 (2023), 225-43
https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it

1. Digital Storytelling as a Theatre Practice with Educational Purposes

In the broadest sense, digital storytelling is a way of telling stories by using digital media. More precisely, it "is the practice of creating a short movie by combining digital artifacts such as images, text, video clips, animation, and music using a computer-based program" (Robin and Mcneil 2019, 2). It is characterised by traditional storytelling, revolving "around a chosen theme, often contain[ing] a particular viewpoint", and most importantly, according to Robin, its essential element is an "emotional viewpoint" of the story (2016, 19).

In Megan Alrutz's opinion, digital storytelling is defined as a practice "of making and sharing of personal narratives through recorded voice-overs, digital photography and video, music and/or digitally composed multi-media collages" (2013, 4), but also "video games, content designed for the Internet, mobile apps, social media, interactive cinema, virtual reality, augmented reality, and even intelligent toy systems and electronic kiosks . . . " (Handler Miller 2020, 4). Alrutz draws a distinction between "a wide range of self-produced media such as blogs and podcasts that employ story and digital technologies for personal expression" (2013, 45-6), including social media (Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok and others), and a narrower use that is of more interest to her work. In the latter case, "digital storytelling refers to the creation of two to three minute personal stories performed through a combination of first person, narrated voice-overs, still and/or moving images and music or sound" (46).

This paper relies on a definition of digital storytelling that combines digital video, recorded voiceovers and digitally composed music, used in theatre for the adaptation and remediation of Shakespeare's text. Alrutz emphasises that many of these practices are already present in contemporary theatre-making while little examination has been carried out in terms of how they can intentionally create critical performance (2013, 4). Although Altruz is focused on applied theatre and work with young people, her analysis and comments are highly valuable to any theatre practice that involves digital storytelling. More precisely, in insisting on the fact that digital storytelling can rethink and negotiate the ways the young are represented and engaged in society, she opens the path to consideration of digital storytelling as a self-conscious theatre praxis providing a tool for rethinking our own (meta)narratives as subjects, creators and society members. By quoting the scholar of applied theatre, Helen Nicholson, who "argues that in theatre, *knowledge or meaning making* is inherently 'embodied, culturally located and socially distributed", Altruz illuminates the ways digital storytelling creates a space "of creating *new knowledge*, around self, others, and society" (ibid., emphasis mine).

However, her most far-reaching insight for the discussion in this paper

is that "digital storytelling, as both a devising process and a performance product, functions as a *political act of cultural production*" (Altruz 2013, 45, emphasis mine). Following that perspective, the idea that personal is always political becomes more obvious in digital storytelling. Altruz comments:

> . . . performing one's personal story can and does constitute *the making and disruption of systems of power*. To tell your story for a public, to share your (perhaps marginalised, new, unpopular or uncomfortable) narratives, has the potential to affect how each of us sees the past, participates in the present and imagines the future . . . *disrupt hegemonic narratives* . . . To perform/tell our stories is to refashion existing ideology, identity and truth. (44-5, 51, emphasis mine).

These features are far from exclusive to digital storytelling (one might even rightly say that they add up to rather a banal conclusion) but they open the space for discussion about how digital storytelling can be a "framework from which to critique discourses and systems of power" (51). Especially because, as Esther Maloney notes, digital innovation in self-expression in young people is vast (2021, 3). From her experience of work in applied theatre and of digital storytelling with students, Maloney draws another relevant yet opposing point. Some of them seem frustrated and inhibited from creating new content and are reluctant to express themselves since in their opinion "everything has essentially already been made or will be made 'way better' than what they could ever do, so 'what's the point?'" (ibid.). Altruz sees a solution for encouraging students in theatre. She suggests that "it is the living, breathing, embodied work of theatre that can *disencumber* young people, somewhat silenced by the digital gloss and perfection that surrounds them, to share their stories through an interdisciplinary praxis" (2013, 55, italics mine) – something that seems alarmingly needed at many universities today.

However, Altruz only touches the surface of what Mark Fisher, in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (2009) has masterfully illuminated. While working at Goldsmiths College in London he had a chance to encounter and observe the generation of students who seemed to him politically disengaged, depressed, with learning difficulties, characterised by what he calls *reflective impotence* and *depressive hedonia*[1] (Fisher 2009, 21, emphasis mine). He sees the cause of these symptoms in the "students'

[1] "Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition I'm referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing' - but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle" (Fisher 2013, 21).

ambiguous structural position, stranded between their old role as *subjects of disciplinary institutions* and their new status as *consumers of services*" (22, emphasis mine). In contemporary society, students are subjected to:

> indefinite postponement: Education as a lifelong process . . . Training that persists for as long as your working life continues . . . Work you take home with you . . . Working from home, homing from work. A consequence of this 'indefinite' mode of power is that external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing. Control only works if you are complicit with it. Hence the Burroughs figure of the 'Control Addict': the one who is addicted to control, but also, inevitably, the one who has been taken over, possessed by Control. (22)

And although Fisher's analysis pointed to a deeply alarming situation concerning education and mental health, his legacy can be followed in addressing a condition that has progressively and disturbingly worsened. One of the most common symptoms in students is the inability to focus, or, as Fisher puts it, "their inability to synthesize time into any *coherent narrative*" (24, emphasis mine). This paper opens the discussion on whether digital storytelling might be a strategy to engage the students in a more compelling and profound way. This claim is perhaps supported by the research that claims how

> teachers' use of multimedia helps students retain new information and aids in the comprehension of difficult material. Students who create digital stories learn to organize their ideas, ask questions, express opinions, construct narratives, and present their ideas and knowledge in an individual and meaningful way. (Ohler qtd in Robin and Mcneil 2019, 3)

Hence, digital storytelling, as a unique approach that utilises personal narratives created through digital tools, offers several notable advantages, particularly in the educational engagement of students with Shakespeare's works. The use of digital media, which students are already familiar with, might facilitate the articulation of complex concepts and ideas with more ease. Then again, digital storytelling serves as a valuable starting point for individuals to make their own stories visible, while simultaneously recognising that the construction of a personal narrative is influenced by the performative nature inherent in various media. Lastly, in the collaborative process of theatre-making, students have the opportunity to create, express, and take ownership of their own stories, thereby establishing a deeper connection to Shakespeare's text, and hopefully progressing from their existing media literacy to a more highly developed competence in close reading and the critical evaluation of texts.

Moreover, it could be a way of dealing with the second important issue Fisher raises when discussing his students – their mental health. As Robin and Mcneil also claim, "in health sciences, digital storytelling can be a tool for patients and health science professionals to share experiences, cope with illnesses, and add a human element to health problems" (3). By adopting a confessional tone, the use of digital storytelling encourages individuals to approach Shakespeare's texts from a personal perspective and contribute something new and unique.

2. What is *Gamlet*?

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate the *disencumbering* role of digital storytelling in Shakespeare adaptations on the example of *Gamlet,* a lecture performance premiered at the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival in August 2022. It was created by *The Brew Company*, a group of artists and scholars

> devoted to interdisciplinary, multimedial and experimental contemporary theatre, with a focus on the dialogue between academic research and artistic practice; more precisely . . . the mixture of literary and critical theory, comparative literature (Shakespeare and Dostoevsky studies) and directing, acting, scenic movement, music, video and scenic design. *The Brew Company* draws inspiration from the genre of lecture performance, as a contemporary form of *performative criticism*, aesthetics and discursive practice. One of our aims is to offer a fresh approach to adapting and staging Shakespeare and create an enchanting, immersive experience for the audience. (Bjelica 2022) [2]

As the founder, author of the performance text and one of the performers, I participated in the collaborative process of staging and creating *Gamlet* by this newly formed collective from Serbia.[3] *Gamlet* is based on the research done as part of my doctoral thesis and "on Dostoevsky's interpretation of Shakespeare's character, including a wider discursive field of references to *Hamlet* and Russian Hamletism. The text is a pastiche of criticism and literary interpretations and it is a parody of the theoretical and critical inquiry of

[2] This is the Facebook page of the company: https://www.facebook.com/TheBrewCompanySerbia (Accessed 1 May 2023).

[3] The following group of people participated in the production of *Gamlet*. Performer: Marta Bjelica; author and performer: Petra Bjelica; director: Ana Pinter; producer: Marija Milosavljević; video artist and editor: Ivana Rajić; video editor: Tamara Krstanović; stage designer and lightning technician: Marija Varga; music designer and sound technician: Anđelina Mićić; costume designer: Stevan Stevanović; technical assistant: Nenad Pinter.

answering the question 'Who is Hamlet?'" (Bjelica 2022). Dostoevsky's reading of *Hamlet* is urgently relevant today in the context of topics raised in this paper, because he deals extensively with the question 'what is to be done' by the youth.

3. Lecture Performance

In order to understand better how the tools of digital storytelling functioned in *Gamlet*, we should take into account the genre of lecture-performance since it regulates the codes of communicating the digital tools that were used. Both digital storytelling and some features of lecture performance, as we will see, have similar aims and mechanisms. As Landar clearly puts it:

> Lecture performances incorporate elements of both the *academic lecture* and of *artistic performance*. They function simultaneously as *meta-lectures and as meta-performances*, and as such challenge established ideas about *the production of knowledge* and *meaning* in each of the forms to which they refer. . . . As a hybrid format, the lecture performance always participates *in more than one context*. (Qtd in Frank 2013, 7, emphasis mine)

Moreover, apart from exploring the way knowledge is generated and questioning "hegemonic narratives", in Ladnar's opinion, many lecture performances are autobiographical because they use autobiographical narration and a form of storytelling that directly addresses the audience (8). In that sense, the audience is invited to participate in the performance and is an integral part of it. Rike Frank describes lecture-performance "as a self-reflexive format . . . suggesting that, at its best, it creates conversational spaces that interrogate the social conditions and processes of knowing" (2013, 5). Lecture performance, in Frank's view, enables another very important possibility, to "experience knowledge as a reflexive formation that is as much aesthetic as social" (5), which might be of inspiration to students who are not used to engage creatively with educational content. Nevertheless, in its usual form, lecture performance is "a commentary directed against (neoliberal) approaches of economisation and commoditisation of knowledge production" (8). As such, it can be a very important tool in developing critical thinking among students, and a way for them to always have in mind our opening question – who's there? To use Frank's words, lecture performance is "an analytical form that turns attention to the way we experience information as a twofold transaction: as an act of structuring controlled by a subject and as an act of subjectivisation – that is, of becoming structured" (8). When applied in conjunction with digital storytelling in theatre, this genre might

prove highly effective in making intricate concepts easily understandable and relatable for students. Digital storytelling can leverage the established assumptions and framework provided by lecture-performance to explore the staging of subjectivity and the portrayal of diverse identities, encompassing factors such as neoliberal economy and its influence on education.

4. *Gamlet*

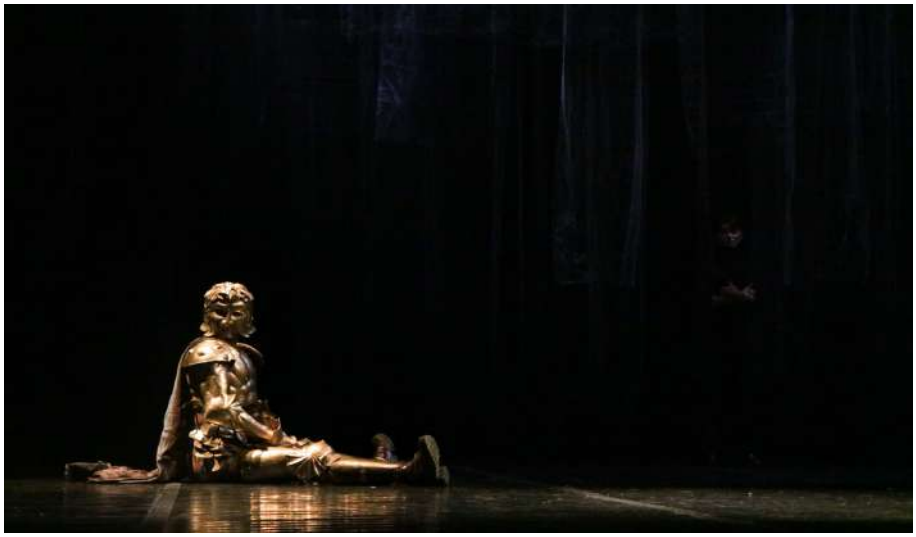


Fig. 1: *Gamlet*, beginning of the second act at Teatro Camploy. Photo by Ivana Rajić

In the following section of my essay I focus on how we used the genre of lecture performance and what were the examples of digital storytelling in *Gamlet*, both as personal narrative choices in the process of creation and the concrete use of digital tools in the performance.

Firstly, I incorporated digital storytelling into my adaptation as a means to express my personal narrative which encompassed *Hamlet*, Dostoevsky's works, the process of academic writing, the conditions of academic education, and trends in contemporary adaptation and staging of Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Hamlet*. Through digital storytelling, I aimed to explore these themes more intimately, using visual imagery to supplement and enhance the narrative beyond text. It allowed me to delve into the intricate aspects of my subjectivity, and to examine my personal connection to performance, creativity, writing, theatre, arts, femininity, and masculinity. Given that my sister Marta Bjelica portrayed Hamlet in the production, and we extensively employed digital video making in the show, digital storytelling provided a

means to explore our intertwined personal and professional relationships. Lastly, digital storytelling can be observed in its relation to the text of *Gamlet,* which was a collage of dramaturgical choices influenced by personal associations with the topics at hand. The performance text was devised as a combination of my lecture segments and voiceovers, while the character of Hamlet on stage remained silent.

The underlying narrative that drove the creation of *Gamlet* revolved around the challenges and complexities of staging an original performance based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. On a personal level, this endeavour posed numerous daunting questions across methodological, theoretical, ideological, aesthetic, and political dimensions. These questions included considerations about whether there were more pressing themes/plays that deserved to be staged and what approach was suitable for tackling the play in the first place. Essentially, the creative process involved a complete transformation of the academic dissertation into a spectacle employing post-dramatic theatre techniques, digital storytelling, and elements of lecture, dance, and movement. The resulting cultural product assumed the form and genre of a performative political act. The political aspect of *Gamlet* was inspired by above mentioned opinions of Mark Fisher and many authors of similar ideological position. In an interview conducted by the *Persona Theatre Company*, which was later published in Greek translation, I made an effort to pinpoint several sources and influences that shaped the performance. In addition to excerpts from my thesis and poetry, the production incorporated various elements:

> Everything we saw, worked on, or read certainly left a trace; by principle of taste, some things were more important than others, sometimes in manner of unintentional references. But we mostly draw inspiration from other genres, arts and media. We were inspired by puppet theatre, circus, *commedia dell'arte*, Meyerhold's biomechanics, Derek Jarman's and Maya Deren's work, Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*, Bergman's *Persona*, the music of Orthodox chants and hymns, electronic, dance music and noise music, just to give some examples. We dealt with references very freely. The whole text is in fact a pastiche of quotations from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, critical literature about *Hamlet* and Russian Hamletism, paragraphs from Dostoevsky's *The Man from the Underground*, *The Double*, *Demons*, and quotations from a long list of works that could only analogously be connected with the phenomenon of *Hamlet*: Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, an interview with John Berger, Lacan's, Foucault's, and Althusser's ideas on power and subjectivity, Borges's short story, Rilke's and T. S. Eliot's poems, etc. (Bjelica 2023)

In line with the lecture performance genre, the beginning of *Gamlet* consists of an introductory segment delivered by the lecturer (Fig. 2). As the lights illuminated the stage, a suit of armour rested in the foreground

before I made my entrance to deliver the prologue. Drawing inspiration from Shakespearean prologues, I introduced myself, provided a summary of the plot, and offered the audience a glimpse of what lies ahead. This prologue served as a paratext, hinting at an interpretative perspective, and reflected my complex and contradictory relationship with *Hamlet*, as well as the challenges I faced during my PhD. My performance style embraced humour, infusing a comedic atmosphere that tempered the provocative and ironic nature of my remarks. It could be argued that I appropriated Hamlet's rhetoric, employing a metacommentary on my role as both performer, director, and spectator in my own production.

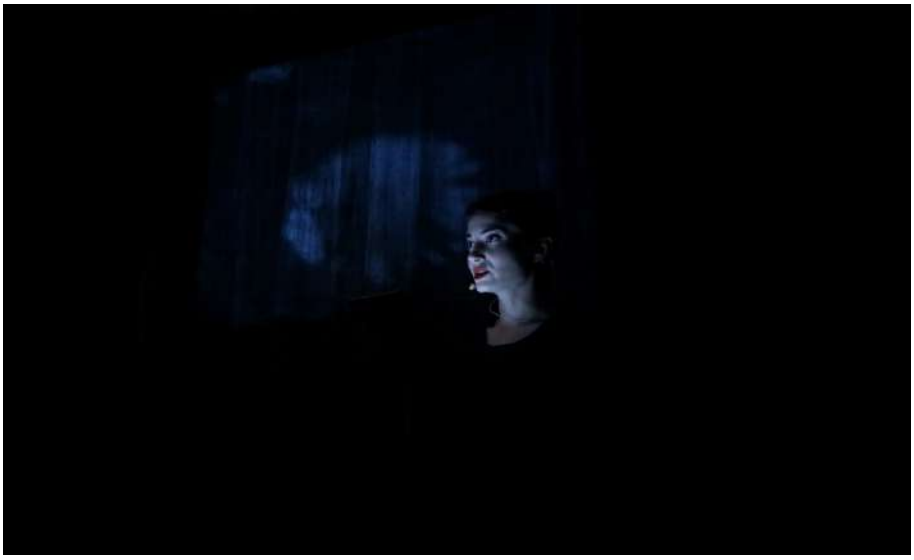


Fig. 2: the beginning of *Gamlet*. Photo by Ivana Rajić

In order to showcase the pertinent themes within the lecture performance genre and establish an ideological framework for the remainder of the analysis of *Gamlet*, I include the entire prologue in this paper. It serves to highlight not only the significance of digital storytelling as one of key elements, but also to emphasise the dynamic of the relationship between myself and the main performer on stage, my sister, portraying the character of Hamlet.

> Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.
> I am Dr Petra Bjelica. Tonight you will watch *Gamlet*.
> It is a practice-as-research, experimental adaptation of my PhD thesis called "Let the other be: Hamlet-ideologemes in Dostoevsky's Demons". It is a form of a lecture performance based on Dostoevsky's interpretation of *Hamlet*, a

theatrical use of critical references to Shakespeare's play and Russian Hamletism.
The performance is called *Gamlet*, but it doesn't follow the plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at all.
Luckily.
I cannot stand to see yet another Hamlet on stage.
Being a Shakespearean scholar I am drowned in critical evaluations, uncountable texts about *Hamlet*, and so many views and interpretations of *Hamlet*. Every performance is almost always on the verge of superficiality and banality.
My knowledge stands in the way of my enjoyment and immersion.
Every line of the play invokes numerous references.
My perception is constantly layered, interrupted, kaleidoscopically broken and multiplied.
But also why suffocate you, the audience, with yet another *Hamlet*.
Didn't we have enough of Hamlet?
Hamlet. Hamlet. Hamlet…The name itself stands for pure annoyance and pretentiousness.
And the question "Who is Hamlet?" is even a bigger cliché.
Indeed, it is in the core of Western culture, meandering around the notions of truth, rationality, justice, revenge, melancholy, action, subjectivity, productivity, freedom…
The genre of lecture performance can help us approach the topic in a fresh way.
My thesis is adapted, played, recorded and directed by seven women from Serbia. But we are not giving a feministic reading of *Hamlet*. Our Hamlet is not a female Hamlet. Although you can see it like that. It was not our intention but you can project your desires as you wish.
Whatsoever, you are invited to do so.
The performance was produced by the INVITE project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodovska-Curie grant agreement No 754345, under region of Veneto Decree nr. 193 of 13/09/2016 and under Università degli Studi di Verona.
The INVITE project is guided by the principles of innovation, intersectionality and interdisciplinarity.
The plot of *Gamlet* consists of three acts. The first act includes surveillance, interrogation and prosecution of our Hamlets, by characters from the play, by critics, by me.
In the second act we encounter Dostoevsky's Hamlets.
The third act … is a mystery.
Please, if you do have any questions, feel free to interrupt.
And don't forget to enjoy.
Unlike me.
(Bjelica 2022)

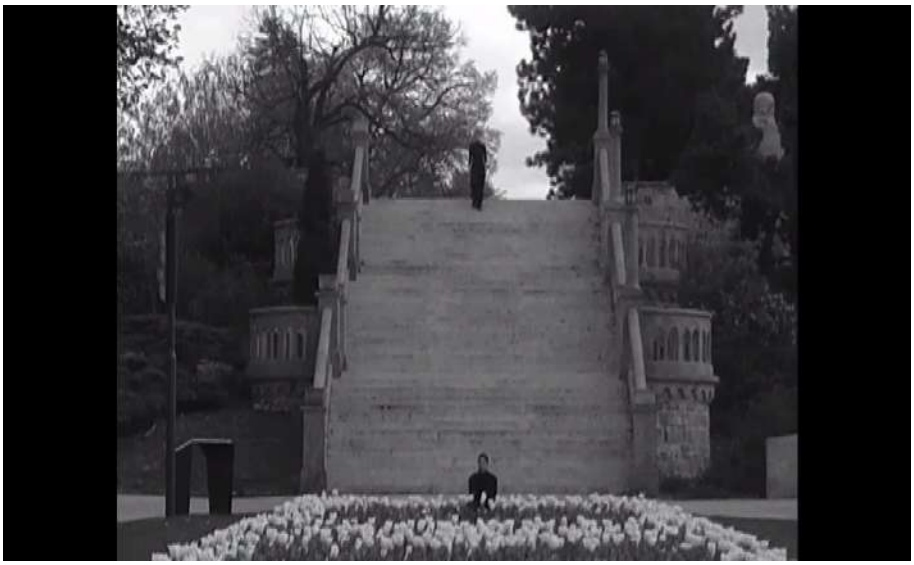
While these insights hold a degree of truth, the prologue takes a radicalised, parodic, and hyperbolic approach to highlight interpretative strategies,

reading regimes, the politics of adapting Shakespeare, paradoxes within academia, power dynamics in projects such as the INVITE, the identities of scholars and artists/performers, as well as the juxtaposition of theory and artistic practice. In this prologue, my intention was to convey the conflicts between the quantitative measurement of knowledge and success in academic discourse on one side, and types of more productive learning that imply playfulness, creativity and qualitative understanding of Shakespeare's work on the other side. Unfortunately, the pressures created by the utilitarisation of knowledge often create a situation where one excludes the other. My experience in teaching revealed that students' fear of not comprehending Shakespeare often discouraged them from exploring his works.

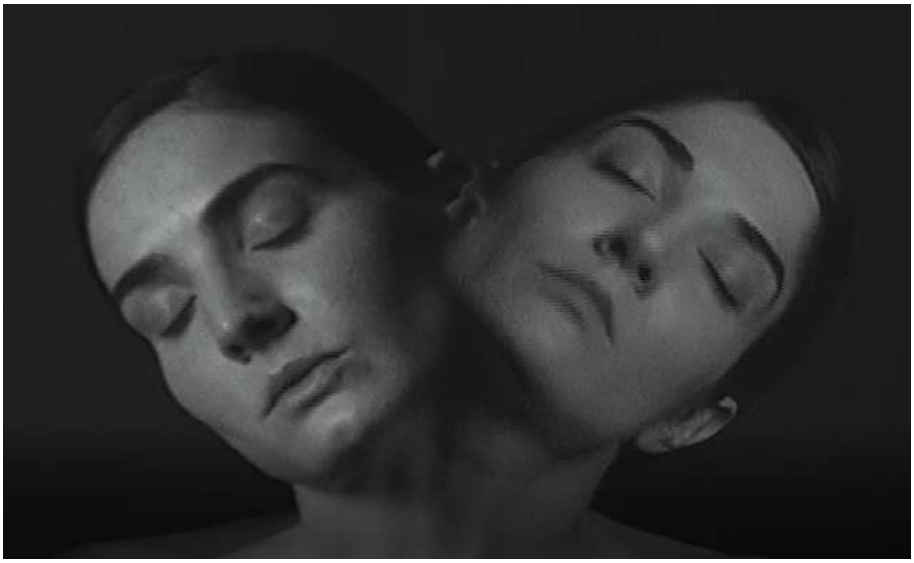
However, it is important to note that this opening does not serve as a conclusive statement on the subject. Instead, it is completed with a different, confessional tone that outlines my personal beliefs and philosophies regarding theatre-making, pedagogy, academic work, and the creative process.

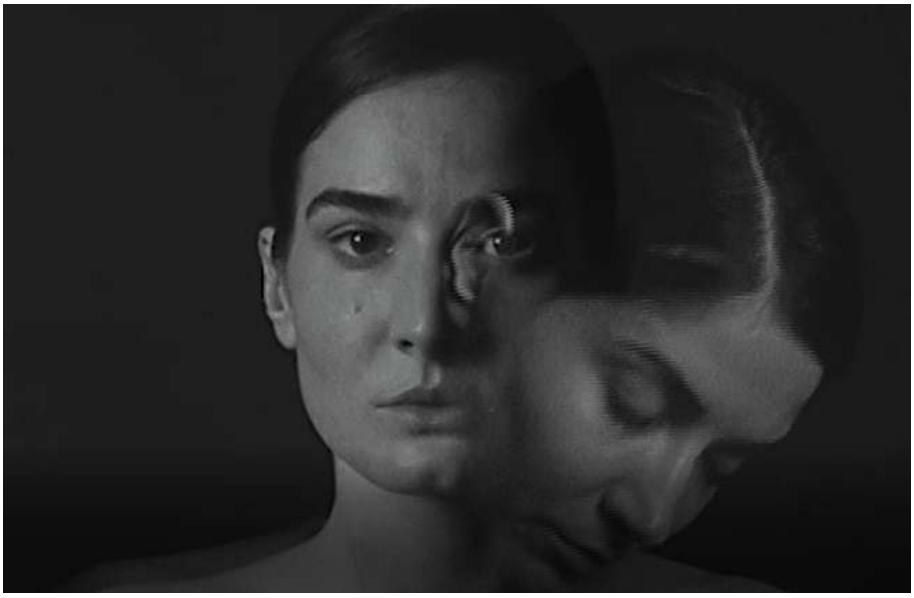
5. Digital Storytelling as Digital Video Making

As previously noted, alongside my role as the lecturer in *Gamlet*, I also appeared as a performer in the video footage projected during the first act. This video material followed its own distinct narrative trajectory, resolving the plot surrounding the dynamic between myself, acting as Hamlet's (Marta's) surveillant - a representation that could be associated with critics and scholars - and Hamlet (Marta), the subject of their inquiry. However, the uncanny similarity between the two of us aimed at pointing at the fact that Hamlet is in fact spying on himself; that we represent one split identity. As Altruz notes, "digital video and photography become creative modes for expressing and interrogating one's experiences and perspectives for seeing one's self, others and the world reflected in a framed and valued space/screen" (2013, 47). Utilising the striking resemblance between my sister and me, we explored various perspectives on self-interpretation, the notion of the other, duality, the choices we make and actions we take. Adopting a surrealistic aesthetic, the video, crafted by Ivana Rajić, was accompanied by hauntingly atmospheric music and sounds created by Anđelina Mićić. Additionally, different voice-overs were integrated into the video.



Figg. 3-6: frames from the video shot by Ivana Rajić





The second act concludes with my departure from the stage after pronouncing:

> The possible answer to the 'to be or not be' dilemma is to embrace the paradox of to be and not to be at the same time. A decision that will define one's identity cannot be a rational one. It must be a product of madness, or a leap of faith, or an act of love. It involves a leap beyond logic, maybe even beyond logos.
> I let go of scientific discourse and let the theatre take over. (Bjelica 2022)

In the last, third act, Hamlet takes off his golden armour, renouncing his external identity that represents the Symbolic law of the father. In the process of transforming into a bare performative body, the actress multiple times without success struggles to climb the aerial silk on the stage. This action symbolises the last attempt of the character to cling to and raise up the phallocentric hierarchy. However, the character is invited by a voice over (a 'poem' I comprised of selected uses of the verb *let* from *Hamlet*) to let go of that attempt, mirroring the claim that identity should not be grounded only in rational, measurable and controllable principles.

> Let him go.
> Let him go.
> Let him demand his fill.
> Let come what comes.
> Let this be so.
> Let Him bless thee too.
> Let him come.
> Let's further think of this.
> Let me see.
> Let shame say what it will.
> Let's follow.
> Let's follow.
> Let Hercules himself do what he may.
> Let a beast be a lord of beasts.
> Let me wipe thy face.
> Let the door be locked.
> Had I but time – but let it be.
> Let go.

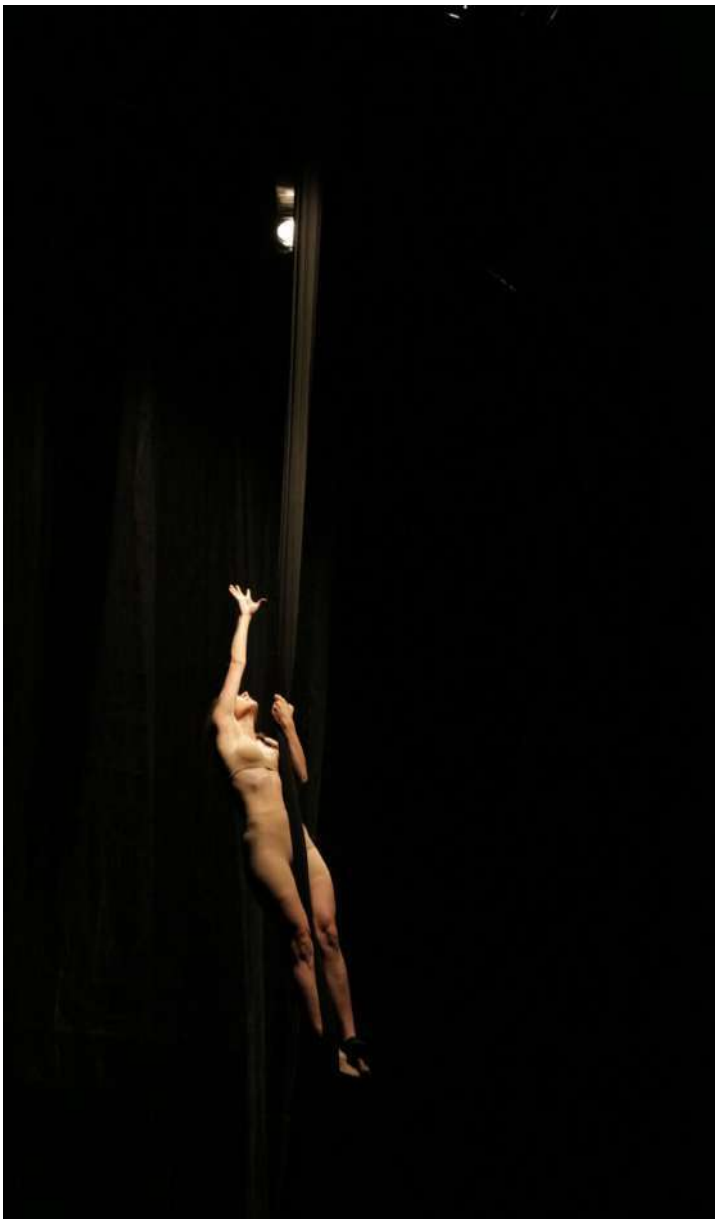


Fig. 7: the performer, Marta Bjelica, climbing the silk. Photo by Ivana Rajić

The performer transits into a feminine identity, into a semiotic realm in contrast to the domination of the masculine principles that governed the action, questions, scope and the plot of the first two acts. The digital storytelling in the last act follows a plot of letting go and freeing oneself beyond the symbolic order towards the feminine and semiotic, expressed in

a liberating ecstatic dance as pure *jouissance*. The parallelism between the live choreography that mimics the movements of the digital double implies that the identity is no longer split, but unified yet multiplied, and that the body of a woman dancing dominated over subjection to knowledge.

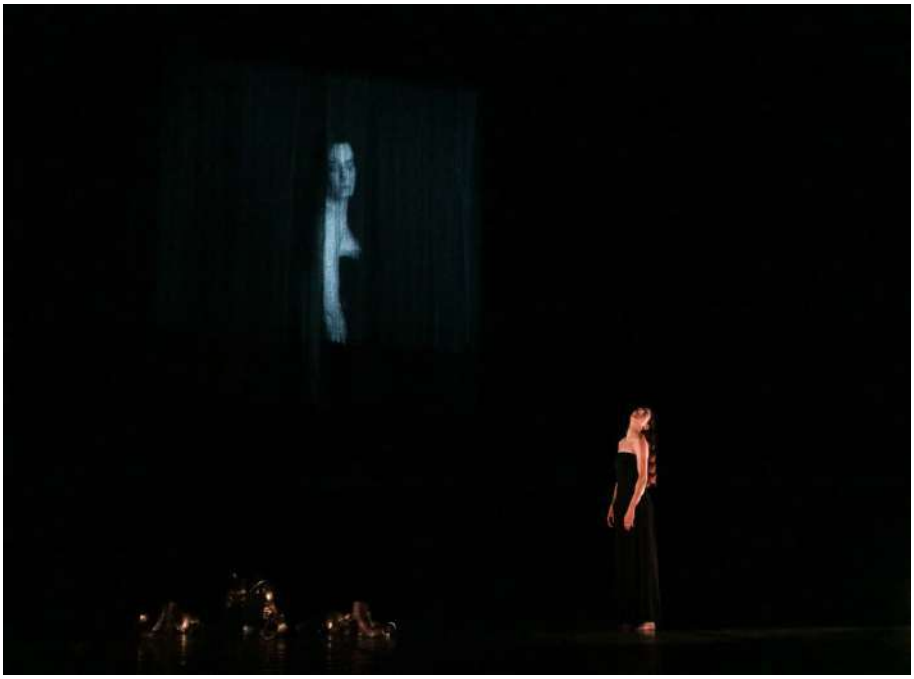


Fig. 8: final scene of *Gamlet*. Photo by Ivana Rajić

6. Digital Storytelling as a Theatre Practice with Educational Purposes in Staging Shakespeare

In the context of this discussion, the decision to stage Shakespeare carries inherent political and ethical implications, and should not simply be driven by a desire to appropriate his cultural prestige. For the occasion of the premiere, the audience primarily consisted of students attending the Shakespeare and Mediterranean Summer School in Verona, as well as Shakespearean scholars. The project aimed to elicit reactions from students, provoking them to contemplate alternative approaches to interpreting and staging Shakespeare, reconsider their roles as academics and researchers, and adopt a critical perspective towards teaching ideologies, particularly in relation to Shakespeare. In other words, letting go of 'control' in the sense Fisher understands it.

I was deeply humbled by the responses of some students whom I had the opportunity to converse with after the performance. They expressed a freedom to openly share their opinions and impressions, without fearing to admit if they were bored or frustrated with *Hamlet*, or Shakespeare's text whatsoever. Moreover, it was important to discover that some scholars themselves harboured similar doubts, fears, suspicions, and challenges, while simultaneously sharing a profound passion for Shakespeare and theatre – pointing out to a shared need for a fresh approach both to Shakespeare and theatre-making. It became evident to me that this impact would not have been possible without the confessional tone established at the beginning of the performance, creating a sense of urgency to depart from the weight of familiar information and clichés. Ultimately, the well-known story about Prince Hamlet served as a vehicle for sharing our own narratives, with the intention of inspiring others to open up and share their experiences.

How do all these elements connect: *Hamlet*, my personal struggle between an academic and artistic career, the current political and historical circumstances and our ethical responsibilities towards them, the adaptations of Shakespeare, and the work with students? The initial question of 'who's there' resurfaces on multiple levels: who is in the audience, who is speaking or performing, who is producing and showing interest in Shakespeare and for what reasons, whose identities might be transformed in this process? Digital storytelling and lecture performance offer formal opportunities for staging Shakespeare, while attempting to address the question of why *Hamlet* remains relevant to students and whether it can evoke a deeply moving and inspirational experience. It raises the critical inquiry of whether the institutionalisation, commodification, and appropriation of *Hamlet* within a conservative production framework undermine its ability to resonate with contemporary young audiences. I hold a profound belief that if contemporary Shakespearean productions fail to connect politically, emotionally, and psychologically with the experiences of young people in the audience – by engaging in meaningful dialogue with their modes of communication – they risk becoming yet another representation of institutional power or conforming to economic trends.

7. Conclusion

In analysing *Gamlet*, I selected certain aspects of digital storytelling that I believed were most apt in highlighting the role it can play in theatre, particularly in the context of Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations. This form of digital remediation offers a valuable tool for students to delve into questions surrounding their own identity, drawing inspiration from

Shakespeare's works.

Putting the focus on the question 'who is the storyteller' in digital storytelling made by students, implicates a defying political act because one refuses to commodify students but rather to offer them space for exploration of themselves while educating them in critical thinking, performance and Shakespeare studies. By embracing the diverse range of digital tools available to when staging Shakespeare, digital storytelling has the potential to expand creative processes and foster the development of innovative performances. Simultaneously, it provides a critical space for young audiences to engage and comprehend the myriad possibilities of staging Shakespeare in more familiar ways for them. By applying digital storytelling as an additional tool for adaptations and staging, Shakespeare scholarship is not disregarded or detached from younger students, but rather integrated into their sense of themselves, nurturing a more engaging kind of knowledge in comparison to mere use of information. Moreover, digital storytelling can be effectively employed for educational purposes, facilitating the exploration of intertextuality and interdiscursivity between Shakespeare's plays, subsequent reinterpretations, texts inspired by his works, or texts that are otherwise connected to them.

Works Cited

Alrutz, Megan. 2013. "Sites of Possibility: Applied Theatre and Digital Storytelling with Youth". *Research in Drama Education: the Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 18 (1): 44-57.

Bjelica, Petra. 2023. "Interview". *ΘΕΑΤΡΟγραφίες* 27: 121-6.

— 2022. Script of *Gamlet*. Property of The Brew Company.

Dogan, Bulent. 2021. *The Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling* website, http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu (Accessed 1 May 2023).

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* Ropley: Zero Books.

Frank, Rike. 2013. "When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances". *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 33: 4-15.

Handler Miller, Carolyn. 2020. *Digital Storytelling: a Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Ladnar, Daniel. 2014. "The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing." PhD diss., Aberystwyth University, https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.606507 (Accessed 1 May 2023).

Maloney, Esther. 2021. "Working with Propositional Stories: Digital Storytelling as Applied Theatre Praxis with Newcomers in an Urban Middle School". *Research in Drama Education: the Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 27 (1): 4-18.

Milder, Patricia. 2011. "Teaching as Art: the Contemporary Lecture-Performance", *PAJ A Journal of Performance and Art* 33 (1): 13-27.

Robin, Bernard R. 2016. "The Power of Digital Storytelling to Support Teaching and

Learning". *Digital Education Review* 30: 1-29.
Robin, Bernard R., and McNeil, Sara G. 2019. "Digital Storytelling". In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*, edited by Renee Hobbs and Paul Mihailidis, 1-8. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

25,00 €

ISSN 2421-4353