

Esther Through the Centuries

Jo Carruthers

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For my Father
Bernard Ashton Smith
1928–2004

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Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on Western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily, if not exclusively, to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to

one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention. The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant), and medieval exegesis, as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship, and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed; but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though commentators will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is to write a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

John Sawyer
Christopher Rowland
Judith Kovacs
David M. Gunn

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Introduction

In 1988 Margaret Thatcher decided to read through the entire Old Testament and reported daily to her staff on her progress. Hugo Young in his biography, *One of Us*, explains that her attraction to the Book of Esther fitted with her propensity for ‘vacuuming up the facts’:

What was the only book in the Bible that did not mention God? she challenged them one day, and beamed with pleasure when nobody else knew it was the Book of Esther. But her eye was caught mainly by the biblical accounts of vengeance. ‘It is a very *gory* book’, she noted. ([1989] 1991: 427)

Young’s account here demonstrates the relative ignorance about Esther in British culture, or at least as far as Thatcher’s staff can be taken as representative. Her own response is typical in its pub quiz appropriation of the fact of Esther’s lack of religious content. People who struggle to recall the story (those few who may at

some time have read it, like Thatcher) can often recite this single detail. The ‘facts’ are simple to recite: it doesn’t contain any mention of God or any explicit religious activity; it is one of only two books named after a woman; it is the only book not to be represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls; it is one of the books Luther expelled from the canon (Martin Luther, *Table Talk* XXIV, cited in Moore 1982: 370).

Such celebrity overshadows profound engagement with Esther’s storyline. When it is alluded to, it is often in the following conveniently succinct terms: a Jewish girl becomes queen, and when her people’s lives are under threat, she risks her own life by appearing before the king, who offers her anything she requests, even half the kingdom. Janet L. Larson, in her biblically informed analysis of *Bleak House*, dismisses the Book of Esther as a ‘fairytale’ narrative, ‘on the level of Cinderella’ (1983: 133), an ascription echoed by Esther Fuchs (1999: 77). Although Thatcher’s response is shaped by her own blood-curdling preferences, her foregrounding of the ‘gory’ elements challenges this simple fairytale frame. In fact what attracts readers to Esther seems to be precisely the book’s complexity, and one suspects that such a reductive summary would have been considered puzzling only a century ago.

Part of the most influential book in Western culture, Esther is notably obscure. Modern commentaries are quick to trace its interpretative history and importance in Jewish tradition (as the source for the popular festival Purim) but simply skim over its significance in Christian contexts. Its interpretative history is little known, especially when compared to an equally problematic book such as Ecclesiastes – the bibliography in the recently published study in this series includes a whole section for studies of its reception history. This study, in contrast, is the first book dedicated to the interpretative history of Esther.

Why Reception?

Esther is enriched by its reception in many ways. Because it is such a difficult book, commentaries are central to its existence as religious communities depend upon secondary writings to make sense of it. The vast majority of writers and artists respond to Esther as ‘an uninviting wilderness’, as B. W. Anderson has named it (see Moore 1982: 130–41). On the one hand, they see the book as a challenge to solve or to tame, and they subject it to the norms and expectations of their own society. On the other hand, it is precisely Esther’s strangeness that other readers appropriate for its subversive potential. For those on the margins of orthodoxy, there is something alluring about this wilderness text that promises an alternative perspective from the mainstream, a heterodoxy to be tapped into for seditious means.

Unearthing Esther's reception history is much more than an exercise in curiosity. Ignorance of how Esther has been appropriated in culture at large – how it has circulated and which debates and ideas it has informed – has led to critical ignorance of what the book may have signified to its readers. This has directly influenced naive readings of the biblical book itself as merely a fairytale, or as in the explanation given by the Oxford World Classics edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, which asserts that Esther 'was a homiletic exemplum of sorrow, duty, and love' ([1850] 1990: 275). As is apparent in later chapters, this tripartite description in no way represents what Esther *was* to the *Scarlet Letter's* readers. Such narrow interpretations obfuscate more intriguing interpretative potentials and do not answer the question of why Esther is so attractive to so many artists and writers.

The gulf between contemporary responses to Esther and its past readings is remarkable. Esther is often overlooked in contemporary feminist scholarship, dismissed as a symbol of female submission (there are, of course, exceptions). Alice L. Laffey, for example, comments that 'buried in Esther's character is [...] full compliance with patriarchy' (cited in Fox [1991] 2000: 1). Esther would indeed be invoked as a model of female submission, but more often than not (and certainly outside theological contexts) she represented the sexually problematic woman, the heterodox woman and even the warrior woman. Contemporary negligence is challenged and undermined by such a colourful reception history, and this commentary hopes to inspire the modern, lacklustre Esther with its more stimulating historical readings.

Thatcher's staff's ignorance of Esther belies how popular the story is in Jewish cultures – and especially America – for whom Esther is made familiar through the annual, joyful celebration of the Purim festival. As Goldman has remarked, Esther is 'among the generality of Jews, the best known of all the Books of the Bible' (1952: 193). Indeed, references to Purim are replete in American popular culture – from *Sex and the City* to the 2006 film *For Your Consideration* – and make Esther a household story.

The meaning found 'in' the book in standard commentaries – which are interested in what Esther means and, more specifically, what it meant in its original context and to its original readers – is elusive in the case of Esther. The most commonly proposed interpretation, God's providential care for his people, is absent from the text itself because of its lack of divine reference. Although clearly an extraordinary biblical book, Esther only makes more obvious the dependence on reception common to readers' experience of all biblical books – and especially the religious reader who is guided by a theological framework for interpretation. For centuries devout readers have automatically turned to their commentaries and concordances to find out what the Bible 'means'. Although set apart in theological terms, in practice it has always been dependent upon explanations extraneous to it.

Reception studies have highlighted the tricky enterprise of working out exactly what happens when we read and what we purport when we talk about a text's *meaning*. It is a question of apparent concern to the Book of Esther, itself full of writings: an edict commanding female obedience, a death sentence, an *aide-mémoire*, an edict bringing reprieve from death (see pp. 244–9). And it has been a prominent question in academic subjects that deal with interpretation. In the field of Literary Studies, focus has moved from locating meaning in the author's intention to a formalism of locating meaning solely within the text, to identifying the reader as the locus of meaning (the most popular approach in theoretically explicit biblical reception studies to date such as Yvonne Sherwood's *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, 2000). The difficulties of this project are illustrated in Alice Bach's contention that the 'creation of meaning arises in the intersection between text and reader', an essentially dialogic relation. She nonetheless goes on to privilege one party: 'scholars have learned to focus on the reader rather than upon the author or the text itself to understand how meaning happens' (1999: xxiv). Although it is tempting to identify a single source for meaning (author, text or reader), it is important to keep the 'intersection' that Bach initially speaks of in an, albeit uncomfortable and inevitably blurred, focus. Ken Hirschkop insists on 'the intersubjective quality of all meaning', in relation to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, an 'inter' that he asserts is 'not a limitation but the very condition of meaningful utterance' (1999: 4). Bakhtin's theories helpfully articulate language's and meaning's inherently social character; to understand how Esther has been *meaningful*, it is necessary to divorce meaning from a cold abstraction and instead to recognize the dynamic process of the performativity of the text.

To privilege the reader is to misunderstand the process of reading itself, a frustratingly fleeting and difficult-to-trace event. Jacques Derrida, referring to the take-up of a particular piece of writing in *Limited Inc*, describes it as performance, and more specifically as 'structure, event, context', a triad that keeps in tension the inextricable affect of text, the eventness of reading and the constraining context (1988: 43). For Walter J. Ong the understanding of language as an activity – as something that *does* – is inherent in Hebraic linguistics and conceptualization: 'The Hebrew *dabar* which means word, also means event' (1982: 74). The idea that texts are not dead things, brought alive by reading, but that they act and achieve effects, is therefore potentially suggested by the semantics of the biblical language itself. Implicit in the intersubjective nature of meaning is the text's productive role. As material objects, texts are imbued with differing degrees of authority, created within social contexts in which power relations are an inherent and essential element. Bakhtin describes texts as 'historically concrete and living things' (1981: 331), embedded within the world, imbued with power and effectivity.

No text can be considered apart from authority, because even its absence – marked by context, genre, format or status to give only a few examples – invites a particular way of reading. Writing is not an unproductive enterprise, but, as Edward Said has suggested, ‘ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied’ (1994: 5). The workings of texts within Esther illustrate this principle. The deathly edict, because of its proclamation by the king, is *represented* as monologic (with a singular significance), with alternative interpretations constrained by the authority of the empire (see Bakhtin 1981: 331). The Jews cannot contest the interpretation that will result in their annihilation. This monologism is possible because the writer of this specific text at this specific time can manipulate his knowledge of the cultural codes regarding language, determining interpretation. It also positions the entire Persian army in the ‘open space’ in front of the text: a rather impassable obstacle to free play of interpretation. Esther and Mordecai respond to the text’s authority and meaning as a socially constructed condition and simply create a new context for the first edict to be read within. The activity authorized by the decree is no longer the slaughter of defenceless Jews, but becomes the authorization of a risky venture: attacking a lawfully military enemy. The enigma posed by the attempts of Esther and Mordecai to reverse this irreversible decree, and their success, reveals the mutual power of text and context: the subject of this study.

The interpretations analysed in this book are not offered as pure registers of their cultural and historical location, but approached as individual and uniquely motivated responses to this specific biblical text, grappling with its authority. Readings from shared historical and cultural contexts are shaped by a variety of identifiable as well as undetectable constraints that conform to, modify or contest mainstream or dominant cultural norms. Interpretations are therefore not necessarily completely locked within the dominant ideological framework from which they emerge. Patterns, trends and similarities are nevertheless often observable. Parallel interpretations and appropriations are, of course, often contradictory. Although Esther is cited as an exemplar of nationalist impulse, it has, as Jon Levenson points out, a ‘complete lack of interest in the land of Israel’ (1997: 14). Can such a divergence in readings be explained by polyvalence, that it can ‘mean’ – or be made to mean – anything? To insist that any piece of writing can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways may be a fact of linguistics; far more interesting are the limited ways in which a piece of writing has been meaningful in specific contexts. As such, a reception history confronts real readers and their contexts in relation to a story, and tries to grasp why and how it is read in certain ways, for certain purposes, at certain times.

Readers will inevitably be selective in whether they privilege the stabilities or instabilities of the text. Timothy K. Beal in his *The Book of Hiding: Gender,*

Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther, is concerned with the ‘ambiguities of ethnic and gender identity, and with the problematics of political orders based on those identities’ (1997: ix). Such a destabilized taxonomy incurs anxiety in many of the book’s readers, who desire clearer, dogmatic application. While Beal can assert that the characters ‘exceed the identities that frame [them]’ (2), other readers are simply blind to the blurring of identity. A major project of this study will be to dwell on those readers who desire clear messages and delineations of doctrine ‘to improve’ or ‘to instruct’ (2 Tim 3:16), and the textual acrobatics that readers have to perform to negotiate the text’s instabilities.

Although ostensibly about readers, this study is nonetheless also always about Esther itself. The cacophony of voices that respond to Esther in sermon, commentary, painting, novel, drama and poem do not flatten out beside one another into a featureless landscape of noise. Instead, different voices are brought into tension – a tension that inevitably provokes our own judgement and discernment as to which voices resonate most harmoniously with the story itself. Esther is not lost in a sea of responses equally reasonable and resonant; instead, responses reveal misogyny, racism and parochial interests, and are at times genuinely thought-provoking. As already noted, engagement with biblical texts always occurs within a context of authority – the commentator quotes in order to back up an argument; the misogynist cites to demonstrate women’s depravity; the novelist alludes in order to create webs of meaning. And as the Book of Esther’s focus is the court – with its faithful and manipulative ministers, resolute and rebellious women, incompetent king, and threatened minorities – insular interpretation is perhaps inevitable. Edward Said has insisted that ‘Culture [. . .] is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that’ (1994: xiii), an assertion pertinent to the readers of Esther.

It is easy to see the appeal of the story for creative response. Esther’s potentially fatal approach to the king provides great drama. Its lack of psychological depth leaves tantalizing questions of motivation that invite speculation. Michael V. Fox comments that it is the writer’s ‘sharp and subtle craft’ that makes the characters at least ‘intriguing to adults’ ([1991] 2000: 1). In the hands of artists the story’s drama is heightened, and it easily becomes a story of the triumph of love (although love is never mentioned), or of female beauty over male brutality.

This study will work through the Esther story to give both an idea of the major trends of the reception of scenes and characters as well as dwelling on those specific interpretations and depictions that are of particular interest because they are either especially inventive, curious or clever. Those familiar with the Jewish tradition may be less aware of Esther’s place in Christianity, and vice versa. Taking into consideration its marginal status in Christian and Western cultures, I have therefore assumed no prior knowledge of Esther beyond a reading of the story (itself not unproblematic because of its different ver-

sions). Esther's marginal status in the Christian tradition means that theological engagement with the book has been sporadic. It will be apparent that key periods of theological activity and major theologians are under-represented. As a marginal book, Esther was rarely commented on at length by Christians, Catholic or Protestant, and Jewish tradition is shaped by the dominant frame of Purim. It is therefore unavoidable that this study is full of theological writings that are as obscure as the biblical book itself. That it focuses more on literary writings undoubtedly stems from my own interest in this area, but it is also representative of the book's own cultural status as marginal: it seems to have had more popular, as opposed to institutional, take-up. My specific interest in the literary reception of Esther (in its widest sense to include writings such as sermons and commentaries) in the early modern and modern periods undoubtedly dominates the commentary. This study provides a summary of Esther's reception to inform further and more in-depth analysis, and also includes examples of detailed readings. It is necessarily selective, and it is in the nature of an ambitious project such as this that there will be plenty of areas for others to improve upon and delve more deeply into.

An Irredeemable Book?

Timothy Beal calls the Book of Esther 'exotic, savage, violent, difficult to reach, difficult to map, dangerous, perhaps irredeemable' (1997: 5). In many ways its reception can be seen as a catalogue of attempts to redeem this strange and difficult book. From the very beginnings of commentary, writers have sought above all to make this book make sense. Its problems, although conveniently ignored by some readers, are the seed from which its reception history springs. The book's lack of religious content, instead of thwarting religious readings, makes it a fascinating spur to theological creativity. Of course, obscurity and opacity have never presented any real challenge for the religious reader, who is always keen to identify, and thereby be the possessor of, a special key that will unlock the mysteries of faith. The Irish Baptist minister Alexander Carson claims in the early nineteenth century that to learn to read Esther provides the secret to reading the world, so that in it 'we have an alphabet, through the judicious use of which we may read all the events of every day, of every age and nation. This is a divine key, which will open all the mysteries of Providence' (1835: 7). As such, for many, Esther is merely a hurdle to be overcome in the effort to fit the Scriptures and the world into a neat, coherent whole.

Esther's status as the story of Purim makes it immediately meaningful for Jews, but Christianity has little rationale for the book's existence in the canon in

the first place. As Ann Sidnie White pithily puts it, its ‘indifference to religious practices, its dubious sexual ethics, and its female heroine continued to baffle commentators, who wished to make the book conform to the expectations of a Western Christian audience’ (1992: 126).

Content, date, authorship and genre are all the subject of intense debate. It is one of Bickerman’s *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (1967), and Celina Spiegel has called it ‘one of the strangest books in the biblical canon’ (1994: 191). It is simply a book about which little is known, the lack of verifiable historical evidence for (or against) the story’s events causing consternation to historicist commentators especially. D. P. Schötz regards the ‘problems of lower criticism in Esther as the most complicated in the Bible’ (Moore 1982: lxiii). Levenson is typical of religious readers who, despite its dubious historical status, claim that it ‘need imply no impairment of the religious or literary worth of the book’ (1997: 44).

Esther’s problematic status is exemplified in the debates over its canonicity: it is the only text absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls, although this makes sense considering that the Qumran community did not include Purim in its liturgical calendar, illustrating how closely its canonicity is tied to its festival (see Abegg et al. 1999: 2). Esther appears in the earliest canonical list, a Talmudic work from the second century, and Carey Moore considers Josephus’ paraphrase in his *Jewish Antiquities* to intimate canonical status ([1971] 1984: xxiii). Yet rabbinical writings reveal anxieties about its inclusion. The Talmud questions its inspiration – that the scroll does not ‘make the hands unclean’ is offered as evidence against it in *Megillah* 7b. When Esther asks for her book to be included, they argue that it will ‘incite the ill will of the nations’ (*Meg* 7a), recognizing the antagonistic potential of its representation of triumphant Jews. In the early church Athanasius includes it alongside Judith, Tobit and others as ‘edifying reading’ and the Greek MS58 in the Larger Cambridge Edition of the LXX has ‘Esther: not canonical’. Those Church Fathers who did accept Esther invariably listed it last (see Moore [1971] 1984: xxv and Clines 1984a: 255). In general terms, Esther was canonical in the West, whilst often not in the East (see Moore [1971] 1984: xxvi for map). Its canonicity can only be considered unquestioned in the fourth century at the Council of Hippo in 393 and Carthage of 397. Its marginal status has not overwhelmed its appeal for readers, and even Luther’s repulsion is questioned by H. Bardtke, who notes Luther’s frequent allusion to it in his other writings (cited in Moore [1971] 1984: 117f).

Of particular relevance for a study of this book’s reception is the question of *which* Esther is being appropriated. Jewish and Protestant communities use the ten chapters of the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), but Catholic Bibles take as their source a Greek version of Esther, in the Septuagint (LXX), finished no later than 78 BCE (there is a second Greek version. For more on the Additions, see Moore 1977; Fox [1991] 2000: 9–10; Bush 1996: 9; *A New Catholic Commem-*

tary [1969] 1981: 407). Its textual variances have proved galling to those readers who equate authenticity with the identification of origins. The LXX more or less follows the MT story, but has six extra episodes: a prophetic dream that Mordecai has before the action begins (A) and its explanation at the end of the story (F), prayers by both Mordecai and Esther (C), the text of the genocidal edict (B) and that of the edict that saves the Jews (E), and Esther's 'highly dramatic appearance before the king' (D), an alternative version of Esther 5 (Moore 1982: lxiii). That the Additions fit uneasily into the MT text is reflected in the *New Catholic Commentary's* ambivalent assertion that, even when read in chronological order, 'a coherent, if not always consistent, tale is unfolded' (407). Catholics consider them deutero-canonical (part of a secondary canon), whilst for Protestants they are apocryphal (literally 'hidden', outside the canon; on their status see Moore [1971] 1984: lxiv and Levenson 1997: 27).

The story exists in multiple – and even contradictory – versions, because Bibles present the canonical and apocryphal material differently. Most Protestant and Jewish Bibles contain only the canonical Esther, whilst Catholic and some Protestant Bibles contain a mixture of canon and Apocrypha. The relation between the 'Additions' and canon are best understood by analogy to DVD format, with its 'main feature' and 'extras'. These additional scenes or deleted scenes – whether you consider them supplementary or extricated – contain episodes that can be watched in isolation from the main feature but that ultimately transform the whole narrative. The rewriting of Esther's approach to the king might be thought of as the 'director's cut' of chapter 5. In it the queen faints when she enters the throne room, and events take an explicitly supernatural turn as God intervenes to make the king accept Esther's appeal.

Bibles edit the material in diverse ways. The Douai–Rheims Bible, for example, follows Jerome's Vulgate in placing all apocryphal material after the canonical material, obscuring chronological veracity. After the story's dénouement and celebration of Mordecai, the story jumps back to a dream that pre-empts the narrative's trajectory (its mystery dissolved and its later explanation unnecessary now that the story is known). What is interesting about these scenes for the purposes of this commentary – this is not, after all, the place for investigating the different versions' claims to authenticity – is when they are chosen above the canonical scenes and why. The frequency with which Protestants turn to these 'unauthoritative' (yet ironically more religious) Additions to support their spiritual readings is striking. These Additions also influence *Esther Rabbah*, which contains prayers by Mordecai and Esther as well as a rewriting of Esther's entrance scene, taken from Josippon, considered to be a Hebrew translation of the LXX (see Moore 1977: 215).

Although relished by Thatcher, the book's 'gory' elements have troubled many readers. Violence, hardly a rare topic in the Hebrew Bible, is perhaps more

striking in Esther because of the book's ostensible femininity. Barry Walfish describes the violence as 'an embarrassment': 'Many Christian scholars and not a few Jews, even in our century, are offended by its particularistic, nationalist tone and especially by the bloody scenes of revenge and the joyful triumph of the Jews over their enemies' (1993: 75). S. L. Driver considered it to be 'further removed from the spirit of the gospel than any other Book of the OT [*sic*]', an opinion that Elliot Horowitz considers to be representative of a 'liberal-Anglican consensus' in the late nineteenth century (cited in Horowitz 2006: 27). L. E. Browne, in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, presents an extreme and perhaps the most fervently hostile reading of Esther. Esther is the biblical equivalent to the 'villainous rogue', and in it there is 'no noble character', all are 'actuated by the basest motives of pride, greed and cruelty'. It is 'a picture of unredeemed humanity' ([1962] 1975: 381). He explains its popularity by its secularism (*ibid.*), even blaming Jews for the genocidal hostility they experience, 'either for economic reasons, or because, owing to peculiar food laws, etc., they did not mix socially with others' (382). Stephen Sykes is rare in celebrating Esther's problematic character, arguing that it is 'precisely in such grubby contemporary circumstances that God is bringing about the work of redemption and liberation among us' (Foreword in Beckett 2002: vii).

Jewish Tradition

Whilst there is little reference to Esther in Christian writings until the medieval period, in Jewish circles Esther has been consistently popular. Philip Alexander explains that Purim's popularity with the rabbis (compared to the sparse attention given to Hannukah) is because they deemed it 'politically much less dangerous' as it celebrated Jewish deliverance in the Diaspora. Hanukkah, on the other hand, celebrated 'deliverance in *Eretz Israel*', linking it to 'Jewish nationalism and messianism' (2001: 336). Purim may have been viewed as innocuous by the rabbis, yet it has certainly become bound up with precisely those problematic qualities that Alexander cites.

Although the Talmud emphasizes the book's cosmic application (invoking Psalm 98 to read Esther as a story of the 'salvation of the Lord', *Meg 11a*), for many, Esther's breaking of dietary laws, her marriage to a Gentile and her seamless assimilation into Persian society caused uneasiness. The Talmud dedicates a whole book (*Megillah*) to the discussion of Esther and Purim, and it is the only biblical book to have two Targums (expansive Aramaic translations dating from no later than the sixth century). The intricate discussion concerning the observation of the Purim festival and mitzvot in *Megillah* show that many activities

now associated with the festival had already become established in the early centuries. It is celebrated in the Jewish calendar in the month of Adar, around springtime, and the story of Esther is read aloud in both the evening and morning synagogue services. Following the narrative detail of the story itself in 3:13 and 8:11, it is stipulated that young and old, men, women and children must listen. As such, the story bears an uncommon weight upon the celebrations and, mimicking Jewish midrashic interpretation, details of the story become elaborated and translated into specific observances. So, to illustrate, the tropes of reversal found within the story – the fall of the villain, Haman, and the rise of the good Jew, Mordecai, to prominence – are enacted in the topsy-turviness of the day. The festival has a carnival atmosphere, as students take the place of their teachers to mock and create anarchy; men dress as women (and less often vice versa), and Jews dress as non-Jews.

In both text and festival, these symbols of reversals are interpreted theologically: the world turned upside down celebrates Jewish chosenness and the providential care of God over his chosen people (as seen later in this introduction). For many Jewish communities it is simply an excuse for a party. Many Americans are familiar with its street parties, the giving of gifts, a time when Hamantaschen (three-cornered pastries) fill the bakeries, and children (and often adults) dress up.

The Purim synagogue service frames how the story of Esther is interpreted. Deut 25:17–19 is read on the Sabbath before Purim, *Shabbat Zakhor*, in order to tie the story to God's injunction to the Jews to 'Remember (*zakhor*) what Amalek did', attacking them on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Ex 17). Because Haman is called the Agagite, he is understood to be a descendant of the last Amalekite king, Agag (see 1 Sam 15), the Amalekites functioning as a prototype of all enemies of the Jews (see Goodman [1949] 1988: 423–4; Horowitz 2006: ch. 6). The story inspires a memorial, and even for some a provocation to hatred. Rabbi Yitzchak Sender, head of a Yeshiva in Illinois, asserts that to remember Amalek is 'to make war upon him, admonishing them to hate him, to the end that the commandment may not be forgotten and our hatred for him may not be weakened or lessened with the passage of time' (2000: 24).

Esther is known as the *Megillah*, the scroll, and as such is pre-eminent amongst the five scrolls that are related to a festival: Canticle (Passover), Ruth (Shavuot, Feast of Weeks), Lamentations (9th Av) and Ecclesiastes (Sukhot, Tabernacles). The scroll, unusually, is well known for its elaborate decoration and illustration. Cecil Roth suggests that scrolls may have appeared as early as late antiquity (cited in Soltes 2003: 142), but extant scrolls date only from the early seventeenth century. As Ori Soltes explains, 'The issues that make it suspect as canon, most particularly the fact that the name of God is never mentioned [. . .], make its extensive visual decoration feasible' (2003: 142). Its popularity in Jewish communities was undoubtedly due to the folk nature of Purim that the book

narrates, but the commentaries themselves testify that extensive explanation was necessary in each generation for this exceptionally problematic book.

Barry Walfish argues that it was precisely Christian disinterest in the book that made it so attractive to Jewish medieval scholars, who could imbue it with their own significance (1993: 75). Esther became 'the prototype of all the many persecutors of the Jewish people', writes Goldman, 'a Book which exemplifies, vividly and concisely, the eternal miracle of Jewish survival' (1952: 193). Jewish interpretation is best known for its expansive and imaginative reworking in rabbinic literature, which has overshadowed the swathe of medieval Jewish exegesis on Esther, on which little work has been done beyond Walfish's impressive study. Yet Maimonides (1135–1204) even ranked it next after the Pentateuch in importance (Moore [1971] 1984: xvi). These commentaries differed from rabbinic writings because of their use of 'Peshat', a concern for contextual meaning and analysis of individual words, typical of the northern French commentators Rashi (1040–1105), Rashbam (Samuel b. Meir, c.1080–1174) and especially the Spanish Abraham Ibn Ezra (c.1089–c.1164) who also made use of parallel wordings in Arabic (see Walfish 1993: 14ff and Halivni 1991). Rabbinic sources were alluded to, but the medieval scholars' work was inevitably influenced by their philosophically dominated climate (see Walfish 1993: 27, 32). The late fifteenth century saw a proliferation of Esther commentaries linked, argues Walfish, to the increasing popularity of preaching in this period (*ibid.*: 5). In the sixteenth century as many commentaries were produced as in all the preceding centuries together (237, n. 14).

In modern Jewish exegesis Esther is as popular as its festival Purim, but it is notably important to Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox groups. Yosef Deutsch presents an example of modern Orthodox interpretation in his *Let My Nation Live: The Story of Jewish Deliverance in the Days of Mordecai and Esther*. He considers Esther and Mordecai in the context of the exile as 'two great Jewish people' who 'came forward to redeem the Jewish people and start the chain of events that would culminate in the reconstruction of the *Beis HaMikdash* and the return to Yerushalayim' (2002: xv–xvi). Deutsch explains that the threatened genocide spurred Jewish acceptance of the Oral Law. They had accepted the Oral Law at Sinai, he argues, only under duress. However, in the light of the Purim miracle, they accepted it willingly (334). Esther's story is therefore embraced because it underscores the importance of the Oral Law – the tradition of interpretation – passed on by scholars such as Deutsch.

Christian Tradition

The difficulties of the Book of Esther are only exacerbated for Christians. The Rev J. W. Niblock, Headmaster of London High School and occasional lecturer

at Pentonville Chapel, in 1837 gives a good catalogue of accusations against it: it contains no promise to the Church, makes no mention of the Gospel, has no type or prophecy of the Messiah, does not once introduce the name of God or recognize his providence, reveals none of 'those precious and fundamental doctrines' found elsewhere in the Old Testament and is not quoted in the New Testament (1837: 7).

Because Esther is rarely mentioned in the Church Fathers' writings, it has been hard to establish how seriously this book was taken in the early years of the Christian Church. Tertullian cites Esther as historical evidence of the extent of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom ('from India to Ethiopia,' Esth 1:1), but this says little about its sacred status for him. Catholic tradition embraces Esther as a prototype of Mary, and it is this emphasis that is found in the earliest Christian commentary by Rhabanus Maurus (for Middle Ages' commentary see Paton 1908: 104–18) and in material culture such as in the sculptures at Chartres Cathedral and the stained glass windows at St Chapelle, Paris (see Buchthal 1957 and Katzenellenbogen 1959). Perhaps the most celebrated reception of Esther is in Racine's 1689 play. He explains his choice of Esther when composing for the ladies of Saint Cyr because he thought it would be 'sufficiently easy' for him to dramatize without having to change even 'one of the circumstances however small of the Holy Scripture', something he would consider a sacrilege, but could 'fill up all my action with the scenes which God himself, so to say, has prepared' (Daril 1895: iv).

It is with the Reformation and the Protestant relegation of Mary that Esther becomes a puzzling member of the canon, and Protestant commentaries and sermons are rich sites for gleaning creative elaborations. In many instances Esther's significance is narrowed from any wide theological application to much narrower concerns: it becomes a site through which to comment upon monarchy, female nature or response to threat. It is also in the early modern period that Esther first becomes a significant subject for artistic appropriation. Rembrandt, Gentileschi, and Filippino Lippi, among others, are drawn to Esther, and depictions of Esther's approach to the king are extremely common and were the most popular image used in embroidery of the period (especially for use in marriage paraphernalia, see Frye 1999). It is in this Christian tradition that many of the creative works analysed in this study emerge.

Summary of Works

It will be helpful to provide a summary of the reception of Esther, with special attention to those works concentrated on in this study (I privilege selected pieces throughout the commentary in order to provide a sense of continuity

and comparison). I will be treating the Greek 'Additions' as the first responses to the MT Esther, focusing on the LXX because of its influence on the Vulgate and subsequent Catholic readers (which explains the dominance of the account of Esther fainting in her approach to the king). Carey Moore argues that they 'were created later to make Esther more "historical" (Additions B and E), more dramatic (D), or more "religious" (A, F, and C)'. White also sees them as attempts to 'compensate' for a 'lack of religiosity' (1992: 125).

The Additions' influence was not limited to Catholic reception. João Pinto Delgado, a Portuguese Marrano (crypto-Jew), includes Mordecai's dream in his Spanish long poem on Esther, published in Rouen in 1627, reflecting his familiarity with a Catholic, not Jewish, Bible ([1627] 1999: 43). Even Protestants are allured by the spiritual depictions of their biblical heroes, yet are rarely unambivalent. John Mayer, although he invokes Esther's prayer, explicitly argues that 'the adjections to *Esther* thus plainly contradicting the authentically History, plainly shew the ignorance of him that made them' (1647: 64). Alexander Symington identifies overuse of God's name in the apocryphal Additions as 'significant proof' that they were written by a 'spurious writer' who, as such, would have taken care to 'avoid so marked an omission' (1878: 9).

Browne claims that the Additions 'add nothing to the understanding of the original book' ([1962] 1975: 381), an opinion with which White later concurs: 'the additions add nothing to the dramatic quality of the book and, in fact, lessen the impact of the heroine Esther' (1992: 127). Few Jewish or Protestant commentators give any explicit attention to the Greek versions, although Levenson includes them in full to serve an 'interfaith readership' (1997: 28) and values their historical witness to Second Temple Judaism (31, 135).

Talmudic and midrashic sources are cited consistently because of their ingenuity and their influence on nearly all later Jewish reception and many Protestant works as well. I refer mainly to *Megillah* in the Talmud (almost completely devoted to Esther) and the Midrash *Esther Rabbah*, two Targums (Rishon and Sheni), as well as the later, more popular collection of midrashic works, Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*. I rely on Barry Walfish's outstanding study of medieval Jewish commentary on Esther, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (1993).

Esther is hugely popular in Jewish communities. Philip Goodman's ubiquitous *Purim Anthology* (1949) and *Purim: The Face and the Mask*, published by the Yeshiva University Museum (1979) are rich sources for Purim objects and traditions for those interested in further study. At the Purim festivities, it became common to stage a play, a *purimshpil*, especially in Yiddish-speaking communities, many reworking the Esther story. *Megillot* (Esther Scrolls) that date from the seventeenth century, are also rich sources for rabbinically influenced marginal images (see pp. 62–4). A fascinating source for how the story informed Jewish experience of exile is the poem by Delgado, who in 1627 publishes a

poetic rewriting of the Esther story, into which is woven the story of Jewish experiences in early modern Inquisitorial Spain. I have focused on the modern commentaries by S. Goldman in the Soncino Commentary (1952), the Orthodox writers Yosef Cahn (1995) and Yosef Deutsch (2002), and the Harvard academic Jon Levenson (1997). For further reading, Elliot Horowitz's *Reckless Rites* (2006) narrates a fascinating reception of Esther (focusing largely on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and its relation to 'Jewish violence'.

Hymns from the fourteenth century illuminate Esther's relation to Mary in the Catholic tradition (Brown's collection, as well as a selection by James Ryman). The stained glass windows at St Chapelle in Paris and the sculptures at Chartres Cathedral demonstrate how the story circulated visually in the population at large. Esther is a popular subject for paintings, her approach to the king rendered by artists such as Rembrandt, Filippino Lippi and Tintoretto.

The first extant play of Esther is *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Esther* (Greg [1561] 1904), written sometime in the decades after 1520 under Henry VIII. In 1581 the Puritan John Stockwood translates a commentary on Esther by the German Brentz (referred to hereafter by Stockwood's anglicized name Brentius). The headmaster of Tunbridge School, Stockwood dedicates his work to Sir Francis Walsingham, and the lengthy preface to his translation is a forceful diatribe on the need to protect, and sacrifice for, the Protestant church.

In 1617 an author adopts the pen-name Ester Sovernam to write *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman*, a radical appropriation of the violent Esther in defence of women. Sovernam's pamphlet is a response to the highly popular misogynistic *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women* (1615) that Charles Butler explains was notable for the 'comprehensiveness of its attack on women, combined with an unprecedented level of vituperation' (1995: v-vi; see Carruthers 2003). Sovernam appropriates Esther as a woman writer, a rare yet fascinating strand of interpretation (see pp. 275-6). Only four years later, Francis Quarles, the most popular poet of the seventeenth century, writes his poetic version of Esther, *Hadassa*. It is fraught with allusions to monarchy (Quarles was a Protestant Royalist) as well as depicting Esther in extremely misogynistic, sexualized terms. Printed first in 1621 when James I was on the throne (and dedicated to him), it was reprinted in *Divine Poems* (1630), dedicated to Charles I. This collection went through numerous reprints in the following two decades (I will quote from the 1621 version, but also include pagination for the more easily accessible 1642 edition). Although one of the most popular poets of the seventeenth century, by the end of the seventeenth century, 'Quarles was merely a synonym for poor poetry and practically nothing more' (Nethercot 1923: 225). Because of their historical contingency, Sovernam and Quarles demonstrate Esther's interpretative potentials within the same period.

As England's Parliament debated the Civil War, it is unsurprising that in

their sermons clergy would turn to Esther for political reference in the 1640s, including the Puritans Herbert Palmer (1643), Obadiah Sedgwick, member of the Westminster Assembly and later rector of St Paul's, Covent Garden (1643), and John Heyricke, Warden of Christ's College in Manchester (1646). Other Protestant sermons and commentaries include Samuel Kem (preaching at Oxford in 1644) and long studies by Arthur Jackson (1646) and John Mayer (1647). Although the Gunpowder Plot occurred in 1605, later sermons by Henry Case (1679) and William Beveridge, the Church of England minister (1704), memorialize this threat to James I and Parliament through mapping the story on to the threat – and triumph – of the book of Esther.

In the Catholic tradition, Lope de Vega wrote a Spanish play, 'La Hermosa Esther' (Esther the Beautiful) in 1610, unfortunately not yet translated into English, and in 1689 Racine's celebrated *Esther* appeared, to be translated into wildly differing English versions: namely Thomas Brereton's *Esther, or Faith Triumphant: A Sacred Tragedy*, which was the first in 1715, followed by two translations in the nineteenth century by James Rice (1882) and A. P. Daril (1895). Racine's play inspired George Frideric Handel's oratorio *Esther* (1718) as well as the masque, 'Haman and Mordecai' (1718). In New England, the Puritan Cotton Mather invokes Esther as a model for womanhood in his *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692). Later Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Vermont, the Protestant Royall Tyler wrote in his youth *The Origin of the Feast of Purim: Or, the Destinies of Haman and Mordecai* (n.d.). In England, the anonymous *Hester, A Poem* appears in 1714, and in the late eighteenth century long poems appear by the Paisley poet James Maxwell (1784) and the American Timothy Dwight (1793). The Edinburgh Anglican Alexander Webster, later chaplain to the Prince of Wales, writes two sermons on Esther – one applying the triumph of the Jews to the British victory at Culloden and the subsequent Highland clearances. Webster was so popular, it seems, that it was worth someone's while to imitate him (who I have called Pseudo-Webster) in a sermon that, like Webster's 1740 sermon, contains a thinly veiled accusation against the Prime Minister, Walpole. Other sermons were written by Thomas Knagg (1716), John Balguy (1773) and the American Thomas Reese (1791). The Protestant commentators Matthew Poole (1669–76) and Thomas Scott ([c.1788] 1827) both include notable sections on Esther in their works. The model of petitioning government was imitated anonymously by two English authors in the eighteenth century, and in Rhode Island in 1803. Poems on Esther include those by the Americans Maria Gowen Brooks (1820) and Hannah Flagg Gould (1839), the Montrose Baptist minister James Watson (1845), Isidore Gordon Ascher (1863), Dinah Maria Mulock Craick (1866) and Helen Hunt Jackson (1892). Writers drawn to Vashti include John Bradshaw Kaye (1894), Zeto (1897) and Tennyson (in 'The Princess', 1911). Modern dramas include those

by William Tennant, Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at St Mary's College, St Andrews (1845), the Scottish Alexander Winton Buchan (1873) and William Tidd Matson (1890). Four full-length studies of Esther by evangelicals appear across the nineteenth century: George Lawson, the Chair of Theology at the Association Secession (Burgher) Church of Scotland (1804), Alexander Carson, Minister at Tubbermore, a popular preacher who received two American honorary degrees (1835), Thomas M'Crie, Professor of Theology at the London College of the Presbyterian Church (1838) and Alexander Symington (1878).

Esther appears in nineteenth-century proto-feminist writings: in Josephine Butler (1888) and the *Woman's Bible* (Stanton 1898). It is from the Victorian period onwards that Esther figures in novels flourish. Better-known novels include Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Felix Holt* (1866); Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848); and *Cranford* (1851–3); Margaret Oliphant's *Hester: A Story of Contemporary Life* (1883); Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* (1892); and George Moore, *Esther Waters* ([1894] 1936); but there is a swathe of lesser-known 'Hester' novels.

Although less common, the impact of Esther is still discernible into the twentieth century. Rewritings include dramas by Rita Benton (1922), Louise S. Maxwell (1923), the Austrian Franz Grillparzer (1953), the Catalan writer Salvador Espriu (1948) and the Welsh playwright Saunders Lewis (1960). Brief allusions in Saul Bellow and in *The Untouchables* (1987, dir. Brian de Palma) testify to its continuing cultural currency. There is deeper engagement by biblically knowledgeable authors like Margaret Drabble, Edith Pearlman, Carol Shields and Gloria Naylor, and a return to rewriting the story in Tommy Tenney's *Hadassah: One Night with the King* ([2004] 2005) and Rebecca Kohn's *The Gilded Chamber* (2005), and even a British musical, 'LuvEsther' (written by Ray Goudie and Murray Watts, dir. Murray Watts, 2005). Films include Raoul Walsh's *Esther and the King* (1960), starring Joan Collins, Amos Gitai's *Exile* (1986) and the 2006 release of an adaptation of Tenney's novel, *One Night with the King* (dir. Michael O. Sajbel).

Novelistic appropriation of Esther will necessarily be allusional and vague. The epistemic and archaeological approach to truth characteristic of nineteenth-century scholarship means that names often carry significance in the period. The accumulation and patterning of references to Esther or Mordecai across different works all suggest that – at least until the twentieth century – popular conceptions of this book and its characters were being deliberately invoked. The most obvious way a writer could signal a link between their fictional Esther and her biblical counterpart was through the character of queenship. The very term 'queen' indicates a strength or authority that sets the heroine

apart from her female peers. George Eliot's Esther Lyons is her 'light-footed, sweet-voiced Queen Esther' (106). The heroine of K. S. Macquoid's *Hester Kirton* (1864) resembles her queenly counterpart, she 'was born to command' (I. 262), 'queen-like' (III. 110, 206), and 'grand as a queen' (III. 247). In *Hester's History: A Novel* she had 'the beauty and bearing of a princess' (Anon. 1869: 61). Other queenly Esthers carry with them specific elements from the biblical book. The Hester of Emily Foster's *Hester Cameron's Three Offers* (1888), is 'some queen of a pure arcadian land' (14), and works for the temperance cause (see Esth 1:8).

Although William Axton makes a brief allusion to a connection between the Esther of Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852–3) and the biblical queen, the connection has since been left unexplored, even though it is unlikely that Dickens uses the name unthinkingly. Inspector Bucket describes the qualities of a young lady by which she 'becomes a Queen', declaring to Esther 'and that's about what you are yourself' (Dickens 1996: 834). She is further aligned to the biblical Esther through her echoing of 'If I perish, I perish' in her punctuated "'Once more, duty, duty, Esther"' said I' (562). Although fleeting references, for the attentive reader familiar with the biblical story, the connection is suggestive. That novelistic Esthers at this time were unusually assertive and resolute characters, as well as often representing sexual misdemeanour of some kind, suggests that Dickens had a sense of what Esther signified in culture at large. Fredric Jameson convincingly deprecates a model of the monadic reader, instead representing our reading practice as an essentially social experience, of the 'always-already-read' (1986: 9). We inevitably approach a text with the preconceptions and interpretations (and the methods of interpreting) that we have already been exposed to. For example, few readers have a sense of Adam and Eve that is not inflected by Milton's rewriting – even if they have not themselves read it (see Carruthers 2006b: 261ff). It seems there was an understanding of Esther in the Victorian period as representing particular qualities, as both a story and as an individual.

Novels often borrow simple plot elements from the Esther story. Catastrophic banquets are common features: for example, in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* ([1859] 1994: 254) and in George Moore's *Esther Waters* ([1894] 1936) in which the maid Esther's entrance into the grand household begins with a banquet from which women's exclusion is, at least, attempted (18). Haman's games with fate in the throwing of lots resound with Esther's master's gambling (53, see comments on Esth 3:7). The Cinderella element is even present as Esther becomes the 'belle of the ball' at the servants' party (66).

The novel *Hester's Sacrifice* (Anon. 1866) betrays a remarkable echo of the plot, the protagonist's name providing an early clue to the correlation. The Psalmic lines that the character Jane reads to her fellow maid set up both stor-

ies in terms of the reversal of personal fortunes: ‘Let his days be few, and let another take his office,’ a fall that occurs in the novel to the character Nils. Jane is a Vashti figure, whose ‘beauty and grace made her the belle of the town’; terrifyingly, ‘a more imperious queen never drew after her the homage of a crowd of half-frightened, half-fascinated captives’ (II. 129). Nils meets Jane in the West Indies and cuts their affair short when he returns to Britain. She vows revenge, reflecting Esther’s measure-for-measure reversals: ‘Nils Brayton has cursed my life – I will curse his too. As he loved cursing so let it come unto him. A true psalm that!’ (II. 126). She is a typical Victorian Vashti in her unrestrained passion (see comments on her in Esther 1), wreaking her revenge by setting fire to the ship on which Esther and Nils are embarking to India, Nils suffering a God-ordained, Haman-like death (III. 288).

Another novel that seems peculiarly indebted to the Book of Esther for its inspiration is Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester: A Story of Contemporary Life* (1883). Catherine Vernon is a kingly figure who runs the town bank after her cousin nearly ruins it and runs away; hers ‘was a reign of great benevolence, of great liberality, but of great firmness too’ (20). Her neighbours, Captain Morgan and his wife, ‘made a princess of Hester’ (83) and Catherine talks of receiving her as ‘one crowned head receives another’ (347). Oliphant subsumes within Catherine the king’s role, manifested in the repetition of the unusual phrasing of Esth 6:6: ‘She did full justice to [the dinner-party], and to Roland Ashton, the chief guest, the man whom she delighted to honour’ (391). Roland is identified here as the Mordecai figure who will replace the ascendant, yet corrupt and Haman-like Edward. The repetition of crisis (here, betrayal) is the logic behind the annual celebration of Purim, played out when Catherine saves the bank once again and comments to Hester:

They tell me you wanted to do something like what I had done. Ah! You did not know it was all to be done over again. This life is full of repetitions. People think the same thing does not happen to you twice over, but it does in my experience. (492)

Catherine expresses a gallows humour, typical of the tragi-comedy of Esther: ‘what a world this is! – all mockery and delusion, all farce except when it’s tragic’ (493). Oliphant also explores through Hester themes that appear in the other Esther novels: the dangers of gambling and the opportunity of heroism for women (see comments on Esther 3 and 5, pp. 172–4).

The Esther of Mary Hudson’s *Esther the Gentile* is the love object of a stranger, Mark, who waits for the ‘queen’ who will ‘glorify his existence’; she is a ‘graceful girl with the plain name and the homely dress’ (15), echoing Esther’s lack of ornament (see comments on 1:15). Hudson also echoes the queen’s relation to Mary in Catholic tradition in describing her as having ‘the loveliest Madonna

face he had ever seen' (16). Esther and her father are exiles, 'the loving daughter and the gentle father' (36), like the queen and Mordecai, and Hudson explores the psychological experience of diaspora: Esther 'laid her head on her arm so that she could look at the sky. The exile always finds some comfort in this' (38). The story ends with Mark and Esther married, 'with herself as the admiring queen' (138). The resolution of the novel, as in Esther, is relief from danger: 'Esther is queen of a home that has never known the blighting breath of doubt and fear' (166).

Israel Zangwill's interest in Esther appears long-lived; his drama *The Melting Pot* (which played in Chicago before Roosevelt in 1908) is set at Purim. As well as the name of his heroine, the chapter titles of *Children of the Ghetto* (1893) invoke Esther: I.XI, 'The Purim ball'; II. X, 'Esther defies the Universe'. Chapter 6 opens with an epigraph from the *Ethics of the Fathers*, the most popular tractate of the Mishnah, which includes: 'Whosoever reports a thing in the name of him who said it brings deliverance into the world, as it is said: And Esther told the King in the name of Mordecai' (63). Esther's mother has died when she was eight, marking the 'commencement of her reign' (57); her sister considers her 'the avenger' (84), and the 'melancholy' song associated with Esther is from a *purimshpil* (85). Zangwill's novel explores Jewish diasporic identity in England (see p. 39 for further discussion), and other connections between novel and Bible are evident. Raphael, Esther's love interest, represents a Purim approach to life: 'Eating, drinking, every act of life is holy, is sanctified by some relation to Heaven' (256). The hero is also anti-pacifist suggesting a connection to Esther's violence; he considers Christianity's command to 'turn the other cheek, a farce', concluding that 'all practical honourable men are Jews at heart' (256).

Signposting the biblical Esther continues into the twentieth century. Margaret Drabble's trilogy that includes *The Radiant Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *Gates of Ivory* (1993) involves the Jewish Esther, beautiful and clever. *The Radiant Way* plays with the notion of queenship and its relation to privilege: 'Liz, Alix and Esther were not princesses. They were not beautiful, they were not rich. But they were young, and they had considerable wit. Their fate should, therefore, be in some sense at least exemplary: opportunity was certainly offered to them, they had choices, at eighteen the world opened for them and displayed its riches' (1987: 88). *The Radiant Way* is full of allusions to Bible stories. Liz, for example, tries to learn the Book of Job off by heart (89). Diasporic experience is transposed to the three friends who are 'on the margins of English life' and have 'a sense of being outsiders', Esther specifically 'by refugee status and the warsickness of middle Europe' (90). Esther's style is suggestively Oriental, characterized by a 'predominance of red-carpet cushions, the characteristic mixture of Persian geometric patterns on floor and couch – a Jewish mixture, a Viennese mixture, a Freudian mixture' (94).

Although perhaps not aware of them herself, Drabble's reflections on her protagonists' choices and opportunities echo the way in which the queen's heroism is taken up by various authors in order to explore cultural limitations on women's potential (see pp. 172–4). Drabble transposes Esther's queenly authority prosaically to 1980s Britain: 'Adventure and possibility lay before them, as they had not lain before Liz's sister Shirley, who married at nineteen and stayed on in Northam [. . .]' (88). Although not a princess, there is yet something queenly about Esther that makes her a perfect inheritor of her novelistic and biblical forerunners: 'Esther was small, neat, brown of skin, smooth, tidy, even (almost) elegant, yet somehow at the same time pugnacious of aspect, subversive, aggressive, commanding, Napoleonic of manner' (86). Langha Kizito's Cameroon novel *Esther* (1993), also echoes many elements of the biblical story. Esther is a sexually promiscuous woman, initially 'maintained' by an older man; she makes a dramatic approach to her father who wears a golden ring and sceptre-like staff (the narrator Victor remarks that 'she worshipped money', 109); the story is replete with chance and destiny (13 9) and Esther ends the novel pregnant and on trial (155).

The themes of *Esther* reflected in its reception are often those only implicit in – or even absent from – the book itself. For this reason it makes much more sense to think of them as themes of reception than of content. These include theology, providence, exile and diaspora, nationalism, patriotism and political application. Many readings respond to the book as a whole rather than to specific episodes, and these will be the subject of the rest of this introduction.

Godless Scripture

The absence of religious referent hasn't stopped many from arguing for its inherent religiosity. Reading God into *Esther* has posed little challenge for religious readers, who understand the book to demonstrate divine omnipresence from a specifically earthly perspective. Jewish tradition has long understood the book as promoting a theology of God's hiddenness, and this strand is evident throughout *Esther's* interpretative history. Perhaps the simplest response to *Esther's* irreligiousness is to claim a latent religiosity. The need to read beyond the surface can also be applied to a seemingly godless world. As the author WRC asserts, God is not explicit, but there is not a situation in which 'to an opened eye, God is not seen' (1897: 2). The primary frame through which *Esther* is understood is that of providence, to the point that its lack of reference to an overarching divine power offers little resistance, at the end of the day, against vehement assertions of God's supernatural immanence. A logical step

from recognizing in the book the essentially hidden nature of God's presence in the world is to assert his intervention in everyday events.

Although most reception is unreflective about its manipulation of the biblical text, others explicitly privilege their own interpretative endeavour, the 'gap' of God's name becoming a code to be deciphered by the discerning reader. Alexander Carson berates other commentators for their 'conjectures' and 'shrewd guess[es]', insisting that it is the good Christian's duty to 'remain in the most obstinate ignorance of every thing that they do not reveal' (1835: 10). Defences of Mordecai are deemed 'forced interpretations and violent suppositions', 'the effects of human wisdom' (46), and he judges them as he judges Mordecai for not 'implicitly bowing to its dictates' (46–7). As will be seen in Carson's writings cited in this study, he is far from innocent of such 'violent suppositions' himself.

Overwhelmingly pious and supernatural, the apocryphal Additions spiritualize the book with prayers that vindicate both Esther and Mordecai (see Moore 1977). Scribes have also succeeded in spiritualizing the text without moving beyond it to supplementary material. In the very inscription of the Hebrew scroll, God is inserted in two ways. Although strict rules have to be followed, some scribes manipulate the placing of the text so that each column of writing begins with *hamelek* (the king, a very common word in the story), emphasizing the heavenly king's latent presence. Some manuscripts have the initial or final letters of words in 1:20, 5:4, 5:13 and 7:7 written large to reveal the name YHWH as an acrostic.

Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome (c.1261–after 1328, Italy) finds the absence of God from the book remarkable, contending that God's name 'by right' should appear in Esther, because it should 'be full of thanksgiving and praises and the telling of God's acts of kindness' (Walfish 1993: 76); a vehemence that itself asserts a theological reading of the book. The most popular explanations of God's absence include the following representative examples, all of which were circulating by the medieval period. Saadiah Gaon suggests that if believers had inserted God's name, then heretics would have substituted their gods' names, making the book idolatrous (ibid.: 76). This pious motivation, suggests Abraham Ibn Ezra (c.1089–c.1164, Spain, Italy and France) means the author (for him, Mordecai) must have been a *maskil*, a thinking man who always has God in his mind (ibid.: 77). Immanuel, uniquely, suggests that the kings were proud when Mordecai was writing, and as such he writes as though the story were 'an accident', otherwise he 'may have angered the king' (see ibid.: 78). Isaac Arama (1420–94, Spain) argues that hidden miracles such as Esther's are typical of exilic Jewish experience of God. Gersonides (Levi ben Gershom, 1288–1344, Provence) in his *to'lot*, like many after him, reads the references to fasting and mourning by Mordecai and later by Esther to be lessons in the importance of communal prayer at times of danger (ibid.: 81).

Scroll and book illustrations work to steer interpretation of the story along specific lines. An early German Christian printing of the story of Esther, *Historie von Joseph, Daniel, Judith und Ester* (Barnburg: Albrecht Pfister, 1462) contains a picture of a formidably authoritative Mordecai standing amidst a group of praying Jews. In the background Esther and her two maids pray on their knees which, alongside the apocryphal account rendered in medieval German, encourages a pious framework in which fasting is an indicator of prayer. Jewish *Megillot* (Esther scrolls) function to expand the Hebrew Esther to guide the reader to assume implicit religious elements within Esther and Mordecai's activity. John Rylands Manchester MS 32, for example, contains a frame of Jews at their synagogue, thus converting the explicit fasting of the story to community-wide prayer (Plate 3, p. 63).

Many writers simply assume a divine frame for interpretation. For Francis Quarles, the lack of God in the narrative should be interpreted as proving (hidden) sovereignty behind all hierarchies:

What power is, is from Diuine directions;
Which oft (vnseene through dulnesse of the minde)
We nick-name, Chance, because our selues are blind[.]
(1621: sig F2v 1642: 119)

Handel's oratorio inserts a prolonged section of praise lasting eighteen minutes following its opening on Haman's genocidal decree. The call is to 'Tune your harps to cheerful strain,' a pious exhortation to praise under persecution. The previous gentle aria becomes more forceful, conveying heroic determination in its steady, yet more punctuated vocals: 'Shall we of servitude complain?' The joy of the opening piece returns as an Israelite woman calls her people to God's praise, the harp evocative of the ethereal in its petitions to the 'heav'nly choir' to praise. 'Sing songs of praise' sets material slavery (and its 'light' yoke) against spiritual freedom, and presents suffering against a future in which 'Zion again her head shall raise'. The flowing cadence of the strings and voice are insistent yet calm. The Chorus ends with 'Shall we of Servitude Complain?', majestic and optimistic, the high tessitura of the sopranos echoed first by the tenors and then the strings.

Theological discussion in the nineteenth century continues to assert God's activity in the banality of the everyday. Alexander Carson reads Esther's 'surprising series of events' through a divine lens. He asserts: 'It is thus God rules the world; he is continually working, yet blind men perceive him not' (1835: 104, 105). Thomas M'Crie expresses a typically confident religious reading of the book: 'And what though the name of God is suppressed, provided his works, and wonders, and benefits are announced and celebrated?' (1838: 11) and

makes the claim, rather specious itself, that: 'Had the book been spurious, it is not likely that it would have wanted the sacred name' (M'Creie 1838: 12) He also creates a New Testament intertext by invoking Heb 11:34, those who 'by faith escaped the edge of the sword' (12).

Buchan in his drama of Esther theologizes the wheel of fate:

[. . .] it still becomes us to be calm,
Not drooping overmuch when our wheel sinks,
Nor hoping overmuch when it ascends.
That we attain to permanent quietude,
The wheel must roll. Then let us only look
To Him who guides the chariot of the world,
That the small movement of our single lot
May, with His gracious plan, be consonant.

(1873: 27)

H. Foster Pegg offers a homely version of a providential theology of Esther in the *Church Family Newspaper*: 'working by ordinary, everyday means in which there is no trace of the miraculous' (vol. 15, 1908: 414, cited in *Expositor's Dictionary* 1910: 313).

Rather than simply inserting piety, novels that appropriate Esther more often engage in theological speculation, perhaps better resonating with the godless biblical book. George Eliot, in her depiction of Hetty and Arthur in *Adam Bede*, complicates a simple theology of good versus evil. Adam locates Arthur as an Esau-like enemy yet sympathizes with him: 'He's of a rash, warm-hearted nature, like Esau, for whom I have always felt a great pity' (457), and Hetty is acutely transgressive in her child murder. Both figures are set in a complex relation to responsibility and guilt, questioning simple dualistic morality.

In *Hester's Sacrifice* (1866) the maid, Jane, takes providence to its extreme:

Everything in this world is settled just how it's to be, and no praying of ours can change it. What is the meaning of God working all things according to the counsel of his will? (II. 299)

Set against Jane's theological fatalism is Esther's simple faith and assertion of God as a benevolent guardian: 'but I don't touch theology [. . .] I'm lost directly when I get into expositions, and that sort of thing. We are a set of very weak children, the best of us, and all we can do is to keep fast hold of the Great Father's hand' (III. 98).

Hester's uncle in *Hester's Fortune, or Pride and Humility* (1870) presents a theology of hiddenness. Whilst tracing the path to his brother's grave he comments: 'We cannot see it [. . .] like many o' God's ways wi' us – it is hid frae

our eyes wi' a drift o' snow – but I ken it reel' (Plunkel 1870: 81). Hester is disappointed when she doesn't receive an awaited fortune, the novel promoting the material world as exilic: 'we are all so ready to build our hopes and set our affections on earthly things and God has to teach us, by so many ways, that this is not our rest' (150).

Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Story of Esther Costello* (1953) presents tension between human and divine activity. Mrs Bannister is the wife of a man who extorts the blind and dumb Esther, leading her on tours of America. When people talk of Esther as a miracle, she expresses annoyance: 'This thing has been worked for: nothing so lazy, so feeble, so inept as a miracle, had had any part in it' (78). The divine is rejected, yet human effort culminates in self-serving manipulation.

Henry Adams, in *Esther* (1884), portrays the failing love-affair of a minister and the protagonist Esther, caused by her unorthodox beliefs. Her expression of belief is uncannily similar to those proffered for Esther:

The form of act or thought mattered nothing. The hymns of David, the plays of Shakespeare, the metaphysics of Descartes, the crimes of Borgia, the virtues of Antonine, the atheism of yesterday and the materialism of today, were all emanations of divine thought, doing their appointed work. ([1884] 1961: 212)

The following year, Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* presents an equally disruptive Esther, her unorthodoxy acting as a foil to Christopher's move from orthodoxy to Utilitarianism. Her 'theological creed' is a 'loose jumble' like the theology ascribed to the Book of Esther:

Belief in the direct and personal superintendence of God over the affairs of men, faith in the power of truth and the invincibility of right, with the correlative belief that falsehood would not prevail nor wrong ultimately conquer because of this personal rule of God and the 'stream of tendency' in humanity. (1885: III.23)

Christopher's rejection of mainstream Christianity and Esther's dubious self-proclaimed prophetic calling parallels the subversion of religious narratives by science at the end of the nineteenth century. Christopher himself comments:

it was all in the air. The emancipation of the human intellect from superstition in the substitution of the scientific method for the theological, was the great event of the time and made itself felt everywhere. (III.81)

Christopher's atheistic trajectory reflects the increasing secularization of the main tenets of Christianity in society at large, a trend often observed in the writing of George Eliot, an author also drawn to the biblical Esther for perhaps

this very reason. By choosing the figure of Esther, Linton and Eliot draw upon a book that is the weak link in the chain, the paradox of sacred status against atheistic content endorsing the privileging of agnosticism over belief.

Modern commentators are still troubled by earlier assertions of the story's inherent religiosity. Goldman argues for pious reasons for divine absence in Esther, suggesting like Gaon that the author feared that the Divine Name might be profaned if it occurred in the reading at Purim (1952: 194). Paton echoes this argument, but adds that it does not, however, explain the absence of 'law, covenant, dietary regulations, prayer, angels, or afterlife' (Moore [1971] 1984: xxxiii). Clines considers the absence of God a 'deliberate excision of all religious language' (Clines 1984a: 109). Talmon's solution is that Esther is a Wisdom book, much like Ecclesiastes, 'an enactment of standard "wisdom" motifs' (Moore [1971] 1984: xxxiv). Critics continue confidently to assert an implicit religiosity. Carey Moore identifies 'faith in the concept of Providence, or the hand of God in history [4:14], as well as faith in the efficacy of fasting, and, by implication, of prayer' [4:16] (ibid.: xxxiii-xxxiv). Shimon Apisdorf explains in his popular *The One Hour Purim Primer* that '*Megillat Esther*, when literally translated, means to reveal (*megillat*) that which is hidden (*esther*)', the festival presenting a challenge to 'look beneath the surface'. He further asserts that 'at every turn in the story one can't help but sense a transcendent presence' (1995: 9). Barry C. Davies is one critic who berates the Jews for the absence of religious reference, judging that they 'did not have a proper relationship with their God'; their actions are 'suspect and devoid of spiritual consideration'. He nonetheless suggests that the application of the book is for those who 'conceive of themselves as being exiles in the midst of a world that shows little or no interest in God or in spiritual things' (1995: 372, 373).

David Clines suggests that the lesson of Esther is that 'human initiatives and divine action can be complementary' (1984a: 268), what Frederick Bush calls 'the complementarity, the synergism, of divine and human action' (1996: 334). Clines makes great claims for the book: 'It might be more sophisticated to be wracked with theological doubt, but it is hard to beat taking God for granted as an expression of genuine faith' (1934a: 271; echoed by Levenson 1997: 21; see also Fox [1991] 2000: 242). Levenson asserts a theology of a 'hidden force' whose aim is that 'even against the most daunting odds the Jews are protected and delivered' (1997: 21). For him, Mordecai, like God, is silent, but he, also like God, 'sets things up' (ibid.). He expresses incredulity that fasting would be 'a totally impotent and senseless gesture' if it were not religious (19). In addition to 'another quarter', he cites the phrase 'who knows' (*mi yodea*) of 4:14 because it is used elsewhere in the Bible in relation to a relenting God. Together with the phrase 'another quarter', it is the 'strongest approximation in the Masoretic Esther to an explicit theological affirmation' (1997: 81). Diana Booher's use of

Esther as a model for the contemporary woman is as presumptive as Levenson's, depending on an Esther of faith, who gets 'calm assurance' in difficult situations 'from knowing that God is in control of the future' (2001: 22). Mark Mangano discerns a wrathful God, citing Ezek 11:23 and Am 8:11 in which his silence and displeasure are conflated so that lack 'implies then his displeasure with the sinfulness of his people' (2001: 24).

Its secularity is also embraced. White claims that it 'remains one of the most secular in the Hebrew Bible' (1992: 125). In Carol Shields' short story 'Edith-Esther', the protagonist is subject to the same treatment by her biographer as the canonical Esther is by the apocryphal Additions: an imposed piety. Edith-Esther is without theology or reference to God ("I don't believe", she told him plainly, "in God", 2004: 503). Her biography is named *A Spiritual Odyssey*, and the author argues that her protestations about faith are themselves proof: 'Faith's absence pressed to the wall and brought to question' (508). To Edith-Esther's atheistic horror, her life story becomes an 'uplifting' spiritualized story (512).

The dilemma of God's silence in the face of evil is more pertinent post-Holocaust and is engaged with in Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God* (1979), a *purimshpil* of a mock prosecution of God within the *purimshpil* of *The Trial* itself. Edith Pearlman's short story 'Purim Night', set in a post-war Displaced Persons camp, instead presents the State of Israel as the answer to persecution. A spectrum of secular and religious interpretations of Esther is presented by Ludwig's teachers:

His version, a droning bore [. . .], insisted that the Lord, not Esther, had intervened to save the Jews. The History teacher had said that night that there was no justification for this interpretation of Scripture. A day later the Philosophy Professor referred to the story as a metaphor. (2005: 188)

The story ends with the sceptical Ludwig's return to Israel and assertion of salvation.

The distinction between chance and providence depends, of course, on what frame you use to interpret a set of events; a distinction that has attracted Jacques Derrida to the story of Esther. A philosopher drawn by the uncertainties that circulate around human activity, it is the chance/providence divide that he meditates upon in his 'Envois'. He admits that what 'intrigues and interests' him the most about Esther is its edicts, the '*arrêts des mort*', 'which give and suspend death', and more specifically the relationship between such fatality and fate, 'to good and bad fate, to the writing of chance, of destiny, or accident, of prediction, in that it throws out a fate (*prognostica* and *fortune-telling*, if you prefer)' (1987: 72).

Allegory

Whilst for Catholics Esther functions as a type of Mary, Protestants shy away from giving Mary significance, leaving the book without a Christological frame. It will be no surprise to anyone who has glanced at commentaries on Esther that it is the book that Luther wished to expel from the canon because it 'judaizes too much' (*Table Talk* xxiv, cited in Moore 1982: 370). As Timothy K. Beal observes in his *Book of Hiding*, Esther is the 'most remote outpost' of the Hebrew Bible (1997: 5), the last frontier to be conquered by Christian supersession, and as such is all too easily turned into what David Clines has called a 'test case', for 'whether one truly accepts the Old Testament as a legitimate and necessary part of the Christian Scriptures' (1984a: 256). In other words, if Esther can be conquered, then the rest of the Hebrew Bible will fall into place.

When the literal, 'surface' meaning of a text is inadequate for a spiritual community's expectations of sacred Scripture, allegory is a useful reading strategy. The allegorist is like an archaeologist digging below the surface in order to uncover a deeper (and as such more profound) layer of meaning, whether spiritual or more commonly one conveniently applicable to contemporary culture. An example of the former is found in the writings of the Jewish Karaite Judah Gibbor (from Constantinople in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries). Whilst not undermining literal meaning, Gibbor asserts a secondary meaning applicable to the personal spiritual life. In his interpretation, 'Mordecai is the active intellect out of which emanates the force of understanding which is Esther.' Hadassah represents force *in potentia* and becomes substantial only in her *alter ego* Esther, a force identified as feminine because it is not self-sustaining. The Jews represent an inner spiritual force, and Haman the forces of evil personified. The encounter between Haman and Mordecai is the ongoing battle between active intellect and evil. Ahasuerus (everyman) is strengthened through union with Esther (activity), and thereby able to conquer evil inclinations (Walfish 1993: 50–1). Although perhaps the first example of an allegorized reading, it has little influence. Jewish tradition needed no such strategies to make Esther meaningful; Purim was a sufficient – and very popular – interpretative frame.

The spiritual allegorical interpretation of Rhabanus Maurus (c.780–856), Benedictine monk and archbishop of Mainz, Germany, is an early example of converting the story to Christian application and is occasionally repeated in later commentaries, although its influence has waned in modern times. Rhabanus understands 'by *Ahasuerus* Christ reigning far and wide, by *Vashti* the Jewish Synagogue, by *Ester*, the Church of the Gentiles, by *Haman*, the Devil, and by *Mordecai*, *Paul* and the other Apostles,' a paraphrase here applied in

John Mayer's commentary of 1647 (55). In the early eighteenth century the American theologian Jonathan Edwards asserts a similar interpretation:

It appears to me very probable, that this book of Esther is an history that is a shadow of gospel things and times [. . .] The great feast that Ahasuerus made, is the gospel feast [. . .] Vashti, the queen, is the church, or God's people. (1998: 60)

Vashti is the rejected synagogue (60), Mordecai the gospel ministry, Esther the Christian church (61) and Haman a 'type of the devil' (63).

Although the most common Christian method of allegory is to read Christologically, this application is notoriously difficult with Esther. In 1837 the Rev Niblock offers an allegorical reading. It is both simple and extreme, and is worthy of extended quotation because of its impressive ingenuity and complexity, stretching the story of Esther to incredible allegorical length. 'Make but a few changes', he suggests, 'such as *Mordecai* to *Christ*, and *Jews* to *Christians* or *believers*, and the like', and 'the whole will read as if it were a chapter taken out of the very Acts of Apostles themselves!' (1837: 54). He reads the story of Esther through Milton's *Paradise Lost*, framing it as a battle between the rebel Satan and Christ, 'the only begotten son, *the Mordecai of the Church*, hurled down, through the vaults of heaven, those rebellious spirits, who thus "left their first estate"' (15). Haman is demonic in his deceitfulness (16) and, like Judas, he betrays for silver (30). Niblock follows Rhabanus in reading Vashti, 'the king's *first wife*', as the Jewish church, invited to the feast of the gospel who refuses 'rebelliously and haughtily' (19). Following predictable lines of anti-Jewish, Christian rhetoric, Vashti's refusal is equated with 'the rejection and crucifixion of her Messiah', and her exile corresponds to God swearing 'in his wrath' that the Jews 'should never enter his rest'. A swathe of other connections are made. As Mordecai took in the orphan Esther, so Jesus brings Christians into the family of God; as Mordecai walks outside the harem, so the Spirit of God walks with his church. Mordecai's depression of spirit and pity for his people 'depict to us the incarnation, humiliation, exceedingly great love, and tender compassion, of the Son of God for his beloved church' (35). Esther is 'the *adopted* or *Gentile church*', 'once a stranger and foreigner', 'having nothing to recommend her to *mercy* but her *misery*'. She is consigned to 'the cleansing grace and purifying influences of God the Holy Ghost, *represented by the Hege or Hegai of this book*' (20). Hatatch, the messenger between Mordecai and Esther, is a symbol of prayer, 'the appointed means of intercourse with God' (36). Esther turns to Mordecai as an advocate, just as Christians turn to Christ (37). Mordecai's urging of Esther corresponds to Christ's encouragement 'to come into the divine presence' (38). Haman is akin to Satan, who 'in attempting to *oppress* the Messiah [. . .] *exalted* him: in seeking to *falsify* the prophecies, he *fulfilled*

them' (46). The dispersal of edicts depicts the worldwide dissemination of the gospel (50). Even the two days of Purim become '*our Christmas and Easter*' (53), and the 'good day' (*yom tov* – a Hebrew term for a day of celebration or holiday) is the 'Gospel' (56). Niblock proposes that the absence of God's name is in fact a call to Christian judgment: '*designed perhaps to exercise the spiritual discernment of the people of God! Rev 13:18*' (55). Turning Esther into a code enables Niblock to claim a greater spiritual perception. He expresses astonishment at those who call the book irreligious, 'merely because *they* cannot see the traces of its heavenly original!'; for him it is merely a matter of deciphering hieroglyphics (9).

That Mordecai is the Christ figure reflects a general hesitance amongst commentators to identify female types of Christ in the Old Testament. Rupert of Deutz asserts Esther as a type of Christ (see Schaus 2006 under 'Esther'); and the Catholic Lectionary implies the link (Brown 2007: 10). Lawson's commentary of 1804 suggests such a reading of Esther, but is tellingly allusional:

She had been the saviour of the Jews. At the risk of her life, she had preserved theirs. What do we not owe to him, who, not only by endangering his life, but by giving himself up to an accursed death, hath delivered us from the wrath to come? (Lawson 1804: 232)

W. G. Wilmslie's Christology is similarly gestural. He finds in the book 'No teaching of religion, no prophesying of Jesus, no foreshadowing of the evangelical truths of redemption', but instead a representation 'of a human heart struggling against its own weakness, rising to a grandeur that had in it the glory of Christ's own self-sacrifice' (W. G. Wilmslie, *The British Weekly Pulpit*; cited in *Expositor's Dictionary* 1910: 311).

A more common Christological move is represented in Michelangelo's fresco 'The Punishment of Haman' (1508–12), in the Sistine Chapel, in which Haman's crucified body invokes Christ's suffering (see Plate 1). Earlier, Rupertus of Deutz (c.1000) had called it 'the most beautiful image of the future triumph of the Redeemer' (cited in Bickerman 1967: 211). An explicit working-through of the typology of Haman is demonstrated in Ray C. Stedman's evangelical sermon which reads Haman, a man 'nailed, screaming, to a tree until he is dead' as foreshadowing the Christian crucifixion (1963). He explains the link between Haman's and Jesus' fate:

It was an instrument on which an evil man met death! Does that shock you? One of the most amazing sentences in all Scripture is the word from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he says, "He who knew no sin was made sin for us".

He also reads the story as an allegory of personal victory over sin, with Esther's accusation of Haman aligned to inner conviction. The king's confusion becomes



PLATE 1 Michelangelo, *Punishment of Haman*. The Sistine Chapel, Vatican. Photo Vatican Museums.

‘A Conflict Within’, the personal battle with self-justification and compromise. Finally, the king’s sentencing of Haman to death becomes an injunction to ‘Hang it on that tree’ – to put sins ‘in the place of death’.

Esther’s success, however, is to be found in its specific application to contemporary political life. Unlike many other stories of Israel’s triumph, it is a drama of individual against individual, matching wit and wiles in the political arena, and in which a whole people’s existence is at stake. It is an easy move for interpreters to pare down the book into a skeletal dualism of the good Mordecai (and more rarely the good Esther) versus the evil Haman, and to find examples of these types in their immediate contexts. Readers have found a swathe of Mordecais, Esthers, Hamans and even Ahasueruses in the world around them. The Haman–Jewish rivalry is taken up by Henry Case in 1679 as pre-empting the ‘Hellish Powder-Plot’ against the Protestants (the ‘new’ Jews), one of many such applications of the escaping of violence in Esther to the averting of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, the unsuccessful violent attempt on James I and Parliament (see chapter 9). The Edinburgh Anglican Alexander Webster in 1746 supports the crown’s efforts in the Highland clearances and the Battle of Culloden by aligning the ‘butcher’

Duke of Cumberland with Mordecai (see chapter 10). John Stockwood identifies a Mordecai in Queen Elizabeth's minister Walsingham, a model of the exemplary adviser, fighting on behalf of his people, the Protestant Church.

The most gratifying figure for identification has to be Haman, for the vast majority of readers the personification of evil. Perhaps the most infamous Haman is Hitler (who even interpreted himself as such, declaring in a speech delivered on 30 January 1944 that if he were defeated, the Jews would have a 'second triumphant Purim', Goodman [1949] 1988: 4). Haman also becomes the model of the 'evil counsellor' who leads a worthy leader astray (see Esther 3). Alexander Webster, for example, implicates his Prime Minister, Walpole. His sermon is interesting because of the way it negotiates such pointed and politically risky allegory. Although subject to 'whole Floods of Venom poured out' (1740: ii), he denies specific application, diverting responsibility from himself by proclaiming deference to his readers' judgement:

if Gentlemen will claim the Honour of being the Successors [of the wicked Prime Minister], or draw parallels betwixt the Living and the Dead, he is not obliged to answer for the Consequences: Nor will he dispute their superior Knowledge in these Matters. (1740: iv-v)

Providence, Chosenness, Nationhood

For Jews the assertion of providence is a key to the festival of Purim, at which God's care and supervision of his chosen people is celebrated. The received narrative is simple: God protects his own, even in some applications to the point of triumphal victory over the enemy. The story offers consolation and surety against the flux of fortunes for marginalized or persecuted people. It appeals because of its articulation of the visceral experience of threat alongside offering hope against danger. For Rabbi Yitzhak Sender the message of Esther is fully applicable to the twenty-first century, offering comfort that 'so too would we overcome the evil decrees of our present-day enemies and their false claims would come to naught' (2000: 1). Which theme is in the ascendant, consolation or triumph, dictates its effects. Responses are either projected inward into the community (consolation in the midst of persecution) or outward (triumph over another), resulting in the cultural effect of identity consolidation in the former and possible violent or persecutory action in the latter – an aggressive move that potentially initiates a cyclical activity of hostility.

I will turn now to consider the ways in which Esther has been interpreted in relation to providence and the 'chosen people' (identified, of course, by the reader), and further its relation to nationalism and patriotism and to discus-

sions of exile and diaspora, dual terms used distinctly to translate the Hebrew *golah* or *galut*. I use 'exile' to signify a dispersed community in which identity is centred on a homeland, and 'diaspora' to indicate a coherent yet non-territorial identity recognized by other characteristics such as religion or race. To deal with these different issues separately is somewhat artificial because of how they are interrelated in a complex web of logic. But to follow each strand, recognizing the fabric in which each is woven, reveals a clearer picture of how they relate to each other in the specific instances discussed.

Providence

The providence associated with the story of Esther is one that invokes an earthly experience of a hidden God, working behind the scenes. The evangelical Carson inflects the story with apparently contradictory theologies, pointing to the conjunction of 'two things apparently irreconcilable – the free agency of man, and the over-ruling appointment of God' (1835: 134). M'Creie identifies in Esther a providence with a strong moral agenda, infusing common Wisdom tenets (against overreaching, for example) with a religiously inflected causal logic (1838: 4). William Tennant identifies universal morals, 'that God / Rewards a man according to his works', and that he will not suffer 'Malice to triumph o'er simplicity, / And cruelty to crush the innocent, – / So shall all good men hope – all bad despair' (1845: 130). Although he has to adjust the story to achieve it, he identifies the qualities God rewards as 'Merit, Modesty and Meekness' (231).

The message of hope within persecution is expressed in Isidore Gordon Ascher's penultimate stanza:

Through the ages dim and hoary,
Through long suffering, dreary years,
Sweeter than a poet's story,
Crowned with more than martyr's glory
Esther's name, a star appears.

And our trust in God shall arm us
With a strength, like hers of yore,
Then no Amalek's son shall harm us,
While her name still lives to charm us,
In its beauty evermore!

(1863: 36)

A year before, Ernest Bertheau, Professor at Göttingen, labelled such triumphal sentiment 'an godly confidence in a victory over the world', a judgement that

Horowitz cites as representative of 'strident criticisms' of Esther and Purim by 'liberal Protestant circles' (cited in Horowitz 2006: 33, 32).

Modern commentators offer more diverse readings. The Presbyterian A. H. Huizinga refuses supersessionist readings of providence, instead interpreting the lack of explicit divine intervention to signal God's continuing care of the Jews: "That signal, unmistakable lesson must be recorded that it may teach the nation, the race, for all time to come, that, even though no prophet speaks to them, still God himself watches over them and will keep them safe' (c.1936: 401). In spite of readers' assertions of its religious content, Browne prefers instead to assign to the author a secular sense of transcendence, speculating that it 'seems he was still conscious of an unseen Fate ordering the affairs of men' ([1962] 1975: 384).

That Esther was popularly conceived of as a book of providence is evidenced in its infusion into novels that invoke it, yet rarely unproblematically. In his novel *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), Israel Zangwill's engagement with Jewish exile resonates suggestively with Esther's story. For Zangwill, the Jew 'knows that he is in *Goluth*, in exile, and that the days of the Messiah are not yet, and he looks upon the persecutor merely as the stupid instrument of an all-wise Providence' ([1892] 1977: Proem, 2). The poor Esther loses her purse and reflects on the unseen power whose 'working seemed so incomprehensively indifferent to human joys and sorrows'. She asks: 'Would she believe [. . .] that a special Providence watched over him? [. . .] she felt that she would' ([1892] 1977: 210). George Eliot's Adam in *Adam Bede* expresses an everyday belief in divine control: 'It's God's will and that's enough for us' ([1859] 1994: 312). In *Hester's Sacrifice* (1866) the protagonist reiterates her response, 'nothing but providential', to all events, once adding the qualification that 'sometimes Providence seems such a hopeless tangle that there's no seeing to the end of it' (I. 212). Her assertions of divine oversight touch upon the tedious, although her assertion of divine working in the arrival of Hester's maid, the revengeful and Vashti-like Jane, frames the coming disaster in terms of a divine order of retribution: 'I think I may say again, as I said before, that the opening was providential, nothing else but providential' (II. 20; see also III. 205).

In Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), a novel suffused with the Esther narrative, Edward denies divine order in favour of material cause and effect: 'You can believe in Providence when you have money' (154). In a conversation that Edward and Hester have, when he says that 'no one can help; it is fortune that must decide', Hester responds: 'You mean Providence.' And then adds, awkwardly, for she 'had never used the phraseology of religious sentiment [. . .] and was very shy in respect to it' [. . .] "And one can always pray"' (359). Edward's connection to gambling constructs him as a Haman figure, compounded by his speculating on the Stock Market, by which he authors his own downfall. When

Edward tells Hester that his fate depends 'on a turn of the cards,' Hester responds with a condemnation of the flippant attitude it denotes: 'Edward, you cannot mean it is play? You are not a gambler!' (406). That he considers himself the autonomous ruler of his future denies the providence that Esther represents:

He seemed to himself to have fallen down from a height, at which he had been master of his fate, to some deep-lying underground where he was its slave, and could only wait till the iron car of necessity rolled on and crushed him. He had set, he felt, machinery in motion which he could not stop, which might destroy him. (377)

A theology of providence works to pull the world under a single purposeful influence, a contraction that dominates the perspective of the Esther in Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way* (1987):

sometimes, when accused of eccentricity or indeed perversity of vision, she would claim that all knowledge must always be omnipresent in all things, and that one could startle herself into seeing the whole by tweaking unexpectedly at a surprised corner of the great mantle. (83)

Exile and Diaspora

The Jews' vulnerability in Esther resonates with Jewish communities living under Gentile rule, but is also emphasized in Christian rewritings. A desire for Jews to return to Palestine had resonated in Europe since the early modern period, and in England especially, because it was often conflated with hope for the coming of the Messiah. The Jews' return was understood (amongst Puritan and evangelical circles at least) as the precursor of the second coming of Christ. David Katz warns against 'attributing genuine religious toleration' to Christians of the late seventeenth century despite discussions over the readmission of the Jews to England at the Whitehall conference of December 1655, which culminated in an unofficial acceptance of Jewish residencies after this date (1994: 175). Toleration of the Jews was instead a result of the increasingly messianic flavour of popular Christianity (see Katz 1982: 120). The anonymous long poem *Hester* of 1714 contains a messianism fully cognizant of a Christian view of the eschaton as one prefigured by Jewish return to Israel and conversion:

So Heaven he constantly Address'd in Pray'r,
For scatter'd *Israel's* Return from far,
With distant Hopes of Shilo to appear.

(Anon. 1714: 19)

The author's depiction of the fall of Jerusalem exhibits sympathy with the Jews but acts ultimately as a reminder of the religion's decay (see 45). The Jews' exile is because of their 'Unweary'd Wickedness, and Grace abus'd' (44), terms that invoke Christian castigation of Jews for their denial of Christ's grace. A year later, Thomas Brereton's Jerusalem is a relic for archaeological survey, not a living centre for faith. Echoing the Apocrypha's rendition of her prayer, Esther despises her material wealth because of Israel's equally material poverty:

[. . .] amidst this publick Joy,
My self with Shame and secret Horror die. [. . .]
Yet thou, *Jerusalem!* with Grass o'ergrown,
To pois'nous Reptiles a Retreat art known.

(1715: 5)

Brereton emphatically calls for the preservation of the Jews, but in a way that is fully in line with evangelical messianic interpretation of biblical history:

No, Saviour! Thou wilt not erase their Name,
Whose only Mouths on Earth thy Truth proclaim[.]

(13)

Esther saves her people 'to spare the chosen Line from which you spring' (12), implying that salvation is for the Messiah, not the Jews *per se*. The coupling of messianic fervour with exilic desire for the homeland in both Jewish and Christian traditions made plays like Racine's *Esther*, played originally in Christian cities with high Jewish populations such as Rouen, appealing for both communities (David Maskell, paper delivered at Yarnton, Oxford, 2006).

The anonymous *Esther's Suit to King Ahasuerus, In Behalf of the Jews. In a Letter to a Member of Parliament* of 1753 presents an extreme (though not so rare) argument for Jewish return to Israel. The pamphlet defends the 1753 Bill naturalizing Jews to Britain for exclusively Christian messianic purposes:

this seems to prepare the Way for the Call of the *Jews*, which the Learned say, must precede the second Coming of the Messiah; this may bring about the Conversion of the Sons of *Jacob*; they may by this be gathered together in this City and Kingdom, [. . .] be brought into the Pale of *Christ's* church; and if at the Coming of the Messiah, *London* should be fixed on by him for his glorious Reign on Earth, as is his Metropolis, will not all Nations by that Means be subject to *Britain*, and will not the Law go forth from our *Sion*. (15–16; see also Symington 1878: 22)

Royall Tyler's early nineteenth-century play *The Origin of the Feast of Purim*, although citing the Jewish festival in its title, is another example. In the opening scene, the chorus laments the loss of Jerusalem with the repeated refrain: 'His

promise to our Fathers is forgot' ([n.d.] 1941: 33–6). The keeper of the harem, Haggai, rebukes the Jews as a 'stubborn unbelieving sinful race' (35), and expounds the return of the Jews to Israel as a fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy: 'The time has come when those who love / The Lord their God, with joy will straight return' (ibid.). The messianic fervour has an unmistakably Christian resonance in the Persian Haggai's echoing of Nativity language:

Messiah – long foretold by men inspired,
 Messiah – glorious Savior, sent by God,
 Not merely to redeem our captive tribes,
 But to bring light and life good will and peace
 Unto the world. O haste, O hasten, then
 Thy glorious Advent. Saviour of mankind;
 Come bless all nations with thy gospel peace.

(37)

Such Christian supersessionism is reflected in the speech of the head of the harem, Haggai, who enters into an anti-Jewish tirade:

That thou in wisdom
 Unto this sinful race should e'er commit
 The knowledge of thy name ineffable –
 E'en to this sinful race, backsliding still!

(ibid.)

Although Jewish tradition holds the Jews complicit in the edicts against them (see, for example, *Esther Rabbah*, VII.13), such berating is discomfoting when a feature of Christian works. For Tyler, the edict against the Jews is, unsurprisingly, due to 'indignation of the Lord' (42). Esther, praying, declares that 'we have sinned, and justly thou, O God, / Hast to our enemies deliver'd us' (57).

Handel's Jews are exemplary in their willingness to praise their God, the oratorio invoking Psalm 137's reluctant exiles. A grim picture is painted in the priest's rendition of the coming genocide, of the infant 'stabbd at the mother's breast', the strings piercing the melody with staccato urgency. The fear of death is undercut by a lament, in intermittent deep and soprano notes, that the Israelites 'never to your country shall return!' In the aria 'O Jordan, Jordan, sacred tide' the priest mourns the loss of Jerusalem as a landscape bereft of the Israelites' worship: 'Shall not thy hills resound with praise / And learn our holy song?' The image is of a wasteland that needs to be infused with the praise of God by being peopled by believers. Emotion is conveyed through repetition of the phrase, 'Shall we no more'. The different settings of the phrase 'no more', each building in emphasis, is punctuated with strings, at times abbreviated and at times lengthened, evoking both waves of grief and the urgency of mourning.

In her drama of *Esther*, Eliza Cushing, daughter of the minister of the Congregationalist Unitarian Church in Brighton, Massachusetts, paints a Mordecai longing for Jerusalem yet grateful to his monarch:

Exiles we are, beneath a pagan sway –
Yet has this prince, a heathen though he be,
Granted us many boons, and been our shield
From evils that assailed.

(1840: 23)

Cushing's king even gives aid to the rebuilding of the Temple. The play ends in Messianic triumph:

He bares his arm full oft to aid their cause,
And ever cheers them with the precious hope
Of that Messiah, whose victorious arm
Shall lead them forth to conquest and renown.

(103)

Buchan's play replicates these impulses in Mordecai's opening lines:

The land of exile is the land of tears!
Far, far from thee, Jerusalem, we dwell.

(1873: 10)

Messianic overtones are again discernible:

We utterly must fade beneath Thy stroke,
If Thou dost not through Him, the appointed seed,
(Whose day, oh! may it even now be nigh!) [. . .]

(11)

Mordecai celebrates Purim triumph with an eye to Israel:

Gather, O gather soon, if so Thy will,
All the dispersed of Israel into one
In their own land, around Thy Zion-hill!
Amen, amen, amen!!

(97)

Symington's desire for Jewish return to the land of Israel leads to philo-Semitic expression: 'we Gentiles are set in their high place of privilege', but need to ask 'Is there any left of the house of David, that we may show them the kindness of God for Jesus' sake?' (1878: 41).

In Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) the exilic Jews are described as being 'of no country and of one': 'Encircled by the splendours of the Modern Bablyon, their hearts turned to the East like passion-flowers seeking the sun. Palestine, Jerusalem, the Holy Land, were magic syllables to them' ([1892] 1977: 144). Esther leads an exilic 'double life', negotiating a dual identity as Jewish and English. The narrative notes the greater sensibility of her English heritage, her 'pride in Nelson and Wellington':

she rejoiced to find that her ancestors had always beaten the French [. . .] that Englishmen dominated the world and had planted colonies in every corner of it [. . .] that the English language was the noblest in the world.

The novel relates her growing Jewish loyalty, and, after the passage quoted above, anticipates her later change of heart: 'The experience of a month will overlay the hereditary bequest of a century. And yet, beneath all, the prepared plate remains most sensitive to the old impressions' (83). Zangwill personalizes Diaspora as he conflates Esther's and wider Jewish diasporic experience in Raphael's speech:

I have come to conceive your life as an allegory of Judaism, the offspring of a great and tragic past with the germs of a rich blossoming, yet wasting with an inward canker. I have grown to think of its future as somehow bound up with yours. I want to see your eyes laughing, the shadows lifted from your brow; I want to see you face life courageously, not in passionate revolt nor in passionless despair, but in faith and hope and in the joy that springs from them. (398)

In contrast to those who insert Israel into the narrative, Browne interprets the lack of reference to Israel in this 'ultra-nationalist book' as an attempt to divert attention away from its subjection to foreign powers under Persian rule ([1962] 1975: 385).

Modern commentators reflect instead on the experience of Diaspora living, the emphasis on successful negotiation rather than migration. David Clines suggests that the story demonstrates the 'irony' of Jews' experience in Diaspora: 'both protected and threatened by the imperial powers to which it was subject' (1984a: 254). For Sidnie Ann White, it is written for those who 'must learn to make their way in a society in which they are a minority and in which there is always danger of persecution and oppression' (1992: 124). Harold Fisch argues that the story of Esther promotes a specifically assimilative response to Diaspora, 'accommodation' the key to her political influence (1994: 65). For Levenson the story is not of survival, but of triumph in how the Jews 'came to be respected and feared by the Gentile majority' (1997: 1). This emphasis is explicit in his contention that Esther is a 'story of the transformation of the *exile* into the *Diaspora*' (15).

Nationalism

Despite the lack of reference to Israel, the Book of Esther does present a coherent, yet unspecified, 'Jewish' identity. The Talmud fears that the book undercuts Jewish integration into other nations in its aggressive self-identity (*Meg* 7a, see p. 8). Delgado's long poem contains many reflections on court life and nationalism, pre-dating by nearly 500 years Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community:

An empire is not merely territory
but a realm of the mind about which men agree,
complying not with force but just the threat,
the idea of force [. . .]

([1627] 1999: 57)

Delgado also foregrounds the performative nature of living under totalitarian rule, in which habitual behaviour changes personality, identity and ability. The advisers are hindered because 'their collective judgment has been affected by their habit of servitude' (20). The king's psychological instability is caused by his absolute rule, and the Jews are constrained by their 'habit of fear' (86). The king claims that he (not the queen) is in exile, as he is 'befuddled, confused'. Cut off from normal human contact, the king suffers an analogous pain to the secret Jew:

The silence he must maintain builds up inside him
a kind of pressure, a silent scream of pain[.]

(24)

A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester (1561), asserts an explicit theology of chosenness, that 'The Iewes be the people of god elected', in Esther's mouth (Greg [1561] 1904: 43). Haman is characterized primarily by his alien national identity, a 'Macedone borne and lyke to theyr owne kynde / Not of our nacion' (44), foreignness implicitly then a divinely ordained indicator of disloyalty. Nationhood and election become intimately linked, religious and national identities subsumed within one another. Herbert Palmer in the pamphlet publication of his sermon delivered at the House of Commons, 28 June 1643, frames his sermon on Esther 4:13, 14 in nationalist terms through citing on his title-page a text from Jeremiah 18:7–8:

At what instant I shall speak concerning a Nation, and concerning a Kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it: If that Nation against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evill, I will repent of the evill, that I thought to do unto them.

Applying the story to England, Palmer fixes Israel in a distinct temporal realm from which Jews can be used as a non-threatening model: ‘The Jews, at this time, Gods onely visible Church on earth, were now in one of the greatest dangers that ever threatened a Nation’ (1643: 2). His reference to both ‘Church’ and ‘Nation’ enables a construction of normative Englishness as being something both religious (Protestant) and political. For Christians, their emphasis upon providence involves such assertions of the ‘chosen people’, setting themselves as the subject of the book, claiming (and to their own satisfaction, proving) their superiority over the Jews. The emerging self-identity of England as the inheritor of the Jewish mantle of chosenness and identity as Israel has such strong associations in Protestant England that often no explanation of the connection is necessary. As such, *Esther* is a book through which national identity is asserted and negotiated (for more on *Esther* and nationalism see Carruthers 2006c).

In Brereton’s 1715 translation of Racine, Mordecai’s appeal to *Esther* becomes one of nationalistic focus: ‘Degen’rate *Esther*! when your Country dies, / Do you for ought your single Being prize?’ (10). Thomas M’Crie assumes that Haman’s revenge is one of ‘national and religious rancour’ (1838: 74). Tennant’s *Esther* in his *Hebrew Dramas* prefaces the action by linking Haman to Esau, setting him up as the progenitor of a race characterized by hatred because he ‘did his red-haired brother baulk / Of the dear birthright, sold so very cheap’ (1845: 128). Even Haman likens the Jews to the ‘cheater and fraud’ Jacob, citing the tribal enmity as cause of his prejudice:

I have him –
Him and his total Amalek-hating race,
Proscrib’d, death-doomed – for this – for these insults
To me, and to my house!

(145)

Buchan’s 1873 play expresses a universally applicable military triumphalism:

While to our God, the living and the true,
We look in faith, our enemies shall rue
What time, in any age or any land,
Against the Jews they dare to lift the hand!!

(99)

James Rice’s translation of Racine emphasizes the hereditary nature of loyalty, a concept of national belonging replicating late nineteenth-century concepts of national identity. Mordecai links patriotism to race in his appeal to *Esther*: ‘Your life, *Esther*, is it your own? Does it not belong to the blood from which you are sprung?’ (1882: 11).

In 1890 the Reverend William Tidd Matson depicts a specifically racial antagonism. When Haman begs Esther for his life, she answers: 'Thou dog of Amalek, / I spare thee? Never!' giving as her reason that she 'should but bring / The curse of Saul on my unsheltered head' (13), referring to the divinely ordained animosity between the Amalekites and the Hebrews. That this is a racial distinction is suggested in Mordecai's lamentation over Esther's entrance to the harem and the mixing of races, reflecting popular nineteenth-century eugenicist concerns:

Whereof thou hast been the joy, snatched and transplanted
Among the minions of the court, mid manners
And customs alien to thy bringing up,
And mixing with abhorrent Gentile blood,
Oh, this is harrowing!

(4)

Zangwill aligns *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) to the theme of Jewish preservation by describing it as 'a study through typical figures of a race whose persistence is the most remarkable fact in the history of the world' (Preface to 3rd edn [1892] 1977: v). His protagonist, Raphael (Esther's love interest), is the spokesperson for a triumphal Judaism that in its embracing of diaspora (through which Jewish values are disseminated) resists identification with nationalism: 'History testifies that this has verily been our mission, that we have taught the world Religion as truly as Greece has taught Beauty and Science. Our miraculous survival through the cataclysms of ancient and modern dynasties is a proof that our mission is not yet over' (255). One character Sterlintski, a Russian acquaintance of Raphael's, presents an idealistic view of diaspora:

May we not dream nobler dreams than political independence? For, after all, political independence is only a means to an end, not an end in itself, as it might easily become, and as it appears to other nations. To be merely one among the nations – that is not, despite George Eliot, so satisfactory an ideal. [. . .] For I prefer the dream that we are divinely dispersed to bless it, wind-sown seeds to fertilise its waste places. To be a nation without a fatherland, yet with a mother-tongue, Hebrew – there is spiritual originality, the miracle of history. (385)

Zangwill's universalist view of the Jewish contribution to other cultures contrasts with Walter Adeney's commentary in the same year that interprets the book as asserting a 'practical deification of Israel' which 'permits a tone of harsh cruelty', focusing on the final scenes that 'reek with blood' (cited in Horowitz 2006: 28).

Writers frequently assume an implicit nationalism. For Wilhelmina Stitch, 'a true Christian cannot be a Nationalist', and Esther 'is clearly written by a Nationalist gone mad' (1935: 255). She sets the book in an age in which 'national hates

were augmented by religious difficulties, promoting instead her own era of 'Christianity and the Gospel of Love' (ibid.). Esther can only act as a negative model, 'as an example of what happens when people think Nationalism is a fine thing, forgetting that God, who is to be loved warmly and abidingly, has no enemies' (ibid.). It is judgements such as these that for Horowitz 'carelessly condemn' and that later demonstrate 'obtuseness' in light of the Second World War, and that replicate circulating assumptions about Jewish and Christian religion and culture (2006: 36).

Some modern writers present more contested understandings of national identities. In Grillparzer's post-war 'Dramatic Fragments', *Esther* (1953), Mordecai and Esther represent antagonistic approaches to national loyalty. Whilst Mordecai arrogantly asserts that 'God ordained' Jews to be 'the topmost peak' of humanity, Esther rejoins: 'One's own appraisal is a faulty standard' (118–19). Mordecai reminds Esther that she is a descendant of David, urging her to be inspired by her foremothers Deborah, Jael and Judith. She again resists his nationalist fervour: 'Then shall I kill, deceive, shall I betray, / To be a worthy daughter of my house?' (120). Mordecai's dedication continues unabated as he speculates on Esther's success, hoping that 'Israel's ancient folk should rise anew / To wield the sword of wrath against the heathen / Who kept them down' (138).

Post-war writers nonetheless continue to ascribe nationalism to the book. *The Interpreter's Bible* presents Esther as 'above all others the book of Jewish nationalism; Purim is the great national day' (1954: 846). Its nationalism is identified in the 'will of the Jews to survive as a distinct people' (833), and it asserts Esther's 'central theme' as 'the indestructibility of Israel'. It approaches the topic as a 'sociological problem' decrying separatism as an inadequate strategy for identity cohesion and concludes that the 'tension created may in a democratic society be lessened, but the tension remains; in a totalitarian state the tension cannot be tolerated, and the separatist group is liquidated' (841). The book's supposed alignment of 'race and culture' is asserted as at 'radical variance with New Testament Christianity', which elides ethnic 'distinctions' (830). Despite the story's representation of an assimilated Esther, it imposes Jewish separatism on the story:

We can imagine what might have happened if the Jews had been assimilated into the culture of Babylon, and we know with what determination they remained Jews [. . .] It was literally impossible for them to tolerate anything non-Jewish and remain Jews. (851)

Jewish particularism is nonetheless seen as bringing 'Christianity into being' as 'the proselytizing religion of the western world, transcending all differences of peoplehood and nationhood' (852).

Browne sets Haman, peculiarly, as a victim of Jewish prejudice who is considered, like all Gentiles, 'only fit for destruction' ([1962] 1975: 383). He concludes: 'The Jews, like other people striving for nationhood, often tended to selfish nationalism, which reached its lowest depths in this book'; but he vindicates them by arguing that at other times they 'outshone all other nations in the breadth of their universalistic vision of the salvation of mankind' (ibid.). Horowitz articulates the outrage that so soon after the Holocaust 'a Cambridge-educated Anglican vicar and former university professor was thus able to perversely present Mordecai as a Jewish proto-Hitler' (2006: 40).

Some later commentators are more sensitive. Moore sympathizes with the book's importance to Jews in the early centuries: 'Certainly many Palestinian Jews in the time of Judas, Jonathan, and Simon could easily have identified with the ethnic and nationalistic pride – and fears – as incarnated in Esther and Mordecai' (Moore 1982: xxxi). White interprets Esther's successful integration as evidence that, 'for the audience of the book of Esther, being a Jew was more an ethnic designation than a religious one' (1992: 125). The American theologian Levenson considers it 'remarkable' that the 'miraculous transformation' 'involves only the squelching of anti-Semitism, not the restoration of the land of Israel or the reversal of exile' (1997: 15). Despite these assertions, he still manages to read nationhood into Esther:

transformations from refugee to prime minister and from orphan to queen recall prophetic visions of restoration after exile (e.g., Isaiah 54) and suggest that Mordecai and Esther, for all their particular character, are also allegorizations of Israel's national destiny. (16)

For Yosef T. Cahn, in the stories of Esther and Joseph, Israel and Egypt are 'in mortal contest for survival', and for him this is a battle against assimilation in the Diaspora. He argues against the 'superficial philosophy which teaches cultural blindness', because it is 'the door to assimilation for Jews who never understood their own religious identity' (Cahn 1995: 32). His application is to the individual: 'The most menacing "Egypt", however, is the one within us. It is the inclination within us to want to assimilate' (34). In contrast, Larry Domnitch presents biographies of key twentieth-century Jews who 'had a sense of responsibility to use their positions in government to aid and assist their people, just as Esther had done over two millennia earlier in Persia', including Henry Morgenthau Jr, Secretary of the Treasury under F. D. Roosevelt and the creator of the War Refugee Board in 1944, who Domnitch estimates saved 'over 200,000' Jews in the Second World War.

Patriotism

A sense of the nationalist application of Esther expressed itself in calls to patriotism, a term that like 'nation' can have more than political connotations. John Stockwood's 'epistle dedicatorie' to the German John Brentius' *A Right Godly and Learned Discourse upon the Booke of Ester* (1584) is dedicated to Walsingham, in his desire that the book 'may encourage them bodily, yea if it were in times of most present and greatest daunger, to aduenture to speake for the wealth of the church, and wellfare of Israell' (1584: sig A2v). For Stockwood the story is pertinent to the persecuted church: 'the many daungers she is in, the number of aduersaries, their suttle shiftes, & craftie practises, the churches deliuerance, her enemies confusion, the bad ende of such as abuse their dignity and authority with great kinges and potentates, to the molesting of the true professors' (2). Conversely, it tells of the blessings of God towards those who 'vse their places to countenance the godly, against the pestilent policies of all proud and ambitious Amans' (ibid.).

Heyrick assumes that Esther's motivations are patriotic: 'who could desire to live when the Country is dead?' (1646: 8). Nation even overshadows religion: 'all owe more to their Country then [*sic*] to themselves; this *Esther* knew which thus strengthned [*sic*] her resolution, together with the preservation of her Religion, a second consideration' (ibid.). Later in the century, Case also asserts that Esther sacrifices 'out of love to her own Country' (1679: 9).

Alexander Webster's sermon celebrating the 'victory obtain'd over the Rebels at the Battle of Culloden, April 16th 1746' is dedicated to those who have 'Concern for the Welfare of our JERUSALEM, and Zeal for the BRITISH ISRAEL'. For him, Esther is a lesson against rebellion and instead a model for 'a generous Concern for the *publick Weal*' (1746: 10). James II's attempt on the throne is interpreted as fighting 'to destroy our civil and religious Interests', and 'may justly be considered as justly having acted the Part of *Haman* and his Abettors' (22). He goes on to paint the rebellion in terms of national disaster:

The Injustice and Oppression, Rapine and Plunder, Bloodshed and Murder, hitherto occasioned by this most wicked Rebellion; is but a faint Emblem of the *direful Misery* and *Destruction* that would have attended its further Progress. (23)

Haman and Catholicism are inherently dangerous: 'What could have been expected from *Rome*, but *Romish* Superstition [. . .] And what from the bloody House of *Stewarts*, but Fire and Faggot, Racks and Tortures?' (25). The key to his analogy is the book's record of coincidences, the 'many signal and similar Appearances of Providence in our Behalf' (28) that infuse the Protestant monarchy with divine support. His history of England reads as a succession

of continual aversions of catastrophe through providential provision of godly monarchs and leaders:

It was *then* that the same God, who raised up *Mordecai and Esther* for the Deliverance of the *Jews*; – who raised up King *William*, of immortal Memory, for the Restoration of our civil and religious Liberties, when all was well nigh lost; [. . .] This same gracious God *then* sent to our timely Assistance his Royal Highness the Duke of *Cumberland*, whom I may call the *special Gift of Providence*[.] (30)

Webster's application of *Esther* to Culloden stems from his perception of Scotland's marginality in terms of government support, the Church of Scotland subject to accusations of being 'a disloyal seditious People'. On the contrary, he argues, their 'Loyalty [. . .] stirred forth as the Light' (39).

Into the nineteenth century patriotic fervour continues to burn. Lawson commends *Esther*: 'Patriotism and piety were shining ornaments of this princess. She desired not great things for herself. She was well satisfied with her own condition, if she could but see peace on Israel' (1804: 180). Thomas M'Creie echoes the sentiment in identifying *Esther* as 'a bright example of female patriotism', but for male application: 'The true patriot is ready to sacrifice every thing for the public weal; he prefers public to personal interests, and would rather die than witness the desolations of the church of God and the ruin of his country' (1838: 231). He defensively asserts: 'Patriotism is not inconsistent with religion in its purest form' (292). In Cushing's play, when *Mordecai* mourns his loss of *Esther*, he resolves:

Come, swell our hymn of triumph, and forget
Each selfish feeling in a nation's joy!

(1840: 38)

The term 'nation' is conveniently slippery, potentially referring to race, land or religion, a conflation that suits the diasporic reception of the book. It is unsurprising, then, that writers often turn to the book to underpin or overthrow nationalist tendencies.

Political Application

In *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* (1561), *Esther* offers advice to the king regarding his proper activity:

Let God alwaye therefore haue hys parte
And the poore fedde by hospitalitie

Eche man his measure, be it pynte or quarte,
And no man to muche, or that is great ieoberdie.

(Greg [1561] 1904: 14).

The king himself warns regarding the ways of kings:

My Lordes by this fygure ye may well se,
The multitude hurte by the heades negligence,
If to his pleasure so geuen is he,
That he will no paine take nor dilligence,
who careth not for his cure ofte loseth credence,
A prouerbe of olde sume time in vsage,
Few men that serue but for theyre owne aduantage.

(45)

This early example demonstrates the more subtle form of criticism that the book enabled. John Brentius, although advocating obedience to monarchs, condemns general ‘unconsideratenesse and want of discretion’ as ‘shamefull’, but in a king it is ‘a most foule thing, & most uniuert’. He dictates: ‘For it is the chiefe office and duetie in a king, in judgement not to condemne the parties accused being unheard’ (1584: 90). With the Scriptures a household item from the sixteenth century on, Esther is a familiar story in the years of civil unrest by which critics can surreptitiously judge the monarchy. Less contentiously, it provides a model for the consort queen in Esther herself, Elizabeth’s reign replete with allusions to Esther as a model of (limited) queenship (see further Esther 2).

Francis Quarles’ poetic rewriting of the Book of Esther is representative of early modern concerns, which he outlines in three parts: the ‘Ethicall’, ‘the object whereof is the manners of a private man’, including moral virtues such as fortitude, temperance, magnanimity, modesty and justice; the ‘Politically’, ‘the object whereof is publique society’, which encompasses the behaviour of ‘a Prince to his Subject’ and vice versa, the rewarding of virtue and the nurturing of peace; and the ‘Oeconomically’, ‘the object whereof is private society’, which involves the ruling of husband over wife, of father over his child and of a master over his servant (1621 Preface: sig A3r-v; 1642: 86–7). His outline neatly sums up a mass of responses to the book throughout its history. Dedicated to James I when it appears in 1621 and to Charles I in 1642, *Hadassa’s* major concern is the maintenance of moral and societal hierarchies, something that crops up almost incessantly in the reception of Esther. Quarles meditates on God’s omniscience, and in so doing presents biblical examples that critique monarchical rights:

Man sees like man, and can but comprehend
Things as they seeming are, not as they end;

God sees a Kings heart in a Shepherds brest,
And in a mighty King, he sees a Beast.

(1621: sig Gr; 1642: 124)

Marginal notes in the 1621 edition point the reader towards the shepherd-turned-king David in 1 Sam 16:11 and the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4:29, who becomes bestial when God drives him insane. His conclusion nonetheless is that: 'A lawfull King / Is Gods Lieu-tenant; in his sacred eare / God whispers oft, and keepes his Presence there' (sig Nr; 1642: 166). Thomas Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* (1715) commends Georgian rule: 'Who rather wou'd by Love than Fear subdue; / Happy the Land! the Sov'raign happy too!' (37). Written under a restricted monarchy, the pamphlet *Esther's Suit* offers strident advice that 'the Heart of Kings is in the Hand of God, who by this Precedent teaches them, that they must bear the Burthen of the Crown themselves, and see with their own Eyes; lest, leaving their Authority to others, they meet with those who abuse it' (Anon. 1753: 15).

Beyond monarchical application, the book becomes a pattern for courtly behaviour. In *Hester, A Poem* of 1714, Mordecai is admired by the king for his 'bashful Meekness', demonstrating for the author 'how Merit most when humble thrives' (Anon. 1714: 22). Pseudo-Webster considers Haman's rise to be telling of how 'fickle and wavering is Court Favour!' (1740: 7). As such, the Book of Esther is a cautionary tale of court life:

Courts are slippery Places where even the justest Man can scarcely walk upright;
Power is intoxicating; and those that swallow large Draughts of it, lose their
Understanding, their Feet fail them, and they fall down and are dash'd to Pieces[.]
(1740: 6)

For Thomas M'Crie the story demonstrates 'how Christians are expected to act when elevated, in providence, to stations of rank, influence and authority' (1838: 302).

Haman and the king provide opportunity for writers to expand on the nature and role of the evil counsellor and monarchy (see further in *Esther* 3). The Montrose Baptist minister James Watson warns against the danger of favourites:

In spheres too high they dwell, to find
A faithful friend – whose love can state
The guileless dictates of the mind;
But flatterers false the throne surround,
Whose words are deadly poison found.

(1845: 33)

Such a court dynamic provokes both harsh and sympathetic portraits of princes, Grillparzer's symptomatic of the latter:

How loathsome hearing always but oneself
And empty echoes all the others make.

(1953: 129)

Esther as Literature

The impulse to make sense of Esther is apparent in attempts to place the book in a recognizable generic category that might provide a clear frame for interpretation. It has been compared by different critics to the *Arabian Nights* tales, to the Herodotus story of Candaules, and very commonly to other biblical tales, in attempts to locate its genre (for its relation to contemporaneous works see further Levenson 1997: 88 and Moore 1977: 205–6). Readers' claims for the story are indicative of how they see, especially, its historical or fictional credentials. Even when committed to its sacred status, some readers identify a genre that resists a literal, historical frame. *The Interpreter's Bible* suggests that we 'read Esther as we read the parables. Jews have been delivered, there have been a Haman [. . .] there have been a Mordecai and an Esther [. . .] Jews whose loyalty to Israel is without limit' (1954: 834). Even the *New Catholic Commentary* considers it to be 'an inspired midrash [. . .] written on an older profane tale' ([1969] 1981: 409). Because it is a story about human activity, it is seen by some to be typical of Wisdom literature. Shemaryahu Talmon, for example, points out the stereotypical representations of characters: 'that is, Mordecai and Esther as the righteous wise struggling against the cunning schemers, Haman and Zeresh, for the favor and support of the powerful but witless dupes, Xerxes and Vashti' (Moore [1971] 1982: xx).

Secular readings insist on its lack of historicity. Browne calls it a 'novel,' 'with no historical basis, but set for the author's purposes in a time long past' ([1962] 1975: 81). His reading is typical:

It is pretty clear that the author's purpose was to provide an historical origin for the feast of Purim, which the Jews living somewhere in the East had adopted as a secular carnival. This feast and its mythology are now recognised as being of Babylonian origin. Mordecai represents Marduk, the chief Babylonian God [. . .] Esther represents Ishtar.

Identifying Esther as a mythological adaptation has been common since James Frazer's anthropological mapping of Purim on to a Babylonian New Year festival

in his *Golden Bough* (1913: 360–7). Sidnie Ann White, like Browne, designates it as a ‘Jewish novella’, which she describes as ‘a fictional piece of writing in prose that is not designed to meet any tests of historical accuracy’ (1992: 125).

Some recent scholars seek to maintain a fruitful tension between fiction and truth in their claims for Esther. Clines asserts the ‘current consensus of opinion’ that Esther is a ‘historical novel’ (1984a: 256; also Moore [1971] 1984: lii). Levenson claims that it is ‘best seen as a historical novella set within the Persian empire’, endorsing Fox’s claim that Esther’s frame of historical reference may be different to a modern reader’s: ‘How exactly an ancient religious community – or a modern one – understands “actual historical events” is a complicated epistemological and hermeneutical issue’ (1997: 26).

Throughout its history of reception religious readers have paid attention to the literary richness of the Esther story, and its quality is claimed to either enhance or overshadow its spiritual value. Medieval Jewish writers are sensitive to literary elements and identify meaningful parallelism in chapters 3 and 4, and 8 and 9, Mordecai’s change of clothes from sackcloth to royal robes, which emphasizes the story’s reversal. Joseph Kara notes the linguistic similarities of the two edicts, ‘writing about the joy of the Jews when they were saved in the same language that he wrote about their punishment’ (for more examples see Walfish 1993: 63). Such attention to literary elements that highlight the human factor in Scripture, are a ‘rare phenomenon in medieval exegesis’, according to Walfish (*ibid.*: 64).

Literary judgements are rarely ideologically unfettered. For Thomas Scott, the influential Protestant commentator, the book’s simple narrative bypasses anti-Semitic prejudice in readers: ‘Had this conclusion been urged on the Gentiles by a despised Jew, their prejudices might have been excited: let the simple narrative then speak for itself.’ He rejects the Additions for the aesthetic reason that they ‘decorate the history’ and ‘destroy its simple unity and beauty’ (1827: 408). The book’s sparse style is no less meaningful for Thomas M’Crie who insists:

The excellency of the Scriptures, and the wisdom of their Divine Author, are to be seen in what they conceal and keep back, as well as in what they reveal and bring forward.

Authored by the ‘inspired historian’, silence only proves that the readers’ inferences will be ‘sufficiently correct’ (1838: 102–3).

Modern critics have paid great attention to Esther’s formal structure, noting its ‘bilateral chiasmic structure’, ‘doublings’ and ‘elaborate chains of synonyms’ (see further Levenson 1997: 10–11). For many, the book’s literary merit overwrites any perceived lack in this atheological book (see, for example, *The*

Interpreter's Bible 1954: 832). Levenson claims that because it is 'so entertaining, so comical, and so subtle, any didactic purpose is deflated, so that 'to speak of its "message" can be profoundly misleading' (1997: 12). This is evidently not a thought that occurred to many of the writers featured on the following pages.

Esther 1:1–9

Early Jewish responses to the Book of Esther read trauma in its very first words: ‘Now it came to pass’ (*wayyehi*). The imbuing of significance in such small details of the text is typical of midrashic rewriting, as the Orthodox Jewish commentator Yosef Cahn explains: ‘In the holy writings of the Torah, every word, every letter is a capsule of energy containing a message to us, a profound teaching. Rashi refers to the derivation from a single word of Torah as being like “mountains suspended from a hair”’ (1995: 54). The Mishnah’s *Megillah* makes sense of the verse by invoking its parallel occurrence in, for example, Ruth 1:1 and Gen 6:1, contexts which signify ‘distress’ (*Meg* 10b); a portent of ensuing threat. The twelve sections of *Esther Rabbah*’s proem meander through various biblical passages to end at: ‘WAYYEHI (THERE WAS WOE) IN THE DAYS OF AHASUERUS’ (*Esther Rabbah*, 5; ‘there was woe’ is a common rabbinic interpretation of *wayyehi*).

1:1 The King and Empire

The scene is the vast Perso-Medan Empire and its king, Ahasuerus. *Midrash Rabbah* identifies the king as Artaxerxes (as do LXX, Josephus and, more recently, Hoschander). Modern commentators more commonly identify the king as Xerxes I (485–465 BCE), son of Darius (Moore [1971] 1984: 3; see also Browne [1962] 1975; Levenson 1997: 43 (who asserts confidently that Ahasuerus ‘is the Hebrew form of the Persian name that the Greeks rendered as “Xerxes”’); and the NIV, whose king is named Xerxes). Historical fascination with the king begins with the medieval Jewish exegetes who paid great attention to the story’s detail and context. Rabbi Shamariah ben Elijah of Crete (1275–1355), for example, analyses the architecture of the palace (Walfish 1993: 102). Some authors promote ingenious solutions to the problem of Ahasuerus’s historicity, given the lack of verifying evidence. Arthur Jackson in 1646 aligns the king with Darius, meaning that the name Esther conveniently corresponds to the queen Atossa (1646: 792), and more recently Goldman makes a link between the Persian Khshayarsha and the Greek Xerxes (1952: 195). Buchan’s play identifies Esther’s king-son as Cyrus who allowed the Jews to return to Palestine (1873: 99).

Historicity aside, readings of the king tend towards moral emphasis. *Megillah* 12a’s seemingly equivocal ‘One said he was a clever king, and the other said he was a foolish king’ misrepresents the overwhelmingly negative rabbinical response to the king. Because Haman inhabits the role of enemy, Ahasuerus is left with the unenviable role of buffoon. Talmudic responses are tellingly dismissive in their humour: ‘That Xerxes who killed his wife for the sake of his friend; who (then) killed his friend for the sake of his wife!’ (*Meg* 12a). *Midrash Rabbah* identifies him with Artaxerxes of Ezra 4, objectionable because he ‘stopped the building of the Temple’ (I.1). It also indulges in word-plays on the king’s name. R. Levvi says says he was called Ahasuerus because ‘no one could mention him without feeling a headache (*hoshesh et-rosho*) (I.3). The punning of the king’s name is a practice continued by Cahn, who suggests that Ahasvrosh can be translated into *aleph*, I am, *hsh*, hasty, and *vrosh*, the ruler (1995: 26), and by the Catalan playwright Salvador Espriu, who calls Ahasuerus an ‘overblown sneeze of a man’ ([1948] 1989: 21). The most common representation, in the *Targum Sheni*’s terms, is of a ‘foolish and presumptuous king’, who, in proverbial style, ‘Let his kingdom be undone rather than let his decree go undone’ (98). This mixture of the serious and the humorous is indicative of gallows humour in much Jewish response to Esther (tellingly absent in most Christian reception).

Abraham Saba, an exile from Spain to Morocco in the fifteenth century, models his comparison of Ahasuerus and Haman on his Muslim and Christian



PLATE 2 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Ahasuerus Seated at a Table*. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

hosts respectively, likening them to Esau and Jacob. The king, as a Persian and as such (according to Saba) an Ishmaelite, although ‘lacking in wisdom, science, counsel and speech’, and from ‘a people unskilled in speaking’, is nonetheless free of intrigue and malice. Haman, on the other hand, like the Christians, has intellectual sophistication and ‘urbanity’, but is, as such, wicked and smooth-talking. Haman is ‘a slanderer who knew how to present his arguments properly and forcefully with boasting tongue and flattering lips to follow counsel’, just like Jacob (Walfish 1993: 136–7). The choice between the king and Haman as rulers thus maps on to the choice between a Christian or a Muslim exile (ibid.: 138). Delgado’s response is tellingly measured, indicative of the caution endemic to his Marrano identity. The king is merely (yet erroneously) ‘A bit confused / by the drink perhaps’ ([1627] 1999: 19). Rembrandt’s sketch of a lethargic and spoilt king perfectly represents Jewish attitudes to the king (Plate 2).

The assumption that the author of Esther intentionally constructs a ridiculous king is one that many Christians writing under an absolute or limited monarchy found harder to take on board. In *Hester, A Poem* of 1714, for example, Mordecai and the king are allies to the extent that the king is ‘almost a Proselyte’ concerning ‘the Jewish Chiefs, the fatal Flight, / And Israel’s Doom’ (Anon. 1714: 22). In the same year John Henley’s *Esther, Queen of Persia* presents universal ease at Ahasuerus’s feast – even heaven smiles – only ‘the Monarch’s Bliss alone was dash’d with Care’ (1714: 17). The reader is encouraged to pity the king who is harassed, not flattered, by over-enthusiastic worship from his subjects: ‘Sometimes the Royal Soul will draw a Sigh, / When Flatt’ring Crowds salute him DEITY’ (18). James Maxwell, the ‘Poet in Paisley’, makes the king, ‘tho’ a heathen’, a subject of divine Providence, which ‘o’er-ru’ld his heart, / Unknown to him’ (1784: 128–9). Further, the king is ‘most humane and just’ (125) and ‘Without oppressive rigour on mankind’ (127). Eliza Cushing in her ‘sacred drama’ follows romantic conventions in painting the king as an idealist: ‘vain this pomp! the heart rejects it all / And asks for nobler joys to fill its void’ (1840: 8).

When Christian commentators do criticize the monarch, it is more often than not covert. Lawson’s condemnation seems severe: ‘Wine has transformed him from a king to be a clown, or something below a clown’ (1804: 17). He expresses monarchic commitment, rather than any anti-establishment sentiment, condemning the king because ‘not only Vashti, but royalty itself, might be disgraced in her person, when she was made a gazing-stock to the people with her royal ornaments’ (17). Watson’s king has a weakness for flattery, caused by the benign reason of tenderness:

Such gentleness did he display,
His subjects felt – that to obey
His will – to them was sweet delight,
For more by love he ruled, than might; [. . .]
Yet flattery could perchance him blind[.]

(1845: 7)

Although in her novelization Collins includes rumours of the king being ‘easily controlled’, she nonetheless idealizes him. He was ‘by no means an unfavourable man in person’, but his ‘youthful appearance and firm dignity as a ruler had won upon the nations’ ([1893] 1900: 29).

Later Christian commentary is less kind to the king. Influenced by Orientalist assumptions he becomes, as in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ‘the typical impulsive and impressionable Oriental despot’ (1954: 831). That he ‘yields to the charms of a woman’ is but one fault cited by A. H. Huizinga in *The Presbyterian Quarterly* (c.1936). This ‘capricious, irresponsible, sensual, oriental despot’ reveals

himself in the ‘way in which he exalts and puts down his favorites, indulges his appetites [. . .] and permits or instigates extensive slaughter among his people’ (395–6). A. Streane is similarly dismissive: he is ‘a mere puppet worked by those who successively gain his ear [. . .] helplessly weak’ (cited in *The Interpreter’s Bible* 1954: 836). Although *The Interpreter’s Bible* insists that ‘we may not moralize about the character of Ahasuerus and Vashti’, it nonetheless concludes that ‘although the author of Esther does not actually tell us that Ahasuerus thought of his queen as someone to be manipulated and exhibited (1:11), surely that is how the king, and therefore other men of that day, thought of their wives’ (838).

Recent commentators are in agreement. Carey Moore pithily sums up the faults of the king: ‘But above it all looms the fascinating figure of Xerxes, the mighty king, mastered by wine, defied by his queen, and ill-advised by his friends. Xerxes stands desperately in need of a good consort’ (Moore [1971] 1984: 14). For Clines he is ‘at bottom a vain man, easily enraged’ and ‘an utterly unselfconscious male chauvinist’ (1984a: 274). Levenson notes the irony that the king is ‘a man of inordinate official power but no moral strength’ (1997: 12). He judges him ‘a spoiled playboy, a person who overindulges in physical pleasures and lacks a moral compass’ (46).

Midrash Rabbah contrasts the instability of the Persian kingdom with the permanence of Israel: the latter is described as *be-shebeth* (in-sitting), the former as *ke-shebeth* (as-sitting), in other words ‘a seat which was yet no seat’ (I.11). That Ahasuerus’s empire is a shadow of Israel’s kingdom explains *Esther Rabbah*’s contention that he had a reproduction of Solomon’s throne made (I.12, as visible, with its ornate lions, in the frescos at Dura-Europos).

The Persian setting of Esther provokes many British readers to draw direct political lessons for their own empire. Thomas M’Crie questions the success of despotism:

Such a sovereign has it in his power to do much harm, but he can do little good; for how is it possible for one man to take cognizance of the affairs of such an immense territory? An overgrown empire, like that of Britain, which boasts that the sun never sets on her dominions, carries within it the seeds of its own dissolution, and ultimately sinks by its own weight. (1838: 14)

M’Crie warns against administrative limitations, not the morality of empire (his commentary as a whole shows that he is certainly not opposed to colonialism itself). He rejects human caprice, instead advocating systematic rule, judging it better to have ‘a code of laws, however bad, than to have none but the will of a man’ (30).

The *Expositor’s Dictionary* calls the feast ‘EMPIRE DAY’ and takes the colours and imperial theme of Esther 1, applying its ‘Red, and blue and white’ aesthetic to the colours that have ‘floated both in England and foreign parts over

the whole of the British Empire' (307). Red is the colour of war – only promoted in preference to a 'greater crime': 'by a life of lazy indulgence to let our country be invaded and exposed to the horrors of a second siege of Jerusalem' (308). The chosenness of the Jews of the Book of Esther is mapped on to England, a promised land to be protected at all costs. Finally, blue is a colour of patriotism: 'Be true blue to your country. Be patriots' (308). Levenson follows traditional Jewish criticism in discerning an empire 'overblown, pompous, over-bureaucratized, and, for all its trappings of power, unable to control events' (1997: 12).

1:3 The King's Feast

In *Esther Rabbah* Haman persuades the king to have a feast in order to lure the Jews into debauchery, knowing that if they sin, God's protection will be lifted. Even though Mordecai warns the Jews of Haman's plan, they still attend. They 'became drunk and misconducted themselves', causing Satan (the Accuser of Job 1:6) to call God to destroy them. God agrees, but when the Torah laments, and the angels, the sun and moon, Elijah and the Patriarchs with it, so God allows Mordecai, following Moses, to pray for Israel's salvation, ensuring their preservation (VII.13). According to the *Targum Rishon*, the use of Temple vessels indicates that the feast was put on to prevent the building of the Temple, and it places the disastrous events of the king's banquet in a divine frame:

Now the righteous Mordekhai had been praying to the Lord since the first day of the feast until the seventh day, the Sabbath; he ate no bread and drank no water. Then on the 7th day, which is the Sabbath day, his complaint and the complaint of the Sanhedrin came up before the Lord. When the king's heart became cheerful through wine, the Lord incited against him the angel of confusion to confound their festivities. (34–5)

To locate the story historically, commentators attempt to link the feast to a military victory. Many suggest that it is a celebration of Xerxes' subjugation of Egypt, before his Greek campaign (see Baldwin 1984: 18). Raoul Walsh's 1960 film starring Joan Collins, suffused with military prowess, opens on Ahasuerus's victorious return from the battle. The film ends with his defeat under Alexander, echoing American, post-Korean War imperial self-identity, Joan purring: 'it was never for his victories that I loved him!'

For Saba, the wine through which the Jews' sin metamorphoses into the celebratory wine at the festival of Purim (Walfish 1993: 42). Mordecai and Esther raise themselves, through prayer, to the 'place of the supernatural wine (*yayin shenl ma'lah*)', a wine pleasing to God and people that is located in the mind (*ibid.*).

Francis Quarles (1621) presents a self-controlled populace, who after ‘The hard oppression of a third yeeres raigne, / Softly began to grumble, sore to vex’ because of tributes the king demands of them. Quarles emphasizes the reticence of the populace and the openness of the king, who is described as having the ‘nimblest eares’ (1621: sig C3r; 1642: 99). The king orders the feast to ‘blow the coles of old affection, / Which now are dying through a forc’d subjection’ and ‘Partly to make his Princely might appeare, / To make them fear for loue, or loue for fear’ (1621: sig C3v; 1642: 99). When the poem was reprinted in the 1640s, this advice must have grated. That Charles I does not take this course of action problematically aligns Quarles’ advice with that of the rebels who finally executed the king. He judges his own ‘degenerate’ age (‘guided by a lewder lot’) in contrast to Ahasuerus: ‘Their friendly feasts were fill’d with sweet sobriety; / Ours, with obsceane delights, and foule ebriety’ (1621: sig C4v; 1642: 102). He levels criticism against the greater sinfulness of the contemporary, Christian (and so, for him, enlightened) culture: ‘How in so blind an Age could those men see! / And in a seeing Age, how blinde are wee!’ (ibid.).

Pseudo-Webster condemns the Feast as a ‘licentious Org[y]’, although it is providential in its making way for Esther (1740: 10). Lawson retracts with Victorian austerity from its opulence with graphic explicitness: ‘What disorders of the head, of the stomach, of the bowels, of the spirits, must have been the effect of an half-years’ gormandizing and drunkenness’ (1804: 7). The banquets are also read symbolically. Cahn reads the story alongside Joseph’s, both of which open on banquets intended ‘to celebrate and promote the stability and continuity in their reigns’ (1995: 22). Fox, and then Levenson, give significance to the pairing of banquets; the story begins and ends on them, Vashti’s last feast contrasting with Esther’s first. Levenson also suggests a link to the ‘festive banquetting’ of Purim (1997: 6).

1:4 Display of Wealth

The ostentation of empire is judged by its readers both morally and politically. Abraham Hadida understands the display of wealth to be out of generosity, following Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Book 4 (available in Hebrew in the mid-fourteenth century) in differentiating between the magnanimous and pusillanimous (Walfish 1993: 47). The German Protestant John Brentius defends the king’s ostentation as politically strategic: ‘if a godly Prince doo meanely use his riches unto royaltie, it is not any wicked lavishing out of money, but a profitable strengthening of his kingdome.’ But he warns: ‘yet it is not lawfull to poll thy people, that thou maiest russle in royaltie’ (1584: 19). Pseudo-Webster in 1740,

writing against the corruption of prime ministers, considers the opulence of the ‘*Oriental Grandeur*’ (1740: 9) a sign of the corruption of ‘absolute Princes and Tyrants’ who ‘know no Bounds to their Power, take Delight in indulging themselves in all Manner of Licentiousness’ (10). Thomas M’Crie, rather less convincingly, sympathizes with the king’s duty to throw the banquet: ‘What a sacrifice of comfort does the world exact from its votaries!’ (1838: 16). It is symbolic for the *New Catholic Commentary* and Levenson: ‘a picture of magnificence and luxurious splendour to contrast with the plight of the exiled Jews’ for the former ([1969] 1981: 409), ‘less historical than hyperbolic’ for the latter (1997: 45).

1:8 No Compulsion to Drink

This small detail is one of the many that has puzzled commentators. *Midrash Rabbah* explains that wine was drunk by each culture according to their local customs (II.13). Josephus notes the contrast between the consideration displayed here and the normal Persian practice of forcing drink on guests (*Antiquities* XI.6.1).

Joseph ibn Kaspi argues that the phrase ‘there was no compulsion’ means that there was free will, following Aristotle in setting it in opposition to compulsion. Other exegetes reflect their own contemporary experiences as they present a variety of reasons, from the suggestion that guests must drink as much as their host to the idea that no one would be made to drink anything he didn’t like (Walfish 1993: 107). Moore attempts to locate the drinking practices historically. He points the reader towards Herodotus I.133, IX.80, for details of ‘Persian lavishness and drinking prowess’ ([1971] 1982: 7).

Rather than entangling themselves in the specificities of the verse, many Christian commentators instead denounce the evils of drink. Francis Quarles’ king makes a ‘temp’rate Law’ to avoid the ‘Abuse’ that ‘attends vpon Excesse’ (1641: sig C3v; 1642: 100, 101). He excuses any immoderation because of the burden of monarchy: ‘The boundlesse tryumph of a King is such, / To sweeten Care, because his care is much’ (1621: [C4r]; 1642: 101). Although excused, drinking is nonetheless the cause of the coming disaster: ‘Anger, contentious Wrath, and wrathfull Hate, / Attend the Feast, where Wine’s immoderate’ (1621: sig D2v; 1642: 105). Matthew Poole asserts that the kings’ commendable practice here is in contrast to the normal drunkenness ‘which the Persians, and other loose and heathenish Nations used to do’ ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.).

Thomas M’Crie testifies to the lesson of temperance that the book offers, both for the ‘absence of compulsion in drinking’ and the ‘delicacy displayed by

Vashti' in having a separate female feast. His narrative appeals to a system of Western, imperial values, in which the language of the binaries of civilization/barbarism, Christian/heathen and human/animal construct his hierarchy of moral behaviour, entwining within his moral and spiritual points geographic and cultural ones. He contends that the Book of Esther is here 'a reproach to many in a Christian land', who apparently should know better but instead 'they make beasts of themselves with intoxication' – 'a barbarous custom' (1838: 17). Hierarchy's duty is promoted by M'Crrie: 'Every one is to live, and to entertain his friends, according to his rank, without, of course, falling into 'barbarous custom[s]' (20). His warning tone seems informed by experience: 'There is little enjoyment at great feasts, which are full of 'confusion and noise' and 'even the excitement they produce is usually succeeded by painful depression' (21). Drink is ultimately denounced because of its effect upon that bastion of enlightenment thinking, reason (23).

In Emily Foster's *Hester Cameron's Three Offers* (1888), the 'queen' (14) Hester's 'more real sense, greater powers of discernment, and firmer decision of character' (5) makes her an ambassador for the temperance cause. *The Woman's Bible* cites the pithy 'when the wine is in, the wit is out' (Stanton 1898: 85). Browne sardonically considers the verse to be a response to the extreme generosity of the king: 'there was so much provided that the guests might wonder whether they were ordered to drink a gallon each' ([1962] 1975: 382). Levenson locates in the 'permissiveness and lack of standards' signs that portend the coming genocidal edict (1997: 46).

1:9 Women's Feast

The *Targum Sheni* expresses unease over female society in Vashti's separate feast for women: 'She would show them (in reply) to whatever the women wanted to know; she told them everything – the king's bedroom, where he eats, where he drinks, where he sleeps' (128). The anxiety that the women at the banquet reveal secrets – intimate secrets – about the king pre-empts the later legislation against women after Vashti's rebellion. In the 'Poet of Paisley' James Maxwell's rewriting, fear of women's companionship is explicit:

Where female chat excited was with wine.
And as we may suppose, their nimble tongues
Were not inactive to relate the news
Of all their neighbours round both far and near.

(1784: 7)

In the nineteenth century Christian writers are instead concerned with removing women from public society. George Lawson laments: ‘How many mischiefs does the unrestrained intercourse of the sexes occasion in many public diversions?’ (1804: 14–15). Although he argues that women should not ‘be locked up in their chambers, as if they were criminals’, he warns, nonetheless: ‘Let them keep at a distance from those scenes of riot and festivity, where “foolish talking and jesting, which are not convenient”, are likely to be heard.’ In obedience to Christ, he argues, they must ‘be “keepers at home”’, and ornament themselves with ‘shamefacedness and sobriety’ (15). Responses presume knowledge of Persian customs. According to Symon Patrick, Lord Bishop of Ely, Vashti had her feast in the royal house, ‘more privately, as was fit for women’ (1813: 685). These concerns are replicated over a century later as Browne contends that gender separation is not culturally prescribed, but ‘one would guess that the ladies felt it was no place for them’ ([1962] 1975: 382).

Lawson asserts without evidence that ‘It would have been dangerous to morals, and inconsistent with received usages, for the queen and the ladies of Shushan to have associated with the other sex in their banquet’ (1804: 14). Moore insists, like Browne, that women weren’t banished from feasts, ‘but Queen Vashti chose to have a separate party for the women’ ([1971] 1984: 12). In contrast, Ahasuerus banishes women from his banquet in James Watson’s poem, a sign of his culture’s lack of appreciation for female company:

But why to grace this courtly glare,
Oh, Persia! was no female there?
Oh, why exclude from festive hall
Her smile, whose power is felt by all?

(1845: 19)

Timothy Beal more recently argues that Vashti’s narrative undermines the reader’s potential associations with Jews, aligning them with the unfortunate queen, making the story as such a ‘gender-based conflict’ (1995: 88).

Vashti

Vashti fascinates her readers: *Esther Rabbah*, for example, gives two of its ten books (III and IV) to the queen’s story. The rabbis alienate the Persian Vashti from the Jewish self, associating her with the despised Babylonian monarchy. They use a verse from Isaiah to illuminate the queen’s heritage, interpreting 14:22 (‘I will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, and offshoot and offspring’) so that “*Name*: refers to Nebuchadnezzar; “*remnant*” to Evilmerodach; “*offshoot*”

to Balshazzar; and “*offspring*” to Vashti’ (Simon and Freedman 1939: proem, 17; also in *Meg* 10c and 12b). With a genealogy of evil kings, she becomes a darker foil to the celebrated Jewish Esther.

There are numerous accounts of the king’s reasons for asking Vashti to appear (and *how* he asks her to appear). A tradition that becomes remarkably pervasive is that the queen is asked to appear naked: taken literally to mean that she must appear *only* in her crown; in the *Targum Rishon* it is Nebuchadnezzar’s crown (35). According to *Targum Sheni* the men at the king’s banquet get into an argument ‘concerning indecent matters’ and argue over who are the most beautiful women of the empire. Ahasuerus asks Vashti: ‘arise from your royal throne and strip yourself nude [. . .] so that they may see you, that you are more beautiful than all other women’ (128). According to *Midrash Rabbah*, Vashti asks permission to ‘wear at least as much as a girdle, like a harlot, but they would not allow her’ (III.13). Rabbis cite the pithy proverb, ‘For man receives measure for measure’, to illustrate that she is getting her just deserts. Nudity is divine retribution because ‘the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on the Sabbath’ (*Meg* 12b). She is not to be pitied, nor the king blamed, because God is wreaking revenge for cruel behaviour towards Israel.

Despite the rabbis’ creativity, the religious impetus is to construct Vashti in opposition to Jewish sensibility. Here, religious conformity not only sits alongside textual plasticity, but is, in fact, dependent upon it. In midrash or *drash* (applied meaning) the text is rewritten and expanded – in contrast to the more familiar practices of *perash* (literal or plain meaning) – but, at least in Vashti’s case, along controlled lines. James Kugel explains that midrash’s ‘precise focus is most often what one might call surface irregularities in the text’, and ‘the text’s irregularity is the grain of sand which so irritates the midrashic oyster that he constructs a pearl around it’ (1986: 92). It is this process of imposing religious cohesion that impels the rabbis to turn anything awkward into something ethically and religiously pleasing.

Vashti’s nudity becomes legendary, and is replicated in numerous writings and artwork. A *Megillah* at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, MS22, has illustrative panels surrounding the columned biblical text. Following the Talmudic legends, one panel shows the half-naked Vashti being executed, and the margins are full of crudely drawn, but expressive, naked women (Plate 3; see also Plate 4). The disdainful expressions on some of their faces suggest that they may be the Israelite women forced to work naked; alternatively, they could be allies of Vashti, as lascivious as she is in Jewish tradition. The illustrations are unusual because of their inclusion in a liturgical scroll (although probably intended for home use, it is nonetheless for use at Purim). In one striking scene, Jewish men are praying in the synagogue, decked in prayer shawls, juxtaposed



PLATE 3 Jewish synagogue and naked female figures. *Megillah*, John Rylands Hebrew MS 22.



PLATE 4 Vashti's execution. *Megillah*, John Rylands Hebrew MS 22. Plates 3 and 4 reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, the John Rylands University Library, the University of Manchester.

with naked women. At a glance it seems as though the men could be venerating the nude figures. Despite their desire for religious and moral conformity, the rabbinical distancing of Vashti produces an anomalous reception (see Caruthers, 2007).

Ahuva Belkin notes that in the Yiddish *Dos Purimshpil* (The Purim Play) the 'defiance of this taboo [to appear nude] is replaced by excitement' as the courtiers cry: 'Naked, naked, in her bare skin'. Vashti herself sings: 'Why have you forgotten all the times / When you used to fondle my snow-white breasts?' (cited in 2003: 40). Apparently suggestive, Vashti's song becomes absurd, Belkin points out, when sung by a man in – according to the stage directions – 'a trace of a beard, and in a short dirty dress, beneath which one can see great clod-hoppers' (ibid.).

Historical records are cited to gauge the reasonableness of Ahasuerus's actions. An early non-Jewish analogue to the Vashti story, which many Christian commentators allude to, is that from Herodotus' *Histories* in which Candaules forces his servant Gyges to spy on his naked wife, who takes revenge on her husband by inciting Gyges to usurp the throne (1:8–112). John Brentius in 1584 inconclusively cites Josephus' contention that women should not be seen by men alongside Herodotus, who records that wives and concubines were present at feasts (1584: 31). Bishop Symon Patrick alludes to the request that Vashti appear naked as 'a very absurd conceit' (1706: 686), condemning rabbinical practice and extrapolating from it a denunciation of Jews in general. He bolsters his self-identity through distancing himself from both Jew and Persian in a similar manner to the Jewish rabbis' impulse to differentiate between themselves and the Persians. Thomas M'Crie's denouncing of the call to display Vashti appears at first to echo feminist arguments:

how unbecoming it was to lead in an illustrious female as a pageant, to expose her beauty to the impudent gaze of half-inebriated nobles, or of a rude populace!

Yet it is the honour of rank, not of women, that is at stake: 'How degrading to the queen! how dishonourable to her royal husband!' (1838: 26).

As will be seen in the following chapter, the representation of Vashti is overwhelmingly controlled in the modern period by the discourse of modesty that determined socially acceptable female behaviour. It was these overwhelmingly normative assumptions that Vashti presented a challenge to. From at least the eighteenth century onwards, modesty is constituted not only by action but by thought; the spontaneous reaction of shame is essential. Defoe's *Dictionary* of 1737, for example, defines modesty as 'Sobriety, Discretion, Shamefacedness'. Although the *OED* declares this interior aspect of chastity to be applicable to both men and women, it is nonetheless considered more appropriate, and more

natural, for women, echoing contemporary discourses of femininity. Perry's *Dictionary* of 1804 defines 'maidenly' as 'gentle, modest', inscribing modesty as an especially female, virginal trait. It is this framework of moral values that shapes much of Vashti's – and Esther's – reception, the two functioning as negative and positive models of female modesty respectively.

In the nineteenth century Vashti explodes into creative works. A significant number of novels and creative works have a Vashti heroine, clustering around the *fin de siècle*, including Ella Cross's *Queen Vashti; or the Story of a Sister's Love* (1883), Sarah Tytler's *Vashti Savage* (1889), Emma Sarah Williamson's *Vashti and Esther: A Story of Society Today* (1893) and Augusta Jane Evans' *Vashti* (1889). *Vashti* long poems include those by Lascelles Abercrombie (1930), John Bradshaw Kaye (1894), and Zeto (1897).

In *Hester's Sacrifice* (Anon. 1866), the Vashti-like Jane (see p. 19) is typically unrestrained:

She should have controlled herself as these quiet, well-bred Englishwomen do. She should have smothered her wounded pride, and married one of the gallant cavaliers who sought her smiles; and lived a comfortable, respectable, fashionable life, instead of giving way to her passions, and flying across the seas and risking life and honour and everything for that one thought of revenge. (III. 112)

Ella Cross's novel, *Queen Vashti* (1883), is set in a school in which the boys have a self-imposed 'queen' – a girl whom they agree to be governed by. In French class the girls are translating Racine's *Esther*, described as the story of 'the gentle pride of Vashti; then her deposition and the elevation of Esther, whose earnest pleadings on behalf of her exiled race made her beloved by all' (82). The heroine Flora is falsely assigned the name Queen Vashti by rival girls, but is revealed as an Esther, not only vindicated but the cause of her errant brother becoming a missionary.

The Christian name and surname of Sarah Tytler's *Vashti Savage* are mutually affirming, enhancing the rebel nature of the child that Roger Swift, a widower, finds and adopts. She is described by the housekeeper as 'a perfect scarecrow of a dark-skinned, ill-grown girl, with unkempt locks under a torn hat' (1889: 17). Vashti describes her namesake as 'from the East' (12), and is later described by the narrator as having the 'Jewish cast of features of a gipsy' (34). She outspokenly defies her adopted father at their first meeting, but he merely considers her 'tolerably self-sustained and dignified' (14). She is a typical Vashti, beyond societal control:

Vashti was dauntless and daring, bold to audacity, and thoroughly destitute of so much as the knowledge of any principle which could restrain her. She owned neither the obligations nor the restraints of civilised life. If left to herself, she would

have done what she liked and taken what she fancied, irrespective of the rights of mine and thine[.] (36)

In a novel replete with strong racial stereotypes, Vashti embodies the noble savage. The novel expresses ambivalence towards both the cultivated and the uncultured alike, her adopted father conceding that ‘civilisation has its pains and penalties too’ (276). Despite being ‘the offspring of rude barbarism’ (154), she is a formidable woman: ‘She laughed at fatigue just as she laughed at the soft indulgences of civilisation’ (38).

Unrestrained, Vashti is, as a result, more creative. Her teacher considers her ‘an original’ with her ‘odd ideas’: ‘The fact of her not being able to read was such an advantage to her’ (244). Reminiscent of the queen who refuses to appear at her husband’s command, she refuses to marry: ‘to walk at his heels and be lounded at every time I sneeze against his will! not if I knows it! What do you take me for? I ain’t such a fool as not to know when I’m well off’ (264). When Roger Swift becomes bankrupt and attempts to run away, Vashti has the moral and physical strength to confront him, saving the family from ruin.

Louise S. Maxwell’s drama conflates “proud Vashti” – the first woman known to have defied the will and pleasure of her lord and master’ with the haughty Egyptian Princess Nitetis (1923: 1). Vashti despises the men at their feast: ‘They feed, the human beasts [. . .] more bestial than the foulest beasts. And to such as these it hath been decreed that *we* should submit!’ (6). She is contemptuous of the king, saying to herself: ‘thou art only a man, before the beauty of thy wife’ (11). The king, although besotted, recognizes the danger of her arrogance: ‘for surely when a woman hath been made so proud there is no telling of where lieth the limit of her ambition’ (18). Maxwell weaves a convoluted plot in which Vashti is in love with the chief of the king’s guards. When the king finds out, he makes him instead chief of eunuchs – halting any physical relationship – and Vashti swears revenge. She becomes Nitetis, priestess of Isis, and although Esther is now queen, Vashti has power over the still-besotted king. In collusion with Haman, she conspires against the Jews to strengthen her own position, the play ending with her son on the throne.

Lascelles Abercrombie creates in his *Emblems of Love* a portrait of Vashti and Ahasuerus to explore romantic relationships, critiquing the treatment of women. The poem opens with praise:

For look how from their wondrous bodies comes
Increase: who knoweth where such power ends?

(1930: 139)

Ahasuerus articulates a view of women that the poem as a whole undermines, as he claims that women were created:

[. . .] that man, fordone
 And wearied, may find lodging out of the noise
 Upon her breast, and looking in her eyes
 May wash in pools of kindness, fresh as Heaven.

(ibid.)

Vashti declares such use of women 'Filthiness!' (140). Although Ahasuerus swears he will not show Vashti at the banquet ('I'll have no adulteries, / No eyes but mine enjoying thee, 144), when his poet identifies her as the king's greatest glory, she is called to appear. The poet reiterates the king's view that women are merely a panacea for men: 'She is God's bribery to man / That he the world endure' (154). Vashti's refusal is a defence of women's dignity, refusing that 'woman should be sin / Amid man's life' (174). She is visited in a vision by Ishtar, who presents three women to her. They represent three stages of woman's status in romance: Helen, Sappho and Theresa. C. L. Sastri suggests that they represent, first, the woman 'awakening lusts in men, but herself not given to love', second, 'an object of beauty given to romantic and imaginative love' and third, 'a saint given to love for the most perfect but unattainable ideal' (1971: 75).

In Lee Smith's novel *Oral History*, Vashti Cantrell is as briefly portrayed and as intractable as her biblical namesake (1983: 86). In this story of three generations, set in the hill country of Appalachia, Vashti is sexually problematic (she moves into Almarine Cantrell's house and mothers his children), unwanted (he pines after his first, dead wife) and desexed (she is accepted into male rituals). She has an 'old Indian poker-face' (86), a 'broad impassive face with dark, somehow almost burning eyes' (126). When the men gather for the hog killing, Vashti 'was out there working along with the men' (192); her son comments that he heard a 'whole bunch of stuff you don't hear [. . .] when the womenfolks and girls is around', but 'that don't count Mamaw of course' (195). Her daughter Ora Mae testifies to her fearsomeness: 'Nobody fooled with Mamaw then' (216).

Esther 1:10–22

Vashti's refusal is unqualified, a gap that has begged explanation. Carey Moore, among others, focuses briefly on the eunuchs before turning to the queen. He notes especially their 'indispensable' role in the harem and their involvement in 'struggles for succession to the throne' ([1971] 1984: 8). For Lawrence Warner (1995) they are symbolically liminal figures who in their movements between male and female realms in the court represent the principle that 'it is *transgression* of these simple boundaries that leads to victory' (1995) – a transgression that, for many, Vashti embodies.

1:12 Disobedience

Why Vashti refuses the king's command is a question that has intrigued readers and speculations are related at length, especially in rabbinical writings that con-

tinue to influence Jewish interpretation of the banished queen to the present day. The Targums and *Esther Rabbah* cite her responses, giving the canonically silent Vashti voice, agency and form. In the *Targum Sheni*, her first reply is simply contemptuous. She calls the king a drunken fool and defends her refusal by referring to her genealogy:

(This is) disgraceful! Go tell your foolish master that you are also fools like him. I am a queen, the daughter of kings who are kings of Babylonia since ancient times. My ancestor drank as much wine as a thousand people, yet the wine did not confuse him into saying words which are improper like yours. (1991: 129)

In the Talmud, Vashti's scorn is exacerbated by the fact that Ahasuerus was previously the son of her father's steward (*Meg* 12b). (Vashti's royal genealogy is picked up in modern reception: for example, in Cushing's drama, Vashti is Cyrus' daughter, 1840: 11.)

In the *Targum Sheni*, when the king sends a threat to the queen, her reply reveals sound reasoning, even reflecting the logical gymnastics of the rabbis themselves. She argues that there is danger in her appearing:

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 would kill you and take me as a wife. (1991: 129)

In *Esther Rabbah*, Vashti again displays perfect logic, as she 'remonstrate[s]' with the king: 'If they consider me beautiful, they will want to enjoy me themselves and kill you; if they consider me plain, I shall bring disgrace on you' (III.14). Vashti's logic exposes the king as foolish – and dangerously so in his drunkenness. The rabbis even condemn Ahasuerus for being indifferent to his queen's arguments: 'he was blind to her hints and insensible to her pricks' (54).

Louis Ginzberg relates her story in his amalgamation of Jewish rabbinic stories, *The Legends of the Jews*, exposing the queen's lack of principles: 'But it must not be supposed that she shrank from carrying it out because it offended her moral sense. She was not a whit better than her husband' (1913: 375). He refers to the legend from *Meg* 12b:

She fairly revelled in the opportunity his command gave her to indulge in carnal pleasures once again, for it was exactly a week since she had been delivered of a child. But God sent the angel Gabriel to her to disfigure her countenance. Suddenly signs of leprosy appeared on her forehead, and the marks of other diseases on her person. In this state it was impossible for her to show herself to the king.

Ginzberg is echoing the Talmud here, which states that 'She was immodest, as



PLATE 5 Vashti's tails. From the facsimile of the Duke of Alba's Castilian Bible (1422–33). © Facsimile Editions, www.facsimile-editions.com.

the Master said above, that both of them had an immoral purpose. He leaves out the Talmudic alternative that 'Gabriel came and fixed a tail on her' (*Meg* 12b), a detail elaborated on in later representations of Vashti. The Duke of Alba's Castilian Bible renders Vashti with an animal's tail stemming from her head (Plate 5), a detail picked up in Shmarya Levin's description of a *purimshpil* held in his home town of Swislowitz (see pp. 81–2 later in this chapter).

Ginzberg praises Vashti's making 'a virtue of necessity', her refusal, as such is the quick-witted reply of a woman with no way out of her situation. The contradictions in her portrayal seem to result from the rabbis' disdain for the king to whom Vashti acts as a negative foil. However, what tellingly remains consistent throughout the rabbis' rewritings is the inscription of moral and religious integrity. She is condemned as the *Persian* Vashti, underlining Jewish supremacy, and for her immodesty, a characteristic, as Leila Leah Bronner has explained, that 'became an overriding obsession in the rabbinic portrayal of women' (1994: xvii). Vashti is such a fascinating figure because she personifies the many fearful aspects of womanhood that are legislated against in cultural configurations of femininity: she is desirable and deplorable, invisible and figured, diseased and, ultimately, disobedient. Despite apparent contradictions, Vashti is ultimately vilified.

Although they articulate it in more philosophical terms, medieval Jewish commentaries continue the negative rabbinic representation of the queen. Abraham Ibn Ezra elucidates Gabriel's bestowal of leprosy or a tail as meaning that God made her ugly in Ahasuerus's eyes (Walfish 1993: 32). For Moses ben Israel Halayo the tail is a 'type of disease which broke out on Vashti's skin', and it was 'justice which was represented by Gabriel' (*ibid.*: 33). Zechariah ben Saruk suggests that the eunuchs, by making her follow them, turned her into a tail (playing on the tail as something that follows, implying obedience), 'which would have been insulting and degrading to her' (*ibid.*). Joseph ibn Kaspi places Vashti's refusal in a political context. He quotes Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, arguing that 'a disease in the body politic is more difficult to cure than one in the ruler' defending monarchical honour and order (*ibid.*: 46).

In the seventeenth century, the Jewish exile Delgado departs from his predecessors in defending Vashti's actions. He spends little time reflecting on Vashti's refusal; her sedition for him is unremarkable, and is even the response the king 'must expect' ([1627] 1999: 19). Delgado's is the beginning of a divergence in Vashti's reception. Although Levenson claims that both Jewish and Christian traditions share a 'negative reading of Vashti' (1997: 49), the ensuing reception is remarkably varied, disconnected from the authoritative condemnation of the rabbis.

The German Protestant Brentius' Vashti is as immoral as the rabbis', and he draws explicit lessons about beauty: 'if she had beene of as modest and reuerent

a mind towards the king her husband, as shee was beautifull of personage, neither had so princely a feast bene troubled, nether had she beene thrown downe from her royall maiestie' (1584: 29). She refuses from 'pride and contempt', and harbours unreasonable ambition: 'she was not contented to have the chiefe place in the feast among the women, and to beare rule among them, but she would also have rule over her husband the king' (32). Brentius takes Vashti's refusal seriously, declaring that 'this arrogancie and this pride in a woman is worthy of sharpe punishment' (33). He spells it out for his readers: 'Moreover the woman was not made to beare rule ouer her husband, but to be subject vnto her husband' (ibid.). Brentius cites numerous New Testament quotations to prove that the law of women's subjection was 'ordeined by God himselfe euen from the beginning of the worlde' (41). In his extended discussion of domestic order, he blames 'not the untrayned and untameable nature of women', but instead the 'cowardlinesse and ungodlinesse of men, who when as they obey not the calling and will of God, but lead either an idle, or a wicked, or an ungodly life, it is no maruell that women obey not them in their calling and will' (42). The logical conclusion of Brentius' arguments is that the king is as complicit in Vashti's disobedience as she is: bad men produce bad wives.

Quarles' largely misogynist rewriting of the story contrasts the queen's appearance and her character:

But fairest *Vashti*, (in whose scornfull eyes
More hauty Pride, than heauenly Beauty lyes)
With harsh deniall of a flinty brest[.]

(1621: sig D2v; 1642: 103)

In Jonathan Edwards' supersessionist reading, Vashti's refusal is mapped on to Jewish refusal of the gospel, with Jews 'through their pride and vanity, trusting in their own righteousness, through their pride and vanity, in their own wisdom, being foolishly fond and proud of their own ceremonies' (1998: 60). Vashti, according to Matthew Poole, although breaking the king's law obeys the cultural law that women weren't to be displayed in public ([1669–76] 1700: 908). Nonetheless, inciting women 'to contemn and disobey their husbands' is 'a crime of a high nature' which 'deserves an exemplary punishment' (909).

Vilified by these writers, the female rebel becomes literally demonized through association with Satan, dethroned and exiled because of rebel pride. In John Henley's poem *Esther, Queen of Persia* (1714), she is the Satanic other to the 'guardian angel' Esther, the two women becoming two 'types' of womankind. Henley underlines his (hardly subtle) typology in his index, in which the reader is pointed towards 'Comparison of Vashti to the leader of the Apostate Angels, p. 22' and 'Comparison of Esther to a Guardian Angel, p. 28.' The adviser, Memucan, explains the dangers of Vashti's disobedience:

Usurping Female Rule will bear away
 The Native Privilege of Manly Sway [. . .]
 And no Romantic Airs of Female Pride
 Invert all Rule, and make the Wife Preside;
 But each Enlighten'd Spouse confine her Sway,
 And learn her proper Lesson, to *Obey*.

Xerxes the Prudent Overture approv'd,
 Proclaim'd the Fact, and *Vashti* was remov'd.

So, when the New-born Morning's Fairest Son
 Lost his Obedience first, He lost his Throne;
 From Virtue fall'n, from Heav'n He ruin'd down,
 Swift as that Lightning He would make his own.

(Henley 1714: 21–2)

Although both *Vashti's* and *Satan's* rebellion lead to dethroning, disobedience is especially sinful for the *female* *Vashti*, because it is *her* 'proper Lesson, to *Obey*.' The male *Satan* consequentially evokes the female gender in his rebellion and women become his progeny. In contrast, *Esther* is literally angelic (see p. 121).

Although reflecting dualistic ideologies of women as either demonic or angelic, it is only *Vashti* who properly represents her gender in her corrupt ambition. It is notable that *Henley's* judgement of *Vashti* soon becomes a condemnation of all women:

Deep in her Heart the Pois'nous Rancour spread,
 And on each Infant Seed of Vertue fed.
 In wild Ambition all her Passions meet,
 And ev'ry Thing is Good, if it be Great.
 With double Force a Woman ever moves,
 She Hates with Fury, and with Rapture Loves.
 They're all Excessive, where they once engage,
 Their Favour's Dotage, and their Anger Rage.
 The Make's so Tender, and the Spring's so Fine,
 So delicately Turn'd the Whole Machine;
 Wrought to the Height, no Mean the Movements know,
 If Just they prove, they will Harmonious go;
 But all is Discord at each idle Jarr,
 A Breath's a Hurricane, a Frown a War.
Vashti was all her Sex, and something more,
 Her Passions rul'd with a Tyrannick Power[.]

(5)

Here women are determined by their bodies; because they are made so delicately, they are consequentially temperamental, knowing no 'mean' or balance.

Vashti is ‘something more’ than all her sex, but then, paradoxically, so are all women: ‘they’re all excessive.’

Symon Patrick, Lord Bishop of Ely, defends Vashti’s modesty because it protects men from their passions: ‘the great men, inflamed with wine, might be provoked by her beauty [. . .] to lust after her’ (1813: 685). In 1740 Pseudo-Webster (in his pamphlet on the corruptibility of court life) vindicates the queen’s modesty, repudiating totalitarian rule:

Prudence and Modesty, any one may reasonably imagine, occasion’d her to send back a Refusal. No Regard was had to the Immodesty which must have attended such an Action. When an absolute Monarch commands, be his Orders ever so unreasonable they must be obey’d, and the unfortunate Queen was upon this doom’d to Exile. (1740: 10)

For Maxwell, Vashti refuses from pride which in turn is caused by her beauty:

For she was very fair to look upon.
But pride and beauty, when divest of prudence,
Often procures a just contemptuous fall.

(1784: 7)

He adds to these flaws cronyism:

But lo, the haughty dame refus’d to come,
For she was feasting with her female gossips.

(7)

Vashti’s function as a model of modesty is illustrated in Reverend J. Price’s *The History of Esther, Considered and Elucidated by a Variety of Questions, Answered Publicly by a Number of Youth (Of both Sex) at Albion-Chapel, Leeds*, in 1802, in which ‘Miss Selby’ answers the question: ‘Did their happiness and festivity continue till the end of the feast?’ with the explanation that ‘the intemperance of the King’ fuelled his request, ‘but she modestly refused to come’ (Price 1802: 2). This educational setting is suggestive of why representations of Vashti become more positive: the rabbis’ reproduction merely replicated immorality, whereas her modest refusal is a more fitting example for ‘youth’.

George Lawson differs from these precedents by declaring Vashti contemptible. For him beauty is only in obedience:

A beautiful woman, destitute of virtuous principles, will, by the frowardness of her temper, and her rebellion against those whom she is bound to obey, discover a soul more deformed by pride and selfishness, than her body can be beautified by nature and art: but a woman that feareth the Lord will cultivate humility and

self-denial. She will shew a ready disposition to give honour and obedience to whom honour and obedience are due[.] (1804: 18)

Lawson interprets the story's silence about Vashti's motivation as her own 'flat and unqualified refusal', judging that 'if she had sent her humble request to the king to spare her modesty, he might have recalled his orders' (18). He privileges the law in condemning her breach, by which she is 'exposing herself [. . .] to just punishment'. He claims for himself privileged insight, reacting against prevailing representations of the modest Vashti as he reveals that 'she was really acting under the influence of pride, under the mask of modesty' (18).

Because of commentators' concurrent desires both to condemn Vashti's culture as immoral (and in so doing making her actions defensible) and yet to condemn female disobedience (rendering her actions inexcusable), readings are perversely contradictory as Vashti is vindicated for her modesty but condemned for her disobedience. Robert Stevenson picks up previous defence of Vashti, adhering to Jewish tradition that she was to appear naked, but repeats Lawson's deference to the law:

yet it was certainly imprudent to persist in a refusal of the king's request, which, considering his absolute sway, and the influence of evil counsellors, could only terminate in the most fatal effects. (1817: 234)

Thomas Scott's influential commentary follows in a comparable vein. It both defends Vashti's disobedience as well as marking it as a strategic mistake:

A reluctance therefore to an exhibition [. . .] became her rank and modesty: but [. . .] it was highly imprudent of her, to persist in a refusal, which could terminate only in an open contest and the most fatal effects. (1827: 409)

In contrast, for Alexander Carson defiance of an 'absolute monarch' is itself proof that 'the thing required was contrary to the general sentiments of decorum' (1835: 11). Although Carson's response is set within a framework of divine providence, he is nonetheless plagued with questions, seemingly unsatisfied by heavenly logic.

what must have been the intrepidity of the daring woman that refused to obey him? Her conduct was singularly bold and imprudent. Her resolution was no doubt suggested by her pride, or by her sense of decorum; but a regard to self-interest is usually stronger than these principles, especially in courts. Why then did her delicacy at this time prevail over her prudence [. . .] Why then did a woman of such spirit fill the situation of queen at this critical moment? Why was not her beauty accompanied with an abject spirit of servility, as is usually the case

among the slaves of eastern despots? [. . .] God had provided this high-spirited woman for the occasion which he meant to serve by her. (14–15)

Because Vashti is a modest woman, it is her culture of ‘eastern despots’ that becomes culpable. As is evident in depictions of the Orient in *Esther 1*, the degraded harem is interpreted as a testament to privileged Western civility. Vashti’s modesty highlights the inferiority of Persian culture at least as considered by these Western writers.

Thomas M’Crie, in his *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (1838) berates the king for his treatment of Vashti, vindicating her actions: ‘how unbecoming it was to lead in an illustrious female as a pageant, to expose her beauty to the impudent gaze of half-inebriated nobles, or of a rude populace!’ (26). Although the king is at fault, ‘it does not follow that the queen was right in disobeying.’ With convoluted logic he argues that although ‘no danger should constrain a woman to do anything which is vicious, or essentially immodest’ (27), if she had appeared ‘out of respect to authority [. . .] her conduct would have appeared in a very different light in the eyes of all reasonable persons’ (28). In a further twist of reason, M’Crie concludes that ‘Vashti was proud as Ahasuerus was vain, and determined that if he was imperious, she would be haughty and unyielding’ (28).

Perhaps the most famous literary Vashti is the actress in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), based on the infamous French-Jewish actress Rachel, who performed around Europe in the 1840s and 1850s (see further Carruthers, 2007). The protagonist-narrator Lucy Snowe goes to the theatre, a space in which Vashti is wilfully displaying herself to the audience, an activity transgressing Victorian norms of acceptable female behaviour. The biblical queen is explicitly invoked by Brontë in Lucy’s description: ‘What I saw was the shadow of a royal Vashti: a queen, fair as the day once, turned pale now like twilight, and wasted like wax in flame’ ([1853] 1996: 253). Embodying transgressive femininity, she becomes, like Henley’s Vashti, devilish:

For a while – a long while – I thought it was only a woman, though an unique woman, who moved in might and grace before the multitude. By-and-by I recognized my mistake. Behold! I found upon her something of neither woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. (252)

Lucy is equally repulsed and attracted: ‘It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle, low, horrible, immoral’. Vashti is not, as Lisa Surridge suggests, the ‘biblical Satan’ (1995: 7) but the Romantic and Miltonic Satan, heroic in exile:

Wicked, perhaps, she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives fearlessly fair,

and docile as fair. Even in the uttermost frenzy of energy is each maenad movement royally, imperially, incedingly upbourne. Her hair, flung loose in revel or war, is still an angel's hair, and glorious under a halo. Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled. Heaven's light, following her exile, pierces its confines and discloses their forlorn remoteness. (252)

The actress Vashti invokes Milton's Satan, so admired by the Romantics, who, although doomed to failure, will not concede. She 'stood before her audience neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor in finite measure, resenting it: she stood locked in struggle, rigid in resistance' (252).

Lucy condemns her companion's 'branding judgment' because he 'judged her as a woman, not an artist' (254). Gillian Beer has suggested that this scene 'marks symbolically the stages of [Lucy's] coming to impassioned life', Vashti herself representing the projection of Lucy's latent passion for John (1977: 181). What is more likely, in light of her reception history, is that Vashti represents for Lucy the awakening of rebellion against societal gender norms.

In the novel, Vashti's inflaming performance leads to a fire in the theatre, producing (like Vashti's rebellion in the biblical story) 'a blind, selfish, cruel chaos' (255). When the fire breaks out, John, the voice of normative judgement on the unfeminine Vashti, describes the scene, setting up but then undermining gender taxonomy:

'How terrified are the women!' said he; 'but if the men were not almost equally so, order might be maintained. This is a sorry scene: I see fifty selfish brutes at this moment, each of whom, if I were near, I could conscientiously knock down. I see some women braver than some men.'

The 'blind, selfish, cruel chaos', although opposed to John's desire that 'order might be contained', is the feared conclusion to female rebellion, even though, illogically, much of the worst activity is that of 'selfish brutes'.

Lucy goes on to compare her rebel heroine, Vashti, to a painting of Cleopatra by Rubens that she had recently seen in a gallery. She ridicules Rubens' Oriental women, challenging him to bring into the theatre 'all the army of his fat women' to compare to her martial hero Vashti: 'Place now the Cleopatra, or any other slug, before her as an obstacle, and see her cut through the pulpy mass as the scimitar of Saladin clove the down cushion' (252).

Vashti had enough cultural capital for Elizabeth Gaskell to allude to her as an apparently familiar symbol of unrestrained emotion and rebellion in *North and South* (1854). When she is provoked, 'all the latent Vashti in Margaret was roused, and she could hardly keep herself from expressing her feelings' ([1854] 1998: 373). The Oxford Classics note here suggests that the allusion is designed to 'make Margaret into a more radical figure, questioning masculine as well as

class authority’, and notes Gaskell’s debt to Brontë’s Vashti, whom it calls ‘an ultimate symbol of rebellion’ (449).

In commentaries in the late nineteenth century, modesty overtakes obedience. Alexander Symington celebrates Vashti’s transgression in his ‘Popular Exposition’ of the Book of Esther (1878):

For Vashti disobeyed him; and Vashti was right. There is a higher law than even the will of a king and husband – the law that gives a woman a right to guard her own modesty when those who should guard it for her do not. Vashti obeyed that higher law written by the Creator in the nature of men and women; and we can think nothing but good of her in that matter. (48)

Instead of replicating arguments that judge her refusal impudent, he considers her a martyr: ‘the royal crown was a cheap price to pay for her own self-respect’ (48).

Dramatic reconstructions of Vashti’s refusal animate her rebellion. The American Eliza Cushing’s Vashti accuses her messenger of having a ‘maddening brain’. She declares:

[. . .] Vashti did not wed
To swell the pomp and triumph of her lord;
She has a spirit, that will not be chain’d
E’en to the chariot-wheels of Persia’s king,
All-powerful as he is.

(1840: 13)

In James Watson’s long poem, Vashti’s maid Zebodie tries to persuade her to appear because she anticipates it will open the public sphere to women:

If Persia’s queen at royal board
Appear – shall she degraded seem?
No; her example will, I deem
The slavery of our sex undo,
And bring us to the public view.

(1845: 22–3)

Nonetheless, Vashti is proud and invokes the practice of female manipulation:

“Obedience!” cried the queen, in haste;
“That word I from my soul detest:
Few married ladies e’er obey
Their husbands – [. . .]
A thousand schemes they can invent
To bring about their own intent.

(23)

In Alexander Winton Buchan's drama the eunuch describes Vashti's refusal 'with martyr energy':

The play of feeling o'er that noble face:
Astonishment, alarm, grief, pride and shame,
The offspring and the prop of modesty,
Chasing each other, as a hounded pack
A slender, timorous deer, – can I forget?

(1873: 8)

John Bradshaw Kaye expresses esteem for Vashti, his long poem expressly written to exemplify 'the kindly, loving, yet strong nature of the fair woman, who, at such peril and sacrifice in the cause of womanly modesty dared to ignore the command of the cruel and imperious Ahasuerus' (1894: vii). Here Vashti's defence of her modesty reaches its moral peak: her refusal is a misunderstanding, and she is utterly innocent of any misdemeanour. Vashti, 'knowing of the flow of wine', at the king's party,

Was much amazed to hear the king's behest,
And thinking surely there was some mistake
Went not, but told the chamberlains to come
Yet once again, weren't still the king's desire,
And she would hasten to him.

(37–8)

Her reasonableness only emphasizes the king's excesses: he has the herald's tongue cut out for the message he delivers. The distraught Vashti defends herself: 'Have I shown aught but kindness to the King? / Or, knowing what he willed, have I withheld / To yield unto his will obedience?' (57). Kaye underlines his defence of the queen in his refrain for 'one so deeply wronged':

THE NOBLEST WOMAN,
THE KINDEST SOUL IN A WHOLE MIGHTY EMPIRE, –
THE LOVELIEST HEATHEN THAT THE WORLD HATH
KNOWN.

(166)

Although a 'heathen', Vashti is spiritually exemplary as she prays for Esther's success in saving the Jews, demonstrating her superiority over Esther, who is degraded through her calling for slaughter:

Oh, why should she, after that day's defence,
Which well insured her people's further safety,
Crave from the King another day of blood? –

A day of slaughter, and a day of vengeance,
 Unclaimed of justice and bewailed of mercy? [. . .]
 I would for my own peace she had not stooped
 To drink the bitter waters of revenge[.]

(137)

The princess in Tennyson's 'The Princess; A Medley', sets up a university for women which banishes men from its realm on pain of death. A prince to whom she is betrothed infiltrates the university through cross-dressing. 'He' (as a woman) reminds her of her promise of marriage, reneged through her separation from men. She invokes Vashti in her response:

And as to precontracts, we move, my friend,
 At no man's beck, but know ourself and thee,
 O Vashti, noble Vashti! Summon'd out
 She kept her state, and left the drunken king
 To brawl at Shushan underneath the palms.

(1911: 184)

J. S. Beamish's dramatic poem has Harbona, Bigtha and Zethar all involved in the assassination plot, discussing Vashti's disobedience and further, women's rights. Zethar defends Vashti:

[. . .] The right of pure,
 Exalted, modest womanhood, to loathe
 And cast sway, with fix'd disdain, the fulsome,
 Adulatory words, of men inebriate.

(1875: 17)

Harbona calls it a 'novel language' to talk of 'woman's rights!' (ibid.). Zethar defends the view that she should be 'His helper, *not* his slave! His bosom friend! / The dearest, closest, treasure of his heart!' (ibid.). If she is 'free!', 'lov'd and honour'd', he asserts, then 'man will rise / In being and intelligence!' (18). He sites their 'sacred influence' in the domestic sphere, the 'holy power' of their 'matchless grace, and precious love untiring' which is to 'mothers only known' (ibid.).

Helen Hunt Jackson celebrates the 'Poor uncrowned queen' Vashti, who is 'pure and loyal-souled as fair', and as such it 'was love which made thee bold to dare / Refuse the shame which madmen would compel'. Her Vashti cries 'bitter tears' as she sacrifices herself to ensure the crown's dignity, maintaining that 'He will but bless me when he doth repent!' (1892: 180–1). In Zeto's poem *Vashti*, the queen echoes rabbinical writings in her reply to the king: 'Go, tell my master that I am his wife, / And not his slave or concubine, to be / A show for idle hours' (1897: 7). It is she, not Mordecai and Esther, who saves the king from

assassination, and although praying for the Jews' salvation, she is treated with suspicion by them and ultimately kills herself.

One of the earliest proto-feminist writings on the Bible, *The Woman's Bible*, considers Vashti one of the 'grand types of women' from the Bible, alongside Deborah, Huldah and Esther. She reflects Kaye's, Jackson's and Zeto's concern for what it calls 'womanly dignity', lauding her refusal to put 'herself on exhibition as one of the king's possessions' (Stanton 1898: 86). She is *The Woman's Bible's* exemplary woman:

Excepting Deborah as judge, no example had been given of a woman who formed her own judgement and acted upon it. There had been no exhibition of a self-respecting womanhood which might stand for a higher type of social life than was customary among men. (87)

The analysis of Vashti's behaviour by its authors traces a trajectory of female evolution:

Vashti was the prototype of the higher unfoldment of woman beyond her time. She stands for the point in human development when womanliness asserts itself and begins to revolt and throw off the yoke of sensualism and tyranny. Her revolt was not an overt act, or a criticism of the proceedings of the king. It was merely exercising her own judgement as to her own proceeding. She did not choose to be brought before the assembly of men as an exhibit. (87)

Above all, Vashti is a 'sublime representative of self-centred womanhood' (87).

The influence of early rabbinic writing on Vashti appears in Shmarya Levin's first autobiographical account, *Childhood in Exile*, which recounts this renowned Zionist's early childhood in Russia. He relates the staging of a Yiddish *purimshpil* and the problems that representing Vashti caused, revealing the ways in which rabbinic writings have metamorphosed into popular cultural interpretation:

Vashti the queen was as wicked as her husband was foolish: *but* on the day when she was summoned to display herself to the banqueters, something exceedingly ugly and exceedingly immodest grew out on her forehead. And the modesty which prevents me from saying exactly what it was that grew out on her forehead, also prevented the historic presentation of the rôle of Vashti the queen [. . .] every boy in Swislowitz knew what had happened to Vashti the queen, and what the biblical account does not mention. Who told me, I cannot remember, but it was certainly neither the Rebbi nor my mother. (Levin 1930: 147–8)

The transgression of gender in Vashti's new appendage contrasts with the normative constructions that this passage alludes to (and that are delineated in the

autobiography as a whole). The rabbi and mother are denied the young boys' knowledge, bolstering their own sense of a masculine identity. Ultimately Vashti is a figure of threat and subversion as it is she, under the veil, who has privileged knowledge and access (see Carruthers, 2007, for a detailed discussion).

The queen is also Wilhelmina Stitch's choice for ideal womanhood, assertive in her modesty: 'Now *she*, Vashti, is a woman to write about! for when she was commanded by her husband King Ahasuerus to show off her beauty to a thousand revellers all the worse for drink, she flatly refused' (1935: 248). Compared to the bloodthirsty Esther, 'I like Vashti far more [. . .] and I'm sure you do too', she comments, patronizingly. She even commends the queen because of her influence on the empire's laws (ignoring the problem that it legislates female subservience):

She had a proper understanding of the dignity of womanhood. She valued herself highly. She was not the type (like Esther!) who would enter a beauty competition. Although deposed, she too made history! Her act of rebellion brought forth a royal command. (253–4)

Goldman's response to Vashti is more ambivalent. Although defending her refusal as reasonable, he suggests that she 'too, may have drunk too much and thereby have been fortified in her refusal' (1952: 198). Browne's defence of Vashti is unequivocal. Reminded of Salome's 'questionable dance at Herod's birthday party', he considers her refusal 'fully justified', but laments over the 'unhappy effect of removing so early from the stage the only character who commands his respect' ([1962] 1975: 382). Carey Moore compares Vashti's refusal here with Esther's own disobedience, noting that the former 'raises the king's anger', whilst the latter 'stirs his mercy' ([1971] 1984: 9). Shulamith Lev-Aladgem reflects on the participants' attraction to the 'spark of genuine feminism' in Vashti as they act in a Purim play at their day-care centre (1998: 127). Levenson is one commentator who questions the suitability of Vashti for the feminist agenda. Although he considers her treatment at the hands of her 'brutish husband' worthy of sympathy, her banishment makes her unsuitable to be appropriated as a feminist heroine. His judgement replicates earlier assertions of her 'imprudence': 'Queen Vashti's absolute and uncompromising refusal to comply with her husband renders her powerless and ineffective, and ultimately sweeps her from the scene' (1997: 48). Vashti's refusal also highlights for him the limits of Ahasuerus's power: he can display his wealth but not his wife (13).

Modern Jewish responses to the rabbinic literature on Vashti demonstrate its dissemination into popular practice. Rabbi Yitzchak Adlerstein (1997) writes of his discomfort at the anticipation of visitors observing his family's Purim practice: 'We would get to the fateful climax of festive activity, when Achash-

verosh would order his queen to appear in less than decorous attire, and she would refuse. Someone would ask, if only to show that he /she knew the answer: “Why did Vashti refuse to strut out?” And a chorus of happy voices would respond: “Because she grew a tail!” He refuses the literal interpretation of the rabbis, instead following Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (writing at the turn of the sixteenth century), that Vashti was caused an inconvenience equivalent to the sprouting of a tail: ‘she felt a fullness that made her slow and lethargic’. In his modern context, he suggests that she may have ‘put on a few pounds’.

In 1959, the Texan Edith Deen paints Vashti’s transgression as daring: ‘At any rate, her courage must have been as great as her beauty or she could not have braved the displeasure of her husband’ (1959: 299). Deen’s response is in contrast to feminist recovery of this rebel heroine, by whom she is read in overwhelmingly, even excessively, positive terms. Writing on Brontë’s *Villette*, Patricia Johnson judges that the biblical ‘Vashti is a feminist rebel contained within a patriarchal text’ (1990: 626). As White contends, her strength makes her ‘congenial to the modern woman.’ She notes the irony ‘that her punishment gives her exactly what she wanted: she is no longer to appear before the king!’ (1992: 127).

1:13–22 *The Empire Strikes Back*

Rabbinical constraint of Vashti into a controllable, albeit reprehensible, model is mirrored in the ensuing edict demanding female obedience and commanding all men to be rulers in their households. According to *Midrash Rabbah*, the king’s anger at Vashti in 1:12 is divinely induced. God sends the angel in charge of wrath: ‘Go down and blow up a spark in his belly and fan his ashes and throw sulphur into his oven’ (III.15). It is clear in *Targum Sheni* that the king acts rashly: ‘anger overpowered him’ (1991: 129). The rabbis respond soberly to Vashti’s crime, *Esther Rabbah* identifying (but not celebrating) her as one of four women ‘who have bourne sovereignty’, her rebellion interpreted as a successful usurpation of power (III.2). In contrast to the later, rash edict proclaiming genocide, *Midrash Rabbah* notes in the case of this edict the lawful treatment of an undeserving subject: ‘R. Isaac said: [To think that] that swine is treated according to law, and a holy nation not according to law, but with barbarity!’ (IV.5). The adviser Memucan’s speech suitably elaborates Vashti’s crimes, accusing her of striking him on both sides of his face with her shoe. It contends that as Vashti didn’t invite Memucan’s wife to the feast, the edict is motivated by his desire to minimize the queen’s influence over her (IV.6).

In rabbinical tradition, Memucan is aligned with Haman, who orders Vashti’s execution because he wants the king to marry his own daughter. He

is foiled because ‘it was determined from Heaven that each day she became defiled with excrement and with urine; her mouth also smelled exceedingly offensive whereupon they hurried her out’ (*Targum Rishon*, 63). Associating Haman with Memucan explains for medieval exegetes his sudden rise to power. In an alternative tradition, Memucan is associated with Daniel, the famous Jewish adviser to the Babylonian court. He had taken a wife from Persia, who was richer than him, who refused to speak in his language (*Targum Sheni*, 130), leading him to suggest the edict. By inserting Daniel into the story, a Jew is instrumental in Vashti’s death, providing a clear link to God’s providence (*ibid.*: 131). Memucan is also motivated by fear of Vashti – that she must be killed because she will take revenge on him if pardoned (*ibid.*).

Exegetes of the High Middle Ages linked the phrase in 1:13 to 1 Chr 12:33, the men of Issachar who also ‘had understanding of the times’, and concluded that the advisers must be Jews (Walfish 1993: 113). Joseph ben Kaspi considers the phrase to refer to wise men, citing Aristotle’s opinion that to listen to experienced elders is equivalent to listening to oracles. Isaiah of Trani also considers them Jews, translating *‘ittim* as laws, so that it refers to men knowledgeable of both kingdom and Torah law. For Ibn Ezra they are astrologers or historians, whilst Gersonides considers them experts in law, political philosophy and astrology, reflecting the values of his time. Late medieval scholars are interested in legal matters (Walfish 1993: 114). Zechariah ben Saruk considers the continuation of the verse, ‘this was royal practice [to turn] to all who were versed in law and precedent’, to indicate that the king turned to advisers for those cases in which he had a personal stake (*ibid.*: 115). Aristotle’s writings again influence Isaac Arama’s distinction between conventional justice (*sedeq nimusi*) and situational justice (*sedeq helqi*). As such, Arama concludes that Vashti needs to be punished primarily because of the public circumstances under which she committed her crime, threatening the king’s authority (*ibid.*: 119).

Delgado paints a set of advisers who are made useless through a habit of subservience and declares that their ‘collective judgment has been affected / by their habit of servitude ([1627] 1999: 20). Memucan’s advice is a mockery of right government, a perversion of norms of justice – all too pertinent to Delgado’s experiences as a Jew in Spain. The adviser argues that to rule by reason is weakness, and a monarchy is instead judged by ‘its arbitrariness’ (20). Rather than a bad ruler, the king is a victim of his state, which forces him to act against his own inclinations (22). The poem presents a lengthy psychological reading of the ruler and his state as a monarch isolated by his ‘despair’:

He cannot trust his own
emotions and reactions. Or anyone else’s.

(24)

Arthur Jackson in 1646 articulates the gravity with which obedience, sedition and authority were considered at this time. Regarding ‘*that every man should beare rule in his own house*’, he commends ‘the same penalty’ for disobedient wives that the story presents: ‘namely, that they should be divorced from their husbands’ (794). Symon Patrick, Lord Bishop of Ely, continues in Jackson’s serious vein: ‘For none would dare to disobey, when they heard that the greatness of the queen could not preserve her from such a heavy punishment’ (1813: 686). Lawson is similarly condemnatory of Vashti. Although she may have thought that she was defending ‘the honour of her sex’, he deems her behaviour a public ‘affront’ to ‘her husband, and her king’ (1804: 19). He claims to observe precisely the imitation of Vashti’s rebellion that the king’s advisers fear, writing against those wives who have ‘promised obedience’ (19–20), promises that are proved empty when they only mean to please their own humours. In breaking such a ‘solemn promise’, such women ‘heap guilt upon guilt by the many violations of the covenant of their God’ (20). His harsh judgement of the women extends to men, whom he impels to not ‘impose a burden’ that a wife cannot bear (20). Although he has condoned the advisers’ behaviour, he insists that a disobedient wife should be ‘reclaim[ed] [. . .] in the spirit of meekness’, her sedition not justifying banishment from bed or house. He encourages them ‘to overcome evil with good’ (26).

The story becomes a lesson in government: ‘Happy is the land governed by kings who trust not to their own understanding, who highly respect the laws, and make use of wise men learned in the laws, as their counsellors’ (23). Lawson’s priority throughout his interpretation is proper order, and he cautions:

When authority is not acknowledged in a kingdom, there must be wars and seditions without hope of any termination; and when in a family honour is not given to the husband and father, the house is divided against itself, and peace and comfort are banished. (30)

Lawson makes the comparison between the dutiful British wife, who submits happily to her obvious superior, and Vashti’s rebellion:

What could be expected from women held in the chains of ignorance and slavery, as the women of the east generally were, but that they would embrace every opportunity, and seize every pretext, for disentangling themselves from their fetters? Better things may be expected from women in our land, who are trained in the knowledge of the true religion, and indulged with all reasonable liberty. (29)

The culture in which these women live – a non-Christian and geographically separate sphere in the ‘East’ – creates disobedient individuals and is the focus of derision. The women are merely a gauge of its inadequacy.

Thomas Scott in the late eighteenth century likewise compares the Orient to contemporary Britain and concludes: ‘Let us also remember to be thankful for a limited, mild, and equitable government’ ([c.1788] 1827: 4Q2–3). Like Lawson, he defends male command, but places the burden of responsibility on man’s effective rule:

contempt in the women would excite the wrath of the men, and thus destroy domestick subordination and peace – Yet if husbands had been careful not to act contemptibly, or to give foolish and improper commands, they might have ruled by reason and affection, without either such fatal consequences or violent measures. (4P2)

He explicitly links the familial to the political sphere:

But despotism in civil government leads to despotism in domestic life; men imagine, that there is no way to rule but by force and terror, and thus the superior relations become tyrants and the inferior, slaves, submitting by constraint, without either conviction or affection. (4P2)

Scott’s assertion pre-empts a Foucauldian understanding of coercive power or ‘normative power’, the persuasion of subjects willingly to consent to authority through normalizing power relations rather than resorting to disciplinary activity (see Foucault 1977). Scott expands into general principles of ruling:

Let it also be specially noted, that superiors, in all cases and circumstances, should be careful not to command what may reasonably be disobeyed; for this must weaken their authority, and prove a temptation to those over whom they rule: yet inferiors ought never to persist in a refusal, except when it is really a point of conscience towards God[.] (4P3)

Elizabeth Polack picks up on the rabbinic legend that Haman schemes to put his daughter on the throne in her drama *Esther the Royal Jewess or, The Death of Haman*, produced at the Pavilion Theatre, London, in 1835. He fawns over Vashti and is resentful of her inattention and wishes that ‘the haughty beauty will be hurled from her throne of power; then she will no longer scorn me, nor reject my love’ (Polack 1835: 5). When Ahasuerus gestures towards leniency because of Vashti’s beauty, Haman manipulates him by recourse to law, forcing the king’s hand (6). When he tells Vashti of her downfall, he offers her refuge in his own estate as a concubine (11).

Thomas M’Crie, always with an eye on the British imperial context, compares Vashti’s punishment to the supposedly barbaric modern-day Orient: ‘females, though subjected to great restraints, were not then regarded as slaves, or exposed to the treatment which they receive in Eastern countries at present’ (1838: 29).

Two years later Eliza Cushing seemingly reflects contemporary prejudices against ‘idle women’:

It shall be told by peasant, lord, and slave; –
The shameful tale, which all might blush to hear,
Shall be familiar as a household word,
And rouse up idle women, weak, and vain,
To grasp at rule, to spurn their wedded laws,
And brave defiance to their rightful lords.

(1840: 14–15)

It is a prejudice fuelled by self-interest, the play resonating with rabbinical tradition:

Right eloquent he is in this good cause,
Nor wonder I to hear his earnest words,
For well I ween, he has a shrew at home,
A tameless shrew, that love nor fear can rule.

(15)

In Watson’s poem, Memucan appeals to the king’s wounded masculinity: ‘Thy royal power the queen disdains – / Thy sacred manhood she profanes’ (1845: 26). His concern is for order:

Dominion once o’erthrown at home,
Soon shall the sacred throne become
Contemptible[.]

(27)

Such threat to order leads Symington to condemn such ‘womanly firmness’ as ‘a crime of the first magnitude, being against the king’s supreme majesty, and putting in peril the domestic peace of the whole empire’. He thinks the advisers are disingenuous, only suggesting the edict because ‘they knew the vain king would believe it’ and it would effectively ‘restor[e] his peace of mind (1878: 50).

Paton identifies in the advice absurdity, but not humour. ‘Prompt action is necessary’, he notes in his 1908 commentary, ‘since the trouble is likely to begin at once among the women in Susa’ (155). But he judges that this ‘absurd advice’, that Vashti’s rebellion is ‘politically dangerous’, ‘can hardly be taken as sober history’ (157). Franz Grillparzer’s play echoes Delgado’s earlier reflections, depicting a king who declares his dependency on advisers whom he sees as more potent than himself. ‘You are my ears’, he proclaims, recognizing his distance from the populace. Yet such reliance breeds mutual enmity: ‘And hence I hate you as we hate our masters, / As you hate me’ (1953: 113).

The Interpreter's Bible's serious response borders on the hysterical: 'If other wives of lesser rank follow the example of the defiant queen, the empire will be thrown into anarchy' (1954: 838). Espriu's subversive play, *Premera Història D'Esther* (1948) has the king simply respond to his advisers' fears: 'our wives will tell us what to do? Dear Memucan, that's nothing new!' ([1948] 1989: 33). Other modern responses more often than not identify the absurd in the advisers' extreme response. Sidnie Ann White calls this episode 'burlesque', the court full of 'hapless buffoons' contrasting with 'the calm strength of Vashti' (1992: 127). It is notable that Moore condemns the king for his bureaucratic response, but not for being offended or for banishing his wife:

That the king should have been infuriated at his queen's defiance is just as understandable as his subsequent removal of her as queen; but that he should have brought into full play the communications system of the entire Persian empire for such a purpose is ridiculous. Then again, drunken men sometimes are ridiculous. ([1971] 1982: 14)

To respond to a personal matter by means of an official decree marks the king, for Levenson, as someone with a 'personal deficiency' (1997: 13), inept in the realm of human relations (51). The advisers' ineptitude is highlighted when compared to Mordecai's wise handling of the assassination, the real threat to the king (51).

It is here that the book registers the unalterability of the laws of the Medes and Persians (1:19). Thomas M'Crie's response is typical of a religious scorn of heathen, imperial arrogance. He considers it 'absurd', and condemns it as 'giving perpetuity and effect to every species of injustice and oppression and cruelty, proceeding on the presumptuous assumption of infallibility' (1838: 237). Human error demands that the law 'must always be subject to review and reversal' (238). The *New Catholic Commentary* calls the detail 'a pleasant fiction', citing Dan 6:8, 13 and 25 in which laws are altered ([1969] 1981: 410). The commentary sees it as yet another sign of God's omnipotence: 'What human act, suggests our writer, is irrevocable if God lays his hand upon a matter? – as he is going to do as the story unfolds' (ibid.).

1:19 Vashti's Punishment

Targum Rishon relates the Jewish tradition that the queen is executed: 'let the king decree that her head be removed'. Some *Megillot* illustrate the queen's beheading, constraining interpretation (see Plate 4, p. 63). Soltes notes contemporary application of the beheaded queen in an Alsatian *Megillah*, which he

purports has marginal illustrations in which the Vashti figure looks ‘very much like’ Marie Antoinette. The French Revolution, in which the queen’s execution played a role, led to the emancipation decree which accorded Jews citizen rights, ‘an echo, obliquely, of the long-term consequences of the fall of Vashti for the Jews of Shushan’ (2003: 150).

In Civil War England, Richard Heyricke sees Vashti’s banishment as a vindication of the responsibilities of sovereigns. Even female rulers, he argues, commit ‘masculine’ – that is, public and influential – sins:

Princes have not any license to offend, Queens themselves have not an *Obstante* for sin: ’Tis the misery of greatnesse, the offense is as great as the offender, the sin as sovereign as the Person; great Persons do not so much commit sin as teach it; their disobedience is ever masculine, and it begets followers of it, as of their Persons; they are of a diffusive and spreading nature. (1646: 23)

Although generally disdainful of the Oriental court, Carson considers Ahasuerus to be nonetheless a model of forbearance for his exiling of Vashti: ‘to give up for ever one whom he so admired, discovers more stoicism than is generally to be found in absolute monarchs’ (1835: 16).

Modern reception pays attention to the specifics of the advice to ‘find someone better’. Moore reflects that ‘*Tob* can refer to either physical beauty or moral goodness, including “obedience”’, the ‘shrewd adviser’ making use of the term’s polysemy so that Ahasuerus could ‘read into it whatever meaning he chose’ ([1971] 1984: 11). Clines unsatisfyingly sees the removal of Vashti as a mere literary device: ‘space must be made for Esther who will behave obediently (2:8, 10, 20; etc.) as a foil to Vashti the disobedient (1:15)’ (1984a: 274). Such a reading is strengthened by Levenson’s identification of a verbal similarity in the infamous succession of Saul by the celebrated David in 1 Sam 15:28, in which Samuel tells the king that the crown is to be given to ‘another who is worthier than you’ (1997: 52).

1:22 The Decree

Bibles differ in how they render this difficult verse ordering that ‘every man should bear rule in his own house’. The AV includes the ensuing phrase ‘*it* should be published according to the language of every people’, which the Greek omits and Moore translates as ‘and say whatever suited him’ (1977: 183; see later in this chapter). The Talmud’s response is indignant: ‘Of course he should! Even a weaver in his own house must be commander!’ (*Meg* 12b). *Targum Rishon* emphasizes control: ‘take care that each man should dominate his wife and

force her to speak according to the language of her husband and the language of his people' (39). *Esther Rabbah* mocks the king, arguing that the decree proves that he 'was utterly devoid of sense' (IV.12). It argues: 'If a man wants to eat lentils and his wife wants to eat beans, can he force her? Surely she does as she likes'. Further, it argues that 'he made himself a laughing stock', arguing, 'If a Median marries a Persian woman, is she [able] to speak Median?' (IV.12). For Gersonides, because the edict makes the king look foolish, it must be divinely ordained as it helps the Jewish cause (Walfish 1993: 80).

Because Christian reception of the king is more positive, it may unequivocally embrace his edict. Francis Quarles' poem reiterates the order for the proper 'subjection' of wives to their husbands, the rib from which Eve was taken acting as a 'Hi'roglyphick' for women. Quarles prescribes female behaviour through what becomes in the early modern period conventional allusion to the Creation narrative:

Women (like Ribs) must keepe their wonted home,
And not (like *Dinah* that was ravish't) rome[.]
(1621: sig Er; 1642: 108)

His invocation of Dinah further implicates women in their own rape, which becomes a direct result of transgression of the domestic sphere. Quarles' propensity for the aphoristic rhyming couplet leads him to conclude:

Ill thriues the haplesse Family, that shows
A Cocke that's silent, and a Hen that crows[.]
(*ibid.*)

And further:

I know not which liue more ungodly liues,
Obeying Husbands, or commanding Wiues[.]
(*ibid.*)

Matthew Poole suggests in his note on 1:22 that the decree is sent in all languages – including women's – so that it would be 'inexcusable if they did not comply with it' ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.). He seemingly condones the use of language as 'one sign of Dominion', and explains that it was 'frequent after this time among the *Greeks* and *Romans*, who, together with their victorious Arms, brought in their Language into other Countries'. The Protestant Thomas Scott privileges a spiritual emphasis as he interprets the decree as 'an argument for the vernacular Bible' (1827: 4P2). If the decree is to be sent in all languages to all nations, 'how reasonable and necessary is it, that the holy law and gracious gospel of our God should be put into every one's hands in his own tongue!' (4R8).

Benton's play prioritizes female obedience, Mordecai invoking the king's edict as he orders a rebellious Esther to hide her identity. She responds 'defiantly', 'Why should I conceal what I delight in?', and he replies with authoritarian brevity: 'Because I tell thee' (1922: 135). He insists: 'For men must rule their households, and women must be kept in subjection' (133). T. H. Gaster delights in this 'deliciously humorous tale' of 'poor husbands' turning to a royal edict in order to 'save face' (cited in Moore [1971] 1982: 14).

Goldman privileges respect for monarchs: 'To retract or alter a decree, and thereby to suggest that it was an unwise one or in other respects faulty, would be a reproach on the king's wisdom' (1952: 200). Such humourless reflection is pervasive in many commentaries in the twentieth century. Browne considers the decree an evident fiction, reading the advertising of Vashti's disobedience (but not the divorce) as evidence of the book's novelistic status ([1962] 1975: 382). Moore inserts historical argument into Browne's disbelief:

Outside of the Old Testament [. . .] there is no evidence for this irrevocability of the Persian law (cf. Herodotus IX.109; Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 27). Certainly such a law seems inflexible and crippling to good government, and, hence, improbable. ([1971] 1982: 11)

Moore and the other contributors grapple over the meaning of the Hebrew *'klswn 'mw*, 'according to the language of his people'. Moore suggests, following older translators (following Neh 13:23f) that a man should speak his mother tongue to his foreign wife, whilst S. Talmon understands it to signify the male's right to 'have the last word' (Moore [1971] 1984: 11). C. C. Torrey follows the Aramaic, *mdbr*, 'ruling' rather than 'speaking', rendering the phrase 'ruler of every tongue of his family' (*Harvard Theological Review* 37 (1944): 35). Moore interprets it 'whatever suited him' (12), noting the irony that this decree authorizing male rule 'initiates a story whereby the king having got rid of one recalcitrant wife ends up with one who controls him completely' ([1971] 1984: 14).

For many modern readers, the impossibility of the edict's success being measured, never mind assured, mocks the king and his advisers. Clines notes their 'hysterical assumption' (1984b: 32), and revels in the 'evident hyperbole which is intended to display the super-efficiency of the Persian administrative machine to do everything – except ensure that a man be master in his own house!' (1984a: 283). Yehuda Radday marvels at the irony that 'her disrespect should be recorded in black and white in the official annals of each province' (1990: 297). Barry C. Davies considers the edict 'farcical' in its 'dictation of what can and cannot be done within each and every household of this empire', also ridiculing the turning of a 'private domestic affair' into an 'international crisis that swallows up the time, effort and resources of the leaders of the largest empire of the world' (1995: 137). Levenson notes the irony in the king's demand of male rule, 'a task at

which the king who issues the edict has proven a conspicuous failure' (1997: 2). In Alicia Ostriker's reimagining of the scene, the bemused wives merely 'smile narrowly, and look with narrow amusement from the corners of their eyes' (1993: 61); they are evidently already well-practised in negotiating male rule.

Esther 2:1-7

After the furore of Esther 1, the king's anger abates, and he remembers the banished Vashti. The king is advised to gather virgins from his empire from which to choose a replacement for his insubordinate queen. After the search for a new queen, the narrative turns to Mordecai and Esther.

2:1 The King Remembers Vashti

The exact nature of the king's sense of loss is a matter of dispute. The MT, and as a result most Jewish and Protestant Bibles, has the ambiguous 'remembered' (JB, NIV, AV), contrasted with the pointedly dismissive 'remembered Vashti no longer' in the LXX (see Moore [1971] 1984: 17 and *New Catholic Commentary*

[1969] 1981: 410). *Esther Rabbah* argues instead that his feelings of remorse are because ‘he realised that she had acted properly’ in refusing (V.2). In *Targum Rishon*, the rabbis contend that, despite his repentance, he is divinely directed to punish Vashti because she persuaded him not to rebuild the Temple (69). When sober, the king’s anger is newly directed at his advisers for making him banish his queen (39). The king’s instability in the rabbinical writings contrasts with his positive portrayal in the early modern play *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* (Greg: 1561). The narrative bypasses the drunken feast, opening instead on Vashti’s disgrace and the king’s search for a new queen. By eliding the dubious nature of Vashti’s banishment, the play provides a potentially authoritative defence for Henry VIII’s own controversial divorces (and perhaps even, to those who were aware of Vashti’s execution in rabbinical tradition, a vindication of his even more notorious death sentences for wives numbers two and five). Matthew Poole’s king remembers with

grief and shame, that in his Wine and Rage, he had so severely punished, and so irrevocably rejected, so beautiful and so desirable a Person, and that for so small a provocation, to which she was easily led by the modesty of her Sex, and by the laws and Customs of *Persia*. ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.)

This is not a blanket vindication of Vashti, but an opportunity to amplify the foolishness of the king. Poole had, after all, earlier suggested that her disobedience (even if motivated by ‘the modesty of her Sex’) deserved ‘exemplary punishment’ (see comments on 1:16).

The majority of modern commentators seem to prioritize the MT account and assume that the king’s remembrance here is the regret of the morning after the night before. Eliza Cushing’s king berates Memucan for being motivated by his own unhappy marriage:

Ay, with most cruel haste,
Thou didst the deed. Thou fearedst lest I should change;
Lest in a cooler hour, my angry mood
Should pass, and love return. Full well thou knowest
That the inebriate wine had fired my blood,
And paralyzed my brain, – else my words
Fallen powerless to the ground, as they deserved.
Thou didst not well to chafe me in such sort.
Because at home thou hast an angry wife,
Thou fain wouldst wreak the wrongs which she inflicts,
On all of woman-kind.

(1840: 16)

The king tries to find Vashti to win her back, but she has fled with ‘fierce disdain’

(ibid.). In Watson's poem, the king similarly seeks his queen in the harem, but here it is from an unfeasible forgetfulness, and he is shocked into regret when he finds her banished:

“Wretch that I am!” the monarch cried,
 “I’was for my pride my angel died!”

(1845: 36)

The king's regret is central to Roger Aus's use of the Vashti story as a frame through which to interpret the New Testament Salome story. For him the unjustly killed Vashti is an analogue for the unjustly killed John (Aus 1988: 64). The king's dubious command is also questioned by Karen Jobes, who sees the point of Esther 1 as showing that ‘When such absolute power is combined with decadence and ruthlessness, no one is safe’ (1999: 69). By looking at other biblical uses of the verb ‘to remember’ (*zakar*, in Gen 40:14, Lev 26:42, 45 and Jer 2:2) Levenson asserts that the king is here remembering with compassion (1997: 54). The king, even if foolish, is at least not heartless.

2:2–4 **To the Harem**

To satisfy the empire's need for a queen, women are gathered to compete to be queen, providing an opportunity for commentators to prescribe winning qualities. In *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* the king's list of virtues is suggestive of early modern ideals of womanhood:

In theym shoulde be kyndnes, myrth, and dalyaunce
 wysedome, sadnes, and in loue perseueraunce,
 Constanuncie knit with comlines, ioy to encrease
 Vertue with good demeanour, pleasure to put in presse.

(Greg [1561] 1904: 11)

When Mordecai is called upon to vouch for Esther, he adds to conventional feminine traits that of learning:

Assuringe you, she is a virgin puer,
 A pearle vndefiled and of conscience cleare
 Sober, sad, ientill, meke and demure,
 In learninge and litterature, profoundly seene,
 In wisdome, eke semblante to Saba the Quene.

(ibid.: 12)

Education is apparently a desirable trait for a queen – even a wife – in the mid-sixteenth century.

Hegai praises Esther, in Eliza Cushing's drama, primarily for her passivity, suggestive of nineteenth-century constructs of femininity:

[. . .] No idle wish
To rival her compeers, no proud conceit
Of her own passing loveliness, e'er stirs
Her tranquil soul. Full of all gentleness,
Calm as the dewy star that evening loves,
And blushing with sweet maiden bashfulness
At word or look of praise, she brightly shines
Amid the lesser lights that round her beam,
Eclipsing all, with her effulgent rays.

(1840: 31)

For many of Esther's readers, the harem, languid and luxurious, invokes the exotic Eastern culture of the Turk and the Ottoman Empire. The harem is received with some ambivalence, so that whilst it is exotic, it is always also intrinsically culturally unfamiliar: desirable, yet alienating. Commentators also idealize the gathering of virgins whilst being morally affronted by the unabashed sexualization of women. Watson is a case in point. The gathered virgins have an angelic purity:

But these were charming as the rose,
In bower of Paradise that blows;
And sweet as spotless lily white,
In Hesperidian gardens bright[.]

(1845: 41)

Yet in his notes he comments on the 'debased state of female society in the east':

It is well known that custom has not only reconciled the fair sex to the despicably degrading seclusion of the harem, but even rendered the polite and well-regulated intercourse of enlightened society, in their opinion, highly dishonourable. (112)

Watson's poem conceives of the harem as a site of slavery, comparing its inhabitants to (of course, superior) British women, who are represented as the willing recipients of romantic love:

Thy slave, for money bought and sold:
Oh, shame! – Thou canst not buy for gold
Thy captive's love – no; softer art

Must triumph o'er the female heart.
 Hail! British fair! 'tis thus thy hand
 Is bound by wedlock's silken band;
 Thou yield'st it only when thy heart
 Is won by love's assiduous art[.]

(20)

Female compliance is an essential marker of male supremacy, and yet Watson chooses the term 'bound' in reference to wedlock, indicating a desire for, and expressing a need for, constraint of women by marriage. Far from an assertion of proto-feminist values, it is rather an assertion of the superiority of the West.

Alexander Symington likewise reads the harem as indicative of Eastern values, privileging his own, Western standards as he does so. Whilst the hypocrisy of such Orientalist attitudes is rendered transparent in his recognition of the West's own form of sexual exploitation, prostitution, his criticism of the East is no less disapproving:

The steps taken to fill Vashti's place give a very revolting impression of the evils of despotism. We may reflect with thankfulness that such a thing could not now be done in Europe – Christian Europe. At the same time it is fit to be said, in few words but plainly, that we are not free from the crime which lay at the bottom of this proceeding – the subjection of woman to man's capricious and cruel lust; and that these maidens in Persia were not outcast and ruined, but maintained after some fashion that was reckoned respectable. (1878: 55)

Thomas M'Crie contrasts the practices of 'Oriental nations at present' with Mordecai's apparently easy access to the harem: 'if any man were to be seen frequenting the purlieu of a modern seraglio (those gilded prisons in which the victims of Asian voluptuousness are immured), it would cost him his life' (1838: 51). The lure of the harem is evident here. Although he had asserted earlier in his lectures that the face that 'reflects as a mirror the good qualities of the mind alone can form an object of rational attraction' (44), M'Crie's satisfaction with this superior 'rational' beauty is unconvincing as he turns his gaze on the 'voluptuous' beauty of the Asian. The novelist Margaret S. Black cannot resist commenting in the same vein on the supposed degradation, not only of ancient Oriental practices, but of the present-day non-Western world: 'Such was the treatment of women nearly twenty-five years ago, and, sad to say, to a great extent, such is still their treatment in certain countries despite the enlightenment of the nineteenth century' (1895: 26). Jon Levenson, in contrast, merely mocks the administration's role in the personal life of the king: '*everything* in Ahasuerus's reign is absurdly bureaucratized; even the king's sex life requires commissioners' (1997: 54).

2:5–6 Mordecai

The narrative moves abruptly, and without explanation, beyond the Persian court to a Jewish man, Mordecai, and his cousin, Hadassah. General reception of Mordecai in Jewish and Christian traditions is largely positive: he does, after all, finish the book as second-in-command. It is customary at the synagogue service to read 2:5 along with 2:15–16, 9:7–9 and 10:3, known as the ‘verses of redemption’, which trace Mordecai’s ascension in the empire, underlining his central role. The LXX presents Mordecai’s prayer, echoed in *Targum Rishon*’s gloss that he was ‘a pious man who prayed before God for his people’ (41). Ancient Jewish commentary emphasizes Mordecai’s virtues through intricate textual play and intertextual allusion. *Targum Rishon* notes the similarity between Mordecai and the Aramaic words for myrrh (*myr*’) and pure (*dky*), so that he becomes ‘comparable to pure myrrh’ (41, also *Meg* 10b). *Esther Rabbah* explains that as myrrh is the foremost of spices, ‘so Mordecai was the foremost of the righteous in his generation’ (VI.3). It also says that Mordecai was part of the Sanhedrin, ‘which Esther set up for him at the king’s gate’ (48).

The Talmud (*Meg* 12b–13a) explains that Mordecai is both Benjamite and Judahite (a literal rendition of the Hebrew for ‘Mordecai the Jew’) through dual parentage. Levenson explains that, although in the Hebrew Bible *yehudi* normally refers to someone from the tribe of Judah, in the Exile the term referred more generally to any Jew (1997: 57). Jewish tradition also declares Mordecai to be a descendant of Saul, neatly tying together the tradition that Haman and Mordecai’s battle is a replaying of the encounter between Saul and the Amalekites (in Ex 17 and 1 Sam 15). Ibn Ezra combats the tradition of Mordecai’s ancestry, arguing that such a link would have been rendered explicitly. Levenson recuperates the link by arguing that it is nonetheless suggestive, and that ‘the two are to be thought of’ in ‘contrastive’ terms (1997: 56). Rashi unquestioningly refers to Mordecai’s royal lineage in explaining that Esther’s secrecy was because ‘if they knew that she was of King Saul’s family they would keep her’ (Walfish 1993: 124). The claim seeps into more popular reception. The allusion seems simply too appealing – for the status it confers on Mordecai and Esther – and thereby overwhelms any historical sensibility. Despite being a tenuous assertion, Esther or Mordecai’s royalty enhances the fairytale element of the tale and, for the religious reader, inserts the book into a larger biblical narrative.

Although not explicitly royal, the Mordecai in *Hester, A Poem* (1716) is superior, in both his moral and hereditary character, to the low-born Haman, who is duplicitously ambitious:

The *patriarchal* Blood with manly Grace,
 His high Descent distinguish'd in his Face.
 An easy Carriage, and engaging Look,
 Confess'd his Mind, and Favour first bespoke.
 For, form'd by Nature to be truly Great,
 The Beauties of his Soul were more compleat.
 Firm to the Choice his Reason once advis'd,
 His Policy was simple, undisguis'd.
 Plain Honesty the leading Maxim flood,
 And bid each dubious Scene of Life be good.

(Anon. 1716: 18)

Cultural assumptions that conflate hereditary and moral worth are evident and are echoed in the iteration of hierarchies throughout the poem. Mordecai is also a master of self-control, a key enlightenment virtue: 'Most Master where he found Temptation most' (19). Helen Hunt Jackson's allusion to Mordecai as 'of royal line' undermines, not reiterates, hierarchy. His royalty is invoked at the moment when he appears least important, as he sits at the king's gate, mourning in sackcloth. The poem challenges superficial judgement, warning those who abuse the seemingly insignificant (1892: 109).

As the ultimate good Jew, Mordecai is frequently portrayed as longing for Jerusalem, overwriting the story's lack of reference to Israel. For the Portuguese Marrano Jew, Delgado, Mordecai keeps Jerusalem 'enshrined in his heart and every night he weeps' ([1627] 1999: 26). A rare departure from the traditionally pious Mordecai is found in the Yiddish *purimshpil*, which is, as Ahuva Belkin explains, 'bewildering', as the traditionally heroic and pious Mordecai is reduced to the gross and crude Mordkhe (as his name is rendered in Yiddish). Performed at the annual Purim festival, the *purimshpil* presents a Mordkhe who 'indulges in numerous instances of scatological humour, from comic gesticulations to blunt talk of sex and genitalia' (Belkin 2003: 31). This normally venerated figure becomes the representative of key community figures – the rabbi, matchmaker or cantor – who can be parodied and (like Esther as well in these plays) 'their authority is subverted and ridiculed' (39). He is introduced in a Russian *purimshpil* from Mogilev:

Wander Jew Monderkhe,
 A pauper, a beggar, at every wedding, every circumcision,
 Where nothing is missing
 And everything is laid on the plate.
 What a portrait to look at:
 Hunchbacked,
 Staring at the ground.

(cited in *ibid.*: 39)

Belkin explains that the *purimshpil* served a subversive function and ‘debunked the upper classes by focusing their jibes on the nether regions of the powerful’ (2003: 43).

In Christian tradition, Mordecai is commonly the spiritual hero. John Mayer piously presents Mordecai as a type of Christ, noting resemblances: ‘In his refusing to worship *Haman*, was prefigured, Christs refusing to worship the Devill’; ‘*Mordecai* was honoured by his most deadly enemy, so Christ by the Devill’; both are robed in kingly garments, and just as Mordecai instituted Purim, so Christ instituted holy communion (1647: 73). Pseudo-Webster imputes Mordecai with sympathy, foresight and wisdom: ‘*Mordecai*, who had long beheld the Afflictions of his People with Sorrow, imagin’d and not vainly, as the Event afterwards shew’d that probably the Beauty of *Esther* might be a lucky snare to catch the Affections of the Amorous King and restore the *Jews* to their former Priviledges’ (1740: 10–11). In Timothy Dwight’s manuscript poem ‘Message of Mordecai to Esther’, he is endowed with prophetic foresight, vindicating his own part in Esther’s entrance to the harem. He is ‘Convinc’d’ that ‘The crown was reserv’d for [her]’. And therefore ‘With no surprise, / I saw thee lifted to the world’s great throne’ (Dwight 1793: Bk II. ll. 48, 48–9, 49–50). C. F. Le Fevre in his *Haman’s Gallows*, from his sermon at the First Universalist Church, Troy, New York (1831) considers Mordecai, and the religious Dissenter, ‘a monument of patriotism, unshaken and unmoved, though assailed by reproach and unjust calumny’ (8). Writing in the evangelical *New York Observer*, the Reverend Headley likens Mordecai to Hamlet, an ambivalent hero, ‘Of a noble heart, grand intellect, and unwavering integrity’ who has ‘an air of severity about him – a haughty, unbending spirit’ (1852: 11–12). Headley conjures a Mordecai hardened through having to repress his feelings for his universally desirable cousin, so that ‘he crushed by his strong will his fruitless passion’ (13).

In a story that elides God and faith, Mordecai is a key character who may be imbued with devout qualities. Alexander Carson emphatically asserts Mordecai’s faith in a God who is never mentioned:

But if God is not expressly named in this book, he is most evidently referred to by periphrasis, and the strongest confidence in him is manifested by Mordecai. The faith of that illustrious servant of God is among the most distinguished examples of faith that the Scriptures afford. (1835: 113)

Cushing’s drama replicates Carson’s eulogizing. Mordecai exhorts his fellow Jews to ‘Trust in Him, / Who is almighty to defend and save’, and is given foresight regarding Esther’s role as queen and of the futility of Haman’s attack:

Nor once admit thought that He will spare
That base Amalekite, against whose race

His vengeance has been sworn, to work our fall.
 This cunning courtier plans his own disgrace,
 And knows it not[.]

(1840: 59)

The commentator Thomas M’Crie credits Mordecai with having ‘the gift of prophecy’, which leads him to believe that Mordecai must have ‘been employed by the Spirit of God in penning this book’ (1838: 6). He is also idealized as a model imperial character: ‘he possessed talents which fitted him for the swaying of empire – wisdom, public spirit, decision, courage, disinterestedness, self-command. He was pious, patriotic, and benevolent’ (41). Imperial focus continues in Alexander Symington’s ‘popular exposition’, in which Eastern culture is decried as Mordecai is the positive foil to the despotic Persian king: ‘This Mordecai is altogether an admirable man; of good natural powers, enlarged and applied by religion; wise, sterling, a man who can afford to wait; worth a thousand Ahasueruses’ (1878: 60). This description is from the commentator who declares that the book’s ‘chief value’ is not in ‘its delineation of characters’ but ‘God’s wondrous Providence’ (8), a providence that nonetheless depends upon the bifurcation of the good Jews and the evil Persians as pre-empting the imperial rule of Symington’s worthy British over equally undeserving Orientals. Presenting Mordecai the Jew as an ideal imperial ruler is fraught with problems for Protestant commentators, who are keen to deny present-day Jews aspiration to imperial rule in the nineteenth century (see Carruthers 2006a). Carson, who had upheld Mordecai as a model of faith, nonetheless condemns him for his ‘worldly policy in religion’ (1835: 50) in advising Esther to hide her Jewishness. He also questions Mordecai’s motives in refusing to bow to Haman (40; see Esther 3 for further discussion). By contrast, Mordecai’s self-sacrifice is exemplary in Margaret S. Black’s novelization. His watchfulness over Esther is possible only because he becomes a eunuch: ‘*what a sacrifice!*’ (1895: 16). For A. H. Huizinga, writing in the *Presbyterian Quarterly*, Mordecai is sacrificial in his duty to his people and is identified with his contemporary Lord Beaconsfield, both Jews ‘who have won for themselves distinction and honor and power at a foreign court’ (c.1936: 396).

Idealization of Mordecai appears common enough for *The Interpreter’s Bible* to want to critique its lack of realism, historical veracity as ever a priority: ‘If Mordecai is presented as an unselfish man who was motivated only by devotion to his people, he ceases to be a real person. Human motives are rarely unmixed’ (1954: 381). Other writers go further, condemning Mordecai for his actions and attitudes. Whilst *The Interpreter’s Bible* presents Mordecai as ‘the shrewd leader of the Jews who knows how to seize the opportune moment’ (ibid.), Browne condemns such ambition as a sign that he ‘only thought of political advancement’ ([1962] 1975: 383). It is precisely as a type of patriotic self-denial that

seems to attract George Eliot to Mordecai. Her longstanding interest in Esther culminates in her novel about Jewish life, *Daniel Deronda* (1874–6). Mordecai is here a national hero who is the epitome of community-mindedness that subsumes the self: ‘I counted my sleep and my waking, and the work I fed my body with, and the sights that fed my eyes – I counted them but as a fuel to the divine flame’ ([1874–6] 1998: 426). In submitting himself to the good of his people, he becomes analogous to the ‘cultured Jew’ of Matthew Arnold’s taxonomy, a positive type in contrast to the Cohens, a family who conform to the stereotype of materialist Victorian Jews:

It was an unaccountable conjunction – the presence among these common, prosperous, shopkeeping types, of a man who, in an emaciated, threadbare condition, imposed a certain awe on Deronda[.] (339)

Mordecai is relegated to the past; he is timeless because he has not entered the modern world, unlike the Cohens, who represent the real-life, material present of Judaism. When Daniel first meets Mordecai, he wonders ‘what might be expected of this ancient hero’, and from this moment Mordecai exists within an ephemeral and temporally distanced realm (336). Eliot presents Mordecai’s patriotism as biologically inflected. He declares: ‘English is my mother-tongue, England is the native land of this body, which is but as a breaking pot of earth around the fruit-bearing tree, whose seed might make the desert rejoice’ (426). As a tree transplanted from its native habitat, Mordecai belongs to his original land.

In Maria Edgeworth’s novel *The Absentee*, Mordecai is a disreputable trader and money-lender, a Victorian Shylock. Linguistically slippery, he both manipulates and exaggerates debts, and when found out, vows revenge using monetary metaphor: ‘you shall pay for this!’ (1895: 148). Described consistently as devilish (158), such racial stereotyping is undermined by the negative character Lady Dashfort, who always took the ‘worst exceptions’ to construct ‘precedents’ ‘from which to condemn whole classes and establish general false conclusions respecting a nation’ (204). By contrast, Collins in her romantic rewriting of the Esther story idealizes a Mordecai who defends the Jews in their persecution, insisting: ‘We have in nowise transgressed.’ He longs to return to Jerusalem with Nehemiah, but has stayed behind ‘for memory’s sake, for quietude, and for protection to the remaining Jews in Babylon’ ([1893] 1900: 3, 6).

Michael V. Fox notes that piety is ‘surprisingly absent’ from the portrait of Mordecai, because it is ‘the foremost quality of other ideal figures in Second Temple Jewish literature’ (Fox [1991] 2001: 189). He imbues the text’s silence with significance, contending that there is in fact no evidence that he ‘avoids devotion to God’, and vindicates him for his faith ‘in Jewish survival’. He interprets the text’s silence as a sign that Mordecai ‘eschew[s] rationalization’, ‘instead

assuming [faith's] own adequacy' (189). Modern commentators attempt to verify the historical Mordecai by aligning him with the figures mentioned in Ezra 2:2, who returns to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel, and Neh 7:7. Browne denies the link but cites the passages to suggest that 'this was a name that a Jew living in Iraq might bear' ([1962] 1975: 383)

2:7 Hadassah-Esther

Although the book's title refers to her Persian name, Esther is first introduced to the reader as Hadassah, the adopted daughter of Mordecai. For many readers he is a model parent. In the Talmud, Mordecai is given supernatural virtues as he is described as a 'Nursing father' (42), understood by many to indicate that he was given the ability to breastfeed Hadassah (see discussion in Shapiro 1996: 38). John Henley replicates this gender transgression when he explains that 'Mordecai was all her Mother was' (1714: 25); in William Tennant's drama, Esther declares that Mordecai is 'to me as father, and as mother' (1845: 165). Although his parental role is emphasized, the rabbis nonetheless assert that Hadassah and Mordecai are married, referring to other biblical references in which the term 'daughter' signifies 'wife' as evidence. *Meg* 13a cites 2 Sam 12:3, the story in which the prophet Nathan challenges David on his adultery, in which Uriah's loss of his wife is likened to that of a shepherd who has lost a lamb. This lamb '*lay in his bosom, and was unto him like a daughter*'. The Talmud explains: 'Because it lay in his bosom, was it like a daughter to him? Rather what it means is like a wife; so here, it means a wife.' Later, it glosses the verse 'Like as when she was brought up with him' to mean that 'she used to rise from the lap of Ahasuerus and bathe and sit in the lap of Mordecai [as a wife]' (*Meg* 13b). In his aptly named article, 'Kosher Adultery?', Walfish (2003) gives an impressive and extensive history of Talmudic, medieval and sixteenth-century exegesis of the linguistic problem of Esther 2:7. He explains that her marriage to Mordecai lessens, not extends, her guilt, because her relations with Ahasuerus are considered rape, vindicating her. Walfish explains that according to *halakhah* (law), a woman who has 'involuntary relations' with a man may sleep with her husband, as long as there is a three-month gap between (to ensure paternity) (2003: 117). He also points out that Hadassah's betrothal to Mordecai explains why the text mentions how beautiful and shapely Esther is when referring to Mordecai adopting her. This line of commentary becomes less common after the sixteenth century, although Rebecca Kohn takes up this tradition of Esther and Mordecai's relationship in her rabbinic-influenced novel *The Gilded Chamber* in which Esther stays emotionally faithful to her betrothed, Mordecai

(even though the two never marry), ending the novel waiting for him after she escapes from the palace after Ahasuerus is usurped by his own son. Anxieties regarding Esther's problematic sexual relationship with the king are replete in the book's reception (see discussion on 2:8–14 below).

That Esther was educated – and that this was due to Mordecai's exemplary care for her – becomes a common assumption in her reception (see pp. 95–6). Rembrandt's pupil Aert de Gelder chooses this scene for his 'Esther and Mordecai' (1685), which depicts Esther in front of an opened book as Mordecai instructs her. In Victorian treatments she becomes associated with education and writing (see further pp. 247–8 and 276–7). In Watson's 1845 poem, the king is attracted by Esther's intelligence (and repulsed by the vapid Persian women):

A highly cultivated mind
Her majesty in her shall find;
Not so our ladies, I profess, –
'Tis true, they well can dance and dress,
And fulsome idle chat retail,
And deal in scandal by wholesale,
But ne'er among them do I hear
A word that merits reason's ear.

(1845: 49)

In George Moore's *Esther Waters* ([1894] 1936), the illiterate protagonist turns over the books that her mother has left her, 'wondering what were the mysteries that this print held from her' (22). She is brought up in a strict, yet simple, religious household and, as in Jewish tradition, literacy is intimately connected to religious fervour, and Esther is taught to read after the household's Bible lessons.

The name Hadassah has been infused with specific significance. In Jewish tradition her orphan status makes her representative of the landless Jewish people (see Levenson 1997: 56). Rebecca Kohn's novel appropriates *Esther Rabbah's* explanation that her father died when her mother was pregnant, her mother dying in childbirth (VI.5). For the rabbis, Hadassah is the myrtle, 'Because she was a righteous woman and the righteous ones are compared to the myrtle' (*Targum Rishon*, 42). For the *Targum Sheni* the myrtle's 'fragrance is pleasant throughout the world', illustrating the universal impact of Esther's deeds (135). *Esther Rabbah* explains that as the myrtle has a sweet smell but bitter taste, so Esther 'was sweet to Mordecai but bitter to Haman' (VI.5). Cahn, concerned with modesty, invokes the practice of waving myrtle at Sukkoth: 'Its small, rounded leaves modestly cover its branches like a plaited fabric' (1995: 59).

Hadassah is appropriated as an ideal woman in Henry Spencer Slight's novel, *A Tale of the First Captivity and Destruction of Jerusalem* (1848), which narrates

the Babylonian attack in 586 BCE. The naming of his heroine maps his tale, 'Illustrative of God's Judgements on National Sins', on to the story of Esther. Hadassah is a pious woman, set apart from a condemned nation. Although the nation 'had sinned against their God' (1848: 7), the pious Hadassah's prayers are heard: 'A daughter's, a wife's, a mother's prayers ascended from her bosom, blended together like the curling volumes of smoke from the fragrant incense-altar of the temple' (6). Perhaps the most famous Hadassah is the Women's Zionist organization, originally called Daughters of Zion, the largest women's organization in the world. As *The Interpreter's Bible* explains, 'Hadassah – Esther – is a symbol of the loyalty and devotion every Jew owes to his people' (1954: 846). Almost as famous is its flagship medical institution, the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem, renowned for its Chagall windows.

The dual names of Hadassah-Esther suggest to many readers the dualism of her existence as Jewish maid and Persian queen. Abraham Saba reads the transition in Kabbalistic, spiritual terms as he applies it to the ten hierarchized *sefirot* (levels) of the spiritual realm in which Mordecai raises Esther to a higher spiritual realm, or *sefirah*, endowing her with greater spiritual influence (Wal-fish 1993: 38). Buchan interprets an identity split in her dual naming:

Hadassah, under Mordecai's lov'd roof,
Esther, king-mated upon Persia's throne,
Art thou the one same person?

(1873: 21)

For Jacques Derrida, 'Esther' does not refer to what he had once assumed, and so he deconstructs the relationship between the name and the Jewishness it purportedly signifies. In doing so he questions the seemingly transparent relation between the 'proper name' and the individual. As a connection set in convention, it is one that he cannot revoke:

I have recently been led to presume about my attachment to the literality of this sublime name, Esther is a Hebrew and hidden name, remaining such today even though I know nevertheless [. . .] that this was the name of the queen and not the name of the maiden. (1987: 73–4)

And so Esther's 'Hebrew' name is Hadassah, yet also Esther because of the Jewish tradition in which it is aligned with the similar-sounding Hebrew term for 'hidden', *hastir*.

Esther is the name more commonly invoked in reception of the book, and is a popular name to this day. According to Charlotte Mary Yonge in her *History of Christian Names*, following Racine's play, Esther 'became a favourite lady's name in France, and vied in popularity with the cumbrous splendours taken

from the Scudery cycle of romance' (1863: 140). Jewish commentators also read significance into Hadassah's new, Persian name, Esther – most commonly, the similarity between the name and the verb to hide, *hastir*. *Megillah* 13a explains: 'Hadassah was her name. Why then was she called Esther? Because she concealed [*mastereth*] the facts about herself, as it says, *Esther did not make known her people or her kindred*.' Making Esther's secrecy the key to the Jews' salvation also vindicates what could also be read as a denial of identity, hugely problematic to many Jewish communities. Cahn reads Esther's hiddenness as a moral rectitude: 'She was beautiful but modest; influential but humble [. . .] intensely Jewish and favorite of the king but reluctant to reveal to him her heritage' (1995: 56). Hiddenness is also extrapolated to apply to God: 'It was in the lifetime of Esther that God, as it were, withdrew his attention ("hid") from the Jews because of their sins to awaken repentance' (61). *Targum Rishon* refers instead to Mordecai hiding Esther: 'they called her Esther because she was concealed in the house of Mordecai for 75 years, where she saw no man's face except that of Mordecai' (42). Hadassah's remarkably old age here only testifies to the miraculous nature of her ascent. According to *Targum Sheni*, although Mordecai hides Esther by constructing one room within another, when Xerxes cannot find the 'famous' Esther and decrees death to anyone found hidden, Mordecai is forced to reveal her (136). Intricate word-play becomes punning in later Christian commentators: Esther 'played a stellar role in the lives of her people' (Deen 1959: 148).

In Jewish tradition, Esther is one of the seven prophetesses (Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther, *Meg* 14a), as well as one of four women of surpassing beauty (Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther, *Meg* 15a). Because she is a venerated Jewish woman, her assimilation into the Gentile court is denied in rabbinic writings. *Targum Rishon* presents her as ritually observant:

Sabbaths and Festivals she would observe; during the days of separation she washed herself, cooked dishes, and wine of the nations she did not taste, and all the religious precepts which the women of the house of Israel were commanded, she observed by order of Mordecai just as she observed (them) when she grew up with him. (48)

At some Purim feasts, vegetarian food such as *Bub* (cooked beans with salt) is served to commemorate Esther's observance of the dietary laws, aligning her to the observant Daniel in the Babylonian court (Dan 1:12; Goodman [1949] 1988: 416). Cahn asserts her observance of these laws as he discourages his readers from assimilation in the USA (1995: 74).

In the Yiddish *purimshpil* the Purim world of the topsy-turvy renders Esther ludicrous. Ahuva Belkin describes a typical representation. She is 'introduced by Mordkhe, who compares her to an ugly frog, and calls her the daughter of a

whore' (2003: 40). In the play *Eyn sheyn purimshpil* ('A Beautiful Purim Play'), Esther's 'mouth is like that of an old horse, her nose as big as a rabbit's, her ears like a donkey's, and her brow like a bear's bottom (see *ibid.*: 42). Like the distortion of Mordecai this parody has a social function, here seemingly against bourgeois sexual mores.

The Protestant early modern commentator John Mayer reads Esther allegorically as a type of the Church. As she is obedient to her father Mordecai, so is the Church to the King of heaven: 'Ester was chosen of God to confound Haman, and to succour the poore Jews ready to perish, so the Church by prayer.' Tributes are remitted at Esther's feast as at the heavenly feast for sinners, and the king's generosity to Esther is echoed in Christ to the Church: 'Aske and yee shall have.' His interpretation is strikingly at odds with the apparent meaning of the text (applicable to *Jewish* chosenness and preservation) as he reads the significance of the king's preferential treatment of Esther: 'so God being terrible to the Jews, and to all the wicked in his judgements, yet to the Church of the godly he is kinde and meeke' (1647: 73).

Alexander Symington likens Esther to Moses – 'each exceeding fair; each raised from a lowly station to a place beside the throne; each a deliverer of Israel; each cast upon the waters for a time', although the greater peril of Esther's position means that 'we may credit Mordecai with faith like that of Amram and Jochebed'. Ultimately it is her uncle who receives credit, whilst Esther is overlooked, his faith likened to both parents of Moses, again gesturing towards his ideal parenting (1878: 57).

Despite Protestant efforts to distance Esther from the Catholic Mary, it is still her modesty, obedience and piety that are primary traits for female imitation, in mainstream commentaries at least (see Esther 5 for Esther as a role model). Esther's reliance on, training at the hands of, and obedience to her uncle are key to her success, and she becomes a model of the good woman. *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* (1561), with its concern for the hierarchies of kingdom and family, emphasizes Esther's submissive attitude on its title-page which exhorts imitation of Esther, 'to behaue yourselves in humilitie' (Greg [1561] 1904: xvii). This 'humilitie' is further underlined in Mordecai's counsel to Esther that she will not deserve the king's love if successful:

Than yf the kinge chose you to his queene
 It is of hys goodnes, bountie and grace
 And for none youre merites, the truthe to be seene
 Therefore to hym repaye must you needes obedience
 Trew loue and kyndnes, aboue personnes all
 Not forged nor fayned, but with affection cordiall.

(Greg [1561] 1904: 9)

This passage suggests the centrality of sincerity to concepts of female obedience at this time. It was not simply enough to obey in outward form, women should reflect the reasonableness of male authority in their willing submission. For Goldman, Esther's obedience shows she was 'unspoiled by the riches and splendour of her new position, and retained her filial piety' (1952: 208). The use of Esther as a model for female virtues comes under serious stress as her entrance into the harem muddies her purity in pedagogical and religious reception in the next chapter.

Esther 2:8–23

2:8–14 Esther in the Harem

Esther's entrance into the harem engendered moral difficulties for the story's religious readers. As already noted in the previous chapter (p. 109), rabbinical writers struggle with Esther's seeming complicity in her relationship with a Gentile king, a concern echoed in later Christian reception. *Targum Rishon* states that Esther was 'forcibly' taken (43), and the Talmud suggests that Esther was less than sexually compliant: 'Abbaye said, "Esther was like the ground [i.e. totally passive]"' (*Sanhedrin* 7b). *Esther Rabbah* explains that Mordecai foresees a calamity for Israel because of God allowing Esther to be 'married to an uncircumcised man' (VI.6).

Abraham Saba expands rabbinic tradition, rationalizing God's contravention of his own purity laws as argued by the rabbis (see comments on 2:7):

[God] alone knows and bears witness and overturns the normal state of affairs in order to carry out his promises. And God arranged matters so that the rape of a Jewish woman was permitted. Nevertheless, Esther, out of righteousness said “If I am to perish, I shall perish” (4:16) since I am going willingly to Ahasuerus.” For it seems that at first she went against her will and later she went willingly. (Walfish 1993: 39)

Esther’s declaration of self-sacrifice, applied here to her willing sexual submission to the king, demonstrates how important female sexual purity was to this commentator. As Walfish explains, rabbinical writings succeed in turning Esther’s defilement into a heroic selflessness as she ‘takes upon herself the sins of Israel and intones for them, fights Israel’s enemies and protects her from harm’ (40). Saba’s anxieties over Esther’s purity are applied to the coercion of Jews in Europe:

have we not seen with our own eyes during the expulsion from Portugal, when sons and daughters were taken by force and converted, that Jews strangled and slaughtered themselves and their wives? [...] Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? [...] She too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with him.

Saba conflates sexual uncleanness and idolatry, expressing similar anxieties to those of the rabbis. His misgivings are unusual, and the norm amongst medieval exegetes was to consider Esther’s position as due to divine providence (Walfish 1993: 123–5). Walfish suggests that Saba chooses a strategy of evasion: ‘By shrouding her in a veil of mystery and speaking of her in impersonal mystical terms, he could avoid confronting the issue’ (40–1).

Ibn Ezra points to the passivity of the verb form *va-tillaqah* (‘she was taken’) to argue that she was seized against her will. He argues that Mordecai is present at the king’s gate in order to snatch her away, making him equally non-complicit (ibid.: 122). Resistance to Esther and Ahasuerus’s relationship continues in the *Zohar*, or *Book of Splendour*, written by Rabbi Moses de Leon or his circle in the late thirteenth century (and repeated in Ginzberg), that Esther is replaced by a spirit and never lives with the king as a wife but returns to Mordecai (276a; cited in Walfish 2003: 112).

Another strand of interpretation of Esther’s marriage is represented by the application of the Esther story to the positive treatment of Jews under King Casimir III of Poland in the fourteenth century. Haya Bar-Itzhak refuses the pious rejection of the marriage by Saba, instead asserting that ‘such relations’ are ‘decisive for the survival of the entire community’ (2001: 113). In his *Jewish Poland Legends of Origins* Bar-Itzhak explains how the Esther motif is taken up ‘to explain the grant of settlement rights and the expansion of the privileges of

the Jews in Poland by King Casimir' (1310–70), which is all due to the king's love for the Jewish Esther (*ibid.*). The legend circulates in popular culture, strengthening folk identity and culture, appropriating the Cinderella elements of the story, as evident in the comments of the writer Klemens Junoza that Bar-Itzhak cites: 'She was just a Jewess from the lower class, the daughter of a poor tailor, but later she became a Jewish queen' (115). Bar-Itzhak notes the contemporary currency of the legend as narrated by two tour guides, one of which, Bar-Itzhak reports, 'referred to Casimir as "the king of the peasants" in accordance with Polish tradition, and related that the king brought Spanish goldsmiths to make the gold thread with which Estherke embroidered the ark curtain for the Kuzmir synagogue' (118).

Jewish sensibilities about Esther's relationship with a Gentile are replicated in Christian, and especially Protestant, commentaries. Catholic reception, by concentrating on her approach to the king as foreshadowing Mary's supplicatory role, happily subsumes the sexual relationship between the king and queen into the typological narrative of love and devotion. For Protestants, however, it is a different matter. Alexander Carson asks: 'God evidently provided the beautiful Hadassah for the bed of Ahasuerus. But does the Holy One approve of this connexion?' He sees her beauty as divinely endowed, because without it 'she might as well have been an idiot or a rustic' (1835: 21, 22). He goes on to ask why Mordecai would 'yield so readily to this vile prostitution of Esther' (23–4). His anxieties uncannily echo those of Saba centuries before. Carson refers to the popular commentary of Scott, who argues that the end does not justify the means, and counters: 'Had she been violated by the despot, she would not be justified in afterwards becoming his wife' (Scott: 1827: 24). Like Saba, he unequivocally condemns Esther's entrance into the harem: 'Instead of eagerly seeking a union with the king, Hadassah should have chosen the scaffold in preference. Her crime was much heightened by submitting to become his concubine before she became his wife (24). He concludes: 'Esther saved the Jews, but by being in a situation to do so, Esther transgressed the laws of her God' (33).

It 'is not Strange', explains Matthew Poole, that 'though a vertuous person, Esther did 'in those circumstances yield, considering the infirmity of Humane Nature, and of that Sex, and the state of those Times, when plurality of Wives were permitted, and Concubines were owned as Wives'; and echoes Saba: 'it being certain that God can dispense with his own positive Laws'. Poole, like Saba before him, can only conceive of Esther's relationship with the king by taking the strange step of creating a theology in which God subverts his own laws. He finds some reassurance in the detail that Esther asks for nothing when appearing before the king, 'to shew that she was not desirous to please the King' and had been brought against her will ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.). George Lawson is keen to iterate that Esther is not – in this instance – a model for his Christian readers:

‘Think not that she sets you an example of entering into marriage-connections with a partner of a false religion. She was not an actor, but a sufferer’ (1804: 44).

Rewritings that try to paper over her problematic status merely expose anxieties. The rabbis worry over the good Jewish girl Esther shacking up with the heathen and rather foolish king Ahasuerus, and the LXX version of Esther contains Esther’s prayer in which she expresses her abhorrence at being married to a heathen (Moore 1977: 209). It is not Esther’s relationship with a heathen that is of prime concern to Christians, however, but her dubious status as concubine-queen. James Watson’s poem reveals the extent to which the harem offended Christian sensibilities, as Esther reiterates her own fallen state: ‘shall I with my honor part / To gain, perchance the royal heart?’ She laments: ‘Doom’d in concubinage to dwell / Oh, shame! – oh, prostitution fell!’ (1845: 60)

Anxieties resonate in Stockwood’s 1584 preface to the German Brentius’ commentary on Esther. In his ‘admonition’, he argues against polygamy, pointing out that ‘in the beginning’, God ‘appointed that two should be one flesh, and therefore gaue unto Adam not manie, but one wife’ (1584: sig C3r). Esther’s sexually problematic status, however, provides a striking opportunity for the writer of the pamphlet *Ester Hath Hang’d Haman* (1617) to question early modern sexual politics. Included within the collection *First Feminists*, the pamphlet is a defence of women against a misogynist attack by John Swetnam, the pseudonym ‘Ester Sowernam’ a clear play on his name that also invokes the biblical queen. The title-page puzzlingly proclaims: ‘Neither maide, wife nor widow, but really all and therefore able to defend all’. To make sense of this riddle, it is imperative to understand the function of the phrase ‘Maide, wife, nor widow’, invoked against its converse, ‘wanton’, in the early modern period to categorize, and thereby judge, women by sexual behaviour. By alluding to Esther, Sowernam plays upon this convention by simultaneously tapping into the sexually dubious status of the queen and her biblical authority. The late fifteenth-century carol by James Ryman speaks of ‘Hestere so fayre of face’ as ‘benigne meyde, modere and wyffe’, reflecting a traditional reading of Esther as a type of Mary in her representation of womanhood in all of its acceptable guises. Sowernam makes use of the conflict between the two strands of Esther reception: that represented by the Marian hymn, as ‘meyde, modere and wyffe’, and that reflected in the commentaries in which her sexual willingness is condemned. Esther does not fully conform to any of these categories of womanhood because of her entrance into the harem: she is not married before she is given to the king. For Ester Sowernam, Esther is revealed as both fitting (in traditional readings) and transgressing these qualities at once. In a remarkable move, Sowernam undermines early modern taxonomy of women, rendering sexual categories useless as a moral framework for understanding Esther’s status, and by inference makes the framework inadequate for understanding any woman’s moral state.

Sowernam's approach to Esther's sexuality is chronologically contingent with, yet strikingly different from, that of Francis Quarles. In his 1621 poem *Haddassa*, Quarles introduces Esther in conventionally modest terms:

Bright beames of beauty streamed from her eye,
And in her cheeke sate maiden modesty[.]

(1621: sig E2r; 1642: 111)

The concubines, in contrast, are marred by their sexual activity with the king:

They in their bosomes beare blacke night away,
And (in their guilty breasts, as are their sinnes,
Close prisoners) in the house of Concubines.

(1621: sig E3v; 1642: 114)

His description of Esther's apparently chaste approach to the king is crammed with sexualized language, the concubines' guilt seeping into Esther's representation:

No when the turne of *Ester* was at hand,
To satisfie the wanton Kings command,
Shee sought not (as the rest) with braue attire,
To lend a needlesse spurre to foule Desire,
Nor yet indeavours with a whorish Grace,
T'adulterate the beauty of her face:
Nothing she sought to make her glory brauer,
But simply tooke, what gentle *Hege* gave her: [. . .]
Each wandering eye inflam'd, that lookt vpon her.

(1621: [E4r]; 1642: 114–15)

He here euphemizes the sexual nature of their meeting, but his language works to underline it. Although not directly attributed to her, the terms 'wanton,' 'whorish,' 'adulterate' and 'inflam'd' surround her with the apparel of the immoral woman. He even taps into contemporary notions of cosmetics as a blasphemous and wanton activity of 'adulterate[ing]' natural, and thereby God-given, beauty, using the biblically resonant metaphor of idolatry for adultery (see Dolan 1993).

He goes on to paint her approach to the king in even grosser wanton terms as the poem continues:

Now, now the time is come, faire *Ester* must
Expose her beauty to the Lechers lust;
Now, now must *Ester* stake her honour downe,
And hazzard Chastity, to gaine a Crowne.

(1621: sig Fr; 1642: 115)

Quarles' condemnation of Esther reveals the distance between his reading and Sowernam's vindication of her. Notably, it is also a far cry from that of the rabbis' attempts to distance her from a problematic sexuality in which her rape by the king vindicates her. However, in the early modern period, a woman's intentions or desires were irrelevant to the conception of female chastity, the term 'unchaste' being used simply to indicate sexual experience (whether chosen or imposed).

The king's choice of a virgin queen is expressed through the titillating image of a woman 'plucking' flowers, rendered in sexually resonant language:

As when a Lady (waking *Flora's* Bowre)
 Picks here Pinke, and there a Gilly-flowre,
 Now plucks a Vi'let from her purple bed,
 And then a Primerose, (the yeeres maiden-head;)
 There nips the Briar; here, the Louers Pauncy,
 Shifting her dainty pleasures, with her Fancy:
 This on her arme, and that she lists to weare
 Vpon the borders of her curious haire,
 At length, a Rose-bud (passing all the rest)
 She plucks, and bosomes in her Lilly breast:
 So when *Assuerus* (tickled with delight)
 Perceiu'd the beauties of those Virgins bright,
 He lik't them all, but when with strict reuye
 He viewed *Esters* face, his wounded eye
 Sparkl'd, whilst *Cupid* with his youthfull Dart,
 Transfixt the Center of his feeble heart;
Ester is now his ioy, and in her eyes
 The sweetest flower of his Garland lyes[.]

(1621: sig F1r–v; 1642: 117)

Whilst Quarles apparently adheres to the construction of good womanhood as pious and chaste, he nonetheless spends more time, it seems, like 'Assuerus,' 'tickled with delight' at the spectacle of the harem. Although grossly misogynistic, his attitudes inspired Dr Thomas Fuller to comment in 1662 that he 'had a mind biased to devotion [. . .] Our Quarles is free from faults [of profaneness and satiricalness] as if he had drunk of Jordan instead of Helicon' (cited in Nethercot 1923: 227). Quarles' interpretation of Esther demonstrates how conventional misogyny is at this time, yet Sowernam's reading suggests the range of interpretation available to early modern readers.

Arthur Jackson's Esther in 1646 is modest and unwilling, yet culpable in not refusing further. That she doesn't ask for anything when appearing before the king (2:15) proves the 'modestie of Esther,' and 'demonstrated that she desired it not'. Yet he contends that 'she resisted not so farre as she ought to have done,

yet she abhorred all endeavouring to please' (1646: 796). Although he insists that wives should obey, and man '*beare rule in his own house*', Esther is nonetheless here given a moral imperative to rebel against what her ruler requests. Jackson's logic presents a simple analogue to the fraught position of Protestants themselves, who at the time were committed to the principle of obedience to authorities but had rebelled against their king. Esther is ultimately vindicated through matrimony: 'accordingly, through Gods grace and favour this she obtained, that she was not made his concubine but his wife' (796).

In 1647, Esther's questionable status becomes somewhat more apparent in John Mayer's question: 'Was *Ester* so godly a woman brought in to the King as a whore?' (1647: 57). As I argue elsewhere, both Sowernam's pamphlet and Mayer's question reflect a rarely expressed, yet obviously circulating, understanding of Esther as sexually problematic in this period (Carruthers 2003). Mayer seems to be echoing the concerns of his audience in order to defend Esther's position in arguing that concubines had social standing, that the king 'was imbued with some knowledge of the true God' (1647: 58), and that she would be a positive influence. To counter accusations of wantonness, Mayer invokes her moral qualities:

she was of her selfe very beautiful and withall modest, and of the best composed behaviour, and meek and silent, which are the greatest ornaments of a woman, the Lord working also in the Kings heart, that he could make none other his Queen but her. (58)

As Mayer anxiously layers his punctuated arguments, he seems less than convincing. His case ultimately becomes one of a divine working against apparent sense, and the whorish Esther is saved by her exemplary feminine traits: modesty, meekness, and silence.

Hester, A Poem (1714) has the king engage in conversation with the women who are brought to him, and it is personality, not looks that he seeks: 'In these new kindling Loves each Glance betrays, / But still the Mind's unworthy of the Face' (Anon. 1714: 29). In contrast, Pseudo-Webster describes her rise to queenship as 'raising *Esther* to the Royal Bed, and Imperial Dignity', two phrases that seem dissonant, her role as bedmate overshadowing regal authority (1740: 10).

Later writers impose on the story romantic conventions. Although Cushing's Esther expresses repulsion at marrying a Gentile, when she becomes queen, she declares to Mordecai:

In my lord's love I am most blest indeed,
And were he a believer in my faith,
I should have nought to wish.

(1840: 43)

Watson narrates a typical romance story. Esther regularly dines with Hegai, the harem-keeper, because she craves the stimulating conversation that is absent in the harem. She complains:

'Twas vapid – all as idle play
Of children on a summer's day.

(1845: 56)

Ahasuerus also despairs over the quality of women he interviews:

Pray, tell me, Hagai, can'st thou guess
Why women little souls possess?

Hagai responds:

If duly train'd were all, I deem
That few would despicable seem –
Their souls contracted needs must be,
Train'd as in Persia them we see [. . .]
Denied all culture of the mind[.]

(58)

He claims:

They claim our pity – not our scorn.
Ah! deem not, sire, that female mind,
By slavery's galling chain confin'd,
Can noble grow, and virtuous be?
No – to be great, it must be free.

(59)

Any perceived inferiority is due to women's cultural slavery, and Esther's upbringing at the hands of an enlightened Mordecai reveals the potential of women's intelligence and wit. When the king masquerades as a servant to join Esther and Hegai at dinner to witness Esther's wit, he and Esther fall in love. To test her affection, the king-as-servant incites Esther to escape. When she is caught and taken to the king for punishment, the romantic impulse of the narrative is met in a final scene of revelation in which Esther becomes queen.

For Watson, and many other readers in the nineteenth century, the harem women are ciphers of cultural value, the clay upon which the impress of a degenerate or superior culture is stamped. The slavery of women in the East is stressed precisely in order to assert the freedom of (even working-class) Western women:

A prison this, of mighty state.
 Ah, British fair! in such a place
 Full many a slave, in gay disgrace
 Immured, is oft a captive led,
 Unwilling, to the royal bed.
 Inglorious grandeur! – happier she,
 The menial maid of Britain – free
 Her body to her swain's embrace
 She cheerful yields in wedlock's bliss!

(1845: 55)

Margaret S. Black also subscribes to the constructed nature of female identity:

Women were not qualified by education to assume the dignities and responsibilities of high offices. To serve, to obey, to administer to the wants, pleasures and caprices of their lords and masters seemed the ultimatum of their ambition. For that were they created. (1895: 54)

In Elizabeth Polack's play, Esther dreams that she will be queen, appropriating the Apocryphal dream of Mordecai. She, not Mordecai, is the visionary in touch with God, the channel of God's will. This divine sanctioning of Esther overwrites prejudice against her within the play, as articulated by the Jew Levi, who comments on Esther's entrance to the harem: 'Put den she is a woman, and all women are de little imps of de devil!' (1835: 17)

Bishop Symon Patrick defends the harem, explaining that such women would be considered socially acceptable and were maintained, at least, in a reasonable manner. As such, they are 'not harlots' but 'became his wives of a lower sort; for whom he provided ever after' (1813: 689). In a similar vein, Thomas M'Crie in 1838 argues that concubinage conformed to 'manners of the time', and as such 'there was nothing unbecoming', because 'all those who went in to the king, were henceforth considered his wives' (1838: 47). He further vindicates Esther and Mordecai in arguing that Mordecai must have known that it was her destiny to be queen.

The concerns over Esther's sexual status reveal that she is not a straightforward model for women. The undercurrent of Esther's troubling sexual transgression surfaces again in the Victorian novel in which Esther characters are notably sexually problematic. The first to appear is the infamous Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), set in early modern Protestant New England. What is especially Esther-like about Hester Prynne, and is repeated in other Esthers of this period, is that her sexual transgression is intimately linked to the destabilizing of systems of signification and meaning. Following the riddling of Esther Sowernam, Hester Prynne undermines gender taxonomy, the patriarchal categorizing impulse, and signification at the same time. Hester's power

and strength overwrites the intended meaning of the scarlet letter for the townspeople:

The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her, – so much power to do, and power to sympathise, – that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. (Hawthorne [1850] 1990: 161)

The New England writer Cotton Mather, a contemporary of the setting of *The Scarlet Letter*, is the writer of a major source for Hawthorne's story: *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, Or The Character and Happiness of a Virtuous Woman* (1692). It cites Esther especially as 'An hidden one' (84), perhaps referring to the Jewish tradition of associating Esther with hiddenness and secrecy. His application is highly conservative as he legislates that women should 'not therefore be too much *from Home*' and that by being kept hidden they will avoid 'the uneasy Frenzy of uncharitable Surmizes' (ibid.). Mather draws a connection here between signification and hiddenness (that not hiding but roaming means sexual looseness), an association that is acted out in *The Scarlet Letter* as Hester Prynne transgresses her domestic, and marital, sphere. Secrecy and revelation are central to the plotline of both Queen Esther's story and *The Scarlet Letter*, as Matthew Gartner (1995) has noted. Just as in the biblical book, the revelation of Esther's true identity saves the Jewish people, so the disclosure that Arthur Dimmesdale makes on the scaffold is his own salvation.

Queen Esther is heroic and problematic, submissive and transgressive, valorized by canonicity and yet undermined by the harem, as is Hester Prynne. She is submissive to her authorities at the same time that she asserts herself against them. She forces her way into the Governor's house when she that thinks her daughter, Pearl, will be taken away from her, and repeatedly relies on her own, not her authorities,' judgements. She advocates her relationship with Arthur Dimmesdale as eternal at the very same time that she accepts its sinfulness. In this novel, at least, Esther's sexual problematics are consonant with her disturbing of social convention.

The Esther of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) is the sister-turned-prostitute. Even the priggish Esther Summerson, as George Bernard Shaw calls her, is the symbol of her parents' illicit relationship, the mark of her mother's shame. Q. D. Leavis argues that 'her achievement of social prominence is entirely her own doing – a triumph not only over sexual sin, but also of strength of character' (Moers on Q. D. Leavis 1973: 16) – bringing her even further into line with her biblical counterpart, whose queenship transcends her problematic sexuality. George Eliot's Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, in many ways modelled on Hawthorne's infamous transgressor, is seduced by the lord of the manor, Arthur Dunnithorne, bearing his child. George Moore's *Esther Waters* ([1894]

1936) tells the tale of Esther's struggles as a single mother after being seduced by a fellow servant.

In Paul Smith's *Esther's Altar* (1959), the 'disgusting' (134) Esther is desperately lonely, available to any man who wants her, even the 'drunkard' Hammy Collins, who merely ventures, in his laziness, for a 'fondle' of 'her tits,' 'if he happened to come across her in the hall or at the pipe in the yard at an evening' (76). The most sexually fragile and needy figure in a novel full of unorthodox liaisons, she is associated with that symbol of Catholicism, a statue of Mary, 'considered to have divine powers' by the women in the house. Esther covers the virgin's eyes when visited by her lover, 'the things that he got up to were never intended for the eyes of the innocent' (68). The Virgin plays a surveillance role: 'an' with all due respect to that wan, though she was as pure as the driven snow, had the eyes of a hawk an' in this room it wasn't easy to escape them', the material presence of the statue of the Virgin embodying the cultural pressures incumbent upon the sexually questionable woman. It is a pressure articulated by Esther's neighbours, who turn her into their touchstone of 'degrading' sexual desperation (134). Margaret Drabble in *The Radiant Way* (1987) portrays her protagonist as both secret and sexually liberal: 'Outside college, Esther's life was eclectic, fragmented, secretive. Affairs with older and young men' (93). She claims to be in love with her younger brother, echoing Esther and Mordecai's relationship: 'Esther hinted that it was the grim circumstances of their childhood that had drawn them together with a love that dared not speak its name' (93). Esther has a relationship with a Satanist, Claudio, the modern equivalent of the socially reprehensible 'heathen' of ancient times. Like the apocryphal queen, Esther abhors her sexual relations: 'She could not endure the physical intimacy, the daily intimacy, the perverted intimacy.' Perhaps in direct contrast to the queen, 'She loved, but she could not save' (206).

The sexualized Esther reaches a sinister zenith in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* (1992). Set at New Year 1949, the café, part of Eve's house, is a retreat for the desperate. The novel's characters resonate with biblical significance: Daniel, Eve, Gabriel, Miriam and Esther. The story of 12-year-old 'sweet Esther' infuses the biblical story with suggestive interpretations. She is impelled by her brother to obey the man she is given to against her will. Again, she is the partner in an unconventional marriage:

Do whatever he tells you, and you won't be sent away like the others. Can you be married without a gown? [...] Without love? Even at twelve years old I doubt, but I believe my older brother. He is kind to me and calls me only *little sister*. And there is much more food here than at home. (95)

'Sweet Esther' follows a previously banished 'wife', increasing her sense of insecurity, making obedience imperative: 'I do not want to be like her. I do not

want to be sent away. So I will not tell anyone what happens in the cellar' (96). Queen Esther's palace is evoked as 'sweet Esther' marvels over the luxury she has come to: 'Only princesses would have a bed like this' (96). She has a cleaning ritual like Esther, and is washed every morning with a 'pink soap and it smells like flowers' that she at first mistakes for lard, she is so unused to the luxury or attention (96). Her childish, limited vocabulary cannot express, or adequately interpret, the world she lives in. Whereas Hester Prynne subverted convention, 'sweet Esther' is the victim of the unsayable and of euphemism as she dwells in the linguistically twisted world of abuse. Taken into the cellar by her husband-master, she plays with 'toys', and 'feels the shapes of the leather-and-metal things':

No, they are not toys. I do not know what they are, but I will soon learn what they are for. And I will learn that in the dark, words have a different meaning. Having fun. Playing games. Being a good girl. (96)

Esther is now a resident at Bailey's Café, and Eve notes that she still retains her purity, despite her abuse: 'You have the most honest face of any woman I know, sweet Esther' (99). Naylor's appropriation contrasts with the reading by Cheryl Ford, an American evangelical, of a 'compliant' Esther (2002: 116), which nonetheless demonstrates anxiety as she questions why God 'allowed Esther to spend the night with Xerxes', as it 'violates God's demands for sexual purity', a question subsumed under an assertion of 'His larger purpose' (111). Karen Jobes expresses pious acceptance of Esther's questionable status in being 'taken to the bedroom of a ruthless man for a night of pleasure' in her response: 'How inscrutable are the ways of the Lord!' (1999: 160). That contemporary readings are as divergent as Sovernam's and Quarles' nearly 400 years earlier is demonstrated by comparing the responses of two evangelicals, Mark Mangano and Lisa Ryan in 2001. Mangano berates Esther because she 'failed consistently living according to the standard of God's holiness' (2001: 25), whilst Ryan invokes Esther's virginal state to support the 'love waits' movement (2001: 17).

Some renditions simply elide Esther's problematic sexuality. In *Esther and the King* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1960) the gathering of virgins is undertaken by heavy-handed soldiers who, under Haman's rule, gather shrieking women from field and seashore. Esther herself is betrothed to a war hero, Simon, and is taken off in the middle of the wedding ceremony. Although taken against her will, she falls in love with the rugged king, who merely asks her to stay in the palace and to consider becoming his queen: there is no unrespectable pre-marital activity.

2:15 *Esther's Beauty*

Despite the dubious status that the harem bestows on her, Esther's beauty is most often cloaked in moral terms. She is one of the four women of surpassing beauty (*Meg* 15a), and *Esther Rabbah* suggests that her universal attraction applies to heavenly and earthly realms, applying to her Prov 3:4: 'So shalt thou find grace and good favour in the sight of God and man' (VI.9). For Zechariah ben Saruk (fifteenth century, Spain and Morocco), Esther's beauty is both natural to her form but supernatural, since she pleases universally (Walfish 1993: 87).

Although Quarles emphasizes Esther's lustfulness ('Each wandering eye inflam'd, that look'd vpon her', 1621: sig E4r; 1642: 115), other Christian readers prefer to cite the scene in which Esther asks for no special attire when she appears before the king. In doing so they privilege pious ideas of aesthetic simplicity, as related to moral characteristics such as modesty and humility (especially pertinent for Protestantism's pious association of lack of ornament with true worship). Symon Patrick in 1706, for example, declares that Esther 'needed no Ornament, for the greatest Ornaments of Virgins, are Modesty [. . .] Silence, well disciplined Eyes, a serene Contenance without Levity, an Horror of all Wantonness: which meeting all in her, made her acceptable to every one that saw her' (698). Her universal appeal is explained through her possession of universally perceptible moral qualities.

In contrast, for Carson, Esther's beauty is essentially physical. In asserting that 'Personal beauty only could raise her', he reduces female power to aesthetics (1835: 22). John Henley compares the angelic Esther to the rebel and Satanic Vashti and she becomes an other-worldly – and as such atypical – woman:

Reverse to *Vashti* in her Whiter Soul,
Where ev'ry Virtue reigns without Controul.
Her Person heighten'd with a Nobler Air,
Which breath'd from Conscious Merit living there;
Superior too in Harmony of Form,
All over one entire distinguish'd Charm:
Her Body, fragrant as the Rising Day,
Was made some Nameless, some Uncommon Way,
Of Something finer than the finest Clay:
Such as Descending Cherubs seem to wear,
When with a Saint in Visions they confer.

(1714: 25)

She is not simply a better woman than Vashti, she is not really a woman at all. She has been made in some 'Uncommon Way', not from a rib but from the heavenly clay from which cherubs are made. She is beyond her gender rather

than representative of it: ‘*Hadassah* all the Heights of Woman shows, / None of their Faults, but all their Beauties knows’ (ibid.). George Lawson lists Esther’s physical and moral qualities, her ‘singular beauty, her modesty, her unaffected simplicity of dress and behaviour’ and asserts: ‘It was God that gave her these lovely endowments which captivated all hearts’ (1804: 44–5).

In his portrayal of the humble Esther, Stevenson in 1817 replicates a Romantic view of beauty as most exemplary in its most natural state:

A native grace
 Sat fair proportion’d on her polish’d limbs,
 Veil’d in a simple robe, their best attire,
 Beyond the pomp of dress – for loveliness
 Needs not the foreign aid of ornament,
 But is when unadorn’d adorn’d the most.
 Thoughtless of beauty, she was beauty’s self.

(235)

For Thomas M’Crie Esther’s success reads as an implicit manual on the imperial values of male guidance. Her ‘modesty, discretion, contentment, and sweet temper’ are the ‘manners and dispositions which she had acquired under the tuition of Mordecai’ (1838: 49). He draws explicit moral lessons on beauty, arguing that only the face that reflects the ‘good qualities of the mind can alone form an object of rational attraction’. Without it, he warns, ‘beauty creates disgust instead of love’ (44). He departs on expansive warnings about the perils of beauty: ‘It is apt to feed vanity and pride; it leads to idleness, thoughtlessness, and extravagance, and in the end pierces the soul with many sorrows’ (45). James Maxwell likewise conflates the moral and aesthetic in portraying Esther as ‘innocence and grace’, ‘discreet’, ‘So modest and beautiful withal’ (1784: 11). Symington draws on the authority of Proverbs 11:22 as he judges that without ‘discretion’ – cleverly employing a term that applies to both the aesthetic and the moral – her comeliness would have been, in his judgement, ‘as a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout’ (1878: 58). In Black’s novel, Esther is yet again a model of modesty: ‘what man does it not please when he finds as rare a quality as modesty in a woman who possesses many charms?’ (1895: 38). *The Interpreter’s Bible* denies modesty or unwillingness; instead, her ‘unexcelled beauty made extra make-up superfluous’ (1954: 844).

Other writers read Esther’s simplicity in spiritual terms. Thomas Brereton’s translation of Racine’s *Esther* of 1715 sites her power of influence not in modesty *per se*, but in her piety:

She, who th’ Eternal Love first makes her Care,
 Shall Man’s Affection undesigning share:

Her Innocence alone will deeper wound
 Than other's Arts.

(Brereton 1715: 4)

The American writer Edith Deen distances Esther her from material worth to spiritualize her:

In that throng of virgins, she may have been the only one who had not worshipped idols or some of the many heathen gods [. . .] in this rich Persian kingdom she was in touch with a power not counted in terms of marble or gold or silver. (1959: 148)

Her piety is also expressed in her positive response to divine calling: 'Her triumphant place in the hearts of her people became assured because she accepted her own divine destiny' (149). *Hester, A Poem* of 1714 places Esther's beauty not in modesty or piety but simply in her Hebraic royalty: 'With partial Favour reverenc'd her Race, / And Read a Queen thus early in her Face' (Anon. 1714: 23).

In many Victorian novels, Esthers possess a universal appeal that gives them a rare female power. In Cornelia Richards' overtly evangelical *Hester and I: Or, Beware of Worldliness* (1861), she is respected 'instinctively' by her brothers' friends for 'her amiable temper'. Amidst this court of boys, 'she was the arbitress in all dissentions; her taste was the standard; her wish was law. She was like a queen amongst them, and they bowed most loyally to the rule she held so unassumingly' (35). Transfiguringly beautiful, Victorian Esthers are also unconventional. The heroine of *Hester Kirton* (1864) resembles her queenly counterpart, her sister-in-law reflecting anti-Semitic strains in the novel in her remark: 'She is awfully handsome. But I detest that severe dark-browed beauty; she would make a splendid Judith' (I.120). Through association with the widow who decapitates Holofernes, Hester's beauty becomes sublimely potent.

Victorian Esthers also display an 'Oriental' love of ornament. The *Scarlet Letter* (1850) describes Hester: 'She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic, – a taste for the gorgeously beautiful' (Hawthorne [1850] 1990: 83). Margaret S. Black's Esther iterates contemporary racial stereotypes: 'Since all Orientals revelled in gorgeousness and love of fine display it may be readily inferred that the queen thus abundantly supplied was able to gratify such love without limit' (1895: 23).

In Margaret Oliphant's *Hester: A Story of Contemporary Life* (1883), Hester's attractiveness is in 'the play of prompt feeling in her face, the interest, the indignation, the pity, the perpetual change and vicissitude' (95). Israel Zangwill's Esther also has 'an arrestive rather than a beautiful face' ([1892] 1977: 80) and he describes at length her first meeting with Raphael:

Seen from the front, the face fascinated again, in the Eastern glow of its colouring, in the flash of the white teeth, in the depths of the brooding eyes, in the strength of the features that yet softened to womanliest tenderness and charm when flooded by the sunshine of a smile. (252)

Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Story of Esther Costello* (1953) has Esther as a leader of her childhood peers, her liveliness again a source of attraction. She 'was daring always and strong enough to punch their heads if need be. There was also [. . .] an element of great beauty in her small, lively face' (17). Like the courageous queen, she is 'feminine and tough at the same time' (19). This mixing of strength and beauty resounds in George Moore's *Esther Waters*, whose protagonist has a 'sturdily built figure, yet graceful in its sturdiness' ([1894] 1936: 5) and is notable for her temper (16).

Edith Deen moralizes Esther's beauty as proving that 'she had sound judgment, fine self-control, and the ability to think of others first' (1959: 149). *The Interpreter's Bible* considers Esther's beauty to be a tool, which she put, shrewdly, to good use. She is 'the beautiful but artful woman (cf. Judith) who knows how to use her charms bewitchingly' (1954: 831). It refuses to reduce Esther to her appearance, instead arguing that in her beauty, shrewdness and risk, 'Esther emerges as a real person' (845). That a woman's power subsists in her beauty is a refrain common to literary Esthers, and anticipates Esther Fuchs' judgement: 'Aesthetic grace paves the way for the woman's success, whereas man's power rests on his ethical fiber' (1999: 81). George Eliot's Esther Lyons in *Felix Holt* (1866) sways the court precisely through her divine beauty (see Esther 5). In Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way* (1987), 'Esther was small, neat, brown of skin, smooth, tidy, even (almost) elegant, yet somehow at the same time pugnacious of aspect, subversive, aggressive, commanding, Napoleonic of manner' (86). Beauty again fuses with a queenly majesty and authority. Realism pervades in Edith Pearlman's short story 'Purim Night', as the character Ida observes: 'A girl with good looks and a beautiful hat can work miracles' (2005: 185).

Although beautiful, Esther is subject to twelve months of beauty treatments. Both the Hebrew word *tamruq*, 'ointment', and the word translated 'purifications' (AV) or 'cosmetic treatment' (NRSV, 1989) in 2:12 are often related to a verb signifying the cleansing of sins, especially in rabbinic Hebrew. Saba links it to the twelve months of the cleansing of the soul after death before it is allowed into God's presence (Walfish 1993: 41). On a more practical front, Matthew Poole suggests that the twelve months' purification was so that 'the King might be sure the Child begotten upon any of them was his own' ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.). Levenson reflects upon Persian culture, refracted through his own contemporary America: 'Perhaps we are to hear a note of contempt for the luxury of the foreign court and its narcissistic and grossly self-indulgent body culture' (1997: 61).

2:16–18 *Esther Becomes Queen*

After the meandering of *Esther 2*, Esther is finally proclaimed queen. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick represents a swathe of feminist criticism in reading Esther's marriage as stemming from 'a crisis of patriarchy and its value as a preservative of female discipline' (1991: 81). She determines Esther's function as 'a salvific ideal of female submissiveness', 'her single moment of risk' only overwritten by 'her customary pliancy' (82). For evidence of Esther's perpetration of traditional femininity, she looks to little girls masquerading as Esther, by which they are 'educated in gender roles – fondness for being looked at, fearlessness in defense of "their people", nonsolidarity with their sex' (82). It is notable that Sedgwick, like the other feminist writers who denounce Esther, is reiterating a highly conventional reading of Esther's 'marriage' to the king, ignoring alternative reception that subverts gender norms.

Esther's success provokes a range of responses. James Maxwell, for one, laments the raising of a woman from the harem: 'Behold an orphan captive, poor and mean, / A servile wretch, advanc'd to be a queen' (1784: 31). Esther's success for Franz Grillparzer is due to her wise advice to the king to take back Vashti, as the only way he can return to his past joy (1953: 130). Whilst *The Woman's Bible* commends Esther 'who ruled as well as reigned' (Stanton 1898: 85), many commentators seem keen to emphasize that Esther took no delight in her royal status. Lawson contends that 'her palace was a prison' (1804: 96). Cushing's Esther scorns Mordecai's contention that she will be queen:

Far be such fate from me! I thank my God
That he has placed me in a humbler sphere,
Where peace and love, and sweet affections grow[.]

(1840: 21)

She laments not marrying a Jew, Cushing invoking messianic ideas that imbue the story with Christian meaning:

And rob me of that cherished hope
Precious to all of David's royal line
[. . .] that from his seed
Should spring the Saviour destined to redeem,
And lead to glory our enfranchised race[.]

(26)

Cahn cites Esther's prayer from *Yakult Me'am Lóez*, which, like the apocryphal prayer, is a denunciation of royal status. Esther's (like Joseph's) suffering in

exile means that she is ‘more qualified to lead the Jews in their times of exile (1995: 78).

Esther is a commonly invoked model for queenship. As John King explains, she was a ‘traditional type for queens as consorts and mediators, as in the 1392 pageantry for Anne of Bohemia’ (1989: 226). As a model for Elizabeth I she represents ‘the biblical precedent for queenly defence of the “true” church’, but continues to signify indirect rule, maintaining patriarchal assumptions that women are unsuitable for authoritative roles, reflecting the Madonna’s role in medieval England as a queen who ‘governed indirectly by means of mercy or a mother’s love’ (219, 196). John Stockwood in 1584 makes explicit links between Elizabeth I and Esther, and Walsingham and Mordecai, in order to demonstrate the queen’s dependence upon the good counsel and advice of her ‘uncle.’ *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* (1561) spends much of its time on queenly qualities. Esther insists to the king that ‘as many vertues be there muste, / Euen in the Quene as in the prynce’ (Greg [1561] 1904, 13), because the queen must rule when the king is absent. Somewhat radical in this regard, the play nonetheless foregrounds Esther’s submission, its title-page epigraph endorsing female ‘humilitie’.

When Esther is invoked alongside Queen Elizabeth, it is often as a protector, as in the early modern carol:

Our God and mighty King
Our comforts hath renew’d
Elizabeth, our queen, did bring
His word and peace endued [. . .]
She brings it from his hand;
His counsel did decree,
That she, a Hester in this land,
Should set his children free.

(Norden [1596] 1847: 38)

Even here, the unmarried Elizabeth is the consort of God, an emissary of his divinely ordained decrees. Her proximity to God nevertheless endows her with an unarguably impressive human authority.

Around the English Civil War, the call to extraordinary action necessitates Richard Heyricke, in a sermon before the House of Commons in May 1646, to emphasize the exceptional nature of female rule. Pre-empting arguments that place Esther as a model of female authority, he presents her as

a virtuous woman more than manfully wrestling with publike danger and destruction; Behold strength in weaknesse, vertue in infirmity, Resolution in inconstancy; strength, virtue, resolution in a woman. (1646: 2)

Delgado, writing as a Marrano Jew, averse to the subjugation of his own people under Christian rule, locates Esther's success in her *lack* of submission. The king, tired of flatterers, instead appreciates the:

[. . .] novelty of finding something true
and fine to which he can aspire.

([1627] 1999: 31)

When the Rev Christopher Bowen preaches on this chapter at the 'Occasion of the Marriage of their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales' in 1863, he anticipates the Princess's future role as 'a wise and pious woman,' her influence best directed 'in supporting some doubtful resolution – in counselling some good work – in soothing, restraining, or modifying the sterner actings of man's mind amidst the perplexities and agitations of the outer world' (Bowen 1863: 15–16). Like so many other readers, he condones indirect political effect for women, yet in doing so he characterizes men as stern and overreaching.

When Esther becomes queen, the king hosts a feast and gives gifts. This is interpreted widely as the remitting of taxes. In Raoul Walsh's *Esther and the King* (1960), the violence of Haman's government is exemplified by the hanging of a Judean for not paying taxes. Esther's influence results in a new tax based on ability to pay rather than a fixed levy, the film constructing democracy as primarily a matter of fair taxes. In Tommy Tenney's *Hadassah*, the queen's removal of the 'queen's tax' (a liberal reading of the 'gifts' mentioned in this chapter) makes her the most popular queen in the history of Persia.

Amidst the main narrative of Esther's rise to the throne are smaller textual details that readers have considered significant: namely the second gathering of virgins in 2:19 (one of those inexplicable textual details that commentators simply can't leave unexplained), Esther's concealing of her identity from the king in 2:20 and the foiled assassination plot of Esther in 2:21–3.

The medieval Jewish commentator (northern French exegete) Joseph Kara explains that because Esther wouldn't reveal her origins, the king ordered a second round of virgins to make her jealous (*Meg* 13a). Although it exposes her to danger, she nonetheless hides her identity to keep her promise (Walfish 1993: 66). Elizabeth Groves suggests an interpretation based on her experience as a dramatist, demonstrating how a difficult verse can become privileged once the resourceful exegete has found a solution. The second gathering suggests to Groves that even this early in the relationship the king's affections had 'moved on' (108). The detail works to 'snatch from his audience the hope of "happily ever after" and to replace it with a sense of foreboding about the tenuous security of Esther and of the Jews' (109). She reclaims the verse, then, for 'the depth and color it lends to the tapestry of the text' (110). Levenson simply considers the king's calling of virgins typical, 'celibacy not being Ahasuerus's forte' (1997: 2).

That Esther is counselled by Mordecai to keep her identity a secret is a linchpin for the plot. The Talmud portrays the king assertively questioning Esther on her heritage and his giving of a feast, his remitting of taxes and sending of gifts as bribes (*Meg* 13a). In *Targum Sheni*, the king grills Esther, asking outright if she's a Jew, but she answers that as an orphan she didn't know her parents (137). *Esther Rabbah* praises Esther here for her discretion, putting 'a ban of silence' on herself (VI. 12).

Isaac Arama (1420–94, Spain and Morocco) reads this verse against its apparent meaning, insisting that Mordecai obfuscates only her specific ancestry, not her Jewishness, in the hope that the court will presume that she is royal and make her queen. In contrast, Rashi explains the deceit in Mordecai's hope that they will presume that she is 'of a despised family' because 'if they knew that she was of King Saul's family they would keep her' (Walfish 1993: 124). Arama's logic does explain how Mordecai can ask after Esther daily and why her Jewishness is not mentioned in her petition. But it leaves the great problem of how Haman dares an attack against the Jews if the queen is known to be Jewish (*ibid.*: 68–9). If the king knew that Esther was Jewish, he would force his officers to marry Jews as well, according to Rabbi Eleazor of Worms or, as Joseph Kara suggests, his officers would block her coronation out of hatred of Israel (*ibid.*: 124). Kara goes on to read the scene as central to the miraculous nature of the Book of Esther, arguing that such extreme situations necessitate supernatural intervention. This line of argument is contentious in rabbinic arguments that claim: 'A man should never stand in the place of danger assuming that a miracle would be wrought for him, for perhaps it will not be wrought' (*Shabbat* 32a). Walfish defends miraculous readings, arguing that such 'comfort and encouragement' were 'sorely needed by the Jews in northern France and Germany who were enduring persecutions and expulsions at this time' (*ibid.*: 85). Ibn Ezra is the first exegete to portray Esther as a crypto-Jew, her secret identity, meaning that she will not be forced to break God's law (*ibid.*: 125).

Esther as an assimilated and secret Jew had obvious appeal for the Conversos in Spain and Portugal (see Roth 1974: 186). Delgado downplays the reasons for Esther's hidden identity, despite his having lived as a Marrano for most of his life. He resists negative interpretations of secrecy, making it instead the action of a shrewd adviser. Mordecai suggests that Esther should 'let him guess' in order to provoke desire in the king ([1627] 1999: 32). Despite the necessarily veiled nature of Marrano activity, Judith Neulander suggestively compares the Catholic celebrations of Santa Esther (see p. 198 on Esther 5) with Jewish Marrano remembrance of Esther. Whilst Catholic celebrations are communal, marked by processions and an outdoor feast, crypto-Jews instead retract from public display, 'emulating Esther's solemn retreat' (Neulander 2003: 187). Their fast reflects the Jewish tradition that she ate no meat at court (*Meg* 13a): they

‘maintained a solemn, indoor *ayuno*, or three-day fast, broken only at night by meals that were strictly meatless’ (citing Gitlitz, Neulander 2003: 187). Domnitch relates the story of the Marrano Jews of Belmonte, Portugal, who believed that they were the last Jews left on earth until they were ‘discovered’ in the early twentieth century. They celebrated the *Taanit Esther* on the day of Purim itself, and Domnitch reads them as modern-day Esthers who ‘concealed their identity for hundreds of years as a means of self-preservation’ (2000: 199).

Some Christian writers see Esther’s secrecy as ground for criticism. Alexander Carson considers it ‘ignorance and carnal policy in Mordecai’ to make Esther hide her (religious) identity and continues: ‘From this fact we may see, that worldly policy in religion, naturally leads to disappointment and trouble’ (1835: 50). Carson’s reasoning is somewhat tenuous, as it is Esther’s secrecy that is the key to the Jews’ salvation. In line with readings of the book that privilege divine providence, M’Crie credits the secretive Mordecai with ‘the gift of prophecy’ (1838: 6) and suggests that Mordecai is the author of the story, having ‘been employed by the Spirit of God in penning this book’ (*ibid.*). In Rita Benton’s play it is Esther’s secrecy that impels Haman to attack the Jews. He resents Esther for being chosen in place of his niece and threatens her: ‘I shall find out thy kindred and thy people, and thou and they shall suffer’ (1922: 137).

In Matson’s poetical drama *Esther, the Queen*, Mordecai tells her to hide her nationality because of fears of anti-Semitism, and expresses distress at Esther’s ‘mixing with abhorrent Gentile blood’ (1890: 4):

For ever doth suspicion dog the Jew
Like his own shadow, and I would not have thee
Among these Gentiles suffer harm.

(5)

T. W. Davies in 1909, although admitting that such concealment would have ‘required extraordinary adroitness’, condemns the ‘little steadfastness of principle’ that the deception necessitated, a judgement that Horowitz deems representative of European ‘uneasiness at the prospect of contemporary Jews who were utilizing sometimes “extraordinary adroitness” in order to hide their origins and “pass” as members of polite society’ (cited in Horowitz 2006: 35). To demonstrate how little effect the Holocaust had on judgements of Esther after the Second World War Horowitz cites the Danish Aage Bentzen, Professor of Theology at Copenhagen (amongst others), who in the late 1940s shockingly considers the concealment ‘morally unsound’ (*ibid.*: 35ff).

Other modern critics are sympathetic to Esther’s secretiveness. *The Interpreter’s Bible* notes that Esther displays ‘nothing of the martyr spirit of Daniel or the strict devotion of Judith, but reads Esther’s privacy as politic in its assumption of anti-Jewish prejudice: “The author seems to commend Esther’s cleverness in

hiding her Jewish identity, knowing that as a Jewess she would have little if any chance of becoming queen of Persia' (1954: 842). The Labor Zionist Organization of America's 1958 publication *Purim: Megillat Esther* is anti-assimilationist in reading Esther as a tale about the effect of persecution on 'those people who believe that they can escape the fate of the Jewish people by denying their bond, whether religious or national, with the rest of Jewry' (4). Levenson interprets Mordecai's strange advice as providential by allusion to the story of Joseph, their parallel rise to power suggestive of divine intervention (1997: 60). As an American Jew, he views Esther's assimilation into court life as unproblematic, and extrapolates the principle that 'pass[ing] for a Gentile' merely means that 'high status' can be used 'to rescue his or her endangered people' (61). Esther's secrecy is not sinister or political for Drabble in *The Radiant Way*, but instead suggestive of inscrutability: Esther 'quickly established herself as a cult figure of mysterious portent [. . .] and went in for gnomic utterances and baroque clutter' (1987: 87).

The thwarted assassination attempt by the courtiers Bigthan and Teresh plays a pivotal role in the story as a whole, its remembrance in Esther 6 resulting in Mordecai's reward. The LXX implicates Haman in the plot (Moore 1977: 174), picked up in various later writings, as the following examples demonstrate. Polack's play, *Esther the Royal Jewess* of 1835 has Haman, Bigthan and Teresh plotting together in order to overthrow what they see as a 'weak and womanlike government', and Haman predicts a revolt because of the law that none may enter the king's presence (1835: 10). It is the assassination attempt, not female revolt, that Vashti's disobedience inspires in J. S. Beamish's 'Mordecai and Haman'. Harbona exults in Vashti, who

[. . .] despis'd
His will, and did her own – she pleas'd herself!
And gained the victory! We will do the same,
And will be rul'd no longer!

(1875: 15)

Matson has Bigthan and Teresh in league with both 'the Lady Vashti', as she becomes, and Haman, who responds to the failure of the plot by blaming Vashti: 'I must henceforth / Beware the wiles of woman' (1890: 7). In Grillparzer's 'Dramatic Fragment', *Esther* (1953), the opening scene sets up Bigthan and Teresh as intimates of the recently banished Vashti. They plot revenge together with Haman's wife, Zeresh, who despises her husband for his part in banishing her friend Vashti (1953: 107).

In *Targum Rishon*, the two guards are incited to plot against the king through jealousy of Mordecai's place at the gate (48). Zechariah ben Saruk (fifteenth century, Spain and Morocco) concentrates on the use of the singular in *qasaf* ('became angry') in 2:21. He utilizes contemporary philosophical understand-

ing of the congruence of union and form to rationalize that ‘since these eunuchs were of one mind they were united by form, and therefore the text uses the singular’ (Walfish 1993: 49). The assassination is cited in the *Sayings of the Fathers* as applicable to the principle that ‘One who relates a matter in the name of its originator brings redemption to the world’ (*Pirkei Avoth*, VI.6). The assassination attempt therefore reveals Esther’s selflessness in her crediting of Mordecai. Cahn explains: ‘when we are prepared to unselfishly attribute to others, we are also ready to attribute to God and, consequently, we begin to merit redemption’ (1995: 153). Perhaps it is unselfishness that is invoked by Israel Zangwill in his citation of *Ethics of the Fathers* in *Children of the Ghetto* ([1892] 1977: 63).

The episode is representative of treason and of providence in Francis Quarles’ poem. The principle of divine intervention is applied, prayerfully, to his own sovereign in the seditious atmosphere of 1640s England (when the second edition of the poem was published, here to Charles II):

And thou preserver of all mortal things,
 Within whose hands are plac’d the hearts of Kings [. . .]
 Preserve thy CHARLES, and my dear Sovereign;
 Let Traitors plots, like wandring Atomes flie,
 And on their heads pay tenfold vsury[.]

(1642: 120)

Quarles’ contemporary John Mayer reads the event allegorically so that:

The conspirators against the King, set forth Hereticks, who conspire to kill Christ in the hearts of the faithfull, by corrupting the faith, but the vigilant Pastour set forth by *Mordecai*, findes it out, and so preventeth this mischiefe, the true faith being upheld, and they hang in hell for it. (1647: 60)

Samuel Young makes a case against Jacobites and Popery in his confused attack upon regicide that also includes a warning for kings to value the happiness of their subjects. His lesson is that ‘Bare Intentions to Murder Princes, tho’ by the Providence of God they prove Abortive; are capital offences’ (1696: 9). He also warns that kings aren’t free from dangers and, as the Book of Esther illustrates, his enemies may be those ‘highest advanced’ (6). The book is directly against ‘a horrid Assassination design’d by Papists and Churchmen’, defending William III against James II, who would ‘bring in the *French!* Who would believe it?’ (18). Papist influence is, above all, foreign: ‘could these Men be reconcil’d to parting with their Bibles for a Mass-Book, with Prayers in an unknown tongue, with Adoration of Saints and Images, with Transubstantiation, with slavery, with Butchering of their Brethren?’ (18).

For Thomas M’Crie the attempted assassination merely underscores the precarious – and unenviable – nature of kingship:

O how little reason have we to envy the state of kings and great men! Assuredly they are set on slippery places, and surrounded with sons of Belial, who, instead of supporting them, cast them suddenly down to destruction. (1838: 57)

His assertion of providence is nonetheless fraught with fear of threat. He notes the 'small, and apparently fortuitous circumstances' that endanger life, but asserts nonetheless that 'each of these comes within divine prescience and pre-ordination!' (60).

Esther 3

Esther's third chapter opens with the promotion of a minister, Haman, to second-in-command. At the synagogue Purim service this verse inaugurates the practice of making noise to drown out the reading of Haman's name. Children and adults shake noise-makers, stamp their feet and shout, the obliteration fulfilling the injunction in 1 Samuel 15 to 'remember Amalek no more' (for the connection, see Introduction, p. 11). The sign of Haman's name is overwritten by this larger narrative that assures the Jews of God's protection and his ultimate control of history. A. M. Klein's poem 'Festival' refers to the Purim practice:

Rattle, you rattlers, at the name of Haman
Ordure to be expelled with sonal senna;
The young men curse him, and the old cry Amen
And he becomes a whisper in Gehenna.

(1974: 41)

3:1 Haman

Esther Rabbah likens Haman to lambs who are fattened not for their own benefit but for slaughter: ‘So the wicked Haman was raised to greatness only to make his fall greater’ (VII.1), his advancement explained as pre-empting a more satisfying and prominent descent. *Esther Rabbah* calls Haman a ‘contemptuous man’, ‘like his ancestor before him’ (VII.10), linking him to Esau, a figure commonly associated with Haman in Jewish tradition, now also aligned with the Arabs. Josephus interprets Haman’s title of Agagite in his *Antiquities* XI.6.5 as relating to the Amalekite king, Saul’s enemy, the only Agag in the Old Testament; an association widely and often unquestioningly adopted by Jewish and Christian scholars. *The Interpreter’s Bible* appropriates this Jewish tradition unquestioningly, presenting the confrontation as a ‘traditional blood feud’ between ‘Mordecai, a descendent of an ancient Benjamite line (2:5), and Haman, of the seed of King Agag’ (1954: 847).

Abraham Saba (mid-fifteenth century to early sixteenth century, Spain and Morocco) purports that Haman acts knowingly in continuing Amalek’s antagonism towards Israel (Walfish 1993: 92). For Delgado, Haman is so arrogant that he delights in defying God ([1627] 1999: 35). He warns against such arrogance, as Mordecai points to the instability of life that resonates so well with the experience of the Jew in early modern Europe. His positing of a future hope results in a passive response to persecution and echoes Catholic eschatology:

[. . .] heaven reckons
rewards for our suffering here, that, by and by
we’ll have: for death, eternal life

(37)

In Jewish tradition Haman is originally a barber (see comments on 6:11), and in Christian contexts he is a model of the elevation of the undeserving. The opening of *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* (1561) contains a discussion of by what cause ‘hie reuerence should aryse’ (Greg [1561] 1904: 3). The options offered are those of ‘noble bloude’, ‘honour’, ‘policie and wysedome sage’, to ‘power and superiall raigne’ or to ‘vertuous demenoure’. The king’s advisers favour ‘vertue’, ‘diligence’ and, ultimately, ‘Iustice’, ‘a vertu as excellent as may be’ (4). The characters Pride, Adulation and Ambition all complain about Haman’s ostentation. He buys up all ‘gownes’ leaving Pride bereft (16), takes up ‘al flatteres’ so that there is none left for Adulation (17), and grasps high positions so that Ambition is left ‘To dwell amonge fooles’ (21).

Brentius’ persistent misogyny becomes more evident in his contention that Mordecai has a ‘valiant and constant mind’ and Haman ‘an unstaid and wom-

anly mind' (1584: 76). Later, he berates Haman's impatience towards Mordecai, that he 'cannot patiently beare the contempt of one poore Jewe,' with the comment: 'What is more womanish then his mind?' (128). Francis Quarles' poetic rewriting reveals the potency of the Haman–Amalek–Esau lineage in early modern Christian understanding of the book:

The off-cast off-spring of the cursed seed
Of *Amalek*, from him descended right,
That sold his birth-right for his Appetite.

(1621: sig F4r; 1642: 121)

Lowly status and its relation to Haman's ethnicity is taken up again and again. Obadiah Sedgwick, preaching before the House of Commons in 1643, turns to Haman as a model of the Church's enemies: 'you shall light upon one *Haman* (an Agagite) a person of ignoble originals, and of an accursed race, and of as wicked a Nature' (Sedgwick 1643: 2).

In 1647 Mayer, in equating Haman's rise and tyranny with the Pope, taps into anti-Catholic sentiment and in so doing predicts a God-ordained decline of Catholicism (1647: 63). In the anonymous *Hester, A Poem* of 1714, Haman is visited by the 'Fiend *Ambition*' who goads him to action (3–8). That the poem ends with Haman's death makes the work a moral tale about the dangers of ambition and revenge, replete with political advice against evil counsellors and the machinations of court life. In Thomas Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* (1715) Haman declares his racial motivations, linking him again to the Amalekites:

Sprung, as I am, from *Amalek*, 'tis true,
An everlasting Grudge is thence their Due.
A deadly Massacre of him they made;
Nor could the Herds and Flocks their Rage evade.
Scarce did a few out-live the gen'ral Waste.

(Brereton 1715: 20)

In his sermon of 1716, Thomas Knagg applies a moral lesson from the scene, arguing that 'Envy and Revenge are restless, fretting, tormenting and murdering Passions', and that those who 'indulge themselves in them are unlike to God, and become Children of the Devil' (8). Echoing the passage about the uncertain man in James 1, Haman is:

toss'd and tumbled with the Wind, foams and swells big, enjoys no Rest, no Calm in his Breast; and thereupon makes a Resolution barbarous, bloody and cruel, to root out all the *Jews*. (Knagg 1716: 4)

Haman and Mordecai provide for Pseudo-Webster a bifurcated model for court life, in that they

afford us a perfect Account of a bad and good Minister, the one drunk with Power, swelling with Envy, aiming to destroy the Man who had sav'd the King's Life, the other sitting in humble Weeds, pleas'd that he had done his Duty, and despising the Insolence of his Enemy *Haman*. (1740: 8–9)

Because Haman is not mentioned among the princes at Vashti's deposition, the author imagines him to have risen 'from some mean and obscure Origin', concluding that 'Favourites, exalted from the lower Class of the People, are more impetuous in their Pursuits after Ambition, than those who were born to Grandeur'. The author defends hereditary rights as he goes on to lament that 'Princes are to be pitied, who seduc'd by Flattery [. . .] set up those over the Heads of Princes and great Men, who are unworthy of such Honour' (12).

The Reverend John Balguy in 1773 considers Haman the model of a man ruled by unquenchable ambition. He warns against the insatiability of desires, which even when fulfilled 'engage us in the same toils and troublesome pursuits' (297). As such, Haman's ambition goes hand in hand with his discontent as expressed in his infuriation with Mordecai, and he advises his readers: 'As it is a joyful and "pleasant thing to be thankful"; so to be unthankful and querulous, is vexation itself' (303).

Stevenson blames Haman's 'indignant rancour' on his new position as the 'new favourite, with all the pride of Eastern consequence' (1817: 239). Whereas Stevenson distances pride by locating it in the East, the American preacher Thomas Reese applies his lessons closer to home. Pride is the result of riches, by which

their hearts are lifted up, and they look upon the poor with contempt. They grow arrogant and tyrannical [. . .] Filled with self-confidence and self-sufficiency, they forget God, become insensible of their dependence upon him, and unthankful for his mercies. (1791: 335)

Haman's pride contrasts with Mordecai, who 'by guarding against a cruel and ambitious temper' (339) gains humility. Such efforts are necessary lessons, he avows, because: 'Every man is by nature a tyrant'. He berates his fellow slaveholding countrymen:

Our country is full of petty *bashaws*, who exercise a tyranny as cruel and absolute in the small circle of their own plantations, and over their miserable slaves, as the most arbitrary *despot* in Asia. (340)

He considers it 'plain' that as a man 'devoid of truth, honor and integrity' he could not have risen because of his merits, but rather by flattery, 'by falling in with the king's humours, and ministering to his pleasures.' Haman becomes an exemplar for all 'favorites' for whom this 'is the common road to preferment,' condemning those who 'in all ages, have been the curse of courts, of kings, and of kingdoms' (325).

C. F. Le Fevre in his sermon *Haman's Gallows* (1831), delivered at the First Universalist Church, Troy, New York, considers Haman's story as one which demonstrates

the course which tyranny pursues, aided by the spirit of malevolence and cruelty, till it falls into those very snares which had been spread for the destruction of others. (3)

The modern-day Haman for Le Fevre is the 'priesthood,' who, like him, are 'highly favored,' 'rich,' 'promoted above the rulers of the people' and 'excused from [...] taxation.' As such, he foresees a similar fate for his condemned priests who will 'fall by those very weapons, which it has been sharpening for the destruction of others' (4). He lists their like faults: 'No class of people, without excepting Haman himself, is so jealous of those outward works of reverence, as the priesthood' (5).

In Watson's 1845 poem Haman again rises because he is the archetypal flatterer, more admired than loved by his peers:

Not Proteus more adept could be
In metamorphosis than he,
For soft and soothing flattery hung
Persuasive on his flowing tongue;
His every look the slave proclaim'd,
His every word to please was fram'd;
As spake his patron, so spake he,
And altered as the case might be[.]

(Watson 1845: 75)

William Tennant's Mordecai notes that Haman's racial prejudice obscures his perceptive abilities:

Tis this double malice,
This fierce, twin-headed hate, that gnaweth him,
Taints ev'n his eyes with prejudice, and makes
Him misinterpret men's most simple acts,
And attitudes, into contemptuous signs
Admitting no forgiveness.

(Tennant 1845: 133)

Haman becomes in Rice's translation of Racine a recognizable character type:

A man such as Aman, when men dare to provoke him, in his righteous anger cannot be too violent. There is need of punishments at which the universe should shudder; that people should tremble when comparing the crime to the punishment: that entire peoples should be drowned in blood. (1882: 19)

A Macbethian plot is created in Matson's drama, in which Haman's vengeance against the Jews is fuelled by a prophecy in which Haman is told 'wherso'er encountering him / To hold the Jew at distance'. He shrugs off the threat, reasoning:

I have the power, methinks
To hold them now at distance; such a distance
As Death doth interpose 'twixt man and man,
Holding men's lives in my hand by the king's pleasure.

(1890: 7)

Fiction and drama provide a form in which demonization of the villain can become more accentuated. Royall Tyler's play is extreme in its denigration of Haman, who worships Moloch through the offering of 'A suckling babe' ([n.d.] 1941: 42). Collins in her *Story of Queen Esther*, extends Haman's moral vices into the aesthetic realm:

He, the chief, was a tall man, of forbidding aspect, which the gaudy sumptuousness of his many robes of state failed to dispel. In countenance he was sinister and repulsive. His flesh hung loosely upon his frame, and was of a deep, yellowish colour; over his sunken eyes protruded coarse tufts of hair that gave him a more repugnant look; and his lower lip hung over his chin in such a manner as to give him the appearance of a brute rather than a man. [. . .] This man was Aman the Amalekite[.] ([1893] 1900: 20–1)

Huizinga in the *Presbyterian Quarterly* reflects early twentieth-century conceptions of racial heritage as he cites the genealogical impulse behind Haman's and Mordecai's rivalry to encourage his readers to keep accurate family records:

The family is a unit, extending latitudinally, so to speak, and embracing every living member of the clan or race; and longitudinally, reaching backward and forward, it binds the past, the present, and the future in a mysterious bond. (c.1936: 398)

In Grillparzer's drama Haman is more pitiful than demonic. His wife Zeresh belittlingly calls him 'small and timid' and 'pitiful' (1953: 107), an impression compounded in his depiction as a forgetful, bumbling counsellor (109).

Modern commentators consider Haman to be 'the typical "enemy of the Jews", drunk with pride and power' (*The Interpreter's Bible*, 1954: 831). He comes to represent a historical type, and as such,

belongs to no one age or nation. He may be a man without power who peddles stories and spreads rumors about the Jews. He may be a man possessing little but a burning hatred of Jewish people, gathering about that fire of enmity those who will persecute and destroy. He may be a man of position who knows what a weapon anti-Semitism is and uses it for his own gain. But whoever he may be, his fate will be the fate of Haman. (849–50)

Levenson is representative in differentiating between Haman's 'active evil' and the king who is merely 'weak, passive and unfocused' (1997: 48).

3:2 'But Mordecai did not bow down'

Mordecai's prayer denouncing idol worship, in the Greek version of Esther and in *Esther Rabbah*, begins a dominant strand in interpretation of Mordecai's refusal. According to *Esther Rabbah*, Haman deliberately 'attached an embroidered image to his garment, and everyone who bowed down to Haman bowed down to the image' (VII.5), and Mordecai's title, Judean (Yehudi), refers not to his heritage (he is a Benjamite after all) but instead signifies his refusal of idolatry because it asserts the uniqueness (*yehidi*) of God (VI.2). The scene inspires reflection on what it calls the 'snare' of idolaters:

They say to me: "Practise idolatry." If I listen to them I am punished, and if I do not listen to them they kill me. She is in the position of a wolf which is thirsting for water and finds a net spread over the mouth of a well. It says: "If I go down to drink, I shall be caught in the net, and if I do not go down, I shall die of thirst." (VII.6)

Esther Rabbah outlines Mordecai's speech, which cites Moses' injunction against making graven images in Deut 27:15 and Isa 2:22, declaring against Haman: 'this wretch sets himself up as a deity' (VII.8). The Talmud also claims that it is Haman himself who 'considered himself an idol' (*Meg* 19a).

The rabbis consider it inexplicable that it might be Mordecai's small transgression that results in Haman's threat to the whole Jewish people. *Targum Rishon* has Mordecai learning, through Elijah (because the Hebrew word *yada*' implies unmediated, not learnt, knowledge), that Israel was being punished because 'they had partaken of Ahasuerus's banquet' (Walfish 1993: 30); and the *Midrash Panim 'aherim* has Mordecai explaining that he knew 'that destruction

was decreed against them from the day that they bowed down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar' (ibid.). Isaac Arama (1420–94, Spain and Morocco) unusually argues that Mordecai does not bow because he was a relative of the queen, and royalty were not only exempt, but forbidden, to bow. As such he is not intentionally provocative (ibid.: 69).

Mordecai's seditious refusal informs the fraught negotiations of monarchical and religious authorities so pertinent to Protestant experiences of Catholic authorities in early modern Europe. Commentators like the German Brentius privileges the honour of princes: 'Wherefore Mardocheus seemeth through his pride to sin, and to bring the whole nation of the Jewes with him, rashly and waywardly into that same great daunger, which afterward followeth' (1584: 72). Compelled to judge Mordecai negatively by his commitment to hierarchical systems of honour, he must nonetheless maintain this biblical hero's standing: 'But we are to judge far otherwise of the fact of Mardocheus. For in that he despised Aman [. . .] it is not a worke of the flesh, but of the spirit' (ibid.). He points here to the Apocrypha's rendering of Mordecai's prayer, although of 'no authoritie' (ibid.), 'albeit a godly speech, yet is it not fit for this place, because it is lawfull, without any injury unto God, civilly to worship or reverence Princes'. He dismisses the rabbinical story that Haman wore an icon as a 'fable' (73).

Many British Protestants also cite Mordecai's unauthoritative apocryphal prayer. Arthur Jackson in 1646 draws on it self-consciously to present Mordecai as renouncing idol worship: 'so farre as they deserve credit, do plainly make this the cause of Mordecai refusing to bow unto Haman' (797). Matthew Poole invokes Mordecai's reference to his Jewishness, in his defence of refusing to bow, in language inflected by his apocryphal prayer. It was not 'out of Pride, or any personal Grudge against him, much less out of a rebellious Mind and Contempt of the Kings' Authority and Command; but meerly out of Conscience, because he was a *Jew*' ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.).

Symon Patrick, Lord Bishop of Ely, credits the Additions with a privileged understanding of Mordecai's reasons for not bowing (1813: 690), asserting that although undoubtedly fabricated in its detail, 'the Sense of it is good' (737). Thomas Scott also defends Mordecai through unreferenced citation of the apocryphal prayer: 'he evidently acted conscientiously, and was accepted by the Lord. We must not therefore ascribe his behaviour to pride, moroseness, resentment or envy' (1827: 4P7). Tyler's eighteenth-century play presents Mordecai echoing the apocryphal prayer:

That God who knows my heart is not now moved
By pride, but by submission to his sacred law
Will me protect[.]

(98–100)

Later in the century, the prayer recurs in the plays by Benton (1922: 143) and Buchan (1873: 35).

Mordecai's refusal to bow becomes an exemplar of the refusal of obeisance as captured in the anonymous pamphlet of 1765, *A Letter from Mordecai at the King's Gate* signed by a 'much injured, And offended, humble servant' (24), who challenges a Haman-like bishop (17) about his misrepresentation of an honest man. He is berated for being 'sole judge, jury, evidence, accuser, libeller, and executioner' (3), for what the petitioner calls 'an imaginary affront' (3-4). Thomas Knagg's sermon of 1716 transposes Mordecai's refusal to bow to 'those Religious *Martyrs* in Queen *Mary's* Days'. That the Protestant martyrs might only have saved themselves 'if they would have subscribed to *Popish* Articles' provides a powerful defence of Mordecai's actions for Knagg's Protestant readers. Although advocating martyrdom, he draws a limit to godly resistance: 'their Religion instructed them not to preserve themselves by *Rebellion*; as knowing *Heaven* is not to be brought up from *Hell*' (1716: 28). Jonathan Edwards also links Mordecai's refusal to the 'true ministers of God' who refuse 'obeisance to the Pope and his haughty clergy, which has always filled them with the greatest rage' (1998: 62).

The monarchist Alexander Webster argues in 1740 that Mordecai may not bow because 'he could not think of paying that Regard to a *Subject*, which was due only to *Majesty*' (1740: 9). Pseudo-Webster simply naturalizes hierarchies (albeit in terms of pious religious devotion): 'He could not bear to see such Bendings and Kneelings to one, who, neither by Birth, nor Merit, could deserve it, his honest Soul was shock'd at it, he saw Adorations, which was due only to the great God' (1740: 12). The American preacher Thomas Reese hails the 'good man' Mordecai as an 'example of holy courage and confidence in the divine protection, well worthy of our notice and imitation', encouraging his listeners to fear God above man (1791: 326). As is so common, it is Mordecai, not Esther, who is extolled as 'the instrument of [Haman's] ruin' (339).

C. F. Le Fevre, preaching in New York on a Haman-like priesthood who demand unearned honours, unsurprisingly heralds Mordecai as someone who had not 'subdued the independence of his spirit' and as such is praised because he 'remained amidst the surrounding corruption, firm in his integrity and true to his country' (1831: 6). He also takes the opportunity to rail against 'the *informers*', applying the situation to those who inform the parochial priesthood 'that in his parish there is a man who dares to think for himself'. He applies the golden rule of American values, independent thought, to his representation of a narrow-minded institution. Le Fevre also transposes his own anti-Trinitarianism on to Mordecai, who likewise 'worships *one* God and one alone, the Creator, Preserver and Benefactor of all', expressing horror that 'for no higher offence than this they would crush him' (9).

Carson in 1835 explicitly refuses to speculate on the reason for Mordecai not bowing, yet his vague response nonetheless presents him in an ambivalent light:

While in Mordecai we find something to blame, we may find in him more to praise. God accepted him as his servant, though he was ignorant of some points of duty. In him we find the strongest faith in the divine protection, and the most heroic devotedness to the cause of God and his people. (97)

Buchan's play sets Mordecai's refusal as fulfilling God's command not to forget the Amalekite attack, echoing the biblical language of 1 Samuel 15 and Exodus 17:

What! To the accursed Amalekite bend low,
 Haman, the Agagite, the doubly-doomed!
 O Amalek, thy name from under heaven
 Shall blotted be; – the Lord's mouth hath said this.
 Thou wast the first to oppose the chosen flock,
 From Egypt, led by God through Moses' care
 Up to the Promised Land. Shall we forget,
 O Israel, what Amalek did to thee?

(Buchan 1873: 34)

Mordecai does not merely refuse, but swears to avert his eyes in 'scorn and anger'; and proclaims, from fear of God, he will 'pray to God to wither up / Thy roots from earth' (35). Symington names his title to this chapter 'The oldest feud: The key of the Story', citing enmity as a perpetual state of the chosen people – first between Eve and the serpent and then between Cain and Abel, even calling for the reader to decide which side they are on (1878: 64). He likens Mordecai to the non-violent Quakers to deride Haman: 'He was full of rage where a man of any greatness of soul would have been only amused. Who would be angry with a Quaker for not taking off his hat when he comes into a room?' (80). In Daril's translation of Racine, Esther explains that Mordecai 'descends like myself from the unfortunate blood of our first King', his enmity a 'just horror' for the God-cursed Amalekites (1895: 41). Brereton's rendition has the violent 'In just Abhorrence of that odious Race, / Whose Name our God commands us to efface' (1715: 43).

For Goldman, Mordecai 'displayed not only a religious conscientiousness, but also a daring independence of spirit' (1952: 209), whereas Browne cynically surmises that his defence of Jewishness is only an excuse, 'perhaps pretending that he was obeying the Second Commandment' ([1962] 1975: 383). The *New Catholic Commentary* infers from the verse 'a racial basis for Mordecai's independence, even though Haman is not yet declared to be an enemy of the Jews' ([1969] 1981: 410).

Raczynow's biography of his sister, Esther, contains her reflections on the

dilemma of Jews in the snare of idolators, applying *Esther Rabbah* (above) to European Jewry:

Because in the past our enemies gave us a choice: we could convert, renounce our faith, or die. Today, no. [. . .] Some people in the ghetto still believe in their own luck, thinking that, like Haman in the Book of Esther, the Germans will flip coins – their life or their death. They forget that Haman was an Oriental, and enjoyed gambling and irony. Not the Germans. The Germans are not gamblers. They don't consult fates. They decide and they execute. And they have decided. (1995: 81)

Sidnie Ann White berates Paton's assertion that Mordecai displayed a 'spirit of independence' for not bowing to an idol. 'The text, however, is silent', she warns, yet goes on to conjecture that Mordecai's response is 'foolish in the extreme' in risking his own and his peoples' lives (1992: 128). Following a supersessionist agenda, Barry C. Davies warns that the 'consequences of self-serving acts may have wide-ranging effects', judging that Mordecai's 'decision to claim his Jewishness as a reason for not bowing' led to Haman's attack on the Jews (1995: 214).

Jon Levenson suggests that the precedent of Vashti's disobedience of royal command raises expectations that Mordecai will share her fate. Instead, '*nahapok hu* – the reverse occurs: He is publicly honoured and promoted' (1997: 9). He continues Jewish tradition that Mordecai is refusing to worship an idol by citing other uses of the verb *kara*, 'to kneel', which is normally used in relation to homage to God (67).

3:7 Casting Lots

In *Esther Rabbah* the days of the week present themselves to God in turn, arguing why they should not be chosen for Haman's planned destruction of the Jews. They defend themselves successfully, so the 'miscreant' Haman turns to the months. Each has a merit (Nissan has Passover, Iyar the lesser Passover, for example), but Adar has no merit. Haman also turns to the signs of the zodiac (explaining use of this image on Esther scrolls such as the one illustrated in Plate 6 from Cracow and Holland, 1716). Pisces is chosen because it is the only sign with no merit (Piscean fish are also common in Purim festive objects). Haman is nonetheless foiled, for 'he did not know that on the first of Adar Moses died and on the first of Adar he was born'. The Piscean sign is invoked in God's warning: 'Wretch! Fishes sometimes swallow and sometimes are swallowed, and now it is you who will be swallowed' (VII.11). It cites God's refusal to blot out the name of Israel (2 Kings 14:27) against his injunction to eradicate Amalek (Ex 17:14) to comfort Isarel. In *Targum Rishon* a heavenly

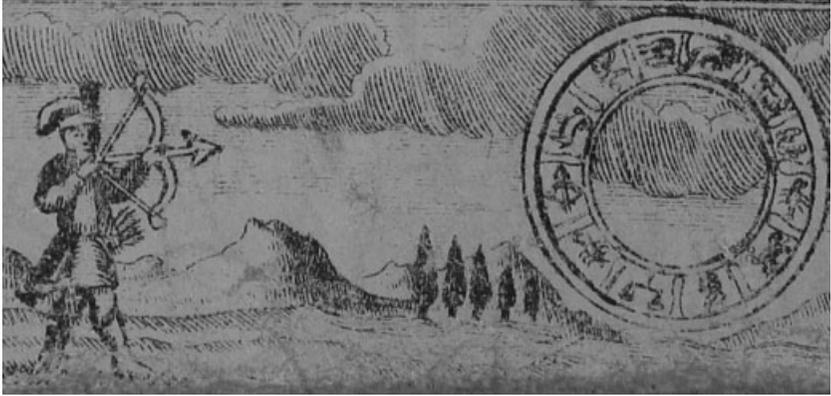


PLATE 6 Haman shooting and arrow at a sign of the zodiac. *Megillah* (Cracow and Holland, 1716). JTS S45. Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

voice declares: ‘Do not be afraid, O congregation of Israel, if you turn about through repentance, then the lot will fall on him instead of you’ (53). Because astrology was a respected science in the medieval period, many Jewish commentators read Haman’s casting of lots in terms of astrological constellations (Adar is chosen because the constellation of Capricorn was in conjunction with Aquarius, Israel’s constellation; Walfish 1993: 55). In the nineteenth century Symington interprets the lot in pious terms to signify first God’s sovereignty and second the security of the chosen people:

And the name Purim, lots, was to keep in the minds of all generations the minuteness of God’s knowledge and the absoluteness of his power, used to take the wicked in their own net, and to make the security of those who trust in Him under all circumstances impregnable. (1878: 180)

In *Esther* novels from the Victorian period, Haman’s casting of lots is transposed into gambling. His downfall is invoked as a warning against the practice, or the unpredictable nature of living is explored. George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* opens with its heroine playing a game of roulette, a metaphor for her life gambled in marriage to the tyrannical Grandcourt. The heroine in George Moore’s *Esther Waters* runs a bar with her husband in which illegal betting takes place. Moore explores the social prejudices against certain types of gambling, Esther’s husband arguing that there’s no difference ‘between betting on the course and betting in the bar’, alluding to the Stock Exchange, at which ‘thousands and thousands is betted every day’ ([1894] 1936: 281). His social criticism leads him to assert gambling as a trope pertinent to the poor: ‘Isn’t

everything betting?’ (282). In Black’s novel, Haman gambles with the Jew, Milalai, to force him to assassinate the queen. When Haman loses, ‘He could not control his rage, but rolled over on the floor, pulled his hair, gnashed his teeth, cursed and raved in madness’ (Black 1895: 106). Modern commentators focus on the etymological link between Purim and the lots (plural of *pur*, Assyrian for ‘lot’; see for example *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 1954: 849; Clines 1984a: 263; Cohen 1982).

3:8 (Mis)Representing Jews: A People Set Apart

Esther Rabbah asserts the futility of Haman’s desire to eradicate the Jews. Because Jews are elsewhere in the Bible likened to stones (Num 23:9; Isa 51:1; Gen 49:24), it cites Isa 30:14 (‘He shall break it as a potter’s vessel is broken’) to avow Israel’s resistance: ‘If a stone falls on a pot, woe to the pot! If a pot falls on a stone, woe to the pot! In either case, woe to the pot!’ (VII.10). Even God argues that Haman’s plan is superlatively ambitious – he after all had tried to destroy Israel (Ps 106:23) but had been averted by Moses’ prayers, so why did Haman think he could succeed? The battle over Israel occurs in the heavenly court in which the Angel Michael defends Israel, opposing Haman’s accusations. God argues that he will not forsake the people – regardless of their innocence or guilt – because the world stands only through the law, Israel’s possession (VII.13).

The interpretative history of Haman’s accusation can be construed as a repository of circulating ‘Semitic discourse’ (as Bryan Cheyette (1993: xi) has termed it). Jewish exegetes in the Middle Ages reflect the period’s anti-Jewish sentiment. The *Midrash Panim ‘aherim B*, for example, places in Haman’s mouth complaints about the Shema (‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’) and cites the blessing against heretics (‘who humbles the wicked’), both of which were frequently construed as anti-Christian (Walfish 1993: 148). For Gersonides, Haman is motivated by his fear of a united, but dispersed, Jewry using their influence, beyond the reach of the authorities, to stir dissent (ibid.: 152). Abraham Ibn Ezra discerns in Haman’s speech echoes of contemporary complaints against Jews’ moral weakness and their internal divisions (ibid.: 154).

In *A New Entertlude* of 1561 Haman fears a proselytizing Jewish nation:

More ouer the preceptes of your law,
They refuse and haue in great contempte
They wyll in no wise liue vnder awe,
Of any prince but they wil be exempte,
wherby good order may sone be interempte,

And occasion is as I do feare me
 your subjectes to rebell in hope of lyke liberte.

(Greg [1561] 1904: 30)

In the play *Esther* defends the Jews by declaring them self-sufficient and hospitable agricultural people. By drawing on positive associations with the bucolic and citing the biblical example of Abraham entertaining angels in his own humble home, she offers a sympathetic portrayal of accused Jews (38).

In 1584 John Stockwood reads the misrepresentation of the Jews allegorically as a prefiguration of the persecution of Christians. He concludes in his 'Dedicatorie' that we 'neede not therefore maruaile' if we 'heare the like slaunders, and craftie leasings practised against the true and faithfull seruants of Iesus Christ, and his woorship and religion' (16). In this move, the accused Jews are a model for the accused *new* Israel, the Christians, but as such, present-day Jews are superseded, transformed into those who 'often accuse Christ, and his apostles of sedition' (sig B1v). The use of Jews as types and present-day persecutors becomes a confused doubling in Stockwood's writing. The Jews accuse Christ; yet when Stockwood writes of *Esther* and *Mordecai* allegorically, making clear allusions to Elizabeth and Walsingham, the latter is 'the godly Iewe' (sig B4r). Persecution becomes applied parochially as he declares that 'I thinke no nation that euer hath had more notable experiance, then this little Iland of ours' (sig B3r). The Reverend J. Price replicates Stockwood in teaching his youth the principle that 'the people of God have suffered from the enmity of the wicked in every age of the world' (1802: 5).

In Delgado's poem, the accuser Haman declares that 'a demonstration of force will better compel', echoing medieval inquisitorial policies ([1627] 1999: 39). In 1647 John Mayer expands Haman's representation of the Jews so that it contains (seemingly currently relevant) specifics of 'singular new rites [...] that is, circumcision, adoration towards *Jerusalem*, and divers washings, and abstinence from some meats unclean' (62).

Thomas Knagg preaches against Haman-like slander in 1716, and especially that used against the king by the 'multitude'. He accuses 'some *Trumpeters of Sedition*', who out of 'Discontent, Envy and Ill-will, clamour against the *Establish'd* Government, stir up malicious and perverse Suggestions', and in doing so 'alienate the Affections of the People from our *Lawful* and *Rightful* KING' (Knagg 1716: 19). His call for brotherly love demands that 'all Quarrels may be forgot, all Divisions cease', with the notable exception of the 'Distinction' between '*Papists* and *Protestants*'; a key to his monarchal fervour for the Protestant King George. For Knagg, George is an *Esther*-like saviour (although his explicit analogue of George is *Mordecai*): 'A KING whom Nature hath made gentle, courteous, and obliging, whom Experience hath made wise, able and valient [*sic*], and whom *Providence* sent to be our *Ruler and Deliverer* in the Day of *Evil Counsellors*'. Alexander Webster takes the opportunity to advise monarchs 'not to take Things

upon Trust, but to see as much as possible with their *own eyes*. On the contrary, it is 'the Honour of Kings to search out a Matter' (1740: 19). Haman is not only a personal example of courtly corruption, but courts themselves come under his judgement: '*Truth and Sincerity are seldom found at Court; There every Thing appears in a false Light, and under Disguise*' (20).

Stevenson explicitly defends Jews from Haman's accusation of disloyalty by arguing that 'even their own laws taught them to seek the peace of the land into which they should be carried captives' (1817: 240). In the same year Mark Wilks chooses this verse for his sermon printed under the title *Nonconformity* in 1818, a defence of Dissenters against accusations of treason. He refers to a case in which treason is associated directly with 'the different seceders from the Church' who are accused of preaching 'faith without works' (1818: 19). Citing the story of Daniel in the lions' den, amongst others, Wilks goes on to defend Nonconformity as necessary to good governance because it asserts the 'equal responsibilities of men to the Author of their being, for the use of their capacities and their rights' (26). Wilks avoids the issue of Esther's disobedience, yet presents an argument that destabilizes the power structures upon which male hegemony depends. By privileging obedience to God over earthly powers, he provides a loophole for women's insubordination towards any men that they may posit as ungodly, the very loophole that women such as the self-proclaimed prophetess Joanna Southcott makes use of. He reiterates the Protestant emphasis upon the priesthood of all believers, the 'equal responsibilities', albeit of 'men', the discourse of Protestant individuality potentially disrupting discourses of hierarchy in whatever form (26).

Watson's play presents a Haman viscerally disgusted by Mordecai: 'Like dung, if I to touch him deign, / I must contract uncourtly stain' (1845: 79). In Buchan's play Haman's speech constructs him as a new Pharaoh, another arch-enemy of the Jews:

Man, woman, child, yea, all
Of Hebrew blood, like vermin burrowing
Through the provinces, must fall as well. [. . .]
How they swarmed in upon our sacred soil,
A locus multitude of slave, escaped
From Pharaoh's ownership.

(1873: 37)

C. F. Le Fevre, in dissenting from the Trinitarianism of the established Church, reads Haman's abuse of court favour as an argument against the Church's use of state law for its religious purposes and more specifically the 'unhallowed proceeding' of 'the stoppage of the Sunday Mail', which he concludes is the 'acquisition of power for *themselves* to the destruction and freedom of

others' (1831: 9) As Haman sits to drink with the king, so Le Fevre's unscrupulous priesthood 'spent much of their time in boasting of the apparent success of their schemes', despite the importance of the conflicting beliefs of freemen 'whose opinions were as sacred in the eyes of an impartial government as their own' (10). He pre-empts the rhetoric of modern politics in which state security is invoked to curb individual rights: 'When Priests at the present day seek power from government, the *ostensible* purpose is the welfare of the republic. There is no *profit* to be derived from these liberal Christians. They will undermine the government and lead it to a state of anarchy and confusion' (11).

Elizabeth Polack reflects Anglo-American attitudes towards East European immigrant Jewry in Haman's prejudices against 'these vultures – who have so long been feasting on the substance of our people's labour, and revelling in wealth robbed from the needy' (1835: 18). Haman and Mordecai argue face to face, Haman calling them 'a wandering race' and 'a grovelling crew – a money-hoarding herd! too lazy for bodily exercise, and too weak in intellect to rule the state'. Mordecai replies: 'who *should* be the objects of scorn – the humble sufferers, or the tyrant robbers?' and continues in a questioning mode reminiscent of Shylock:

Are we not equal to you in manly firmness? are not our women surpassing in their beauty and virtue? When were we called feeble? – was it when our nation gave laws to the world? – or was it when a few of our remaining heroes beat your countrymen in their own native land, and trampled the Amalekite blood into their parent soil? (20)

Thomas M'Crie applies the verse to 'the Puritans in England, and the Presbyterians in Scotland', persecuted because 'they rejecte the ecclesiastical supremacy claimed by the king, and maintained that the church ought to be governed by the laws of Christ' (1838: 80). He likens the decree to those, 'equalling this in atrocity', against 'Protestants in Spain, in Italy, and in France' (84). Cushing's Haman elaborates on his prejudice against Jews, who 'like a plague-spot mar our beauteous land' (1840: 50). Haman presents the Jews as the kingdom's 'one noxious ill' (51) who are not only uncontrollable but purge the land of wealth:

A lawless band, who worship other gods,
Frame their own laws, and boldly set at naught
The mandates of their king. Yet do they reap
With lavish hand the bounties of thy realm,
And still oppression use, and with hard gripe
Wring from the poor his mean and scanty store,
To add to their own hoards.

(52)

Although the king argues that he's always thought of them as 'void of guile, / A harmless race', the scene dramatizes anti-Semitic argument as he confesses that he deems them 'ofttimes obstinate'. The king decries his leniency, trusting that Haman always has the 'nation's weal' in mind (52). That Cushing's Haman acts on an 'ancient grudge' only works to vindicate the Jews:

[. . .] this poor nation, exiled and oppressed,
Can nought have done to wake such malice fierce,
As breathes in this decree.

(1840: 56)

For Watson, Haman is the inveterate actor as he declares to the king: 'I weep to think their blood must flow, / But how to save them do not know' (1845: 83). The king responds:

Severity I deprecate;
But often in affairs of state,
'Tis less severe to punish some,
Than let the whole to ruin come[.]

(ibid.)

For Ahasuerus, nation-wide security is defence enough for the oppression of a select number.

In Tennant's play it is the outward signs of religion that Haman cites as evidence of Jewish sedition: 'their very garment-hems and sleeves, / befring'd with parchments and phylacteries, / Do utter treason and defiance cry' (1845: 138). Black taps into normative constructions of the Jew in Haman's anti-Semitism: 'How I hate him – aye his race! Brought here in servitude and bondage they have by some means won their way upward' (1895: 130). They are described as 'a class of merchants':

grasping, penurious, filthy in their habits, liars, and so *extremely humble* [. . .] they are usurpers in this land – no matter what their condition; – being first brought here as slaves, – a vile race, – and such should they remain forever; – outcasts! (144)

The sentiment is repeated in Zeresh's speech in Goody's play of 1899:

Do they not reap with cunning wile their victor's spoil,
Taking the long results of Persia's patient toil,
Bleeding the people in their cruel lust for gold,
Draining the land and heaping up their gains untold?

(6)

Haman's speech is a tirade against the Jews that echoes the Talmud's narrative of Jewish violence in overtaking Canaan and echoes recognizable anti-Semitic discourse: 'Morose and dark, they live apart / With scowling brow and venomous heart' (8).

Hugh Black in *University Sermons* applies the model of the false witness to prejudice against the 'Christian Faith in the Roman Empire', asserting it had 'the same falseness and evil purpose', yet 'with the same inherent truth' of the people's singularity, a dubious argument that implicates the persecuted. He defends difference by arguing that 'Progress is ever got by dissent' and that only by 'points of departure, lines of cleavage, difference' can 'stagnation and ultimate death' be avoided (*Expositor's Dictionary* 1910: 309).

The Interpreter's Bible reads discrimination against Jews here as representative of the treatment of 'Minority groups', which he claims are 'always subject to suspicion'. It gives the example of Protestant attitudes towards Catholics in Northern Ireland and against Christians in China (1954: 848). Deen makes a similar move when she calls the Jews 'refugees in Persia' (1959: 151). *The Interpreter's Bible* also reads the scene in terms of anti-Semitism, presenting an etymological history, informing its readers that the term appeared in a pamphlet in Germany in 1875 by the founder of an anti-Semitic league, Wilhelm Marr. It nonetheless distances such prejudice from the Esther narrative, echoing arguments of Holocaust exceptionalism in claiming that it was 'only in the twentieth century that the demonic power of anti-Semitism has been fully understood and used with complete logic as a political tool' (1954: 849). Levenson evidently considers Haman's accusation pertinent enough to defend Jewish separateness, citing Num 23:9 in which a Gentile prophet plays a tribute to Israel as special (1997: 70).

Haman becomes the archetypal anti-Semite for modern readers. Toby Blum-Dobkin writes about a Purim celebrated in the Landsberg Displaced Persons Centre in Germany in 1946 in which one ex-inmate dressed as Hitler, mapping Haman's defeat: 'So Haman ended, so Hitler ended, so will end all enemies of the Jews.' Dressing up is here a symbolic expression of power in which the 'masquerader dictates and controls the actions of the character he is playing; in performing the exaggerated Nazi salute, the Jew can mock the Nazi and emphasize the transfer of power' (1979: 57). Shimon Apisdorf inserts the Gulf War into his historical overview of the 'Purim period', assigning Haman's mantle to Saddam Hussein in 1991 when he declares 'himself to be the "new Nebuchadnezzar", attacks Israel, and is defeated in the Gulf War', the analogy strengthened for him because the war ended on Purim 1991 (1995: 12). Haman is not simply the archetypal anti-Semite, but also the epitome of evil, in much the way Hitler functions symbolically in modern times. Saul Bellow's protagonist in his short story 'Him with his Foot in his Mouth' receives a letter from an old colleague

cataloguing his faults: 'That letter – a strange *megillah* of which I myself was the Haman' (2001: 381).

3:8 *Evil Counsellors*

Haman, a personification of evil in Jewish tradition, becomes more commonly in Christian tradition a representative of the courtier who finds undue favour with the king or ruler. The tradition is pre-empted by the Additions' reference to the danger of the 'persuasiveness of friends' who 'beguil[e] the good faith of their rulers by malicious equivocation' (Moore 1977: 232). W. W. Greg, the editor of *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester* suggests that its depiction of Haman is so 'pointedly and bitterly personal' that its author must have had a specific individual in mind. Greg cites Grosart's edition of the play in suggesting that 'it is not impossible that it was the belief that Wolsey was instrumental in directing Henry's mood against the unfortunate Catherine, that may have suggested to the author the biblical groundwork of his satire' ([1561] 1904: ix). When Esther denounces Haman in the play, her key accusation is the nationwide threat that his manipulations present:

By his false leasinges, he putteth other in blame
Deludinge youre grace, when he lyst to fayne
And no man so worthy for to suffer payne,
As he him selfe that by hys poyson and gall,
Hath deceyued you, and eke youre commons all.

(37)

The play expresses anxiety about the vulnerability of language – and especially the language of law – to the linguistic manipulation of flattery:

For al law est & west, & adulation in his chest
Aman hathe locked faste:
And by his crafti pattering, hath turned law into flattering,
So that fyrst and laste,
The cliant must pay, or the lawyer assaye
The law for to clatter:
And when ye wene he saide right, I assure you by this light
He doth not els but flatter.

(17)

Francis Quarles describes the body politic in medicinal and anatomical terms:

The strongest Arteries that knit and tye
The members of a mixed Monarchy,
Are learned Councils, timely Consultations,
Rip'ned advice, and sage Deliberations[.]

(1621: sig E2r; 1642: 111)

He rails against the folly of youthful advice:

What Massacres (begun by factious iarres),
And ended by the spoyle of ciuill warres)
Haue made braue Monarchyes unfortunate,
And raz'd the glory of many a mighty State?
How many hopefull Princes (ill advis'd
By young, and smooth-fac'd Councill) haue despis'd
The sacred Oracles of riper yeeres,
Till deare Repentance washt the Land with teares!

(1621: sig E2r; 1642: 112)

However, Quarles goes on to praise his own monarch, who 'with his Olive branch more hearts did boord' and ends: 'Long mayst thou hold within they Royall hand, / The peacefull Scepter of our happy Land' (1621: sig E2v; 1642: 113). Quarles' suggestion of kingly fault reveals criticism of the evil counsellor to function as covert attack on the monarchy as he berates the adviser:

No one more dangerous, and hard to heale,
(Except a Tyrant King) then when great might
Is trusted to the hands, that take delight
To bathe, and paddle in the blood of those,
Whom ielialousies, and not iust cause oppose[.]

(1621: sig G2v; 1642: 127)

He prays: 'Defend vs thou, and heauens thee defend, / And let proud *Hamans* haue proud *Hamans* end (1621: sig G3v; 1642: 129). The wide spread dissatisfaction with James' actions towards favourites such as Buckingham at the time of *Hadassa's* first publication in 1621 makes an innocent reading of Quarles' advice here unlikely. Later in the seventeenth century, the Bill of Rights of 1689 spelt out the faults of James II, who threatens the Protestant religion specifically 'by the assistance of diuers evil counsellors, judges and ministers employed by him' (Browning 1966: 122). Haman's influence on Ahasuerus resonated with fears of the pernicious influence of favourites common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because Esther is both accuser of Haman and saviour of her people, her actions align criticism of favourites with utmost loyalty, deflecting accusations of sedition.

Samuel Kem's sermon of 1644 purports that the king and Haman are 'fit

instruments' which are open to be used by 'hell' when it 'hath plotted a designe'. In describing the scene as one in which 'corruption hath over-power'd convicting light', he obtusely implicates both Ahasuerus and his adviser (Kem 1644: 8). Robert Whitehall, the Anglican Royalist poet, creates a pithy rhyme that underscores the fatal end of the ambitious courtier in a grotesque, yet faintly comical, manner:

To *Esther* the Kings Scepter is extended,
 The *Jews* and *Mordicai* by her befriended;
 Male-content *Haman*, in his pride and height,
 Scorns both, as standing yet a *Favorite*.
 Ambition thwarted strives to do her worst,
 And *puffs* the owner up, until he *burst*.

(1677: n.p.)

Hester, A Poem (1714) instead bemoans the fate of the king who must rely on (potentially false) counsellors:

UNHAPPY Potentates, whom Distance ties
 To Hear with others Ears, and See with other's Eyes!
 Whom naked Truth must ne'er approach alone,
 But in a Dress and Aspect not her own!
 Whom Fears or Flatteries of Fav'rites doom
 To live eternal Strangers still at Home!

(Anon. 1714: 40)

Haman is condemned by Webster in 1740 for his economic sleight of hand in offering money for the Jews, insinuating that it is because he is a Prime Minister that he 'knew well how to reimburse himself' (Webster 1740: 11). The personal nature of his diatribe implicates the current Prime Minister, Walpole:

A Man advanced next unto the *King*, and yet not satisfied, ambitiously aspiring to equal his *Royal Master* in *Power* and in *Glory*; adored by a Crowd of Dependents, but hated by the *Good* and the *Wise*: *Unhappy* amidst his Preferments, while there is one honest Man about the *King*. (20–1)

Such a minister is marked by his '*Artifices*', by which 'such a wicked Minister deceives his *Prince*, and ensnares his *People*' (23). He vindicates monarchy, arguing that erring kings 'are no otherwise to blame, than in trusting too much to those about them' (24) and advising that all efforts should be made to 'remov[e] such *evil Counsellors*', instead 'promoting to their Place the *righteous* and the *good*' (26). His focus becomes the 'we' of Britain rather than the 'them' of Persia:

Whence is that, when we have a *Prince* upon the Throne, who wishes the Welfare of his People, that yet our *Civil* and *Religious* Concerns are so much on the Decline? You have already heard, that the calamitous Circumstances of the *Jews* flowed from a *wicked prime Minister*, and their Deliverance *from his fall*.
(35–6)

Kenneth Nott suggests that vitriol against Walpole, common as it was, may well have been the inspiration behind Handel's oratorio (1995: 88).

James Maxwell, the 'Poet of Paisley', in 1784 warns against the Haman-figure:

Thus sycophants, have often gain'd the ascendant,
Over the princes by their flattering lies.
(1784: 14)

His warning is nonetheless guarded within a theology of providence in which the king's corruptibility poses no significant threat:

Yet seldom do we see they long remain
In honour, which they have no right t'enjoy.
(15)

By the time that the American Thomas Reese was writing in 1791, following the independence of America from British rule, king and evil counsellor are equally culpable, kings corruptible, weak and consequently unsuitable for rule. As the king and Haman drink together after the latter gains the king's seal, Reese labels them 'Hardened monsters!', and exclaims: 'what havock of the human race has been made by kings and Hamans of the earth!' (1791: 332).

In 1817 Robert Stevenson's condemnation is directed solely at the evil counsellor: 'In the courts of earthly princes, the favourite of the king has often been of the most abandoned character, and of the most immoral conduct' (238). Carson likewise sees Haman as the sole cause of calamity, vindicating the monarch: 'Many a bloody decree originates not so much in the cruelty of [the king's] nature, as in the seducing flatteries of their courtiers' (1835: 60). In contrast, Thomas M'Crie sees it as a 'common fault of absolute princes that they err in the choice of their favourites, fixing upon those who possess showy accomplishments, or who flatter their vanity, or minister to their baser pleasures' (1838: 66). Despite his criticism, he defends the limited monarchy of the British Empire: 'How thankful should we be that we are under the protection of law, and that our lives are neither at the mercy of a despot, nor of a lawless mob!' (83).

In Matson's play of 1890 Haman reflects on his skills as a manipulator:

[. . .] the king, a puppet in my hands
 By dexterous policy to turn and twist,
 And wield his power to work my purposes.

(1890: 7)

The drama presents the king sympathetically, as he laments his dependence upon potentially unreliable ministers:

This is the bane of kingship. At our breasts
 We nurse full oft the envenomed snake that stings us,
 While the true friends and guardians of the throne
 Pine in the wintry shade of cold neglect,
 Starveling and hungry, orphaned of reward.

(12)

When Mordecai is positioned as second-in-command, he echoes Haman's accusation in telling the king that his explicit priority in 'Guarding the interests' of the throne is:

scattering
 The pestilential sychophantic vermins,
 Whose wont is to prowl the courts
 Of monarch's palaces, cringing and fawning,
 Poisoning their minds with double-tongued device
 And fattening on a plundered exchequer. (14)

3:12–15 Genocidal Edicts

Esther's deathly decree is similar to those found, for example, in Ezra 1:1–4, 4:17–22 and I Macc. 1: 41–50 in which the empire sends out an edict demanding Jewish observance of Hellenistic laws, on pain of death (see *New Catholic Commentary* [1969] 1981: 410). *Esther Rabbah* gives voice to anti-Jewish sentiment as it expands Haman's order, rewriting the history of Israel from an Amalekite perspective. The Jews' escape from Egypt is portrayed as plundering and deceitful; Amalek attacks Israel only because of its cruel and ungrateful treatment of Egypt, whilst Joshua is a 'cruel and pitiless' warrior. In the conquest Moses has 'no pity'; Samuel's killing of King Agag is condemned (he cuts him in pieces), and Israel's religious observance is only 'magic' that inspires them 'to slay and lay waste without end'. Haman ends by claiming that the Jews 'mock at us and our religion' (VII.13).

Abraham Saba writes that Haman sent out the edicts so far in advance in

order to terrify the Jews so that they would ‘would die many deaths’ and perhaps apostasize (Walfish 1993: 140). He likens Haman’s motives to those of the Christian authorities in Spain:

the attempt we have seen with our own eyes, by the Edomites [i.e. Christians] to do all kinds of things to the Jews to frighten and confuse them so that they would take pity on their children and convert. (ibid.)

Saba seemingly takes comfort by citing the dénouement of the Esther story in which the fear of Mordecai compels many citizen to become Jews.

Haman’s order for the Jews’ annihilation is the point at which Handel’s oratorio opens. Light and lively strings contrast rather eerily with Haman’s words: ‘Let Jewish blood dye ev’ry hand / Nor age nor sex I spare’ (‘Pluck Root and Branch’). Persian relish and Jewish fear are suggested in the recitative and aria by the syncopated and staccato textures of the chorus, who echo Haman’s words, both joyful and sinister. The Persian officer declares: ‘Our souls with ardour glow / To execute the blow’; the delight of Persian genocide shadowed with terror.

The edicts are again and again applied to parochial concerns. Stevenson takes the opportunity to praise the legal system of his British Government, rejoicing that ‘no minister of state, nor even the sovereign himself, can dispose of the life, or liberty, or property of one individual, much less of numerous bodies of men, but must act according to the laws’ (1817: 240). Le Fevre, in defending religious Dissenters, paints Haman as motivated by resentment of Mordecai’s religious motivations, leading him to attack the Jews as believers (not as an ethnic group, 1831: 8). M’Crie expresses amazement that such evil people exist, yet, like Le Fevre, makes the application pointed: ‘And yet, my friends, such persons are to be found in our own time – in our own land – and in high places’ (1838: 204). In passing, he condemns such persecution because it is ‘politically bad’, arguing that ‘pious’ civilians bring economic riches to a country and ‘are always the most sober, industrious, peaceable, truly loyal, and least apt to engage in plots and conspiracies, to take part in riots, to speak evil of dignitaries’ (ibid.). Symington is even more pointed, as he likens the proposed genocide to the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, and Haman thereby to Catherine de Medici (1878: 82). Goldman presents an example of a similar slaughter that takes place in the ancient world in lands bordering the Black Sea. He quotes Mithridates of Pontus who sent a (successful) proclamation against resident Romans and Italians, in a story that echoes Esther: ‘When the appointed day came, there was wailing and lamentation in the whole of Asia’ (1952: 213). Wilhelmina Stich considers it simply ‘absurd’ that ‘one man should be in a position to order the slaughter of thousands’. She is perhaps the first to

note that 'here is a man called Hitler whose temperament seems much akin to the villain of this piece' (1935: 250).

In his autobiography Shmarya Levin communicates the horror of the reign of Alexander III, and his persecution of the Jews of Russia, by recounting the announcement of the assassination of the liberal Alexander II at the reading of the scroll of Esther in the synagogue:

Suddenly the doors were flung wide open, and at the entrance stood the district commissioner and the sergeant. A shudder ran through the congregation, the hereditary terror, the memory of evil decrees. Without introduction, the commissioner read out the telegram he held in his hand. "Alexander the Second has fallen, a victim of a revolutionary plot. Alexander the Third sits on the throne of all the Russias." (1930: 277)

Post-Shoah commentary necessarily draws connections and, more often than not, distinctions between the two genocides. Levenson, like other modern commentators, claims that the annihilation of an entire people is 'a Nazi innovation', and further maintains that it would be 'anachronistic' to claim that 'Haman's anti-Semitism had the racialist character of Nazism' (1997: 73). It is this privileging of the Shoah that perhaps leads to his insistence on the inherent humour of the book, claiming that the edict 'may have seemed foolish and even comical to the ancient audience, further evidence of Ahasuerus's and Haman's failure to grasp reality' (ibid.). Delgado's translator, David R. Slavitt, calls his poem (1627) an 'extended metaphor', drawing a connection between the Esther story and 'the Jews' experience in Spain with the Inquisition' (1999: xi). Slavitt's translation invokes the Shoah, exposing perhaps its hermeneutical saturation. Regarding Haman's fanning the flames of his hatred, he translates: 'Nothing less than a Holocaust will do' (39). Larry Domnitch attempts to create a genealogical link between Haman and Hitler by pointing out that Haman issued his edicts on the same day (the 13th of Nissan) that the DAP (German Workers Party) became the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party, 2000: 201).

3:15 'The King and Haman sat down to drink'

The story of Ahasuerus seems to allow a degree of covert criticism of monarchy that would perhaps be read as seditious if offered directly. Stockwood in his 'Dedicatorie' to *A Right Godly and Learned Discourse* (1584) considers the king 'to bee blamed and found fault withall', and makes the more general observation (in line with the argument of his writing as a whole):

how easily we are carried away with the sway and violence of our owne corrupt affections, this wisdom and prudence is required in princes, that they search narrowly into the accusations that such as are about them shall bring before them against their loyall subjects and people. (1584: sig B4v)

He even warns that monarchs should 'remember that they are but men, and therefore may erre as men' ([B6r]). Over a century later, in Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* we have the 'too easy King' signing the edict (1715: 10).

Unlike the monarchist Alexander Webster that is the supposed author of the sermon, Pseudo-Webster is very disparaging of the king and monarchs *per se*: 'The credulous King, like many a poor deluded Monarch since, readily believes all he says, and took his Signet from his Finger, as a Token to destroy the *Jews*' (1740: 14). He describes the 'horror' and 'fatal Consequences' of 'Princes making rash Resolves before they have well weigh'd what they are about' (15). The king, for Pseudo-Webster, is fully responsible for anything that his servants do (*ibid.*). He does qualify his criticism with some sympathy for the king, who 'must be more wretched than any of his Subjects, who, immur'd in his Palace, hears nothing but from a circle of Flatterers' (17). He later calls the king '*ill-advised* and *injudicious*', and his warning against Esther's trust that 'his Love [. . .] can save thee from the general Deluge' (20) seems a riposte to Webster's explicit faith in King George (35). Pseudo-Webster's criticism is resonant with that of Reese later in the century, on the other side of the Atlantic, who holds the king ultimately responsible: 'He took his favourite's word for the justice and propriety of the measure; and in this discovered his extreme weakness and temerity' (1791: 327). *The Interpreter's Bible's* assertion that the king is an 'impressionable monarch' proves to him the book's fictional character: 'The Xerxes of the book of Esther is a weakling who is completely dominated by his eunuchs and court officials. This is not the historical Xerxes' (1954: 850).

The perplexity of the 'city of Susa' is interpreted by medieval Jewish exegetes to refer only to Jews, although Joseph Hayyum suggests that Gentiles too may have been bewildered by the injustice, but not from any sense of good will (Walfish 1993: 127). Matthew Poole presents an array of possibilities for the disquiet, like Hayyum denying any possibility of empathy, instead suggesting compassion 'towards so vast a number of innocent People', that the decree may cause disturbance, or because of 'a publick Judgment of God upon them all for so Bloody a Decree' ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.). That Haman and the king drink whilst the decree is sent out causes the American Reese to extemporize on the 'havock' caused by kings and Hamans (see comments, p. 154). It leads into Orientalist invective as he claims that the Persian scene is representative of the activities of rulers in 'eastern countries' (1791: 332). *The Interpreter's Bible's* claims for the Gentile population's humanist sympathy assuages post-Holocaust fears of the tenuousness of Western civilization. 'Far from being

animated by any anti-Semitism', it argues, the Susan citizens are 'peace-loving' and 'mirrored Jewish feelings of dismay over such an outrageous and arbitrary edict' (1954: 851). Levenson also attributes positive qualities to non-Jews, perhaps transposing his own hopes about Jewish-Gentile relations, arguing (in somewhat apologetic terms) that the citizens would be distressed by an attack on those 'who had been living peacefully in their midst' (77).

Esther 4:1-14

4:1-3 'Great mourning among the Jews'

We leave the last chapter with the king and Haman drinking, a dramatic contrast to the Jews who are now reeling from the impact of the decree. John Stockwood cites this scene to commend the Jews for their non-violent response to the edict, that:

in the meane season, neither tumultuously nor seditiously, either by open force banding themselues together against the king, [. . .] not by privie treasons seeking to dispatch them out of the way, no nor so much as in worde or writing, once complaining of any vniustice towards them, albeit they were in deede most wrongfully and uniuistly condemned, are a patterne of patience, and a mirrour

of meekness, yea, and a president of duetifull obedience vnto magistrates and rulers[.] (1584: [B8r])

In doing so he maps Christian on to Jewish identity, Jews acting as both redundant prototypes and a current moral force, exemplifying in this instance non-violent protest. Peculiarly, he presents them as a model against which one can 'discerne the true Church and professors of Christian religion, from all false and antichristian churches & embracers of false and strange religion' (ibid.). Stockwood is blind to the tangling of his logic as Judaism becomes a model for discerning 'true' Christianity.

Delgado, having masqueraded as a Catholic in inquisitional Portugal, interprets Mordecai's mourning as repentance for the idolatry of his people in exile ([1627] 1999: 42). His long speech applies to the state of the Jews in early modern Europe as he declares that exile amongst a 'hostile people' is 'worse than martyrdom'. One of the most poignant aspects of the poem is its exploration of the psychological effects of living under persecution, 'scattered' in exile:

each of us trying to hide his mortal dread
so as not to burden further kith and kin,
though each of us knows the sorry plight we're in.

(45)

The 'Poet of Paisley', James Maxwell, in 1784 dramatizes Mordecai's anguish, the 'noise of which would ev'n have pierc'd a savage, / And made his heart with kind compassion warm'. The poet's superlative portrayal evokes pity whilst constructing Haman as embodying an extreme of heartlessness, dehumanized through negative comparison to a 'savage'. Symington equates Mordecai's mourning with prayer (1878: 95) and renders an internal monologue infused with a rational sense of divine providence:

in the way of obeying God I have exposed my people to this fearful peril: but, on the other hand, God has, these four years and more, established my foster-child next to the throne. Putting these two things together, I am surely not wrong in judging that they point to the place where the cloud will yet part, and greater light come through it. (97)

Mordecai displays a skilled hermeneutics interpreting the events of the world to find God's elusive presence that corresponds to Symington's – and by extension the reader's – attitude towards the Book of Esther itself.

Thomas Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* presents a chorus of virgins lamenting the sins of Israel, the edict and the mourning it provokes both the result of Israel's sinfulness:

Our Fathers are no more:
 And We perish
 For Crimes They dar'd to cherish.

(Brereton 1715: 15)

He portrays the scene of Jewish mourning as an intellectual dismissal of vanity as they face being devoured by their empire. His juxtaposition of the genocide and feast suggests that the opulent gluttony of the empire, as expressed in the banquets that opened the book, leads it into consuming even its subjects:

Off with these toys! that now our Heads adorn;
 For idle Pomp and Gazing worn:
 And let Us so Our selves attire,
 As doth th'approaching horrid Feast require.

(14)

Rice's more prosaic translation expresses a more violent response in the women:

Let us drag off, let us tear to pieces,
 All these vain ornaments
 Which deck our heads.

(1882: 14)

This visceral response echoes the rabbis' interpretation of Esther's pain in 4:4 to refer to a shock that causes a miscarriage, resulting in her never having children (*Esther Rabbah*, VIII.3), a detail picked up in Rebecca Kohn's *The Gilded Chamber* (2005). (*Esther Rabbah* also speculates that she was the mother of Darius, 'pure from his mother's side and impure from his father's.')

The barring of sack-clothed citizens from the city is transposed by W. Robertson Nicoll on to the personal choice to 'bar the door against' difficulties. His solution supports evangelical activity: 'We may face them with the Christian hope, and that is the true and only wisdom' (*The Lamp of Sacrifice*; cited in *Expositor's Dictionary*, 1910: 309). The religious implication of mourning is assumed by the *New Catholic Commentary*, although it still expresses shock over the book's reticence: 'These gestures indicate a turning to God [. . .] it is notable that the writer refrains from saying so, even here' ([1969] 1981: 410).

The sparseness of the biblical narrative offers space for the interpreter to speculate about Mordecai's motivation. Interpretative frames are revealed through the juxtaposition of Sidnie Ann White's and Jon Levenson's responses, critics dominated by a feminist and a Jewish perspective, respectively. White renders Mordecai 'less than helpful to his own cause', and she transposes stereotypically feminine traits of passivity and emotionalism on to him as she represents him going 'into a panic'. Reversing typical gender roles, Mordecai

is dependent upon Esther: 'Mordecai's sole response to the crisis that he set in motion is to bring the problem to the attention of Esther' (1992: 128). In contrast, Levenson is sympathetic to the Jewish hero, the movement from Mordecai to the community of Jews illustrating his function as 'their representative,' 'even their personification' (1997: 79).

4:4-14 Esther and Mordecai Confer

The messenger between Esther and Mordecai is given special attention by the rabbis, who identify him as Daniel, the exemplary Jewish royal adviser, 'upon whose authority the royal decrees were decided' (*Targum Rishon*, 58). The Talmud (*Meg* 15a) and *Esther Rabbah* VIII.4 explain that Daniel is called Hatakh here because he was degraded (*hatakh-hu*) from his position (see also *Meg* 15b). According to *Targum Rishon*, Haman sees him passing messages between Mordecai and Esther, and 'he became furious at him and killed him; whereupon the angel Michael appeared there and related to Mordecai Esther's words' (60). In Tommy Tenney's *Hadassah: One Night with the King* ([2004] 2005), Hatach is a childhood friend of Esther's, a Jew forcibly taken to be a eunuch at the same time that Esther is captured for the harem. Making him Jewish, here and in the rabbinical writings, does explain Hatakh's seemingly passive relating of the news of Esther's Jewishness. Whereas the biblical account is evasive about what it is that Mordecai tells Hatakh, *Esther Rabbah* interprets the 'all' from 'all that had happened to him' (4:5) as a dream, almost identical to that recounted in the deuterio-canonical Esther, told here to Esther to inspire her to approach the king (VIII.5).

Esther's initial refusal is treated sympathetically by Delgado, familiar with the complexities of living under persecution, arguing that by a failed attempt, 'will she not jeopardize / all Israel?' ([1627] 1999: 48). His rational response contrasts with those who emphasize instead the drama and emotion of the scene. *Hester, A Poem* (1714) presents Esther's visceral response to the edict, evoking sympathy:

A sickly Purple stagnates in her Veins,
And Life but in a faulting Pulse remains.
In chilling Dews the vital Flame decays[.]

(Anon. 1714: 43)

Pseudo-Webster exaggerates the timidity that many read into Esther's response by claiming that she advises Mordecai to 'adhere to the sentiments of the *Persians*, and *bow* to *Ahasuerus* with the rest of his *Creatures*.' Esther's compliant

attitude only elevates Mordecai further, who in his refusal 'still kept his Integrity' (1740: 20)

In Tyler's play she 'choked with sobs and tears swoon'd away' ([n.d.] 1941: 44). The American poetess Maria Gowen Brooks presents Esther in feminine trepidation, asking: 'What can a weak and artless woman do?' She bewails her fate as queen: 'Oh! happier far the sun-burnt maid who toils / Where ne'er a court its baneful splendour shed' (1820: ll. 13-14, 17-18). Here her public act of petition becomes a peculiarly feminine submission. Although flinching from her trial, Esther perceives in her femininity a childlike quality designed for such an appeal:

The law is death – yet, should I trembling dare –
Formed for entreaty – gentle, meek, and mild –
The lion, fierce for blood, will sometimes spare,
For pride or pity's sake, the helpless child[.]

(1.125-8)

Although many commentators are quick to dismiss Esther's sending of clothes to Mordecai as a feminine preference for appearance over principle, Thomas Scott defends her, arguing that she sent clothes 'As a token of her sincere and deep sympathy with him in his sorrow' and out of 'her unabated affection for so kind a benefactor' (1827: 4Q4). In drawing attention to Esther's great risk, Alexander Carson turns the scene into a cautionary tale against foreign lands and practices: 'in estimating the danger, we ought to take into account the caprice of despots in countries where polygamy prevails. This moment they devote to destruction the object on which they doted the moment before' (1835: 68). That she has not been called for thirty days is merely evidence of 'the divine plan': 'her faith put to the severer trial, and his own power more fully manifest in obtaining for her a glorious reception' (ibid.). He insists on the inherent femininity of her approach and then spuriously infuses into his interpretation a sign of divine authorship. Had 'human wisdom formed a heroine', he argues, it would have created her 'intrepid and ready to encounter the greatest dangers with more than masculine bravery'. He dismisses a masculinized Esther as a flawed human invention to construct a divinely ordained female nature:

She comes before us in the usual character of her sex, and of the ordinary attainment in the Divine life. She at first declines the hazardous undertaking for fear of losing her life [. . .] she finally displays resignation and confidence, though not altogether unmixed with fear. (116-17)

Esther is a model of the believer's relationship with God; Christians are passive females in relation to a male, active and unquestionable God. Males are femi-

nized in their relationship to God, yet masculinity remains structurally sound in its hegemonic relationship to femininity. Esther's feminine, fearful yet confident, petition is also mapped on to the prayerful. It is, he argues, the 'usual conduct,' 'the usual confidence of the people of God' (117). Like Delgado, Cushing vindicates Esther's hesitance. It is not death she fears but

[. . .] It is the dread
Lest, by a fatal risk, I forfeit power
To aid him in worse need at future time,
Should need again occur.

(1840: 58)

Symington reads Esther's clothing of Mordecai sympathetically, an act of duty, 'glad if her royal abundance may minister to his comfort' (1878: 99).

There are undoubtedly less sympathetic responses to Esther's seeming reluctance. W. G. Elmslie scorns 'her little self-centred world,' Mordecai's speech causing her to 'crush down her meanness and her selfishness' (in *The British Weekly Pulpit*; cited in *Expositor's Dictionary*, 1910: 311). Esther's ignorance of the edict is for James Hastings a sign of how 'complete was the retirement of women in the recesses of the harem' (1911: 532). He transposes Esther's temptation to stay silent on to a universal experience of cowardice. 'We dread to speak,' he submits, 'lest our ease and enjoyment should suffer thereby' (534). He proverbially reflects: 'To serve the needy age is to forswear ease' (535).

In Maxwell's melodramatic and convoluted play *Queen Vashti*, the king's persisting love for Vashti puts Esther's reticence into a fatal perspective. She asks: 'what can a weak and frightened woman do to soften a heart so cold and hard as that of Ahasuerus?' (1923: 37). That the queen has not been called for some time explains the queen's fright for *The Interpreter's Bible*, as it 'implies that Esther had lost favor with the moody king,' making her approach 'extremely hazardous' (1954: 854). Browne's negative reading of the story clouds his interpretation of the queen's 'heroism,' which for him is tainted 'by the fact that she refused to do so until Mordecai warned her that otherwise she would be massacred' ([1962] 1975: 383). White defends her: 'Esther's reaction to Mordecai's demand is not cowardice but a statement of fact' (1992: 128). Levenson, on the other hand, commends Mordecai, because it is his 'eloquence' that 'induces her to accept her fate' (1997: 3). Esther Fuchs strikingly berates the queen for being 'too busy with her make-up and other skin-deep activities' to be aware of her people's danger (1999: 80).

Critics speculate on the law that entrance to the king is barred on pain of death (4:11). *Targum Rishon* contends that it is put in place 'on Haman's order' from fear that Mordecai might reveal the secret regarding Haman's slave status (see comments on 3:1). Heyricke extends the earthly court to the heavenly realm,

condemning the king's barring of citizens, arguing that the throne should be 'equally near and distant to every one; it argues more Tyranny than Majesty to have set and standing Guards to keep out Petitioners' (1646: 5). Matthew Poole merely considers it representative of Eastern 'severe Laws' ([1669-76] 1700: n. p.), and a similar impulse leads M'Crie to praise his own country: 'How happy for us, brethren, that we live not under an absolute but a limited monarchy!' His ideal model of a democratic state, in which no one is disenfranchised, is extended theologically: 'how thankful should we be that we are under the government of the King of kings and Lord of lords!, that we have access at all times to a throne of grace' (1838: 105-6).

Mordecai's ambivalent speech is rendered a threat in *Targum Rishon*: 'the Lord of the Universe will deliver them from (the hands of) their adversaries, and you as well as your paternal family will perish for that guilt' (60). Stockwood privileges an oblique reading of his proof-text, focusing on Mordecai's, not Esther's, petition, providing a more appropriate and 'manly' exemplar for Walsingham. Esther is simply the reluctant female: 'how much a doo had he, before hee could win the Queene to stirre in thys matter' (1584: sig A3r). Her act of supplication is merely an act of grudging submission. Mordecai, now at the centre of the book, is our example of resolution, not Esther: the example of godly 'Mordecai may teach vs vnto a Christian boldnes and constancie in troubles and afflictions, casting all our care vppon the Lorde' ([B7r]). Stockwood succeeds in moving the spotlight from Esther to Mordecai, but still presents as a model of submission a man who is the subordinate of a female monarch.

In Delgado's poem an 'answering voice' speaks to Esther from 'deep in her soul', saying that she cannot escape and hide her identity. Again, it echoes his own fate as a Portuguese, Marrano Jew as he slips into using a male, not female, pronoun:

[. . .] it's a bitter life that awaits
 those whose existence is a fiction. At any moment
 (which the imposter forever anticipates),
 he may be unmasked. That self he has tried to deny
 will return to life and betray him, and he will die.

([1627] 1999: 49)

Herbert Palmer's 1643 anti-Papist gloss on Mordecai's speech applies the story to England ('all our Israel', 2), and subordinates the Jews to a past significance, who 'at this time' are 'Gods onely visible Church on earth'. Although Mordecai's speech is largely read as a promise of salvation, Palmer cites alongside it a passage from Jer 18:7-8, which warns of potential calamity as well as salvation (see Introduction, 'Nationalism'). As such, Palmer presents an uncertain future, his

church, like Esther, in need of ‘quicknings from God’s word when as his providence is about to do some terrible thing, for, or against the Church or both’ (1647: 1-2). Esther is a caution against self-concern: ‘Those whom private, and self-respects hinder from the Churches help, can have no assurance, that they shall escape more than others’ (23).

In Quarles’ poem, Mordecai’s speech to Hatakh implicates a resisting Esther. That God will work to bring success is as inevitable as the coming of each new day:

Goe, tell the fearfull Queene; Too great’s her feare,
Too small her zeale; her life she rates too deare [. . .]
If at this needfull time thou spare to speake,
Our speedy helpe shall (like the morning) breake
From heauen, together with thy woes, and he
That succours us, shall heape foule plagues on thee.

(1621: sig H2v; 1642: 134)

Like the Pharaoh who said no, Esther will be punished if she refuses Mordecai, who as a Moses is the mouthpiece of God. Matthew Poole also renders Mordecai’s speech as implicating Esther: ‘By the righteous and dreadful Judgment of God, punishing thy Cowardice, and Self-seeking, and thy want of Love to God, and to his and thy own people’ ([1669-76] 1700: n.p.). Latent threats are again made explicit in *Hester, A Poem* (1714):

Heav’n will some saving Miracle create,
And mark Thee and thy Father’s house for Fate.

(Anon. 1714: 60)

The poem extols the duty of her royal position:

WHERE Heav’n on Man superior Gifts bestows,
Still with the Benefit the Duty grows.
So Sov’reignty and Rule extended far,
In which Men most their Maker’s Image bear.

(60)

Brereton does away with the mediation of Hatakh, increasing the force of Mordecai’s repudiation: ‘Degen’rate *Esther!*’ he cries (1715: 10; see p. 41). Mordecai also underlines to Esther the working of God behind Haman’s actions: ‘If he thus far gave *Haman* to prevail, / He did it doubtless but to try your Zeal’ (11). Webster joins the sea of voices rebuking Esther, Mordecai asserting that God ‘would punish her *Self-seeking* and *Cowardice*, her Neglect of her Country, by some remarkable Judgment upon her’ (1740: 14; repeated in Scott 1827: 4Q5).

Condemnation of Esther again vindicates Mordecai, who is ‘a brave and good Man, not fearing the Wrath of the *Queen*’ (Webster 1740: 15). Esther is nonetheless credited for the writing of the second edict by Webster: ‘Thus was *Esther*, by the Direction of Mordecai, and thro’ the Blessing of Heaven, the *Deliverer of her Country*, and these were its blest Effects’ (19). Pseudo-Webster composes Mordecai’s speech in equally vicious terms. As a usurping queen herself, her attempts to take refuge in her royal position are futile:

Not all thy Grandeur shall protect thee, not even royal Authority can guard thee against a justly incens’d and vengeful Nation; no Titles thou can’st boast that may have been conferr’d upon thee, as being elected Queen in the Room of Another, it is not this that can keep off the Anger of a Multitude incensed by a long Series of ill Usage [. . .] It is not his Love that can save thee from the general Deluge that must overwhelm the whole People of the *Jews*. (1740: 20)

The American preacher Thomas Reese, whilst undermining monarchical hierarchy, maintains gender authority. Esther ‘succeeds’ only ‘by the advice and direction of her uncle Mordecai, who seems still to have retained the authority of a father over her’ (1791: 327–8). Mordecai is the key to Jewish salvation, as Reese is horrified that he might be ‘taken out of the way’, his loss (not Esther’s) dooming the Jews to slaughter (329).

In Handel’s oratorio the melodic aria of Mordecai’s speech is not the threat common to other renditions; his gentle entreaty is clear in its title, ‘Dread not, righteous Queen’. Instead, the gentle melody is quietly insistent and encourages her that ‘Love will pacify his anger’. The line ‘fear is due to God alone’ is sustained throughout the aria, his exhortation melded with spiritual encouragement. A key change adds dramatic import as he piously implores Esther to follow ‘Jehovah’s calling’, insisting that ‘Death is better than a throne’. Timothy Dwight’s poem again presents a persuasive Mordecai, his messianic argument Christianizing the Jewish cause:

[. . .] Their cause thou know’st
The cause of heaven. In them religion lives;
From them Messiah springs, by whose bless’d hand
All nations good, and life, and glory gain’

(1793: Bk II: ll. 61–3)

His threat against her becomes a warning about the psychological consequences of refusal:

[. . .] while thy race
To peace and joy ascend, thy fairest day

Of duty, glory, lost, thy soul shall feel
 The piercing anguish of a wounded heart,
 And waste with keen remorse, and sad despair.

(Bk II: ll. 76–80)

In Tyler's play Mordecai appeals instead to self-interest and the glory that heroism would bring:

[. . .] to be
 The savior of a nation – to have her name
 From age to age, by unborn myriads prais'd,
 And the remembrance of her daring deed
 Preserved by yearly festival and song,
 Will shed a glory on her regal brow
 Which royal diadems cannot confer.

([n.d.] 1941: 45)

A man of 'ordinary principles,' insists M'Crie, would have resigned himself – and his people – to death after Esther's initial reticence. Instead, the pious Mordecai cites 'If I forget thee, Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning,' expressing 'true patriotism – sacred patriotism, devotion to God and the people of God' (1838: 110; see further, Introduction, pp. 45–6). Mordecai's threat even becomes a model for evangelism: 'We never will persuade sinners to flee to the refuge open for them, if we do not convince them that wrath is coming upon them' (113). M'Crie further expands Mordecai's words – now the Word of God by allusion to Heb 4:12's 'double-edged sword' – to defend physical violence through allusion to Jer. 18:7–8: 'Here is a word which serves at once for a fire and hammer; a fire to melt the hard heart into obedience, or, if it prove refractory, a hammer to break it in pieces' (115). M'Crie nonetheless must reconcile violence with his discourse of Western civilized behaviour, and concludes that 'we must employ higher motives for the conviction of sinners,' reading in Mordecai's final line ('Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?') a concession towards parental persuasion (121).

In Cushing's drama, Mordecai's speech becomes chillingly threatening as he warns Esther that if she refuses to approach the king, 'Their blood, which she has suffered to be shed, / Shall cry to her aloud from the cold earth' (1840: 61). He adds:

Her soul shall writhe with anguish unexpressed, –
 And often in the silent midnight hour,
 The voice of God shall thrill her startled ear.

(*ibid.*)

He uses military language to encourage her:

The hour has come, when, like a champion brave,
She should arise and gird her armor on,
And sally forth to win the victor's meed.

(62)

James Watson likewise compounds the sinister threat:

If thou my counsel shall refuse,
He shall, without thine aid, the Jews
From slaughter save – but, in his ire,
He shall thee strike with vengeance dire.

(1845: 87)

Tennant's drama presents Mordecai warning Esther that she will be

Expos'd to malediction and to wrath
From thine own people, hating one that might
Have sav'd, and sav'd not.

(1845: 163)

For Symington, Mordecai's heavy-handedness is vindicated because of his authority: 'rightly forgetting the queen in the daughter, or rather taking account of her royalty only in so far as it enabled her the better to fulfil her duty as his daughter and a child of God' (1878: 100). Matson's Mordecai warns that whilst God will deliver his people, he will 'cast her down in wrath' (1890: 9). Mordecai is scornful of Esther's reticence in Black's novelization: 'Let her take her choice! She is weak and selfish, and esteems her personal comfort of more worth than all the lives of thousands of her people! She is not the noble woman I would fain have thought her, else would she esteem her *life*, if need be, a paltry thing!' (1895: 156). Esther's response complicates the narrator's judgement of her: 'am I not the noble woman he would have me because I shrink from sufferings worse than death – then, death itself? If that prevents me being noble, then I *am* a frail, frail creature, and I do acknowledge it!' (160). Goody's Mordecai is disparaging as he mourns the lack of Jewish military might and is reluctant to

Urge on frail feeble women to perform a part
Fitter for statesman's wisdom, hero's ironclad heart!

(1899: 12)

He threatens that her name will be cursed, not celebrated, if she 'fearest to help His chosen' (16).

Writing such a short time after the War, *The Interpreter's Bible's* commendation of Mordecai's renouncing of self for country is unsurprising: 'Many a patriot since his day has been rewarded for his wisdom and his zeal,' calling his an 'honest plea of a man who was one with his people' (1954: 841). Quoted in *The British Weekly Pulpit*, W. G. Elmslie rewrites Mordecai's speech: 'tell the queen to be ashamed of her despicable selfishness. Go tell the queen that she does not live in a will-less random world where she may pick and choose the best things for herself.' Esther's response is exemplary: 'all that was good in her waked and seized the upper hand and crushed down her baseness and her meanness and her selfishness' (cited in *Expositor's Dictionary*, 1910: 311).

The extension of Mordecai and Esther to general principles becomes commonplace. Esther's courage is a provocation to boldness for J. Walker, Mordecai's own threatening tones seeping into Walker's writing:

Be bold for Christ now, and your testimony will be a blessing to many; but if you hold your peace, Satan will some day drive you into a corner, where you must either publicly deny your Lord or be forced into a confession which will have very little value.

Mordecai's speech stirs his longing to 'free England from increasing irreligion and sin' and further to 'carry the banner of the Cross amongst the millions of heathen in distant lands'. Missionary and military metaphors combine as he exhorts his readers: 'It is in time of war that soldiers come to the front. It is in days of darkness and corruption that God's people must prove themselves the light of men, the salt of the earth' (J. Walker, *The Four Men*; cited in *Expositor's Dictionary*, 1910: 312). James Hastings is similarly keen to expand the speech, drawing out the more general tenet that 'retribution must ensue upon negligence'. Reckoning 'at times [. . .] takes the form of the overthrow of our temporal possessions,' but more common, he asserts, is 'deterioration of character'. He concludes rather ominously: 'God has a hell of fire for the negligent on this side of the veil' (1911: 539).

Rita Benton's play reverses the emphasis in the discussion between Esther and Mordecai. It is Esther that insists, in response to the news: 'My father, I will come – die with my people', and Mordecai who resists: 'Nay, my daughter, the king will surely spare *thee*' (1922: 143). Maxwell's play *Queen Vashti* contains a hard, politically-minded Mordecai. His perversely anti-Semitic speech, admits that Esther may escape by 'subtle ways maybe, for the Jew hath the wisdom of the serpent, and crawling through the grass none knoweth where he moveth'. He threatens her in the knowledge he will one day rule:

Do thou my will, or thy fair head shall lie in the dust. I, who could make thee Queen, can tear the crown from off thy brow. For when this cursed Haman is removed, I will be the greatest man in the kingdom.

Esther is subservient, avowing, in contrast to the headstrong Vashti, that ‘it is not given to women to know the hidden meaning of things’ (1923: 39). In this rewriting, Mordecai becomes a tyrant ruler who Vashti and Darius eventually assassinate, crucifying him in imitation of Haman’s death (53).

David Clines explains Mordecai’s speech as merely a ‘counterweight’ to Esther’s fear of the king, arguing that ‘staying out of the king’s presence is no less dangerous than entering it’ (1984a: 301–2). White not only defends Esther, but sees the speech as emphasizing ‘the importance of human action in accomplishing God’s purpose’, what she calls ‘a major underlying theme in Esther’ (1992: 128). In his generally anti-Jewish exposition, Barry C. Davies judges that ‘Mordecai’s failure here to credit God for Israel’s anticipated deliverance is one more confirmation of his lack of spiritual depth’ (1995: 233). Typically, Davies admits no ideological partiality, but rather warns that ‘we’ must ‘make certain that we do not read our own ideas (i.e., biases) into the text or intentionally omit text truths in order to skew the data to suit our purposes’ (234). Levenson praises Mordecai’s speech as ‘rhetorically powerful’, and privileges the successful Esther’s strategy of non-violence and human effort over Moses’ ineffectual use of threat and miraculous plagues (1997: 79). For Esther Fuchs, Esther is not ‘a genuine heroine’ (1999: 80), because salvation ‘stems not from Esther’s initiative but from Mordecai’s orders’ (79). The Orthodox ‘Chabad in Cyberspace’ continues traditional rabbinic representations of a Mordecai who inspires Esther just as the ‘Torah is the medium which brings to light the unique distinction of Jews’. Although providing impetus, it is Esther who is the chief heroic force, because Mordecai’s function was only ‘to reveal her innate qualities, to allow her real self to surface’, and at this point ‘she became the direct cause of the miracle’.

The phrase ‘such a time as this’ suggests that extraordinary action is possible only in extraordinary times and circumstances (often interpreted as divinely ordained opportunities). Symington makes this point when he insists that ‘occasion not only develops character, but to a large extent creates it’ (1878: 101). It is this sentiment – and its pertinence for women’s heroism – that seems to have drawn novelists such as George Eliot to the story of Esther. In *Adam Bede* (1859), Hetty Sorrel (Hester in the court proceedings, 414) and her future, are constrained by her gender. She had ‘a woman’s destiny before her’ ([1859] 1994: 243), a ‘rancorous, poisonous garment’ (244). In *Felix Holt, the Radical* Esther Lyons is a character who for Rita Bode ‘articulates most directly the restrictions with which women grapple’ (1995: 769). She is an anglicized, blonde ‘Queen Esther’ (106), her surname invoking the British, imperial symbol. Questions arise concerning the possibility of heroic action for the queen, now transposed to mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Esther muses on Felix’s unrealistically high expectations of her: ‘Did he want her to be heroic? That seemed impossible without some great occasion’ (203). The opportunity does arrive

with the discovery of an inheritance, but it is evident that only exceptional women are able to rise to the occasion. Esther recognizes that she needs to construct herself as a single, forceful agent to achieve the heroism that Felix expects of her: 'Her life was a heap of fragments, and so were her thoughts: some great energy was needed to bind them together' (203). Later, as Esther changes under Felix's influence, she rejects literature, because 'her life was a book which she seemed herself to be constructing – trying to make her character clear before her, and looking into the ways of destiny' (412).

Oliphant's Hester is a girl who has 'such a world of latent possibilities in her' (1883: 44), 'a woman every inch of her, though she was so much of a boy' (78). Although Catherine's clerk declares that women 'are sometimes better than men' at business, 'with an accent almost of awe', it is evident that opportunity is not open to her (85). When Hester hears about a threat on the bank, she has an

eager yet vain desire to have it in her power to do something [. . .] to have that golden opportunity – the occasion to do a heroic deed, to save some one, to venture your own life, to escape the bonds of every day, and once have a chance of showing what was in you! (323)

Hester has a 'sudden revelation' whilst standing under a myrtle bush – the symbol of Hadassah – 'A sort of prophetic sense that the lives of all were linked with her own, a presentiment that between them and among them it would be hers to work either for weal or woe' (324). Hester ridicules Roland's ideas of heroism: "Do you really think?", she said, "that the charm of inspiring, as you call it, is what any reasonable creature would prefer to doing?":

To make somebody else a hero rather than be a hero yourself? Women would need to be disinterested indeed if they like that best. Besides, we are not in the days of chivalry. What could you be inspired to do – make better bargains on your Stock Exchange? (331)

An 'involuntary rebel' (405) with a 'masculine mind' (347), she considers intolerable the ideas that she must be 'compelled to accept the yoke, which, to other women, was a simple matter, and their natural law' (405). Oliphant's Esther is exceptional, her heart 'bounding wildly in her breast with perplexity and pain, as well as love, but ready for any heroic effort' (408).

In Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) two characters talk at a Purim ball: 'I know there's some blessed old law or other by which women haven't got the same chance of distinguishing themselves that way as men' ([1892] 1977: 106), Esther as such the extraordinary hero. In George Moore's *Esther Waters* ([1894] 1936), Esther is unexpectedly heroic as an unmarried mother:

Hers is a heroic adventure if one considers it – a mother’s fight for the life of her child against all the forces that civilization arrays against the lowly and the illegitimate. (159)

Esther’s strength is of a peculiarly English and Victorian kind as she and her mistress form a picture of the ‘quiet, instinctive Englishwomen’ with ‘strong, warm natures, under an appearance of formality and reserve’ (173). Her seducer, Fred, later reflects on the difficulties – yet inherent weakness – of women’s lives: ‘It may not be a woman’s fault if she falls, but it is always a man’s. He can always fly from temptation’ (177). Gambling (invoking Haman’s throwing of lots) is a metaphor for women’s lives: “‘you’ve got to chance it in the end – leastways a woman has. Not the likes of you, miss, but the likes of us’” says Hester. Her mistress agrees, connecting female heroism with surrender: “‘it is always the woman who is sacrificed’” (226).

In Drabble’s *The Radiant Way* (1987) education offers ‘Adventure and possibility’ to Esther and her friends. With their youth and wit,

Their fate should, therefore, be in some sense at least exemplary: opportunity was certainly offered to them, they had choices, at eighteen the world opened for them and displayed its riches. (88)

The president of the self-proclaimed conservative Christian Coalition of America, ‘America’s Leading Grassroots Organization Defending our Godly Heritage’, asserts her belief that the organization is ‘in Washington for such a time as this’. She further explains that this ‘familiar passage from the fourth book of Esther has become a defining factor in how I approach leadership at CCA’ (2005).

4:14 ‘From another quarter’

The anonymous pamphlet *The Politics of Another World*, by Mordecai (1837), links Mordecai’s gesture beyond the present situation to the apocalypse of Dan 8:19–25 to give deliverance a cosmic application. Mordecai, as pseudonym, functions as a prophetic voice of obliteration and transformation. An angel says to the anonymous author that ‘you will announce the annihilation of an *incorrigible world*, and be the herald of the establishment of *another, in which all tears shall be wiped from all eyes*’ (v). The *New Catholic Commentary* simply presumes a religious referent for the term ‘another quarter’ – it ‘is of course God’. White turns to this verse to back up her assertion, despite lack of explicit reference, that here that divine action ‘seems to be assumed by the verse’ (1992: 125).

The book's most providential sentence, 'there shall be enlargement and deliverance', is applied to a variety of subjects by its readers. The Rev H. H. Norris in 1835 makes its subject the Christian Church: 'if we are now, what the Jews were then, God's chosen people – the people pointed at by Christ, to whom the kingdom of God was to be given [...] the very substances of its shadows [...] as Israel's chosen race' (1835: 15). Writing in the context of the Ecclesiastical Commission created by Sir Robert Peel in 1835, he urges action following the model of Esther, contrasting her with Gallio of Acts 18:2–18 who refuses to pass judgement:

If then a weak, a defective, or a perverted faith, if a fearful or a divided heart, or, what is worse, of a frame of mind allied to Gallio's [...] have hitherto indisposed you to regard the signs of the time, and the constraining call they make upon you to quit yourselves toward the church as His faithful soldiers and servants, be admonished by Mordecai's warning voice. (27)

Rev Christopher Bowen preaches on this verse at the 'Occasion of the Marriage of Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales' in 1863, in the hope that his sermon will '*lead them to discern in our National Blessings THE HAND OF GOD*' (1863: 3). He interprets it as noteworthy in showing God's 'providential dealings with men' to 'raise up the fit instruments at the right time, for the furtherance of his gracious designs' (5). For Bowen this providence equates to international renown:

The glory of the present reign – the peace and prosperity which with few and short exceptions have of late dwelt among us – the strong moral sense and right-mindedness which has grown over the land – the respectful deference of other lands to English opinion – all this, which we feel with a personal satisfaction, we have learned to associate in a great degree with the high tone, pure character, and bright example, which has so long been the grace and glory of the British Court.

He feels sure, therefore, that 'God would keep the nation sound and true. Our Sovereign was to us the token of *His* favour' (15).

Hastings reads Mordecai's assertion as an invocation of 'the record of God's faithfulness in the past', that would – like the Esther story itself for modern readers – give 'the assurance that in some way of His own He would prevent the extinction of His people' (1911: 537). Michael V. Fox draws the same conviction that its 'literary force' 'helps us believe, or at least affirm' God's deliverance for the Jews. He asserts faith 'even when God is hidden, as he seems to be in the Esther story', yet adds, more doubtfully, 'as he has been so often, so inexplicably, so unforgivably, throughout history' ([1991] 2000: 12).

Esther 4:15-17

4:15 'Fast ye for me'

The Greek version of Esther inserts prayers by Mordecai and Esther after this dramatic scene. Rather than the fleeting reference to fasting found in the MT, the Greek renders a pious Esther, who declares her ritual purity in eating only vegetables, her abhorrence at being married to a heathen and derision of her royal status. The Catholic Lectionary appropriates both Mordecai's and Esther's prayers from the Greek text. For many centuries Mordecai's prayer was ascribed to Esther, as Catherine Brown points out, 'evidently in order to make explicit Esther's parallel to Christ' (2007: 10). Many later writers are indebted to this pious portrayal of Esther, whether they admit it explicitly or not.

Although *Esther Rabbah* also renders a prayer by Esther (XIII.6), her fasting is still problematic, because it occurs during Passover. The Midrash presents a

pragmatic defence: 'If there is no Israel, why should there be a Passover?' (VIII.6). Cahn relates the timings of Esther and Pesach: the edict is sent in Nissan; Esther's three-day fast overlaps with the beginning of Pesach. The king's insomnia occurs on Pesach night, with Haman hung on its second day. Esther's banquet is commemorated on the second day of Pesach, at which ten pieces of bread are distributed in the home to represent the 'ten crowns of impurity' associated with Haman's sons (1995: 95).

In Christian readings, fasting is a sign of Esther's piety. Queen Matilda, in the twelfth century, commissioned a biography of her mother, her piety enhanced by analogy to Esther's apocryphal prayer, both women praised for scorning their lavish ornaments (see Honeycutt 1990: 135). In a self-consciously questionable move, the German Protestant John Brentius accentuates Esther's piety through allusion to her prayer renouncing her royal apparel but with the parenthetical qualification: '(the which notwithstanding is counted Apocrypha)' (1584: 59). The seventeenth-century poet Aemilia Lanyer pays homage to the Countess of Cumberland in *Salve Deus Rex Judaorum* (1611), associating her with the praying apocryphal Esther. Hester 'spent her time in prayers all that while' (l. 1504) inspired only by fear. The Countess's devotion is superior:

Yet must faire *Hester* needs give place to thee,
 Who hath continu'd dayes, weekes, months, and yeares,
 In Gods true service, yet thy heart beeing free—
 From doubt of death, or any other feares:—
 Fasting from sinne, thou pray'st thine eyes may see
 Him that hath full possession of thine heart,—
 From whose sweet love thy Soule can never part.

His Love, not Feare, makes thee to fast and pray,
 No kinsmans counsell needs thee to advise [. . .]

(Lanyer [1611] 2000: ll. 1514-21)

Unlike the regal Esther, Lanyer's ideal woman will not put on her royal robes until her mournful earthly existence is over. Esther is also cited as the 'Religious Ester, who taught her Maids to fast and pray' in Elizabeth Joscelyn's mother's advice book, *The Mother's Legacy to her Vnborn Childe* ([1624] 2000: 79).

For Obadiah Sedgwick in his House of Commons sermon of 1643, fasting suggests the mutual work of human and divine as he urges pragmatism alongside dependence on God:

I beseech you when you heare of *policies, use means*, but still trust on Gods *wisdom*; when of *powers, use means*, but still trust on Gods *omnipotency*, when of *contrary events, use means*, but still trust on Gods *fidelity*. Though *men* fail you, though *friend*, fail you [. . .] yet, yet still depend on *God; He* never yet hath failed. (1643: 32)

Heyricke presents an extreme theology of prayer in his sermon of 1646 in which he implores the House of Commons to ‘pray, pray with strong cryes and groans’. It is Esther’s prayers that ‘overthrew what they were contriving twelve months’, and he asserts: ‘nothing can stand against Prayer, Prayer is Omnipotent, it is a Commander of the Heavens, a Controler of the Elements, it commands God himself’ (1646: 29).

In *Hester, A Poem* (1714) Esther prayerfully rejects the glories of monarchy:

WITH what Indifference I brook this Crown,
How slight the gawdy Trifles of a Throne.

(Anon. 1714: 45)

Echoing both the Greek version and Jewish tradition, she asserts:

Nor have I, fond or fearful of my State,
Or at their Altars bow’d, or at their Tables eat.

(ibid.)

The poem accentuates Esther’s pious character and her centrality to the narrative, in line with the Greek Additions, citing Mordecai’s dream in which ‘a live limpid Rill, too small for Name, / With sudden Waves a sounding Flood became’ (33). In the early eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards credits Esther’s prayers with Jewish deliverance to argue that it is ‘by earnest prayer of the church that God’s people shall be delivered from Antichrist’ (1998: 62). Thomas Brereton’s translation of Racine’s *Esther* renders her prayer: ‘Thou know’st how I their Pageantries detest:/ Their Feasts and their Libations, all to me / Appear no less than grossest Blasphemy’ (1715: 13)

In Handel’s oratorio, Esther in ‘Tears assist me’ is Christ-like, praying and offering herself as sacrifice:

Is it blood that must atone?
Take, O take my life alone,
And thy chosen people spare.

Her low, serious and mournful tones contrast with the higher oboe melody, communicating both sorrow and majesty. Without instrumental introduction, the vocal urgency of the chorus’s homophony is striking: ‘Save us, O Lord, / And blunt the wrathful sword’. As the refrain is repeated in contrapuntal entries in the different vocal parts, it creates a sense of impending and unavoidable threat.

M’Crie rejects Esther’s prayers not just for their apocryphal status, but because they reject worldly wealth. This defender of Empire concedes that she did not ‘glory in her crown’, but asks, ‘why should she have abhorred them in

themselves? [. . .] There is no sin in persons dressing according to their rank' (1838: 136, 137). He nonetheless contends that 'Providence had permitted these additions to be made' to enhance 'the antiquity, genuineness, and intrinsic value of the book itself' (9).

Rather than merely praying before her ordeal, in Cushing's play Esther proselytizes her maid Zobeida about faith with missionary fervour:

Without its aid my sinking heart would fail,
 But with each prayer its courage stronger grows.
 [. . .] I would this faith were thine, –
 'Tis this alone, mid life's tumultuous sea,
 Can give us strength to breast the billowy surge,
 [. . .] I'll teach thee more
 Of this high faith, and may it captive lead
 Thy willing mind, and spread its gentle sway
 O'er many a heart, which dark idolatry
 Now holds in bonds of ignorance and fear.

(1840: 67)

Her maid indeed responds: 'I would learn / The secret of that strength' (*ibid.*). Tennant portrays synagogue prayers, at which Hatakh recounts Esther's approach to the king. The faithfulness of the Jews is overlaid with Christological language:

Your cup hath pass'd – your cup of trembling, charg'd
 With the full fury of malicious man,
 Hath pass'd your lips, untasted, and returns
 Back to the mouth of him who charged it.

(1845: 186)

For the Protestant Symington, her prayer is 'the secret of Esther's heroism' (1878: 106). Rather than turning to the Apocrypha, he inserts his own narrative:

A seraglio is a sad enough place, with its year-long monotony, its petty jealousies, its gilded restraint; but when, as the curtain now falls, we see Esther with firm-set lips going to arrange for a long prayer-meeting with her maidens, we feel that this queen has brought a good thing into a sad place. (1878: 107)

Symington berates the Additions for going against New Testament principles of fasting. It 'represents Esther as making an apology to God for that which needs no apology, the putting on of her royal apparel'. He cites Mt 6:16–18 to argue that 'Those who fast aright take care not to appear unto men to fast' (1878: 112). Racine's Esther appropriates the apocryphal prayer for God's glorification: 'do not suffer that these fierce people, drunk with our blood, should shut the only

mouths which throughout the whole universe celebrate thy benefits' (Rice 1882: 13).

4:16 'If I perish, I perish'

Esther becomes an exemplar of self-sacrifice, and her declaration a primary source for reflection. The Talmud reads its repetition to indicate a double sacrifice: 'As I am lost to my father's house so I shall be lost to thee' (*Meg* 15a). It is perhaps her speech here that readers have in mind when they invoke her as an exceptional woman. Marbod of Rennes (1035–23) claims that Esther, amongst other biblical women, is 'read' as having 'equalled or exceeded men' (see Honeycutt 1990: 141). In England Esther is invoked specifically for political patriotism. Samuel Kem in 1644 prefaces his sermon on Esth 4:16 with biblical verses (Ps 50:15, Prov 14:28 and 13:17) that frame Esther's approach as one of a model of the selfless, godly ambassador. As such, criticism of the king – as expressed by Esther in her transgressive approach – becomes in his sermon the dutiful response of a subject. He applies the Jews' situation to the English church, plotted against 'for utter extirpation' (Kem 1644: 2). He calls upon the Commissioners to imitate Esther's 'independent heroick self-denying resolution' (4), and more specifically to 'Put on resolution, and use importunate prayer as a Preparation, so go into the King, if ye perish ye perish' (2). In view of divine providence, civil unrest is an indicator that God 'must be incensed highly' (11). Kem applauds the 'hazzarding of her life in the Churches cause' (12), and renders Mordecai's speech in primarily patriotic terms: 'they are your Nations, it is your Church, your Families, your Houses, your Estates, your Children, Wives, Selves, Soules, your Gospell, Ordinances, are aimed at' (26). The objective is peace in the country, 'our Hierusalem' (30), and by turning to Christ's example of resolution to the point of death, he invokes the atonement for a national agenda (14). Resolve is of utmost import, Kem argues, because 'God will never answer a lazie begging Christian' (17).

Two years later Heyricke sets Esther's selflessness against Vashti's self-centredness. He parodies Esther's speech as he imagines that Vashti 'wouldn't have interrupted her vanity to bother' – her response would have been "'if they perish, they perish'" (1646: 8). Poole glosses Esther's speech, inserting the spiritual and rational:

Although my danger be great and evident, considering the expressness of that Law, and the uncertainty of the King's mind, and that severity which he shewed to my Predecessor *Vashti*; yet rather than neglect my duty to God, and to his People,

I will go to the King, and cast myself chearfully and resolutely upon God's Providence for my Safety and Success. ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.)

Alexander Webster applies Esther's resolve here – 'Noble Example, worthy of all Imitation!' (1740: 28) – to his readers to undertake 'the Cause of the Publick'. He commends Esther for not citing obstacles as an excuse for inaction, including those of her gender 'By Reason of her Sex', and the legal limitations of 'the Constitution' (28).

Esther's speech is invoked in many works to explore female sacrifice. In 1793 Dwight's Esther responds to Mordecai's speech with 'her eye, / Kindling with sacred fire' (Bk II, ll. 85–6), her speech infused with patriotic fervour:

Go tell illustrious Mordecai, my soul
Is warm'd to this great deed. His daughter's heart
Shuns not for Israel, or for Heaven, to die' [. . .]
[. . .] Let Israel's race,
Thro' Shushan's walls, with prayers, with tears, and fasts,
Implore the Skies; and tho no bright'ning hope
Presents the king complacent; yet, to morrow,
My feet shall tempt the court of gloomy danger,
And if my life's exacted, let me die.

(ll. 91–3, 97–102)

Esther proclaims herself 'Mean, weak, and frail' for a task which requires 'a manly fortitude', a weakness that may nonetheless 'in the hand of Heav'n, / Be a poor instrument'. This seemingly passive construction of femininity is subverted by her use of the violent Jael (Judg 4:17–22) as an inspiration:

[. . .] The wife
Of Hebre, in her tent, accomplish'd what
The warlike sons of Abinoam could not,
With thousands at his feet.

(164)

Although possessing a 'feeble woman's hand', she prays, rather ominously considering the Jael association: 'Arm me, all over, with a woman's power' (178). The Reverend Headley vindicates Esther in his book on 'the most glowing and impassioned sketches of the enchanting influence of female loveliness' (publisher's preface 1852: ii). Her hesitance is but 'a passing weakness', and she 'at once arose to the dignity of a martyr. The blood of the proud and heroic Mordecai flowed in her veins' (1852: 17).

Novelists seem to be attracted to Esther for the tension between sacrifice and heroism that her speech 'If I perish, I perish' intimates. Dickens' Esther

Summerson, like her biblical namesake, both relinquishes and gains. Ellen Moers argues that, although ‘cast for the role of renunciation,’ sacrificing the handsome Woodcourt for the worthy Jarndyce, ‘it is Jarndyce who must renounce sexual love, not Esther’ (1973: 20). Hester in *Hester’s Sacrifice* (1866) is the epitome of surrender: ‘Giving much, nay, giving all, she never asked for return. To care for others, and not to be greatly cared for by them, this seemed to be her life duty’ (I.49–50). The sacrificial Hester is far from pathetic. Her love interest overlooks her for her weaker sister because: ‘there was a great steadfastness of purpose about Hester Tredegar, mingled with purity and honesty of heart, which he considers ‘transcended his own’ (II.172).

Other works suggest a bond between sacrifice and redemption. In Mary Seamer’s *Our Esther* (1883), the adopted Esther, ‘the pet and darling of the village’ (35), brings religious belief into a sceptical home: ‘even in this time of early girlhood, the sweetness of sacrifice, the joy of giving up all for others and for God, seemed to open before her soul’s gaze in times of prayer, or after she had received her Lord in Holy Communion’ (154–5). When Esther is wrongly accused of theft, in sacrificially protecting the culprit from punishment, she influences the maid to become a Catholic.

In Buchan’s play, Esther’s sacrifice is set in a global drama of a universalist messianism:

[. . .] that God would stretch his arm
 For our deliverance, pardoning our sin
 Which reacheth to the clouds, for the sake of Him,
 The appointed seed, whose day (may it be near!),
 Shall bless all lands’

(1873: 56)

Eliza Lynn Linton’s *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (1885) sets the protagonist’s wife, Esther, against the biblical Esther (who the narrative invokes briefly before introducing the character). Compared to its biblical counterpart, her sacrifice is not political and familial but to her children’s cost. Esther’s neglect of her family because of a ‘higher calling’ is spurned as a model for imitation (III.48).

There is no question of compromise in the feminist campaigner Josephine Butler’s 1888 *The New Godiva*. Two brothers discuss female suffrage through a painting of Esther. The defender of the women’s movement finds her ‘grand resolve’ overwhelming: ‘The details, the technique of the picture are lost in that absorbed, absorbing gaze; tranquil, heroic, pitiful.’ For him she is ‘symbolic’ of female sacrifice for humanity at large (Butler 1888: 27). This description follows a dialogue that conflates personal moral concerns with national well-being, through citation of Froude’s ‘Early Life of Carlisle,’ which links morality (speci-

fied as 'courage, veracity, PURITY, justice and good sense'), nationhood, divine will and biblical Palestine:

Nations which professed well with their lips, while their hearts were set on wealth and pleasure, were overtaken as truly in modern Europe as in ancient Palestine by the judgment of God. (7)

Butler invokes Esther perhaps because she is aligned with the sexually compromised woman, her sacrifice an analogue to Godiva's 'stripping herself bare', her power gained only through compromising feminine convention and reputation.

Heroism and sacrifice are conflated in Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892). The queen's approach to the king is invoked in Esther's entrance into Raphael's office at which she informs him that she is leaving her adopted family because of their hypocritical middle-class spurning of religious identity. Raphael asks:

"But suppose you fail?"

"If I fail –" she repeated, and rounded off the sentence with a shrug.

It was the apathetic, indifferent shrug of Moses Ansell; only his was the shrug of faith in Providence, hers of despair.

([1892] 1977: 339)

Although the queen's 'if I perish, I perish' is cut short in a shrug of 'despair', she is nonetheless a figure of exemplary self-sacrifice: 'Happiness was not for her; but service remained. Penetrated by the new emotion, she seemed to herself to have found the key to [. . .] holy calm' (363).

Appearing soon after the Second World War, Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Story of Esther Costello* (1953) is the story of the enemy's tragic victory, subverting the biblical triumph. The exploitation and death of the sacrificed Esther act as a synecdoche of the extremes of inhumanity: 'there was nothing thinkable or unthinkable, that one man would do to another', the narrative avows. At the end of a list of humanitarian horrors, the Holocaust surfaces without explicit reference:

In Germany a doctor had been ready to gas his fellow men in batches of a hundred at a time, with a squad standing by to salvage their clothes, their shoes, their hair, and the gold in their teeth, before their corpses were rendered down for soap and glue. (1953: 197)

Elizabeth Taylor's *Hester Lilley* (1954) is more domestically focused as the shy, submissive Hester rails against the sacrifice of the serving classes: 'It's wrong to be happy like that. . . not to have your own life', she says of the maid's constricted existence (47).

Modern critics speculate on the significance of 4.16 – Paton, for example, suggests that it is ‘a despairing expression of resignation to the inevitable’ (1908: 226), whereas Goldman invokes Jacob’s exclamation (‘If I be bereaved, I am bereaved’, Gen 43:14) to assert that it is a ‘simple, but sublime and courageous statement of resignation to God’s will’ (1954: 218). *The Interpreter’s Bible* follows Goldman adding that the omission of God for Esther ‘seems deliberate’ (1952: 844; see also Levenson 1997: 82). Although berated for her selfishness, Esther is ultimately Christ-like for W. G. Elmslie, because, ‘Like him, she laid her own life down on the altar’. That she does not die does not ‘diminish’ her deed because of its inspiration to later readers (*The British Weekly Pulpit*; cited in *The Expositor’s Dictionary*, 1910: 311).

For Hastings the immanent presentness of duty is applied to the burden of democracy: ‘It is a great thing to live now. Are we equal to the occasion?’ (1911: 543). The nation’s ills echo those of Ahasuerus’s empire: ‘It is intolerable to think that a noble population like ours should forever lie sodden and stupefied, as now it does, beneath a curse like drunkenness’ (544). From Esther’s example, and without irony, he calls for a ‘far broader, manlier, more courageous and open-eyed style of Christianity’ (544). Cahn echoes Hastings’ emphasis on responsibility. ‘We were chosen by God’, he avows, ‘because we chose God’. As with Esther and Joseph, chosenness is not ‘for pride or for lazy, privileged lives’ but confers responsibility (1995: 159). Levenson reads Esther’s story in the manner of a *Bildungsroman* in which is seen a ‘maturation of her character’, fasting again invoked as a dependence on ‘God’s gracious response’ (1997: 81). He is rare in noting an ambivalence in her speech, recognizing the possibility of both ‘willing acceptance’ and ‘resignation’ (82).

Esther as Exemplar of Resolve

Esther’s courage makes her a model for the furthering of a people’s cause – whether this be a national, ethnic or political group. In the modern period, resolution was a specifically masculine trait – Fenning’s *Dictionary* of 1741 notes the entry for ‘manful’ as ‘bold, stout, daring’ – a cultural ‘fact’ that Esther’s gender challenged. John Stockwood merely sidesteps Esther, instead invoking Mordecai’s appeal to her as his model to compel Walsingham to plea for the Protestant Church. The case of Richard Heyrick demonstrates how complex the nexus of political, gender and religious hierarchies could be. In *Queen Esther Resolves: Or a Princely Pattern of Heaven-born Resolution* (1646), he makes the shift suggested in his title from the female model of Esther to the masculine realm of political application. He does not attempt to reduce her

agency, but presents her as the archetype of the exception in order to stymie her function as representative of her sex. Esther, and her gender, illustrate God's extraordinary action:

a virtuous woman more than manfully wrestling with publike danger and destruction; Behold strength in weaknesse, vertue in infirmity, Resolution in inconstancy; strength, virtue, resolution in a woman. (1646: 3)

As such, Heyricke can maintain the hierarchies of obedience and order, that of female submission to male authority, whilst advocating harsh punishment for the king's advisers and favourites, whom he calls 'often the worst of men' (7). Christopher Hill explains that the English Civil War provoked anxieties regarding an uprising of the peasants (1972: 20–6), a fear evident in Heyricke's desire to undermine some, but not all, hierarchies: whilst Esther bows to the king, she stands against Haman. She is merely part of God's measured transgression of his own laws in desperate times (in her case laws of gender); he maintains that 'the Laws of this Land' should be nullified if 'against the Law of God' (6). The exceptional nature of activity against the king's favourites goes against the 'natural order' of monarchy. His entire argument pivots upon the distinction between the normative and exceptional:

The observation of laws is very commendable, but when exigences are so violent, when confusion hath turned all upside down, when the State is disturbed, when wicked men are combined, when all Order is perverted, then men are to look to the main chance, then to sollicite the principal businesse, and so much the more zealously, as *Esther* did, by how much there is lesse possibility of compassing it the ordinary way.

In a theological logic with which many Protestants would be familiar, in the manner of Christ who came not to break the law but to fulfil it, 'the Queen did not contemn the Law, but necessity made her passe it over' (6). Elizabeth I herself had been subject to such logic. As Mendelson and Crawford explain, she 'came to see herself as an extraordinary woman, a "phoenix, matchless and unique" as emblem books were later to portray her' (1998: 353–4). Heyricke further glosses the nature of 'true' resolution, which is 'not an inconsiderate and rash temerity, nor a senselesse and brutish stupidity' but is intimately tied to 'knowledge and apprehension'. It is not 'the Majesty of her Person' which commends Esther's resolution but her 'wisdom in deliberating, her judgement and discretion in consulting about it, another circumstance that commends the resolution' (Heyricke 1646: 5).

Writers are emphatic in their insistence on the unsuitability of Esther's gender. Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* declares her inherently unsuited

to heroic action, underlining Providential direction: ‘He, by the feeblest Wretch that Earth can show, / Will break our Fetters, and confound the Foe’ (1715: 11). In Tyler’s play *Mordecai* despairs: ‘What can Esther do?’ ([n.d.] 1941: 44), and his praise of her only fortifies her inherent flaws because God:

[. . .] rejects the great,
 The wise and prudent, – and to the sword
 And battle bow – prefers the feeble arm
 And fainting heart of woman – weak and vain[.]

(45)

Esther prays with ‘feeble voice’ (57), and her maidens her ‘frail limbs support’ as she prepares to approach the king (*ibid.*). Yet women are praised for their essential patriotism:

From vulgar shame thy sex redeeming still
 Thy nobler sex, by law and custom bound
 To the dull duties of domestic life,
 Yet when by Providence to action call’d,
 Where is the Man who will like thee display
 Such patriot fortitude – such trust in God!

(46)

Voices are discernible in defence of female resolution. Joanna Southcott, the infamous eighteenth-century prophetess, in her *Warning the World*, asks: ‘Is it a new thing for a Woman to deliver her people?’ ‘Did not Esther do it? Did not Judith do it?’ (cited in Hopkins 1982: 216). For F. C. Le Fevre, the ‘Female influence’ of Esther becomes ‘the GENIUS OF LIBERTY – THE GODDESS OF FREEDOM’ (1831: 11), who has ‘pointed to the constitution, which allows to every man the liberty of worshipping when and as he pleases’ (12). Thomas M’Crie argues that although women ‘are ordinarily inferior to men in constitutional courage’, ‘once resolved, they often display more constancy and firmness than the other sex’ (1838: 103, later imitated by Symington). Their timidity is commended only because it leads them to caution and to ‘receive advice’. He links Esther’s heroism to Mary – shying away from any explicit reference, asserting that because of Esther’s honour, ‘all generations would call her blessed’ (122). Esther and Mordecai are mutually complementary, a move that tempers Esther’s female heroism. As Jesus sent out disciples ‘two by two’, so God’s provision is always in ‘mutual help, counsel, and encouragement’, and perhaps more importantly to M’Crie, ‘the defects of the one instrument are happily counterbalanced by the excellencies of the other’ (124). Therefore, Esther (it is implied, like all women) ‘only wanted to be instructed’, and thereafter is her ‘judgment informed’ and her resolution fixed. His insistence on mutuality is genuine, as Mordecai also

must be 'instructed by his pupil' to fast. It is nonetheless a mutuality provoked only by the extreme nature of the situation: God's word, he claims, *even* when 'spoken by a child, by an inferior, or a woman, claims obedience' (128).

By reference to Esther, M'Crie berates the Church for cowardice that 'stifles their exertions for God and his Church' (139). He asserts meritocracy, despite his commitment to monarchy and empire, revealing tensions within his own structures of hierarchy that are precariously balanced in the lectures: 'The person who occupies the place of a common porter may have within him a soul that towers in real greatness far above that of the most titled grandee' (150).

The transition from hesitation to resolve influences many representations of Esther in the *Bildungsroman* genre, which follows the progression and maturing of a (normally male) protagonist. The development of Esther from a young girl to a politically influential woman is invoked in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852–3), in which Esther Summerson moves towards a more measured and self-assured sacrificial nature. She is the resolute woman, 'as mild as she's game' ([1852–3] 1996: 834), and read alongside the biblical story, distanced from George Bernard Shaw's 'maddening prig' and Broderick and Grant's judgement that she is 'insipid' and 'too good to be true-to-life' (Shaw, cited in Hawthorn 1987: 27; Broderick and Grant 1985: 252). Esther's transformation is symbolized in her move from being engaged to Jarndyce – a selfless, yet impractical philanthropist – to marrying Woodcourt, who Broderick and Grant point out is 'both selfless and selfish in his professional practice' (257). Her initial selflessness is, then, only a foil for the preferable selfish-selflessness of the married Woodcourt and Esther. Indeed, Ellen Moers claims her as 'an intelligent, enterprising, wide-ranging force in the novel' (1973: 5–16).

In George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), Esther moves from being what Felix calls a 'petty creature' to an empress, walking in the steps of Queen Esther, although little prepared for her new role. Harold tells her:

'You are the empress of your own fortunes – and more besides.'

'Dear me,' said Esther, letting her work fall, and leaning back against the cushions; 'I don't think I know very well what to do with my empire.' ([1866] 2000: 415)

Her father recognizes that Esther has 'been led by a peculiar path, and into experience which is not ordinarily the lot of those who are seated in high places' (418). In A. Weber's novel *Hester Tracy, A Schoolroom Story* (1884), the protagonist Hester develops from selfishness towards altruism, in a narrative suggestive of the force of destiny; she was 'born to help, not herself but many others'. The tale concludes its moral lesson: 'Therefore she grew up into the right sort of woman' (Weber 1884: 267). In G. Colmore's *The Strange Story of Hester Wynne* (1899), Hester – an overwhelmingly weak and timid woman – is

brought to courage by necessity, as she testifies: ‘the very desperateness of my circumstances enabled me in some strange way to fight them’ (281).

Frequently a model of the resolute, courageous woman, she metamorphoses into her most intriguing form in the novel *Hester and Elinor* (1854). The heroine has ‘a masculine air about her’, her chief attribute her ‘restless strength’, and yet ‘a smile and peculiar sweetness played around her mouth, and she imparted a feminine softness to her face’ (Anon. 1854: 2). Hers is a life far removed from the ‘woman’s full, free life’ represented by her friend Annie (9). Hester’s uncle (a Mordecai figure) brings her up to be ‘superior to her sex – to be independent of the world’s opinions’ (28). Annie articulates a view of woman who has ‘eminently the power of consolation and sympathy. Her place is with the sufferer, and more than all, with the sinner’ – a view that both Elinor and Hester struggle with. Hester’s friend Elinor, left to look after her family after her mother dies, wishes to be a man, because he ‘has so much more power, such infinitely greater possibilities, such infinitely greater independence of action’, underlining the limited opportunities for women. For Elinor a ‘woman’s mission’ is all about ‘making her out to be a slave to man (211). Hester is the exceptional woman, ‘apparently strong, with little that was womanly about her, save a mind so sensitive that it was scarcely rational’. Like the biblical book she had ‘scarcely any faith in what is high or holy’ (235). After discovering that her uncle is really her father, Hester leaves home and cross-dresses to become Henry Leward, an author. Of her novel, it is said: ‘all acknowledge its genius [. . .] It was no woman’s tale they said’. Hester merely smiles and ‘had almost wondered if indeed it were’ (244). Her transgressive existence is ambivalently portrayed, as she is ‘in truth, a very woman’, wanting nonetheless to submit to a ‘spirit mightier than her own’ (244). Her existence as Henry-Hester makes a ‘strange, perverted life’: ‘with genius wasted, talents misplaced, truth forgotten, hopes crushed, aspiration quenched, love turned to fortune. Here was a fearful retribution’ (309). When Hester and Elinor are reunited, the friend recognizes that ‘she too had wished to put off a woman’s guise’, but, instead of cross-dressing like Hester, had learned women’s ‘strength – the quiet strength of independent self-development, and unselfish devotion to others’ (465), an unremarkable ending to an extraordinary novel.

The heroine of *Hester Kirton* (1864) resembles her queenly counterpart: ‘I have a strong will, and I never yet formed a set purpose that I have not accomplished, so far as it depended on myself’ (Macquoid 1864: II.220). She is the strong, not the swooning, Esther: ‘One of her old tempests of passion swayed Hester now. She had risen to her feet, and with flashing eyes, quivering nostrils and flushed cheeks, looked as Goldsmith had rarely seen a woman look before’ (III.127). The protagonist of *Hester’s History: A Novel* (1869) is described as having ‘Passion, poetry, and courage and simplicity’ (Anon. 1869: 65). In

Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), a novel replete with echoes of the biblical Esther, the protagonist is 'of the old stock, with a head for business, and a decision of character quite unusual in a child' (27). She asserts herself in her new home, Oliphant conflating the king's refusal of entrance into her character: 'A vague sense that she was behaving badly made her uncomfortable; but she was not going to submit, to yield at the first comer, to let anybody enter who chose' (35). Catherine expresses admiration for Hester's resistance, which she puts down to 'more' than simply 'ignorance': 'it was opposition, firm, healthy, instinctive opposition, without any cause for it; that is a sort of thing which it refreshes one to see. It must have been born in her, don't you see?' (39).

In Emily Foster's *Hester Cameron's Three Offers* (1888), Hester's 'more real sense, greater powers of discernment, and firmer decision of character' (5) make her an ambassador for the temperance cause. She is resolute in her refusal to marry those who won't abstain from drink (evoking Vashti's fate): 'If women would understand that the man who honours the wine cup is little likely to honour them, perhaps there would be fewer unhappy marriages' (41). Resolution, purpose and sacrifice entwine as Hester had 'married the right man, had waited for some purpose,' 'an adherent of that cause for which Hester Cameron had been ready to sacrifice so much' (46).

Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) portrays Esther as a girl who 'had strange intuitions about things' and 'was doomed to work out her own salvation as a metaphysician' ([1892] 1977: 82). 'Never was child more alive to the beauty of duty, more open to the appeal of virtue, self-control, abnegation,' the narrative asserts (83). To her sister, she is 'the avenger' (84), and when Esther's brother dies, 'to her, and her alone, must the family now look for deliverance [. . .] She clenched her little hands in iron determination' (203). The rabbi of her synagogue praises Esther's resolution to move from her adopted home: "'That was bravely done," he said brokenly. "To cut herself adrift! She will not sink; strength will be given her even as she gives others strength"' (378). She stands out from her Jewish hypocritical companions, a 'generation of whited sepulchres' (379). Her resolution is to draw people from hypocrisy or indifference (378), despite the isolation that her strength and resolve bring her. She realizes she loves Raphael, but presumes that others will see her as 'a deceitful, scheming little thing' (339). Out of anger she self-defensively asserts: 'Remember I am not like the girls you are used to meet. I have known the worst that life can offer. I can stand alone – yes, and face the whole world' (339–40).

The heroine in George Moore's *Esther Waters* manages her stepfather with shocking assertion: 'You was always too soft with him, mother; he never touched me since I dashed the hot water in his face' ([1894] 1936: 91). Black's Esther is 'possessed of more than an ordinary share of resolution and determination.' Again, her exceptional character reflects badly on her companions,

who, Black writes, were ‘particularly irresolute and dependent’ (1895: 79–80). Matson’s Mordecai sympathizes with Esther’s feminine timidity, but believes in her ethnic strength:

[. . .] spite of all her woman’s weakness, still
 I know the old Hebrew spirit stirs her breast,
 Glows in her veins and pulses with her heart.
 And only let her marshal her resolves,
 My darling will not shame her ancestry.

(Matson 1890: 9)

A more recent example is that of The Kelly Miller-Smith Institute, Inc who in their paper on national dialogue turn to the biblical story of Esther as an exemplar for black Christians. Esther, ‘who did not glory in the fact that she had become royalty, but heard the cries of her people’, encourages those black Christians who are in positions of power not to forget the importance of remembering their heritage, ‘passed down to us by a kidnapped, tortured, and enslaved people who were determined *to be* and *to become* in spite of every attempt to dehumanise them’ (Kelly Miller-Smith Institute, Inc. [1993] 1999: 165, 162). W. E. B. du Bois, a pioneer in black politics, looks to Esth 4:9–16 in his *Prayers for Dark People* as an example of response to the divine call to better the world. Herbert Aptheker explains that du Bois hated that Christianity ‘which became an excuse for the status quo’ (Aptheker: 1980: vii), as demonstrated in his application of Esther’s prayer to his community: ‘Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done’, he prays. In du Bois’ application, Esther inspires the undermining of all oppressive hierarchies. ‘Mighty causes’ are calling, he intones, ‘the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty’; causes which ‘mean work and sacrifice and death’. He prays ultimately for ‘the spirit of Esther’ that ‘we might say: I go unto the King and if I perish, I perish’ (1980: 21). Orlando E. Costas (1989 and 1998) presents a more sustained engagement with Esther in his writings on liberation theology, in which he invokes Esther as a figure who inspires effort on behalf of the marginalized.

Jon Levenson’s admiration for Esther reflects the centrality of resolve (and patriotism) to contemporary norms. She is ‘the most powerful woman – and perhaps even the most powerful person – in the empire and, arguably, the world’ (1997: 1). The importance of loyalty is clear as he sees her progression from ‘beauty queen to a heroic saviour, and from a self-styled Persian to a reconnected Jew’ (80).

4:17 'Mordecai [. . .] did everything as Esther had ordered him'

The reversal of authority in this verse is provocative. Mayer responds pragmatically in arguing that God's interest is in the action, not the gender, of the actor:

And it should be noted, that shee [*sic*] is the author of this counsell to *Mordecai*, who was as her father, when as he ought rather to have first advised to this course. But sometime the woman directs the man as also *Sarah* did *Abraham*, and he obeyed her voyce, and so did *Mordecai Ester*, as God pleaseth to imploy either to put on the other to doe for the best. (1647: 64)

For Mayer, Esther may direct Ahasuerus as, indeed, women may direct men, but it is clear that although women may enter the territories of male behaviour, gender boundaries are still firmly in place, and it is merely a border crossing, not a redrawing of territorial lines.

Lawson, however, retranslates the order so that it is instead a deferral to a higher authority. He argues that Esther commands Mordecai only because 'Esther believed that Mordecai was better qualified than herself to give them proper directions' (1804: 120). Instead, she is the obedient woman who 'delays not to do the commandment of Mordecai, which she considers as a commandment from God' (129). In contrast, White insists that 'Esther ceases to be the protégé of the male characters surrounding her and instead becomes the chief actor and controller of events' (1992: 128).

Esther 5

Esther before Ahasuerus

The narrative now moves directly to Esther's approach to the king, the MT version giving a sparse account of the event over only two (albeit long) verses. The action is austere rendered: the queen enters the inner court and waits; the king sees her and holds out his sceptre, which she touches. He then asks what her request is. The fear and threat from the end of Esther 4 nonetheless overshadow this simple account, and it has, as such, been received as a key dramatic moment.

Her association with Mary in Catholic tradition also encourages this interpretation of her as an exemplum that fits with Marian ideals of the dutiful woman, for which supplication is a central motif. The Oxford World Classics edition of *The Scarlet Letter* picks up on Catholic tradition by asserting that

Esther is 'a homiletic exemplum of sorrow, duty, and love, as well as a figure of the Virgin Mary' ([1850] 1990: 275). That many readings are strained in their policing of Esther's image indicates that views on women, and of women, were more fluid than the imposed Marian projections of female chastity and submissiveness suggest.

Esther is, of course, commonly and primarily a model of the good woman – depending of course on whatever a 'good woman' is purported to be. In a rare citation in the Church Fathers, Clement of Rome (30–99) alludes to Judith and Esther as examples of brave and godly women in the *First Epistle of Clement*, LV. She is also paradigmatic of the good religious person, becoming a spiritual model of Christian or Jewish duty to use influence for the people of God. More rarely she is appropriated as paradigmatic of the diasporic Jew in her manipulation of incontestable but persecutory cultural structures, and occasionally as representative of all subaltern identities in her management of repressive authorities. Because of the setting in the court, she also becomes the paradigmatic rebel.

The spectrum of interpretation of the queen ranges far beyond that of the conventional 'sorrow, duty and love', a reading inappropriate for Protestant contexts such as the Puritan setting of *The Scarlet Letter*. Her moment of approach is indeed cited as a feminine model of submission, innocence and obedience, but also of female cunning, sexual manipulation or power (depending on who is writing), assertion, rebellion, and strength, as well as heroism. Though many appropriations fall into the two extremes of submissive or heroic, many are fraught instead with negotiating these dual aspects of Esther, bedfellows that do not lie happily alongside each other in either patriarchal or feminist perspectives.

The earliest rewriting of the Esther story is the Greek version of the fainting Esther. The *New Catholic Commentary*, amongst others, judges the Greek Esther's 'courage all the greater in that she mastered extreme and justified terror' ([1969] 1981: 410); White instead dismisses her as 'a negative stereotype of a weak, helpless woman' (1992: 127). (For an in-depth study of the different Esthers, see Day 1995.)

Rabbinic responses to Esther's approach spiritualize her actions as well as iron out awkward elements. *Meg* 15a reports that three angels were sent to minister to Esther: 'one to make her head erect, a second to endow her with charm and a third to stretch the golden sceptre.' Rabbi Hanina interprets 'Esther donned royalty' in 5:1 to mean that the Holy Spirit clothed her so that she spoke prophetically (*Meg* 15a), Levenson admitting that this 'inaccurate' reading does 'capture the sense of the text that a mysterious grace envelops Esther' (1997: 89). Deutsch summarizes rabbinic accounts of Esther's approach. God endows Esther with 'an ethereal grace, 'like an angel' (2002: 235), as a reward

for her silence in the palace as well as ‘a testimony to the virtue and chastity of her conduct’ (ibid.: 236). She approaches the throne room ‘with such poise and confidence that it never occurred to the guards to ask if she had been summoned or not’ (ibid.). As the guards argue about whether or not they should cut her down, the king sees Esther. ‘He flew into a rage’ and shouts: “Vashti didn’t come when I summoned her, and this one comes when I don’t summon her” (ibid.: 238). An angel slaps the king across the face, however, saying: “You evil man! [. . .] Your wife stands before you, faint and trembling, and you sit nonchalantly on your throne and turn your head away? What kind of a heartless beast are you?” (ibid.: 239). The king relents, and the three angels of *Meg 15b* work to ensure Esther’s success: one raising her neck, one endowing her with a ‘special divine radiance’ to win over the king, and the third ‘pulled at the end of Achashverosh’s golden rod, which miraculously appeared in his hand without his lifting it from the table, stretching it out like a piece of elastic until it almost reached Esther’ (ibid.).

Not himself a Kabbalist, Isaac Arama’s fifteenth-century mystical reading of ‘royal apparel’ is clearly influenced by the *Zohar*. Esther’s royal clothing signifies prayer and meditation and raises her spiritually so that she acts as a conduit between earth and heaven, interceding to both God and king (Walfish 1993: 37). Arama notes the analogy between Esther’s approach and Vashti’s refusal in their rebellion, identifying the King’s acceptance of Esther’s unsolicited approach as a ‘hidden’ miracle, the divine working in the apparently human (ibid.: 88).

Reception of Esther’s approach to the king as a model for female behaviour is divided in terms of whether hers is a rebellious, transgressive deed or, in contrast, heartfelt submission. A collection of carols by James Ryman, collected in Richard Leighton Greene’s *The Early English Carols*, reveals a complex relationship between the traditionally meek Mary and Esther. Esther’s supplication is juxtaposed with Judith’s decapitation of Holofernes, and a reciprocal relationship is created in which Mary’s meekness reflects and constructs Esther, and vice versa; the Judith allusion working to further compound Esther’s mildness. Carol 194 narrows Esther’s significance to a single dimension of clemency (see also carol 193):

O stronge Judith, O Hester meke,
That the serpents hede of did streke,
At need of the conforte we seke,
Dei genetrix pia.

Esther’s link with Mary distorts her relationship to the king, who also becomes, although an inept monarch, a type of Christ. For example, in the closing stanza of another carol (carol 201), Esther becomes mother to her husband-king Ahasuerus:

Haile, queen Hester with louely chere;
King Assuere, they sonne so dere[.]

Carol 189 speaks to Mary directly of 'King Asuere, thy sonne so deare', suggesting that Esther is well known enough in this period for oblique reference. In carol 199 the reader inhabits the role of the threatened Jews, and more specifically Mordecai (who himself petitions Esther) in requesting Mary's approach to Christ:

With lovely chere pray thy Sonne dere,
King Assuere, in blis so clere,
That we in fere to hym may appere,
O dulcis Maria.

An allegorical reading is given in Ryman's carol 203, in which Esther and Ahasuerus's sexual relationship (how else can 'Hester his yerde did kis' be read?) is transposed to that of the Marian approach to Christ:

King Assuere was wrothe, inis,
Whenne Quene Vasty had done amys,
And of her crowne privat she is;
But, when Hester his yerde did kis,
By hir mekenes
She changed his moode into softnes.

King Assuere is God Almyth,
And Quene Vasty synag [ogu]e hight,
But, when Vasty had lost hir light
Quene Hester thane did shyne full bright,
For she forth brought
The Sonne of God, that alle hath wrought.

The sexual overtones, so alien to a contemporary audience's expectations of a pious hymn, are undoubtedly easily carried in an allegorical reading of the king's love for Esther/Mary in Catholic tradition.

Rhabanus Maurus, Pope John VIII, Sedulius Scotus and the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* all invoke Esther as a model of piety. She is the good and obedient wife for Christine de Pisa (cited in Honeycutt 1990: 129), and is a model of female intercession for the twelfth-century Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I of England. She utilizes what Lois Honeycutt calls the 'power of the intercessory model' (127), in a context in which women's direct access to power was increasingly constrained. Reference to Esther becomes 'nearly formulaic' with regard to medieval queens (132).



PLATE 7 Tintoretto, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c.1547–8. The Royal Collection © 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

Esther's approach is manifest in visual representations that capture a moment of action in a single frame. In the vast majority of paintings, coming predominantly from early modern Continental Europe, Esther is swooning, the artist turning to the LXX account in which she faints from fear. Although her physical weakness is emphasized in fainting, the effect in the paintings themselves is more complex. In Tintoretto's *Esther before Ahasuerus* (1547–8; Plate 7), the eye is drawn to circle from Esther's prone body, along her motionless hand to the stirring king, then across the concerned faces of the courtiers, until it finally settles on Esther. Even though Esther is compositionally at the centre, her lifeless face is quickly passed over, and it is the king's and court's shock that dictate. Her temporary death-like appearance negates her agency, turning her into a lack in the painting, a dead space, leading the viewer's attention instead to the rest of the scene, her attendants and the king. Within Tintoretto's biblical series of female subjects (painted in 1555), that of Esther's approach to Ahasuerus and the Queen of Sheba's approach to Solomon (at the top and bottom of the work) reflect each other compositionally. Esther bows lower and appears more submissive than the Queen of Sheba, but the king's urgency contrasts with Solomon's, as he rises from his throne, holding out the sceptre.



PLATE 8 Nicolas Poussin, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c.1640s. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

In Rubens' tondo (circular painting, 1620), Esther is compositionally central, and the rest of the court whirls around her in a confusion of perspective, the viewer inhabiting the queen's semi-conscious viewpoint. Artemisia Gentileschi's *Esther* (c.1622–3), although held up by her maids, has a strong, wide-shouldered, almost masculine frame, whilst the stylish dandy-king raises himself daintily from his throne in concern. Poussin's vibrant painting from the 1640s (Plate 8) has Esther reeling backwards from the king, the painting almost cut into two as the viewers' eyes are drawn to her face, which turns away from the king and his court. Compelled by the composition to dwell on Esther, the viewer replicates the attention of all the other characters.

Cavallino's *Esther and Ahasuerus* (1645–50) portrays an Esther looking as though she is about to pounce. Her weight propels her forward, the scarlet streak of curtains behind the king suggestive of (his) blood. Esther's gaze asserts itself: as both supplicant and advocate, her strength dominates the composition. Rembrandt's sketch of the scene from c.1645–50 (Plate 9) portrays how unceremonial and public Esther's supposed fainting is. Although a rough drawing, it is clear that all eyes are on her as she slumps in her maid's arms. Valentin Lefevre's king in *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c.1675 (Plate 10) is statue-like and



PLATE 9 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Esther Fainting before Ahasuerus*, c.1645–50. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

hidden in shadows; his cape sweeping as he strains to reach out his sceptre to her lifeless figure. Although cold, it is typically dramatic. In Antoine Coypel's *L'Evanouissement d'Esther* (The Swooning of Esther, c.1704; Plate 11), Esther's supine body is in the position of a half-crucifix, invoking images of the *pietà*, linking her sacrifice typologically to Christ's, stressing her selflessness whilst endowing her with spiritual authority. Here the king is holding her up, supporting her rather than staring down on her in judgement.

Esther's association with Mary led to appropriation of her as 'Santa Esther': namely, the Coptic community (in which her feast takes place on 20 December), the Greek Orthodox tradition and the Roman Catholic tradition (see Neulander 2003: 181). Neulander explains how Esther's story is applied to the situation of the indigenous peoples of the New World in the early modern period:



PLATE 10 Valentin Lefevre, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c.1675–1700. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

‘Esther’s reputation as intercessor for Jews-at-risk was directly linked to the destiny of Indians-at-risk in the Spanish Americas’ (182). She cites Friar Bernardino Cardenas who petitions Philip IV for financial support by mapping his situation on to that of Esther’s: ‘Do it’, he exhorts, ‘for love of Esther, she who is of your own beloved church’ and ‘for the love of the other most beautiful Esther, who is the Virgin Mary, wishing nothing more than the salvation of these poor Indian people’ (183).

John Stockwood presents Esther as a warning against shying away from using ‘the countenance of their places, & the height of their dignity for the preferment and benefite of the people of God, which are hys churche’. He addresses readers who, under ‘christian kinges and princes’, do not run Esther’s exemplary risk of approaching the king in a time of persecution and against explicit laws (1584: sig A4v). Esther (alongside Nehemiah) is an example of using favour to further the church. The German John Brentius draws from Esther’s approach a principle regarding the openness of court and monarchy: ‘The courts of Princes were ordeined by God to this end, that they might be as it were Sanctuaries for



PLATE II Antoine Coypel, *L'Evanouissement d'Esther* (*The Swooning of Esther*), c.1704. Musée du Louvre, Paris. © Photo RMN/ Gérard Blot/ Jean Schormans.

miserable and afflicted persons. For Kingdomes and Empires were ordeined upon earth, that the miserable might be holpen, and the innocent defended' (1584: 102). He also extracts principles for female behaviour. Esther is successful in her approach, because it was

not by foule wordes, not by contempt, not by disdayne, not by brawling, not by rhyding, not by lewde demeanour. For by these maners women are wont rather to carry away blowes and stripes than rule and misrie. But by godlines towards God, reverence towards their husbandes, chastitie, patience, and other commendable vertues. For thus women by serving and obeiing do rule, by which waye onely the rule bearing of women is lawfull. (124–5)

A similar attitude toward Esther is typical of New England Puritans, claims Marilyn Westerkamp, as she describes her as being 'delicate and beautiful, courageous and pious', the two characteristics making her attractive to the Puritans being her 'pliable acquiescence and extraordinary love and devotion' (1999: 25).

The image of the queen bowing before Ahasuerus is one of the most popular subjects for embroidery in the early modern period in England. Susan Frye suggests that women choose this image, and display it in their marital homes,



PLATE 12 *Esther before King Ahasuerus*. Designed by Bernard Picart. Etched and engraved by Cornelis Huyberts. Amsterdam: P. Mortier, c.1700. JTSNY. Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

because it is an image both radical and containable within patriarchal norms. Frye argues:

Esther is herself caught within legal and narrational systems that seek to deny women public action [. . .] To choose the narrative of Esther, then, is to choose a narrative in which a female figure succeeds in public action in spite of the injunction to silence. (Frye 1999: 178–9)

Frye's critique highlights the importance of polyvalent figures such as Esther that appear innocuous, but that nonetheless express potentially subversive attitudes.

With an adept use of language, Quarles conflates the seemingly incompatible duality of woman's essential nature as both whorish and submissive, through use of a term that, whilst meaning 'to prostrate' contains unmistakable sexual overtones: 'Her humble body lowly prostitute' (1621: sig K4v; 1642: 152). It is an emphasis evident in an etching by Cornelis Huyberts, c.1700, which renders Esther kissing and caressing the king's outstretched sceptre, in sexual suggestiveness (Plate 12).

Obadiah Sedgwick in his 1643 sermon on Esther 9:1, in the context of Parliament's fear in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, applies the image of Esther's

approach to the king to a call for Jesuit repentance. Her approach becomes that of the repentant sinner: 'if any of you touch this golden scepter of mercy which is held out unto you, then in the next place take heed and abhorred for every such like future intangling' (Sedgwick 1643: 28). Sedgwick utilizes well Esther's ambiguous position as both virtuous woman and transgressor of the law. However, his interpretation is somewhat licentious as it is in her very approach – the action that he interprets as repentant – that she transgresses.

Many writers inevitably highlight Esther's domestic and submissive role. Poole ([1669–76] 1700: n.d.) highlights Esther's touching of the king's sceptre as a sign of gratitude. Writers who wish to invoke Esther as a model of women's limited influence focus on the familial sphere of her activity. In New England, Cotton Mather writes *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692) and appeals to Esther to encourage women's spiritual influence over their husbands: 'Vast Opportunities are those that a Woman *has* to bring over her Husband unto Real and Serious Godliness, and a Good Woman, will *use* those Opportunities. An *Esther*, a *Witty Esther*, what can't she do with the most haughty Husband in the World?' (Mather 1692: 85–6).

In Brereton's 1715 translation of Racine's *Esther* the king responds to the queen's fainting: 'So sharp a Law was never meant for you.' She is full of fear: 'Ah! what bold Heart could stand, with less Surprise, / The Fire which flash'd from out your Godlike Eyes?' (26). The play gestures towards a sense of mutuality in the king and Esther's relationship. Because there is 'something' in Esther 'which never tiring, ever charms' (27) his mind, the king proclaims to her that 'Where you unseen may hear you shall be brought;/ And I would know your own judicious Thought' (28). Esther's later response, however, merely supports wifely submission when he asks her opinion: 'Since you encourage your obedient Wife, / I dare implore you for my destin'd Life' (40). In the same year, the anonymous author of *Hester, A Poem* (1714) paints the queen as transcending (rather than explicitly transgressing) her gender because of Mordecai's influence on and instruction to her. 'He taught her first the Sweet of holy Love, the laws and rites of religion; but he also teaches her 'all the Benefits of Art [. . .] That Wit contrives, and Decency allows' and in Esther is found 'The Force of Man in Woman's softer Make, making her invincible:

What Victories the fatal Charmer wait,
When Wiles and Pow'r, of Wit and Beauty meet!

(Anon. 1714: 20)

Gender transgression ultimately creates a perversion of nature, as she is now a 'fatal Charmer', dangerous and unnatural. Rather than being imbued with male force she remains overwhelmingly feminine: 'Fear, and unguarded Innocence, supply / What Custom, Nature, and the Sex deny' (67).

When the book is read as a model of court life, Esther is often erased from her own story because her gender simply clashes with the assumed masculinity of the political subject. In Pseudo-Webster's pamphlet Mordecai raises himself against insult, so that the story becomes a personal squabble between individuals with genocide and Esther disregarded (see notes on Esther 3, p. 136). It is worth noting that this erasure of Esther echoes the passage at the end of the Book of Esther that gives the reason for the celebration of Purim. Translators nonetheless sometimes render 'the matter' (in Hebrew the feminine form for 'it' or 'her', *hi*) as 'Esther', inserting her back in again (see, for example, the REB's 'But when the matter came before the king').

Alexander Webster's royalist fervour brought him to the position of chaplain to the Prince of Wales in 1748. In his 1740 sermon, presented at the election of magistrates at Edinburgh, Esther is excluded from his political narrative because 'By Reason of her *Sex*, and the Nature of the *Constitution*, she was not to interest herself in *Affairs of State*' (1740: 28). Although he quotes Esther's speech 'If I perish, I perish' as 'Noble Example, worthy of all Imitation!', the masculine nature of the political arena is emphasized, the author applying Esther's example to '*MEN* of [. . .]', a phrase repeated eight times on one page when listing the qualities required of magistrates (28, 30). Unheroic, she is the subject of God's potential wrath: He 'would punish her *Self-seeking* and *Cowardice*, her Neglect of her Country' (14).

The drama of the scene affords creative elaboration. In Handel's oratorio the king and queen sing a duet dramatizing his concern and her fear. She faints and his gentleness turns to a command as he seeks to awaken her. Like a King Cnut, Ahasuerus gives a command whose inefficacy only demonstrates the limitations of his authority. Esther's question: 'Who calls my parting soul from death?' overlays the king's lower, protracted 'Awake, my soul, my life, my breath!', whilst punctuated strings accompany the duet. Esther's 'Hear my suit, or else I die' is overlaid with the king's 'Ask, my Queen, can I deny?', intertwining the urgency of the petitioner and the willingness of the petitioned. The oratorio presents Esther as both brave and fearful. She sings 'Tears assist me, pity moving, / Justice cruel reproving', praying for God's assistance. Whilst his queen is in a faint, the king declares his love, becoming submissive to her as he declares: 'Who shares our heart, shall share our power' (Aria, 'O beauteous Queen'). Esther's success is subsequently deemed due to her piety. Female voices honour Esther, singing: 'Virtue, truth and innocence / Shall ever be her sure defence', echoed by high tenors reflecting the purity of the sentiment. The song crescendos and then quietens to gentle harmonies that reassuringly articulate: 'She is Heaven's peculiar care / Propitious Heaven will hear her prayer.'

This dramatic rendition is repeated in Matson's play in which the king shouts at Esther's entrance: 'Ha! what! intrusion, and intruders?', causing her to faint.

When he realizes it is the queen, he touches her with the sceptre and takes her in his arms. When she wakes, Esther is astounded, overcome by his magnificence: 'I gazed / Upon thy majesty, I saw the sun, / 'Twas terrible, for thou didst frown' (1890: 10). Tyler's early nineteenth-century play has Esther 'Resplendent in her regal robes, fainting'. Although God does not intervene, still the king's 'every look was love' ([n.d.] 1941: 47). Timothy Dwight's 1793 poem presents a majestic and forthright Esther approaching the king, his description reflecting the assertion of her action:

[. . .] forth she slowly mov'd
[. . .] Strait to the throne
Of sovereign majesty she bent her way.
Before her open'd wide the ivory gates

(Bk III, 107, 109–11)

She gives the king a smile:

[. . .] Full on the King
She cast a sweet, and soul-explaining smile
Of soft complacence; such as angels show,
To greet their fellows[.]

(128–30)

He is softened by beauty:

Yet in the beams of beauty, soul inspir'd,
His softening bosom melted.

(135–6)

Joanna Southcott turns to the apocryphal prayer of Esther and its more dramatic portrayal of her approach to the king when looking for a biblical analogy to her own situation. A notorious prophetess (or 'fanatic' as the DNB calls her) from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Southcott had hundreds of thousands of followers, purported to be pregnant with the second incarnation of Christ, and still has followers today. Appealing to the disenfranchised, she preached a message of God's protection over the marginalized and poor. James Hopkins concludes that what is clear from 'publication figures and estimates of the size of her following' – he suggests as many as half a million – is that 'the Southcottians were not a coterie of cranks and eccentrics subsisting on the margins of society but a people reflecting in a distinctive way the popular concerns of their generation' (1982: 85). Southcott invokes Esther in a pamphlet published around the turn of the nineteenth century. Esther's disavowal of the Gentile king is translated into ecclesiastical terms as Southcott rejects the apparent majesty of

the established Church that she stands against. In prophetic voice, God applies Esther's prayer to her own story: 'Thou hatest the grandeur of the men I have sent unto thee; yet, as I commanded thee, thou hast gone unto them' (n.d. [c. 1800]: 231). Her rejection and fear is a response to the 'ferce countenance' of the king, but her acceptance by her own followers is analogous to the king's move to sympathy. The poetic prophecy that is recounted in this printed edition of Southcott's own manuscript is about God's work above and beyond Southcott's own:

Thy fainting may be known:
My sceptre then shall soon appear,
And all shall see it shine
Upon thy neck: – my power shall break
A sceptre all divine.

(232)

Like Sowernam before her, Esther's story becomes one of a vindication of women as God's protection is gender-focused (albeit qualified through association with Southcott herself):

Women I'll free – they all shall see
Their innocence I'll clear! –
Who now are workers here with thee;
My sceptre all shall wear.

(232)

The prophecy becomes threatening at its close:

For Esther will the victory gain,
Though fury may appear.
I say at first, the rage may burst,
But I shall change the scene,
And every man like him shall stand,
A Haman's end be seen.

(232)

Sowernam's radical appropriation is overwhelmed by more conservative applications. The commentator George Lawson interprets Esther's donning of royal apparel in order to map female virtue:

Good wives will endeavour to please their husbands by a decency in dress, as well as other things that may appear little when they are not considered as means to gain an important end. The married women care, and ought to care, how they may please their husbands; and those women do not act as becometh saints, whose dress, or any part of their behaviour, naturally tends to produce disgust. (1804: 130)

Men's reaction – 'disgust' – is naturalized, making a socially transgressive choice of dress an aberration. He articulates the question that he imagines women asking: 'What can we do to serve the public interest? our mode of life confines us to our own families' (225). He praises Esther's 'public spirit', but qualifies it in reference to 'Lemuel's mother' who 'taught her son to be a blessing to his people', referring to wise sayings in the final chapter of Proverbs that King Lemuel ascribes to his mother. Lawson pre-empts proto-feminist arguments of equality, quoting the New Testament verse that 'Males and females are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28), an equality that Lawson assumes is qualified by gendered spheres; in other words, they are 'equally obliged to promote his interests in the exercise of virtue, and the practice of duties suited to their respective situations' (226).

In *New Sacred Dramas for Young Persons* (1820), the lesson of proper female behaviour is made explicit as the king defends Vashti's punishment to Esther, reiterating the primal importance of obedience. The king makes it clear that Esther's efficacy depends upon her mildness: 'Vashti, thy predecessor, failed in obedience to her lawful sovereign, therefore punishment was due to the offence, but whilst mildness sets forth submission, and wisdom guideth thy ways, all thy wishes shall be a perfect law unto our hearts' (1820: 150). Esther becomes a tutor and guardian:

Thou canst temper judgment, and, in thy radiant smiles, the faded countenance of poverty revives: – dispensing good to others, we view thee as our tutelary angel [...] Had every throne a guardian so propitious, the nations of the earth would be too highly blessed! (1820: 149)

Many women writers embrace Esther as a meek woman, who rises to exceptional circumstances. Brooks is such an example, who concentrates on the psychological turmoil and consequent prayerful supplications she makes before she appears before the king. Esther resembles the 'angel of the house' typical of nineteenth-century ideology:

The law is death – yet, should I trembling dare –
Formed for entreaty – gentle, meek, and mild –
The lion, fierce for blood, will sometimes spare,
For pride or pity's sake, the helpless child[.]

(1820: 25)

She is positioned, in Brooks' fragments, in pious prayer before her entrance, and it is precisely her meekness and piety that ring her success: 'Her guileless looks th'admiring monarch melt, / Who thus, disordered, uttered forth his soul' (1820: 27).

Hannah Flagg Gould, the daughter of the soldier Benjamin Gould who led

the Massachusetts militia at the battle of Lexington, is the author of memorials for soldiers. In her poem, 'Esther,' she emphasizes the patriotic element of the queen's appearance before the king: 'To live with her people, or die for their sake, / Will go to her lord, and her nation declare' (1839: 182), 'declare' containing a dual reference to both articulation (the obvious interpretation) and praise (a more patriotic twist). The queen is empowered by faith, and her femininity explicitly diminished:

The *woman* within her is timid and faint;
The *holy believer*, unawed and serene;
She goes to the presence, adorned as a *saint*,
With power that has never invested the *queen*.
(183)

Nonetheless, she validates female weakness over rebellion:

And now are her people to safety restored –
To peace, and their rights, when resistance had failed;
A woman in weakness, who drew on the Lord
For strength, o'er the mighty of earth hath prevailed.
(184)

Thomas M'Crie rejects Esther's swooning because it 'savours of romance,' and prefers the 'simple narrative' of the MT version, which 'represents Esther appearing with a dignified modesty becoming a royal supplicant' (1838: 138), demonstrating that degrees of status can overcome the problematic of female strength.

In Cushing's drama, although the king has only just been declaring his love for Esther, he sees her entrance as an affront to femininity: 'Why comes she here, / Bringing those wondrous charms, to feast the gaze / Of vulgar eyes?' (1840: 70). He explicitly compares his two queens' actions:

This is a mystery we fain would solve –
Queen Vashti scorned us, when we summoned her,
And fell beneath our wrath – yet now, forsooth,
Our chosen queen and bride defies our laws[.]
(*ibid.*)

Esther overhears the final lines of the king's speech:

She comes uncalled, and stands before our throne,
As though she'd dare us to exert our power
And give her her deserts!
(*ibid.*)

Loosely following the apocryphal account, Esther falters, and Memucan, the faithful adviser, calls for the king to stretch out his sceptre. He leaps from his throne to rouse her and declares:

And with a sovereign's and a husband's love,
My arm sustains, and ever shall defend
Thy precious life.

(72)

James Watson's doggerel demonstrates the urgency and drama of her approach in suggestive terms:

Herself she unveil'd,
And, enthron'd, she beheld
The monarch! – surpris'd and enraptur'd was he;
For straight her he knew,
And his sceptre out flew –
She kiss'd it, and prostrate she fell on her knee.

“Queen Esther!” he cries,
“My angel! up rise,
Ascend to thy glory, and seat thee by me.”

(1845: 90)

In Tennant's play, which abounds in Esther's own self-denigration (she speaks of her own 'feeble woman's hand', 176), Hegai's description of the queen's entrance is fraught with language that feminizes, masculinizes and deifies Esther:

Alone, unguarded, unaccompany'd,
Save by her own unconquer'd majesty,
Her host of noble king-subduing charms.

(Tennant 1845: 189)

She stood, majestic in her modesty;
And, with her look, omnipotent, yet meek.

(190)

Again, it is beauty, not divine intervention, that conquers the king in the Reverend Headley's portrait of Esther:

Her long fastings and watchings had taken the color from her cheeks, but had given a greater transparency in its place, and as she stood, half shrinking, with the shadow of profound melancholy on her pallid, but indescribably beautiful countenance – her pencilled brow slightly contracted in the intensity of her excitement – her

long lashes dripping in tears, and her lips trembling with agitation; she was – though silent – in herself an appeal that a heart of stone could not resist. (21–2)

Novels that appropriate Esther and the scene of her approach do so for a variety of effects, as the following examples demonstrate. They invariably draw attention to her beauty as the basis for her triumph. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hester's beauty even outshines her shame:

Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. ([1850] 1990: 53)

By portraying her on the public gallows, Hawthorne subverts the private–public split. Those areas that are traditionally female, the home and the marketplace, become for Hester public spaces in which she can influence her town or which are used to broadcast her isolation. Even her clothing and feminine work of embroidery become a subversive act of display in which she undermines the public meaning of the letter 'A'. Significantly, it takes on new meaning when she forces entry into the Governor's home, repeating the subversive entrance of her biblical counterpart. She is let in because the bond-servant sees 'the decision of her air' together with 'the glittering symbol on her bosom' and concludes that she must be 'a great lady in the land' (104).

In Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford* (1851) the image of Esther here is a familiar one, with Esther depicted as the ultra-feminine arbiter and peacemaker in the family, tempering the masculine anger of her husband as she arbitrates for her children. Miss Matty narrates:

Presently my mother went to my father. I know I thought of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus; for my mother was very pretty and delicate-looking, and my father looked as terrible as King Ahasuerus. Some time after they came out together; and then my mother told me what had happened, and that she was going up to Peter's room at my father's desire – though she was not to tell Peter this – to talk the matter over with him. (100)

George Eliot's Esther Lyons imitates Queen Esther's entrance to the king in *Felix Holt* (1866) as she pleads for Felix before the court. Entering, she entreats the official, saying 'I would rather die than not do it', echoing metaphorically, if not literally, Queen Esther's resolve of 'if I perish, I perish' ([1866] 2000: 478). Like the biblical queen, the success of Esther's request to the court on Felix's behalf depends upon her beauty, which lends authority to her unorthodox action:

Every face looked grave and respectful [. . .] There was something so naïve and beautiful in this action of Esther's that it conquered every low or petty suggestion even in the commonest of minds. The three men in that assembly who knew her best – even her father and Felix Holt—felt a thrill of surprise mingled with admiration. This bright, delicate, beautiful-shaped thing that seemed most like a toy or ornament – some hand had touched the chords, and there came forth music that brought tears. (479)

The fusing of beauty with heroic action results in something irresistibly divine. Beauty is therefore, for Eliot, the key to women's noble action and influence. Rita Bode suggests that female acquiescence is only a mask: 'like her biblical namesake, Esther appears to embrace submission only to triumph over a society that tries to restrict her kind', and argues that she chooses Felix as a marriage partner because 'he shows himself susceptible to her control' (1995: 770). *The Woman's Bible* of 1898 pre-empts Bode's commendation of Esther Lyons' strategic submission, commenting that the queen 'profited by the example of Vashti, and saw the good policy of at least making a show of obedience in all things' (Stanton 1898: 89).

In the same year as *Felix Holt*, Esther's submission becomes a positive model in Dinah Maria Mulock Craik's poem 'Philip My King'. It is addressed to her infant godson and turns the imagery of the king's sceptre from one of a formal court scene to one of helpless devotion:

Look at me with thy large brown eyes,
Philip my king.
Round whom the enshadowing purple lies
Of babyhood's royal dignities:
Lay on my neck thy tiny hand
With love's invisible sceptre laden;
I am thine Esther to command
Till thou shalt find a queen-handmaiden.

(Craik 1866: 1)

Later in the century, Matson echoes Craik's depiction of unquestioning devotion, Esther's entrance being narrated by Hegai:

I saw the monarch sitting, and the maid
Sat lowly at his feet, with folded arms
That rested on his knees, while with her eyes
Upturned, she looked with gaze all worshipful,
As though he were some god she did adore.

(Matson 1890: 5)

Christina Rossetti invokes Esther as an exemplum of devotion, like a 'holy' saint falling before the feet of Christ as though dead: 'with Esther they faint in approaching their king' ([1892] 1895: 41).

Robert Browning invokes the scene of Esther and Ahasuerus in the monologue of Guido in *The Ring and the Book* (1868). Guido turns to Ahasuerus as the model of a man who relishes in power over women, who delights in the idea that he can:

[. . .] thus impose, thus terrify in turn
A chit whose terror shall be changed apace
To bliss unbearable when, grace and glow,
Prowess and pride descend the throne and touch
Esther in all that pretty tremble, cured
By the dove o' the sceptre.

(Bk XI. ll. 976–81; 1868: 455).

Although ostensibly arguing against such despotism, Guido in his painting of the scene betrays his own attraction to the 'pretty tremble' of the terrified Esther.

Buchan's play of 1873 presents a merely tentative Esther, whom the king willingly accepts, reproducing the apocryphal account. Throughout his dramatic poem, Beamish elevates women's spiritual influence, which means that

'Tis Esther then, by strength divine, shall save
Us from our foe. As when the Canaanitish
Captain, valiant Sisera, was smitten
By a woman's hand, and all his might subdued.

(Beamish 1875: 34)

Despite his adherence to Victorian codes of the dual spheres of female domestic modesty and masculine public strength, Beamish nonetheless cites the violent Jael, perhaps the paragon of domestic transgression – who kills through hammering a tent peg through Sisera's head (Judg 4:17–22) – as his analogue to Esther. Nonetheless, Mordecai concludes:

O! how responsible the wife, the mother!
What momentous stewardship hath God
Committed to their hands[.]

(40)

Esther is the female intercessor, 'with a love for all her people (such / Pure and perfect love, as lives alone in / Mother's breasts)' (ibid.).

For the evangelical commentator Symington, Esther's success is due to her cunning: 'her woman's wit was of more service than a man's strength' (1878: 114).

Yet hers is a stereotypically female *unintelligence*: ‘The only safe way to catch a serpent is by the tail: the only way to get hold of such a villain as Haman is to surprise him. Mordecai never would have thought of and never could have carried out this innocent plot. Esther was as innocent as a dove; but she had a serpent to deal with, and God made her wiser than he’ (115).

Helen Hunt Jackson, defender of native American rights at the end of the nineteenth century, pictures Esther as having a ‘dauntless heart which knew / no fear’ in her approach, despite emphasizing the king’s despotism, who kills not only at will but ‘at pleasure’. Although commending Esther, the sonnet’s resolution questions Esther’s privileging of truth over honour:

Thou wert not queen until thy race went free;
 Yet thoughtful hearts, that ponder slow and deep,
 Find doubtful reverence at last for thee;
 Thou heldest thy race too dear, thyself too cheap;
 Honor no second place for truth can keep.

(1892: 180)

Esther as a model for submission is rejected in Sarah Grand’s novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), the character Angelica proclaiming ‘I am not Esther, most decidedly! I am Judith, I am Jael. I am Vashti. I am Godiva’ (cited in Stopla 2003: 164). The critic Jennifer M. Stopla merely accepts the polarization of the subordinate Esther and rebellious Vashti that Grand asserts (165), which suits her programme of female response to patriarchy: acceptance or defiance.

In Jean Toomer’s bleak short story ‘Esther’ (1923), the protagonist is a serious child, socially awkward and ostracized, her life increasingly narrowing as she ages. She becomes the heroic Esther when she remembers the eccentric prophet Barlo from her childhood and ‘resolves’ one day, whilst working in her father’s shop, that she will tell Barlo she loves him. Her bleak life undercuts the resolution: ‘She mustn’t wish. Wishes only make you restless. Emptiness is a thing that grows by being moved’ (Toomer [1923] 1993: 28). She transgressively approaches ‘Nat Bowle’s place’, where Barlo is surrounded by ‘loose women’, her terror of entry echoing the queen’s: ‘She wants to turn back. She goes up the steps. As if she were mounting to some great height, her head spins. She is violently dizzy’ (29). In a moment of epiphany, she is repulsed by the man she has come to proposition and she seems to die, all hope now gone, and returns to a greater emptiness: ‘There is no air, no street and the town has completely disappeared’ (ibid.).

The ambivalence of Esther’s submission is carried through into her representation in Elizabeth Taylor’s *Hester Lilley* (1954), in which Esther is defiant, and yet ‘so entirely gentle’ ([1954] 1995: 64). *The Interpreter’s Bible* defends Esther’s initial reticence and argues that it serves to emphasize her attraction as

the girl-next-door who does good, her reserve natural. Esther's behaviour is the "heroism of the unheroic" and is therefore the more appealing' (1954: 843).

Recent commentary presents no less varied interpretations of Esther's approach. In Eileen Wallis's *Queen Take Your Throne: How to be a Woman of Authority* (1985) Esther becomes a model for women's proper authority. She is 'not a dominating or aggressive type of woman, but one who embodies the true meek and quiet spirit' (15). Authority is therefore transposed, for the woman, into submission and self-regulation. Obedience and rebellion become markers of spirituality in which Vashti's refusal is described as 'manifesting a spirit of rebellion and independence' (18). The choices women make, polarized in Vashti and Esther, are direct reflections of their spiritual state. Submission paradoxically becomes a weapon: 'Scripture teaches us that submission is not weakness, but the most powerful influence a woman can exert' (22). Even at the end of the twentieth century, the interpretation of Esther as a model of female submission reveals much about the persistent desires to conform this radical figure to a model for patriarchal application.

Clines considers the queen's approach to be 'lightly satirical' in that Ahasuerus's assertion of authority over his first queen is 'thoroughly manipulated by her successor under guise of duty and obedience' (1984a: 274). Esther's triumphal submission makes her, for Johnson, a representative 'good woman', in that she 'obeys male rule and wins by her submission to it' (1990: 626). Mieke Bal writes that '[Vashti] is eliminated only to re-emerge in Esther, who takes her place, avenging punishment by turning disobedience into access to power' (1991: 92). Levenson combats Bal's proposition. He is perhaps motivated by his own assumption that Esther's disobedience would be 'confirming Haman's charge that the Jews are insubordinate' (1997: 89). He argues that Esther only enters the courtyard, and is invited to approach the throne, lessening her transgression in a way that makes no sense of her fear of death.

Abegg et al. in their article on the Dead Sea Scrolls describe Esther's petition to the king as 'gaining her husband's ear' (1999: 2), concurrently domesticating the scene and lessening Esther's bravery or public role. In Diana Booher's *The Esther Effect: Seven Secrets of Self-Confidence and Influence*, Esther is a model for the 'high-impact woman': 'someone who dynamically affects others with her courage, confidence, control, communication, character, connections and calmness' (2001: back cover). Booher speaks of Esther's 'legacy' as demonstrating 'a godly woman's impact on those around her as she builds a home, works her job, relaxes with her friends, and serves in the church or community'. The application is again conservative: 'Our challenge is to change the big, bad things. Our joy is not to mind doing the very small things' (22).

Appropriations such as these demonstrate a conservative impulse still at work in contemporary appropriation of Esther. Leila Leah Bronner in her *From*

Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women concludes that Esther is acceptable to the rabbis (unlike other women such as Deborah, who 'presented more of a threat') because 'after all was said and done, she was a 'wife very much under the control of her husband'. Although 'saviour of her people', she was also the 'tiptoeing wife' (Bronner 1994: 180). The responses to Esther in *The Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Brenner 1995) are no less forgiving. Susan Niditch concludes that 'she is an altogether appealing portrait of women's wisdom for the men of a ruling patriarchy, but hardly an image meaningful or consoling to modern women' (1995: 39). Kristin De Troyer, in the same volume, sees the depiction of the pleasing, submissive Esther as a sign of a text 'written by a man who states what women must be if they want to please men'. She goes on: 'it transmits a code, a norm of behaviour for women. This code and norm is delivered completely from a male point of view' (1995: 55). Complying utterly with dominant interpretations of Esther, De Troyer dismisses her to the realm of passivity: 'Esther is the viewed object, not the subject, of her story. She is not asked for her opinion and she does not give it' (62), a desire for psychological complexity in a text that privileges action. These negative readings contrast with Alicia Ostriker's creative approach. She relates her experience of the Esther story as a child growing up in Brooklyn in the 1940s, and intersperses commentary on the book with her memories of awakening realization of the Holocaust. Her childhood self rejects the 'sickening wiles' of Esther and, disgusted by the sceptre ('how crude can you get?'), instead declares: 'Am rebel Vashti' (1993: 63). Her older self, now writing, is resigned to a pragmatism that we 'save ourselves as best we can' (64), suggesting a connection between Vashti's and Esther's actions. Her description of Esther's approach is compellingly visceral: self-control dictating that she is 'not to scream, not to spit in his face [. . .] not to throw up out of pure cold terror' (63). Joanna Trollope gestures towards a similar complexity of Esther's character and heroism when she writes that had Esther (and Ruth) 'merely been feisty examples of romantic femininity, they would not have taken such a hold as they have, on Jewish and Christian minds' (2005: 63).

For White, Esther's problematic status as a woman is bypassed as she becomes a role model for Diaspora Jews 'seeking to attain a comfortable and successful life in foreign society' (1992: 126). White, however, interprets Esther's actions not as submissive, but contends that she 'skillfully manipulates the power structure of the Persian court' (126). It is her gender that makes her structural position analogous to Jewish disenfranchisement: 'because she was a woman and therefore basically powerless within Persian society, she was the paradigm of the diaspora Jew who was also powerless in Persian society' (126). One problem with seeing Esther as redeemable for Jews, but not for women, is that the powerless Jew is treated as a historical reality (Esther's actions are how the exiled must

and should act to survive), whereas the powerless woman is treated as an ahistorical and thus moral one (a woman should never have to lose her dignity and be subservient). The assumption here, one that dominates much feminist theoretical work in this area at least until recently, is that undermining patriarchal structure is more pertinent than survival.

Esther is upheld as a model for political action. Barry C. Davies refers to the sparsity of the biblical narrative, concluding that the author 'does not paint her as a heroine of superhuman proportions, but merely as someone who has a task to do (albeit difficult) who does it calmly and efficiently' (1995: 246). Nonetheless, Davies makes impressive claims for her: 'If Esther has planned out the entire sequence of events (5:1–8, 7:1–4), then she most definitely qualifies as one of the master politicians of all time' (286). Levenson's Esther is commended as a strategist 'because she maintains relations (in both the sexual and the general sense) with Ahasuerus, is able to gain power and to achieve goals higher than the maintenance of her own dignity': namely, the survival of her people (1997: 48–9).

5:4–8 *Esther's First Banquet*

Esther is offered up to half of the kingdom, and yet she presents to the king a mere dinner invitation, a tricky move for commentators to explain. Is Esther being clever here? Does the strangeness of her actions testify to a providential, all-knowing force? Identifying the human or divine appears to be a prime concern, and religious commentaries especially are concerned with these questions, keen nonetheless to ascribe strategic thinking to her invitation, perhaps because they assume that she must have had commonplace reasons even if the action is ultimately under divine direction.

For many, Esther becomes an admirable character who acts out of prudence (and the commentators demonstrate their own, equal cleverness in their interpretation of political strategy). *Meg* 15b presents several reasons for Esther's postponed request:

R. Eleazer said: "She set a trap for him, as it says, "May their table be a trap for them" (Ps 69:23)." [. . .] R. Meir said: "so that he should not form a conspiracy and rebel (*she-lo' yittol 'esah ve-yimrod*)." R. Judah said: "So that they should not discover that she was Jewish" [. . .] R. Joshua b. Korha said: "She said: 'I will encourage him so that he may be killed, both he and I.'" [. . .] R. Eliezer of Modi'im says: "She made the king jealous of him and she made the princes jealous of him."

Gersonides suggests that Esther is a calculating politician, in Walfish's terms 'a wily, clever, and skillful courtier' (Walfish 1993: 165). Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen

suggests that the ever-hospitable Esther delays her denunciation of Haman until her second banquet because of her disquiet over informing against a guest (*ibid.*: 166).

John Mayer reads the scene allegorically, presenting an opportunity for the venting of vitriol against ‘the wicked’:

Mystically, by *Haman’s* comming [*sic*] with the King to the feast, we may understand the wicked communicating with the Lord in the Eucharist, but it is to their own judgment and damnation. *Haman’s* petitioning to the Queen upbradied, as an oppression of her, shewed that the petitions of the wicked suing for mercie at the last day, shall be so far from prevailing, as that they shall be taken for oppressions, the great Judge being hereby provoked to wrath the more. (1647: 68–9)

Matthew Poole’s Esther may have delayed her request in 5:8 through ‘modesty’ or ‘policy’, but she is undoubtedly a tool of ‘divine providence’, that ‘took away her courage or utterance for this time, that she might have a better opportunity’ ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.). In Handel’s oratorio, when Esther requests his company at a banquet, the king becomes the negative to the disobedient Vashti, who refused to appear at a banquet, declaring: ‘I come, my Queen, to chaste delights’ (Aria: ‘How can I stay?’). Joyous, rapidly running violin sequences express extended emotion. The king repeats ‘I come my queen’, the melody echoing the explicit sentiment: ‘With joy, with pleasure I obey’. The implication in the king’s response, ‘How can I stay, when love invites?’, is that Vashti refused because she considered the king’s command not an invitation of love; or his gentle response to Esther implicates Vashti as indifferent to love. To emphasize the king’s willingness, the Israelite’s comment that Esther ‘all his wrath disarm’d’ and further ‘Beauty has his fury charm’d’ (Recitative: Third Israelite, ‘With inward joy his visage glows’). In Tyler’s play Haman reads Esther’s request for his presence at the banquet as a declaration of love and incitement to usurpation: ‘the Queen extends / Her beauteous hand to aid that step!’ ([n.d.] 1941: 48). Lawson simply sees the invitation as necessary because Haman was ‘inseparable from him at this time as his right hand’ (1804: 133). Lawson also explains Esther’s invitation as an expression of ‘generous and pleasing sentiments’ by which she hoped ‘his heart would be warmed with friendship’.

Lawson contends that Esther delays her appeal because of prudence: ‘she wished for some more time of recollection, preparation, and prayer, before she made her great request to the king’ (1804: 133). Robert Stevenson in 1817 argues that Esther put off her request because she, ‘still hesitating, could not command sufficient fortitude to utter her petition, hoping also that by another entertainment her influence over the monarch would be still further increased’ (246). In Matson’s 1890 drama, Esther is conscious of the battle of wits between herself and Haman:

A woman little skilled in courtier's ways,
 And this bad man a courtier from his youth,
 And trained to all the crafty strategy,
 Politic wiles and cunning artifice,
 Their whole deceptive order know so well.

(Matson 1890: 10)

M'Crie also puts Esther's delay down to procrastination, but for him it is motivated by 'carnal prudence and worldly policy', fed by fear (1838: 142). Cushing has Esther explain her request:

All eyes were on me – speech and thought were chained,
 And in the strong emotion which oèrpowered,
 I did but make one seeming light request.

(Cushing 1840: 74)

Although the comparison of Vashti's and Esther's disobedience is common, Tennant further complicates his depiction of Esther by emphasizing the power shift in the king's obedience. The scene promotes begging over demanding as the more productive strategy, Esther's tears compounding her power:

[. . .] Ere while
 The King demanded Vashti to come forth,
 And shew her beauty in his banquet-hall,
 But she refused to come at his command;
 To-day, Queen Esther begs the King to come
 To her wine-banquet, and the King comes forth
 Obedient, as invited.

(Tennant 1845: 208)

Indeed, this point is made explicitly:

Persia's ladies,
 From this example, will but study more
 To captivate and win, by modest arts,
 Th'affections of their lords, which is the true
 Triumph of woman, and her honour'd crown
 Surpassing, in its glory, the gold-crown
 Set up with pearls.

(*ibid.*)

Symington is assured, yet cryptic, in his insistence that 'He guided her, as He guides us all, by ordinary motives; and it is not very difficult to guess what these may have been' (1878: 116). Goldman weighs up probable reasons for Haman's

presence at the banquet and cites the most convincing as Esther arousing the king's jealousy to disarm Haman or to expose him in the king's presence so that he might not be able to prepare an excuse (1952: 220). For Edith Deen, Esther is heroic, 'Prudent as well as fearless' in her caution: 'though she had won her husband's love and confidence, she was dealing with powerful and sinister forces. It was best to move slowly with the king' (1959: 150). The emphasis on Esther's cunning is continued by White, who explains that Esther's avoidance of 'direct confrontation' is deliberate: 'She uses her knowledge of the king's character in order to attain her goal by appealing to his emotions. The author has already demonstrated that Ahasuerus reacts emotionally rather than rationally' (1992: 128). William Phipps contends that 'spider-like, she lures them to her quarters' (1992: 98). Esther's delay is upheld as a strategy to disarm the second-in-command. If she had made her request at that first approach, White points out, Haman would not have been defeated. The invitation to the banquet is designed to 'lull Haman into a false sense of complacency' (White 1992: 129). The delay is explained by Cahn through analogy with the story of Joseph: just as he concealed his identity until his brothers' third visit, so Esther concealed hers until the king's third request (1995: 72). In contrast, Fuchs condemns her: 'Still, Esther procrastinates over her duty' (1999: 80).

Deutsch, in his Orthodox rewriting of the story, suspects rebellion: 'Esther knew that Haman had designs on the throne, and she wanted to keep a close eye on him to make sure he did not attempt to assassinate or overthrow Achashverosh' (2002: 242). He also refers to the 'impulsiveness' the king 'displayed when he ordered Vashti executed'. As such, having Haman at the banquet, he would 'bear the brunt of his instant vengeance' (243–4). He even suggests that Esther was willing to implicate herself in an affair with Haman, sacrificing her life if it would condemn him (244). In line with her apocryphal prayer disavowing her marriage to a heathen, she invites Haman as a chaperone to stop the king making 'advances' (245). Both Levenson and David Noel Freedman try to make sense of the delay by mapping the narrative on to fairytale conventions in which the king's three requests to Esther correspond to the magical quality of the number three in this genre (see Levenson 1997: 91; Moore [1971] 1984: 57).

5:9–14 Haman's Wrath

Esther Rabbah reports Haman boasting of his post-prandial happiness: 'The king promotes me and his wife honours me and there is none greater than I am in all the kingdom' (IX.2). Zeresh commends hanging to Haman because he has to choose something that 'no one of his nation has ever experienced' and been saved from. 'If you throw him into a fiery furnace, Hananiah and his compan-

ions have already been delivered from this,' she argues, naming Daniel and his lions, Joseph and his prison, Manasseh and hot irons, Israel and the wilderness, Samson and blinding (IX.2). In choosing the wood for the gallows, God calls trees before him, who argue for their likeness to Israel and the thorn wins with his argument that Haman 'is a pricking thorn,' referring to Ezek 28:24 (IX.2).

Zechariah ben Joshua ben Saruk (fifteenth century, Spain and Morocco), influenced by the astrological science so popular in the medieval period, sees Haman's desire to build an oversized gallows for Mordecai as an attempt to thwart an astrological reading that said that Mordecai was 'destined to be over his house,' which could be fulfilled literally if he could build a big enough gallows (Walfish 1993: 60; see Plate 17, p. 258).

Delgado, the Marrano Jew, makes Haman's response to Mordecai much the same as that of the Jews' situation in Spain. Haman contends that Mordecai's insult is treasonous because of its defiance of royal orders to bow to him. Spanish imperial efforts become, in Haman's mouth, a condemnable irrational greed as he lusts after the wealth that he considers his 'efforts' and 'luck' deserve:

Should we then suffer insults from a Jew
who takes no notice of what we have in our purse
except perhaps to envy or to curse?

(Delgado [1627] 1999: 57)

Perhaps countering accusations of Jewish revenge, Cushing highlights Haman's desire for retribution:

[. . .] Oh, righteous gods,
Speed, speed the hour when vengeance may be mine,
A brimming draught – for which my soul's athirst.

(1840: 76)

Watson likewise paints Haman as exemplifying revenge:

Of all, with which the world was fraught,
Revenge he deem'd the sweetest draught;
And, when provoked, he never failed
To pant till he that draught inhaled[.]

(1845: 74)

New Sacred Dramas for Young Persons invests Zeresh with zeal as she goads him into violent action:

And this is the wise and mighty Haman! invested with so many dignities! – the favourite of the court! – Weakly dispirited, because of a crafty, discontented Jew,

with subtle skill endeavours to excite his anger! Shame on such folly! A Froward child could not be more exasperated at a spider crawling over his vestment, without considering that it was in his power to crush the reptile into atoms! A Jew! the very name excites abhorrence in my breast! (1820: 157)

The author WRC condemns Zeresh for her unwomanly behaviour: 'it is a lamentable thing when a man's wife ministers to the self-importance and pride of her husband, as in the case of Zeresh' (1897: 7).

Levenson notes that the term 'merry' (*tov lev*, literally happy of heart) occurred in 1:10 to describe the king's mood just before he calls for Vashti (1997: 91). This connection creates a literary expectation that Haman's happiness will be short-lived and similarly 'ill-considered', claiming that 'One of the themes of the book of Esther is the contrast between wise and foolish joy' (92). Referring to the gallows, Levenson claims that 'Only an enormous, visible disgrace of Mordecai will bring him satisfaction' (93).

Esther 6

The task of differentiating the divine from the human that raised itself in Esther 5 becomes a central question for readers of Esther 6, which Levenson calls ‘the pivotal sixth chapter’ (1997: 7). *Esther Rabbah* indicates that this is the turning point in the Jews’ fate by inserting a story here. Haman goes to find Mordecai, who is teaching schoolchildren (22,000 of them), whom Haman puts in chains in order to kill them. It is their fasting and cries to heaven that touch God, who at that moment destroys the letters condemning the Jews, ‘which were signed with a seal of clay and tore them and brought fright upon Ahasuerus in that night’ (IX.4).

The chapter’s series of unlikely coincidences propels the plot towards its dénouement but also provokes reflection in the religious reader. As Anderson comments in *The Interpreter’s Bible*: ‘Admittedly, fact is sometimes stranger than fiction, but the perfect timing of these events makes this part of the story too good to be true’ (1954: 858). He demonstrates the ease with which religious readers interpret the inexplicable accumulation of coincidences as a coded

expression of divine providence. As Levenson himself states (an assertion linked to his identification of this as a pivotal chapter): ‘Actions seem to come out of nowhere in this tale, but they gradually link together to form an immensely positive and meaningful pattern of Jewish deliverance: If the term “theology” means anything in reference to the book of Esther, this is its theology’ (1997: 95).

Esther’s request has been delayed for a second time, and there is no sign that she or the Jews will be saved from the planned genocide. The prospect of a second banquet leaves the cogs of the plot coming to a standstill, the readers’ expectations delayed beyond reasonable patience. It is the night before the queen’s second banquet, and if anything, the Jews’ fate has only got worse: Haman has added to his general decree his plan to hang Mordecai on gallows that are already in preparation. On this most fateful of nights, the king’s sleeplessness leads him to ask for his chronicles to be read.

The King’s Sleeplessness

In *Esther Rabbah*, the king wakes in terror after dreaming that Haman was about to kill him with a sword (X.1). This supernatural insight into Haman’s evil inclinations prompts his suspicions. The German commentator John Brentius interprets the concurrence of insomnia and reading as analogous to Scripture’s primacy in the Protestant tradition, ‘For in sorrowfull and troubled cogitations and thoughts, there is not a more present remedie than the worde of God’ (1584: 134). To promote the Bible, even implicitly, as an inducer of sleep, was probably not Brentius’ intention. John Mayer, writing in Renaissance England, instead likens the insomniac king to a God who ‘neither sleeps nor slumbers’ (Psalm 121):

hee raiseth not up himselfe yet to reward the righteous, and to punish all the wicked. But the time shall come when he will not sleep thus, but awake and remember all the fidelity of the righteous, and honour them with robes and crowns of glory, making them to ride upon the heavens, as a most royall horse, and that publikely in the view of the world, and then every *Haman*, this wicked man, shall be put to confusion for ever. (1647: 67)

God’s sleep signifies patience as he mercifully delays his punishment of the wicked and the rewarding of the righteous. Like the insomniac king, however, God will wake and, as in Mordecai’s imminent triumph, everyone will receive his appropriate recompense.

Matson’s drama unites the story’s different strands by explaining the king’s sleeplessness as unease over the ‘wretched edict’ against a people unknown to him, which

Poisons my thought and robs me of my slumbers
It liked me not, when Haman first proposed it,
And save for mine infirmity of will,
I had withheld my sanction.

(1890: 11)

The king's apparently admirable disquiet is nevertheless undermined by his weakness. Although this is a story of genocide across an empire, the king's sleeplessness humanizes him for the homely *Church Family Newspaper* (vol. 15). It reads the scene in domestic terms, divine agency applied to the intimacies of its readers' lives. The 'sleepless Providence watching over our world' that denies sleep is the same that has asserted 'that even the very hairs of our head are numbered' (*Expositor's Dictionary*, 1910: 313).

That the king reads of the assassination and of Mordecai's service to him is indeed serendipitous for the Jews. The Talmud enhances divine intervention by identifying the scribe as Haman's son, Shamshai. Although he tries to scratch out Mordecai's name from the document, the angel Gabriel intervenes to preserve the record and ultimately the Jewish people (*Meg* 15b–16a, which relates that Haman's son, by tradition, is identified as the Shamshai in *Ezra* 4:8). Rebecca Kohn's *The Gilded Chamber* (2005), on the other hand, enhances the human element in the story by portraying Esther bribing the court scribe to find the episode of her uncle's part in the thwarted assassination.

The king's immediate concern is whether Mordecai has received just reward. Commentators pick up on this apprehension in order to assert the importance of honouring acts of loyalty. Heyricke, as Warden of Christ's College in Manchester, allegorizes the book for partisan application by presenting Manchester to the House of Commons as the new Mordecai, a faithful town that had been left unrewarded (1646: 24). This concept of ignored patriotism could be applied in a variety of instances, and is the conceit upon which an entire pamphlet is based that calls for the rewarding of a loyal subject: *Mordecai's Memorial, Or, There's Nothing done for Him* [. . .] *A Just and Generous Representation of Unrewarded Services* (1716). The pamphlet requests that a John Dunton be rewarded, a man now in debt because of publishing against the Jacobites and who, according to the author, 'has done more to open the Eyes of the stupid and deluded *Jacobites*' than all other subjects (Anon. 1716: iv). Although 'comfortably plac'd, the Whigs' record of services 'towards the Rescue of Religion and Liberty from Popery and Slavery' is pitiful (15). 'Were there Diaries kept in *England* of particular Services done by Subjects for their King and their Country', such oversights would not occur, the author ingeniously suggests (10).

In Cushing's drama the king considers such oversight to be antithetical to a gracious reign:

[. . .] am I thus ingrate?
 I, who am termed most merciful, most just,
 Generous, and kind, and gracious unto all:
 Alas, I'm none of these – I bear a life,
 Preserved from peril by a nobler man[.]

(1840: 83)

Oversight of a worthy minister is merely a risk endemic to court life for Tennant in 1845, because the virtuous are naturally modest, and the proud self-asserting:

This is the error, fault, or pest of kings,
 That faithful men, and upright, who have wrought
 Good service to the king or to the state,
 Shrink backward in their virtuous modesty,
 Aye dreading to molest with forwardness,
 And hence are overlook'd, or quite forgot;
 Whereas the forward, and the proud, whose claim
 Is but for shallower services, rush in,
 With bustling mein, and clamorous demand [. . .]
 But worth is best known by its modesty,
 And un-worth by its noisy forwardness.

(1845: 172)

His solution is that a ruler must discern the merit behind humility and shun the self-promoting. Mordecai thus becomes a model of modesty in the political realm just as Esther had herself served as a model in the feminine realm, illustrating the extent to which this trait became a valued characteristic for both genders in the modern period.

Beveridge's appropriation of this scene, like *Mordecai's Memorial*, contains an emphasis on the import of writing. In a 1704 sermon he relates the whole Book of Esther to the English Gunpowder Plot – an attempt against Parliament, in which the two groups, Protestants and Catholics, can be mapped on to the polarized Jews and Amalekites of the biblical story. The king's reading of his chronicles and, importantly, his discerning understanding of their significance is applied to James I's foiling of the plot through his reading – and decoding – a letter in which he infers the imminent threat:

a Divine Spirit to Interpret some dark Phrases of a Letter shew'd to his Majesty above and beyond all ordinary Construction, thereby miraculously discovering this hidden Treason, not many Hours before the appointed time for the Execution thereof. (Beveridge 1704: 24)

Reading hereby becomes an inspired act, as James' divinely instituted status endows him with supernatural reading skills. Thomas Knagg instead empha-

sizes the power of words (rather than assigning merit to the discerning reader) as he, like Beveridge, reads the Gunpowder Plot in the light of Esther. Reflecting on the effect of letters in both Esther and the Plot, he comments:

I have read of a poor *Indian*, who seeing his Theft of his Master's Figs discovered by a *Letter*, told his Fellow-Servant, that those black and white things could tell Tales. So it fell out with the Traytors of this Day; their own Pen discovered them, the black and white Letter told the Tale. (Knagg 1716: 7)

Reading also inspires writers to infer humility in the king. Cushing's Ahasuerus reflects on the errors his chronicles reveal to him:

I am a king – yet frail, and weak indeed,
And prone to err as is the meanest slave,
Who waits a suppliant at my palace gates. –
This is a humbling thought for kingly pride,
But meant, no doubt, by the immortal gods
To teach me my dependence on their care,
And make me feel I only am a man,
Though worshipped, like themselves, with incense sweet
Of praise, and homage low.

(1840: 84)

Browning's *The Ring and the Book* also reflects on the humbling effect of the oversight. The story is a murder trial told in turn by its many protagonists, and includes a monologue by the Pope who acts as judge. At the very opening of his monologue, the Pope invokes the king's reading:

Like to Ahasuerus, that shrewd prince,
I will begin, – as is, these seven years now,
My daily wont, – and read a History [. . .]
Of all my predecessors, Popes of Rome.

(Bk X. ll. 1–3, 6; 1868: 381)

He reads the chronicles to 'find example, rule of life', but discovers in them only a series of revisions and reversals which follow the meanderings of the different Popes' own conflicting accounts and prejudices. He asks:

Which of the judgements was infallible?
Which of my predecessors spoke for God?

(Bk X. ll. 150–1; 1868: 384)

The Pope discovers through reading of his institution's inherent fallibility that the necessity of writing merely underscores the weakness of human memory

and the mechanisms of state. The Pope's exemplary discernment implicates Ahasuerus for his lack of reflection, whose irreversible laws give no space for human or institutional error. The fallibility of governments is something that the Talmudists seem to be only too aware of as they relate a story of the scribe who tries to strike Mordecai's name from the courts' records. Goody renders the king in his 1899 play with superlative self-reflexivity as he relates his realization of overlooking Mordecai:

Then conscience, startled from its sleep,
Arose, and cried, in clarion tones,
Showed how ingratitude may keep
Its reign on even royal thrones.

(1899: 21)

Another major coincidence now occurs as the king seeks advice on how to rectify his oversight and asks Haman what reward he should offer. Haman is available in the court only to ask for Mordecai's execution, and presumes the prize must be his. In *Esther Rabbah* X.1 the king is already suspicious of Haman, and his question to him is deliberately ambiguous in order to test his minister's ambition. The answers he gives only add to the king's misgivings, as his request for the king's robes and horse implicate him and suggest his motive to be usurpation. James Watson renders Haman's intentions:

For, if I can a moment wear
The crown, I'll to the people swear
The king hath in my favor made
An abdication – then his head
Struck off, shall leave me nought to fear.

(1845: 98)

In Raoul Walsh's *Esther and the King* (1960), even though the scene of Mordecai's triumph is completely absent from this licentious adaptation, from the very start Haman plots against the king. Haman is first seen in bed with Vashti, calling himself the next king of Persia.

Modern critics extrapolate from Haman's request for royal robes a desire for the throne. Goldman historicizes his suspicions by appealing to other historical accounts: 'Plutarch tells that "when Xerxes allowed Demaratus the Spartan frankly to ask what he wanted, he requested to have the king's crown placed on his head and to be led through the city in the same manner as the king was"' (1952: 224). Cahn reflects on the meaning of clothing here: 'Do clothes make the man? Or does the man make the clothes?' He concludes: 'It seems that both are true.' He gestures here towards the performative nature of dress: 'However, we choose the clothes and thereby activate their effect.' 'It is a cycle. Man makes

the clothes to make the man' (1995: 137). Levenson links the story to Joseph's triumph in Genesis 41 (in which the king also rewards with dressing the second-in-command in royal robes). Here Joseph works only for the good of the country (saving it from famine), a contrast that emphasizes the self-interest in Haman's request (1997: 97).

Whilst many rewritings lose the dramatic impact of the Hebrew story – which delays the naming of the subject of the reward until the very end of the king's speech – James Maxwell's poetic rewriting reflects the force well:

Then said the king, Go do as thou hast said,
Let nought be wanting of thine own prescription.
Take now the crown, th'apparel, and the horse,
And thereon set thou *Mordecai* the Jew.

(Maxwell 1784: 25)

His rendering expresses at first what Haman wants, and expects, to hear – in other words – 'And thereon set thou.' The sentence continues to the object of the phrase – *Mordecai* the Jew – the blow to Haman all the more shocking. Relishing the downfall of the enemy, Levenson calls it 'perhaps the funniest [scene] of the book' (1997: 3), likening it to the scene of Nathan and David in which the listener is also, unbeknown to him, the subject of the parable (96). Carey Moore pithily describes the scene: 'here the early bird is gotten by the worm' ([1971] 1984: 64).

6:11 The Triumph of Mordecai

The rabbis embellish the scene of *Mordecai*'s honour with details that relish Haman's humiliation. In the Talmud (*Meg* 16a) *Mordecai* insists on a bath before his parade:

it would not be good manners to use the king's apparel in this state. Now Esther had closed all the baths and all the barber's shops. So Haman himself took him into the bath and washed him, and then went and brought scissors to his house and trimmed his hair. While he was doing so, he sighed and groaned.

Esther Rabbah echoes this story, also indicating that Haman, although groaning, is merely returning to his roots. In the Talmud, Haman himself was a barber, in Midrash it was his father (X.4). *Mordecai* then complains that he is weak from his fasting when coming to mount the horse. 'So Haman stooped down and he mounted [on his back]'. The Talmud gives a defence of *Mordecai*'s ungracious attitude by staging a debate between the two figures in which Haman berates him for his seemingly un-Jewish attitude, even quoting Scripture at him:

When he was up he kicked him. He said to him: Is it not written in your books, *Rejoice not when thine enemy faileth?* He replied: That refers to an Israelite, but in regard to you [folk] it is written, *And thou shalt tread upon their high places.*

Esther Rabbah sums up Haman's disgrace in his having performed the menial tasks of 'a bath-attendant, a barber, an orderly, and a herald' (X.7). *Meg* 16a also recounts the story of Haman's daughter, repeated again in *Targum Rishon* and later Jewish writings and illustrations. She

looked down from the roof, and it appeared that the man walking on the road was Mordecai, while the man riding on the horse was her father. So she took a pot of excrement and flung it on his head. He raised his head and said to her "You, too, my daughter, you embarrass me." Whereupon, immediately, she fell from the roof and died from the balcony chamber. (72)

In the festival of Purim, Mordecai's triumph is the key scene for the trope of reversal that pervades the celebrations. The reversal is highlighted in the Midrash in which Haman laments:

What an ill fate is mine! Yesterday I was busy erecting a gallows for him, and God is preparing for him a crown! I was preparing for you ropes and nails, and God prepares for you royal apparel. I was going to request from the king permission to hang you, and he has bidden me mount you on horseback. (X. 5)

It is commonly replicated in Purim paraphernalia, such as pewter plates used to carry gifts of food to fulfil the mitzvah of sending portions. The plate held at the Victorian and Albert Museum (Plate 13) renders in Yiddish the phrase from Esther 9:22 and juxtaposes this initial scene of triumph with the greater victory of the hanging of Haman and, unusually, of his wife Zeresh on the left, and his sons beneath with the assassins Bigthan and Teresh seemingly impaled on spikes either side. Mordecai's individual triumph here pre-empts the triumph of the whole Jewish people (see Levenson 1997: 98; on the trope of reversals in Esther see notes on Esther 8). On its rim, the plate frames the central scene with Esther kneeling before the king, suggesting that it is her action that produces triumph. In the synagogue in Dura-Europos, Syria, the scene of the triumph of Mordecai is prominent in its third-century frescoes. Ori Z. Soltes considers the depictions of Mordecai, riding in triumph, as expressive of 'messianic hopefulness' as he is depicted 'messiah-like, on a white horse' (2003: 138). H. L. Kessler has suggested that the paintings are a visual response to Christian appropriation of the 'Old Testament' (cited in Levine and Weiss 2000: 54). Shalom Sabar explains that the synagogue's renovations occurred during 'improved conditions', and the scenes, including the parading of Mordecai, portray biblical heroes, 'showing laudable pride in the Jewish heritage'



PLATE 13 Purim plate. Victoria and Albert Museum.

(2000: 159). The portrayal of Roman figures within the Esther section demonstrates for Sabar the Jewish community's identification with the Romans and against the Persians as represented in the humiliated Haman, whose eyes are gouged out from the walls in a symbolic act of vengeance (163).

Christian tradition follows Jewish in linking the rivalry between Mordecai and Haman to that between Saul and Amalek. British Library Miscellany (Add. MS11,639), a thirteenth-century manuscript from northern France, has three consecutive leaves (fols 525v, 526v and 527v) of which the triumph of Mordecai is the final one, the previous two linking this story to the battle between Israel and the Amalekites. The previous two depict Aaron and Hur holding Moses' arms during the battle and Samuel beheading Agag (the king of the Amalekites) in obedience to God's order. The illustrations give Mordecai's

triumph a military provenance as well as identifying Haman's humiliation with the long-standing feud between the Israelites and their enemies.

The trope of reversals, a key element of Purim celebrations, is widely applied by Christian writers. In 1621, Francis Quarles, although a monarchist, nonetheless expresses the obviously appealing and far-spread republican meritocratic outlook that is the moral of his poetic rewriting of Esther:

Hee's [*sic*] not alway best
That takes the highest place, nor he the least
That sits beneath: for outward fortunes can
Expresse (how great, but) not how good's the man:
Whom God will raise, he humbles first a while;
And where he raises, oft he means to foyle.

(1621: M5r; 1642: 168)

The American Jonathan Edwards allegorizes the scene so that it speaks of God's reward to his people, who will 'make them to reign with Christ [. . .] and to be partakers of his glory' (1998: 62–3). His fellow countryman, Tyler, revels instead in the materiality of Haman's unrelenting anti-Semitism as he responds to the crowd that berates him. He describes their 'vile disgrace' as they look on in ugly triumph: 'Troops of their hated race, crowded the streets / And shook their greasy Jewish garbadines / And seem'd in mockery to say, "Who now / Doth bow?"' (54–5).

Christian writers are keen to distance Mordecai from any triumphalism. Lawson depicts him as above the appeal of celebrity; instead, he was 'too wise to value those childish honours which appeared so glorious to Haman. He was, undoubtedly, struck with amazement when Haman brought to him the royal robes, and the royal horse [. . .] and doubtless he saw the gracious hand of God in what was done to him' (1804: 155). M'Crie cites Mordecai's return to his previous position after his parade to prove that it did not cause him to 'behave unseemingly' as it would an 'ordinary person', who instead would be made 'giddy' (1838: 184). In contrast, Robert Stevenson relishes Haman's fall (punning on the bowing refused to him):

It is impossible for the imagination to conceive more exquisite mortification or more overwhelming anguish, than that which now filled the mind of Haman [. . .] while he, like a servant, attended upon that very man, whose destruction he had meditated. Never did pride receive a more complete humiliation, never were the lofty looks of man more abased, and the haughtiness of man more bowed down. (1817: 253–4)

For the pedagogically motivated *New Sacred Dramas for Young Persons*, this scene is one of moral instruction. Haman rails against the king's command with unbelievably self-motivated transparency, arguing: 'Am I to be thus degraded, my lord the king? Despoiled of my honours – become the gaze of the abject,

artful slaves! – A subject of spiteful exclamation to a wild, ungoverned mob! The king's response spells out the moral lesson:

Thou feelest acutely the misery of degradation to thyself; but for the sorrows of a poor and persecuted Jew thou hast no compassion. – Where thy own character is concerned the fear of obloquy drives thee to despair, but the prejudice and deformity of thy mind destroys all consideration for another! (*New Sacred Dramas for Young Persons*, 1820: 163)

The drama thus succeeds in raising the moral application of the play whilst making the king its arbiter.

Although throughout the play Cushing's Haman is the exemplary actor, when the king reveals that he must honour Mordecai, he unguardedly responds:

On *him*, my king, this vile and abject Jew
[. . .] oh, surely not on him,
This outcast wretch, wilt thou confer such grace!
(Cushing 840: 87)

M'Crie's moral lesson is that the crowd applauds this turn of events and the reversed status of Mordecai and Haman only because of the fickleness of mob mentality (1838: 182). James Watson's Haman continues to plot as he tries to downplay Mordecai's honour, arguing that the king mocks him and merely desires 'A little pastime', 'To dress a dog in ribbons gay, / And laugh at the grotesque display' (1845: 100). Despite Haman's attempts, 'shouting crowds their joy proclaim, / Exulting in the vizer's shame' to a frenzy of celebration: 'Then deaf'ning shouts of triumph high / From thousands rent the echoing sky' (100). Watson delights in the portrayal of Haman's humiliation in which the crowd harrass him and 'missiles vile around him shower' so that he is 'With loathsome filth bespattered o'er' as he reaches the palace door (101).

Tennant negotiates popular conceptions of Jews as he portrays the crowd's response to Mordecai and Haman through a potter. He describes Mordecai's response to his honour: 'How meekly, modestly, he sat it out, / Blushing at all the honours forced upon him' (1845: 199). He continues: 'Albeit a Jew, I'd rather have him for my creditor, / Than yon high-look'd, proud-hearted, Am'lekite' (200). His estimation of Mordecai's humility combats popular prejudice. Although 'these Hebrew folk are evil spoken of', and 'Persia's babbling tongues / Scourge them too strong', he reasons, 'what though they have their God, / And worship him according to their guise?', concluding: 'They're loyal subjects, and they're honest men' (*ibid.*). Goody renders the crowd prophetic in their poetic chanting:

*Haman, false Haman, malignant and proud,
Where are thy boastings so vain and so loud?*

*Haman is falling, and woe be his fate,
Where is his glory, his honour, and state?*

(1899: 24)

In T. Sturge Moore's poem *Judas* (1931), Jesus' passion is represented as a Purim parody of the triumph of Mordecai, in which

On a ramshackle mule that showed its teeth,
Jibbing in terror, a gaol-bird Mordecai
Sat self-complacent, while a convict Haman,
Haggard and dogged, led the brute on foot,
Crowned too, but in derision with spiked thorns,
And throttled by a scarlet cloak [. . .]

(ll. 714–19)

The crucifixion scene is described as 'Haman's cross'. Judas, as zealot, expects a new Mordecai in his Messiah – an imperialistic and triumphal ruler, yet Jesus enacts Haman's role as crucified and defeated. Moore speaks of Judas' 'apprehension / That Jesus has been Haman'. Asking for news of the crucifixions, it is reported: 'On Haman's gibbet, Sir / Hangs Galilee's Messiah!' (ll. 902–3). Judas says, to himself: 'I know, poor thief, the Haman who hung there / Was rare and gracious' (ll. 4–5).

The 1986 film *Exile* (dir. Amos Gitai) adapts the story of Esther to be 'an exposé' of 'how people who are persecuted can become new persecutors' (Amos Gitai: *Images of Exile*, dvd featurette, 2001) and perhaps for this reason leaves out the scene of the triumph of Mordecai, fitting with its explicit aim 'to prevent slaughter' and to avoid a 'cycle of revenge'.

Haman returns home with his head covered: an act of shame explained by the fact that his plans have been thwarted. *Targum Rishon* argues that his shame is because of the excrement his daughter threw on him (72). Haman's humiliation here is central to Browne's concept of 'poetic justice'. He advocates his 'mental torture' as an important 'preliminary to his execution' ([1962] 1975: 384), in contravention of Article 7 of the Geneva Convention of Human Rights' condemnation of degrading treatment, signed only four years later. When at home, his advisers and wife, Zeresh, predict his coming downfall. Goody places anti-Semitic rhetoric in the mouth of a friend, who goads Haman to action: 'Trust not the down-cast eye, the servile timid mien; / Sudden and swift the vengeance springs that crept unseen' (1899: 26). Poetic justice, exemplified in Haman's hanging, is highlighted by Deen in her judgement that 'She who had fostered her husband's vanity and foolish ambition was now to see him hang, and was powerless to aid him' (1959: 300). The connection is later made by Levenson through linking the downfall predicted here and Haman's fall upon the queen later in *Esther 7* (see 1997: 7).

Esther 7 and 8

7:1–6 Esther's Second Banquet

Esther finally pleads for the Jews and reveals Haman as the 'adversary and enemy'. That the biblical text bypasses the king's complicity is redressed in the Talmud, in which Ahasuerus is implicated in Esther's accusation. For the rabbis her dual descriptors, 'adversary' and 'enemy', refer to both minister and king. *Meg* 16a explains that 'This informs us that she was pointing to Ahasuerus and an angel came and pushed her hand to point to Haman'. *Esther Rabbah* does not dwell on the scene of accusation, anticipating instead, it seems, his death and the Jews' triumph.

That Esther implicates Haman, not the king, diverts criticism to a courtly favourite, maintaining principles of monarchical authority. Richard Heyrick skirts

around this issue in his 1646 sermon: 'Kings are but men [. . .] Kings sin, and Kingdoms are ruin'd; *Esther* bows low to the King, but stands upright against *Haman*' (7). He reduces the king to 'but' a man, and yet emphasizes Esther's stance against Haman and her subservience to the monarch. Thomas Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* (1715) has Esther condemn Haman, absolving the king: 'Tis he, this barb'rous minister I mean: / Who fashioning a zealous smooth Pretense, / Your Virtue arm'd against our Innocence' (42).

The *New Sacred Dramas for Young Persons* has the king defending monarchy against reproof:

When persecution is spread as a firebrand over the country, the illiberal and untaught mind naturally ascribes the evil to the reigning sovereign, though he may be as innocent of the evil which abounds, as I have been a stranger to the daring iniquities of Haman. (1820: 171–2)

The king is unaware of violence, asserting that he thought the edict aimed only to 'keep them in due subordination'. His defence of the Jews expresses a messianic hope for their future: 'But the hour, we firmly believe, will come, when they shall cease to be wanderers upon the earth, and by every social and religious tie be united to the community at large!' Esther is more reticent and questions Jewish–Christian 'assimilation', asking: 'when will they forget malice, pride, persecution, that have mutually stigmatised their characters?', concluding that it will be when they praise God together (169). Concerning the king's role, M'Crie contends that he 'at least ought to have been' ashamed of his part in the planned genocide (1838: 207). In Cushing's drama, Esther vindicates the king by further implicating Haman who 'dares abuse thy unsuspecting love / By artful falsehoods' (1840: 94). In turn, the king is appalled that Haman has made him 'seem that which I never was – / A cruel tyrant thirsting for the blood / Of a poor nation' (95).

Esther's speech has been upheld as an exemplar of an ideal political speech and, of course, elaborated upon in many instances. *Targum Rishon* fills in Esther's speech, making overt what it sees as implicit indications of Haman's rebellion: 'the adversary is the wicked Haman who sought to slay you (yesterday) in the evening in your bedchamber, and to dress himself today in royal garments, to ride on your horse, and to lower the golden crown upon his neck, to rebel against you and to take away the kingdom from you' (75). Jewish commentaries dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries point to Esther's speeches for their rhetorical perfection. Isaac Arama (1420–94, Spain) details five aspects: timing (she waited until after her three-day fast); location (in her own home where no one would speak against her); means (the banquet makes the king predisposed towards her); perfect phrasing; and quality (it suited the person asked and explicitly explained the benefit to the king). Walfish notes

that this taxonomy dates from Cicero's *De inventione* (1993: 52). Equally admiring of the queen, Abraham Saba (an itinerant preacher in Spain) focuses on textual detail in explaining the use of the word 'queen' (compared to the 'and Esther said' in 5:4 and 5:7) as an epithet worthy of the cause (*ibid.*: 35).

James Maxwell's poetic rewriting of 1784 may, like Arama, praise Esther's rhetoric, but only to the detriment of womankind:

O *Esther!* I admire thy *matchless* prudence:
 How prudently didst thou thy cause present!
 Let all thy sex a lesson learn from thee,
 Not to be rash and hasty with their words.
 How many righteous causes have been lost
 By over hasty prate of female tongues.

(1784: 21)

M'Crie commends Esther's intercession, for it shows 'a becoming diffidence and modesty' and 'prudent preparation and delay', further admiring her boldness when 'the season for acting came' (1838: 197). She represents a fittingly feminine strength: she was 'calm as well as courageous, respectful as well as resolute' (200). M'Crie puts Esther's success in timing down to prayer, what he calls the 'best preparation' for her action (199). The implication (through allusion to preaching as needing more than simply prayer) is that it was divine, not human, effort that prevailed.

Later in the century, Symington limns a masculine, forceful Esther, who momentarily transcends her feminine (submissive and tearful) nature:

To-morrow we shall see her on her knees and in tears, but to-day she is erect, strong in her holy passion. Her perfect form towers, her eye flashes, her finger points: "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!" (1878: 144)

In Matson's dramatization, Esther piles on the 'wicked, wicked' Haman a heap of crimes:

A traitor steeped in triple treachery.
 He was prime instigator of the plot
 For which the eunuchs suffered. He hath played
 Thee false in thine affairs with Macedon.
 And now he by insidious arts hath gained
 From thee to grant the dread decree that dooms
 Thy queen, thine Esther to the knife with all
 Her kindred, tribe and nation.

(1890: 13)

In the final lines of his play, Goody presents a diplomatic Esther overwriting Haman's treachery with female constancy:

My Lord, though friendship fade away, and faith and hope depart,
One refuge true and sure will stay – a loving woman's heart.

(1899: 50)

In Daril's translation of Racine, Esther explains his evils in more abstract terms of the manipulation of the false adviser:

King, drive out Calumny: his criminal attempts of the most peaceful states troubles the happy harmony. His fury, eager for blood, follows everywhere the innocent. King, take care of the absent against his homicidal tongue. Of this monster so ferocious, fear and feigned kindness; vengeance is in his heart, and pity on his tongue. Fraud clever and subtle with flowers strew his path: but on his footsteps comes at last useless repentance. (Daril 1895: 36)

Modern commentators are quick to comment on Esther's rhetorical skill. Sidnie Ann White lauds the 'raw urgency' of Esther's appeal (1992: 129), and Levenson commends her 'great eloquence' (1997: 3) in contrast to the 'jerky' language of the king (103). Hers is but a performance of 'a weak and helpless woman' (102), a small step from Esther Fuchs' condemnation of the queen as 'silver-tongued, and somewhat manipulative' and as 'placatory' and 'ingratiating', contrasting her with Mordecai, who 'stays proud and regal' (1999: 81). Her reading is again selective, illustrated by her assertion that (contrary to her transgression of the laws to not approach the king), 'She waits patiently and obediently till the king's permission is given for an audience; only then she speaks' (81).

Connie Glaser and Barbara Smalley echo Arama's admiration for Esther's rhetorical skills in their *What Queen Esther Knew: Business Strategies from a Biblical Sage* (2003) in which they advocate her use of speech and body language that says "I mean business!" (132–3). They cite a Harvard psychological study that purports that those who inhabit subordinate positions are 'more sensitive and intuitive towards whoever was perceived to be the leader', 'increasing their interpersonal sensitivity' (136).

The interpretation of 7:4, rendered 'if we had been sold as bondmen and bondswomen, I had held my tongue' in the AV, has been the subject of much discussion. The difficulty arises from the clause, *ein ha-sar shoveh be-nezeq ha-melk'*, and especially the noun *sar* (normally translated as 'enemy') and *shoveh* (often rendered 'equal to' or 'comparable with'). Immanuel of Rome suggests that 'Haman was not equal to the king with respect to the losses suffered'; and Joseph Hayyun reads it as 'the enemy is not worth anything compared to the harm caused to us by the king' (Walfish 1993: 21). The Talmud, followed by

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Isaac ben Joseph and others, understands *shoveh* differently, and has: ‘the enemy was not concerned about the loss or damage to the king’ (*Meg* 16a; see Walfish 1993: 20, 244). Zechuriah ben Saruk comments that if they had been sold as slaves, Esther would have remained silent: it is only because no one benefits that causes her to speak. Immanuel of Rome glosses her words to clarify her emphasis: ‘The misfortune of our destruction is not as difficult for me to tolerate as the damage caused to the king because of Haman’s plot, since the king benefits from the presence of the Jews in his kingdom’ (*ibid.*: 21).

An example from an early seventeenth-century collection of scenes from popular plays has Esther argue:

It is my Life (great Sir) that I do crave,
 And that my Peoples Lives you also save.
 Had we been sold for Slaves, I’d held my Tongue,
 And patiently would have endur’d the wrong.
 But to be threatened every day with Death
 Is worse than Death it self.

(Greg [1561] 1904: xvi)

A New Entelude of Godly Queene Hester renders the lines:

To deathe are determined throughe all this realme,
 No remedy: lesse your pardon vs redeme,
 We woulde rather we myght be solde in bondage,
 Than thus to peryshe, by fury and outrage.

(*ibid.*: 36)

Thomas Brereton’s translation of Racine’s *Esther* (1715) has the queen explain Haman’s action as traitorous and therefore harmful to the king:

Th’ astonish’d World with Slaughter shall abound:
 In your high State a cruel Traytor plac’d,
 Shall mighty Provinces at once lay waste:
 And in this Palace, prostituted too,
 Your subjects’ Blood shall overflow to you[.]

(1715: 42)

Timothy Laniak argues that Esther is here appealing to the king’s honour, as it would be an insult to him that someone would dare to sell her as a slave (1998: 112–15). The *New Catholic Commentary* infers from Esther’s statement ‘we are sold’ a reference to Haman’s equally implicit point in 3:9 that annihilating the Jews will have financial repercussions ([1969] 1981: 410; a point also noted by Levenson 1997: 102).

In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cites Racine’s ‘The

King is to this day unaware who I am' (Sedgwick's translation), as a 'model for a certain simplified but highly potent imagining of coming out and transformative potential' (1991: 75). Sedgwick's application follows many others who have explored a contemporary application of the power structures at work in the court, reading Esther's approach to the king as representative of the disenfranchised individual. Esther's cry 'If I perish, I perish' is to Sedgwick 'recognizable to any gay person who has inched toward coming out to homophobic parents' (76), and the story implies that coming out of the closet is a revelation made in an intimate relational context that 'effortlessly overturns an entire public systematics of the natural and the unnatural, the pure and the impure' (76). The significance of Esther, Sedgwick contends, is that she risks herself for her people – her own 'outing' puts herself at risk but saves those she represents, an argument for 'coming out of the closet', although she does recognize 'how limited a leverage any individual revelation can exercise over collectively scaled and institutionally embodied oppressions' (78). She differentiates between Esther's and homosexual disclosure in that 1) Esther's identity is seen as immutable, rather than dismissed as 'a phase' (7); 2) Because it's an open secret, the response can't be predicted along the simple lines as in Esther; 3) Esther's revelation doesn't potentially harm the king, unlike the revelation of homosexuality which contains 'a consciousness of a potential for serious injury' (80); and 4) in a similar manner, her identity metamorphosis does not explicitly affect her relationship with the king.

7:7–8 Haman's Fate

The king is so incensed, or confused, by Esther's revelation that he retreats to the garden. *Meg* 16a asserts that there he finds men uprooting trees. Although they are angels sent by God, when the king asks, they say Haman sent them, fuelling his ire (see also *Esther Rabbah* X.9 and *Targum Rishon*, 77). It is the king's anger – not Esther's vehemence – that is the subject of Antonio Gionima's painting, appropriately entitled *The Condemnation of Haman by Ahasuerus*, c.1725–30 (Plate 14). Esther is passively reclining, almost nonchalant, whilst the king leans to point at Haman, who is falling backwards as though thrown by the royal command. Lawson, in contrast, condemns the king for his inappropriate rage, asserting that 'Anger is a short madness'. Christians are characterized by their self-control and, playing to contemporary stereotypes of Oriental passion, marks the king as inferior:

If we desire, therefore, to behave uniformly like wise men and like Christians, we must keep our mouths as with a bridle when our hearts are hot within us; and we



PLATE 14 Antonio Gionima, *The Condemnation of Haman by Ahasuerus*, c.1725–30. The Royal Collection © 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

must keep our hearts with all diligence, that our passions may not overpower our reason. (Lawson 1804: 169)

Others suggest that anger is a sign of weakness in the king (see Browne [1962] 1975: 384 and Levenson 1997: 104). The American evangelical Cheryl Ford maintains the king's authority whilst implicating him, as she has him 'furious' not simply with Haman 'no doubt with himself too', asking 'How could he have been so foolishly duped into dooming his own queen, not to mention an entire race of innocent people?' (2002: 123).

Haman's fate seems to be decided, rather arbitrarily, on his fumbled attempt to beg the queen for mercy. *Meg* 16a picks up on the verse's phrasing, contending that rather than 'falling' it should read 'had fallen': 'R. Eleazer said: This informs us that an angel came and made him fall on it. Ahasuerus then exclaimed: Trouble inside, trouble outside!' *Esther Rabbah* represents Michael pushing him on to Esther (X.9); in *Targum Rishon* it is the angel Gabriel (77). A rabbinic debate in *Meg* 6a cites, amongst other verses, Isa 26:10, 'let him not behold the majesty of the Lord', to defend condemnation of Haman against other models of Jewish ideals of mercy (as expressed in the Book of Jonah, for

example). The Talmud here anticipates later writers who appropriate Esther's dismissal of Haman to justify constructions of the enemy as undeserving of forgiveness, especially the national enemy (see pp. 259–65).

Matthew Poole's king is somewhat manipulative, and although speaking out of 'an exasperated mind', he 'takes all occasions to vent [his anger] against the person who gave the provocation, and makes the worst construction of all his words and actions' ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.). Symon Patrick, Lord Bishop of Ely, in 1706 attempts to defend Haman's 'fall' through cultural convention: 'I have not read any where, that this was the Manner among the *Persians*; but it was among the *Greeks*, and *Romans*, to embrace the Knees of those whom they petitioned to be favourable to them' (728).

In 1647 John Mayer reads the banquet – and Haman's condemnation – allegorically. Haman's presence at the feast is to be understood to represent 'the wicked communicating with the Lord in the Eucharist', following the principles in 1 Cor 11:29 that it will be 'to their own judgment and damnation'. As such, the queen's refusal of Haman's suit for mercy is vindicated, as it 'shewed that the petitions of the wicked suing for mercie at the last day, shall be so far from prevailing, as that they shall be taken for oppressions, the great Judge being hereby provoked to wrath the more' (Mayer 1647: 68–9).

Hester, A Poem (1714) has the king edging towards mercy until he sees Haman on the queen:

AND now the King returns with calmer Air;
Compassion seems the Mixture most to share.
But when with jealous Aspect he surveys
The Queen, The Bed, the Posture and the Place:
"And will he force her too before my Face!"

(Anon. 1714: 73)

In Handel's oratorio, Haman deploys biblical language against the background of haunting strings to implore Esther as though she were God ('Turn not, O Queen'). Because set against Esther's own prayer to God, it invokes her selflessness of offering her own life, implicating Haman's self-interest as he petitions only for his own. Esther's response – 'Flatt'ring tongue, no more I hear thee!' – is expressed with a triumphal, lively melody with playful strings. Anthem-like, her 'Vain thy frowns, and vain thy smiles!' always occur at the end of a musical phrase as she lauds her success over Haman. The piece echoes the tragic tones of the Chorus's 'Save us, O Lord, / And blunt the wrathful sword!', invoking Haman's tyranny in the melody as well as in Esther's reminders of his 'bloody' scheme. Once Haman is condemned he sings against ambition. The long notes of his deep bass voice are in counterpoint with the articulated arpeggios in the strings, placing his own tragedy against the triumph of the Jews.

In William B. Bradbury's short oratorio, performed in Cambridge, New York, in 1870, the king poetically refutes Haman in a short solo, calling him a 'Viper, whose treacherous fang, Smites the hand that feeds thee – What turpitude of art Can fitly barb the dart That through death's portal leads thee?' (Bradbury 1856: 72). M'Crie identifies the king as disingenuous, his accusation seen as 'a cutting sarcasm, intimating at once the king's rage against him, and his opinion that there was no crime of which such a base wretch was not capable' (1838: 212).

The question of why Esther – in so many other ways an exemplary woman and Jew – does not show mercy to Haman, contradicting Christian and Jewish values of compassion, becomes pertinent in modern England, at a time in which the sense of national coherence and aggression towards enemies deepened. Haman's invocation of 'Christian' forgiveness in Brereton's *Esther* (1715) introduces the dilemma: 'I find 'tis vain to fight your God, and live: / But does he teach you never to forgive?' (44). Esther claims a desire for mercy, but explains that such a request of the king would be pointless, distancing her from revenge (45). Symington notes that although 'Esther has a tender heart', 'she is not a fool'. He bypasses the tricky question of Christian grace by aligning mercy with the victims, making extermination of the enemy necessary for the preservation of the innocent: 'if the righteous execution of one wicked man can save them, justice and mercy both forbid her to plead for that man' (1878: 151). Symington's construction of the victim/victimizer dyad here pre-empts the use of these verses to defend a theology of unforgiveness.

In Matson's drama Esther refuses Haman's pleas, saying: 'I should but bring / The curse of Saul on my unsheltered head' (1890: 13), referring to the traditional enmity. Cushing's Esther cites a theology of justice to defend showing no mercy to Haman:

He is a God of justice, wretched man!
And his commands writ on eternal stone
Thou hast defied, and dared to violate,
When thou didst falsely swear, and rashly seek
The guiltless blood of those whom He protects.

(1840: 95)

Browne sees the assault as an excuse for the king to condemn: 'his instant death can be ordered for attempted assault upon her majesty, which was high-treason' ([1962] 1975: 384). White's concern is to defend the patriotic Esther's lack of mercy:

the fact that she does not try to save him may appear unattractive. However, Esther must act upon her primary loyalty to her community, which has motivated her throughout this scene. Haman left alive would constitute a threat to the Jewish community. (1992: 129)

Levenson echoes the sentiment, and claims that accusations against Esther ‘misinterpret the entire situation’: ‘while her heart might have prompted her to be merciful, logic and prudence restrained her’ (1997: 105).

Haman becomes, then, an exemplar of evil, undeserving of mercy, and the dramatic irony of Haman’s downfall is enhanced by the powerful image of his being hung on his own gallows, later to become proverbial. It is a trope used in the title of John Rutledge’s pamphlet *A Defence Against Calumny; Or, Haman, in the shape of Christopher Ellery, Esq. hung upon his own gallows* (1803) which argues that ‘Detection and disgrace are the slanderer’s inheritance’ (38). Tyler’s early nineteenth-century play enhances the scene’s irony in Haman’s assertion of faith in the queen’s sympathy for him:

[. . .] that our fair Queen,
Feeling the deep disgrace I have endur’d
In leading forth this base, this hateful Jew,
By this distinguished favour fondly aims
To salve the burnings of my wounded heart?

(Tyler [n.d.] 1941: 84–8)

Levenson, replicating much Jewish reception, considers the king’s line in 7:8 to be ‘the funniest [. . .] in the whole book’ (1997:56), but *The Interpreter’s Bible* judges it to be of ‘the kind which is appreciated only by the victor’ (1954: 831).

Harbonah draws the king’s attention to Haman’s gallows, intended for Mordecai. The rabbis associate Harbonah with Elijah, underscoring his importance as explained by Abraham Ibn Ezra: ‘Harbona did a good deal on Israel’s behalf, similar to the deeds of Elijah’ (Walfish 1993: 33). *Hamlet* expresses the sentiment of the reversal in the proverbial ‘he is “Hoist with his own petard”’ (III.iv.1.207), which appears in Delgado’s poem ([1627] 1999: 77). An alternative Latin version is cited by Ester Sowernam on the title-page of her *Ester Hath Hang’s Haman* (1617), repeated by Thomas Scott over a century later and translated as: ‘There is no law more equitable, then that the devisers of death should perish by their own art’ (1827: 4R4).

By telling the king of Haman’s plan to hang ‘the good old Man’ Mordecai, ‘E’en in your Purple’ (43), Harbonah, in Thomas Brereton’s translation of Racine’s *Esther* (1715), adds to Haman’s crimes that of usurpation and disgracing the king. Watson in 1845 dwells on Haman’s death – first anticipated in the king’s gruesome sentence:

From year to year there let him swing,
While round him all the breezes sing;
Let vultures on his bowels feast,
And eagles to the banquet haste;
[. . .] While loathsome flies together come,

And feed with execrable hum,
 Till bleach'd his bones, by sun and rain,
 The whiteness of the chalk attain,
 And, dropping piece-meal to the ground,
 Be gnaw'd by every dog around.

(1845: 105–6)

The scene is replete with symbols of an exotic, repulsive land: the vultures and eagles, the 'loathsome flies.' The form of death invokes as distasteful the Persian Zoroastrian practice in which the dead are left on towers to be eaten to the bone by vultures. Zeresh faints with 'hysterical scream' when she sees her husband, not Mordecai, on the gallows (107). His hanging is described from the perspective of the crowd, whose savagery is expressed in their perverse, aesthetic delight:

[. . .] deaf'ning peals of laughter strong,
 The crowd their savage joy proclaim;
 His writhing agonies – Oh, shame!
 With diabolic smile they hail
 The crimson, black, and livid pale,
 That shot by turns athwart his face,
 When strongly lock'd in death's embrace,
 In ecstasy of joy complete
 They view – his tossing limbs, how sweet!
 His ghastly grins of horror seem
 More sweet than summer's evening beam[.]

(108)

Set up as the most Eastern of the poem's characters, Haman is killed in a way that endorses the negative value ascribed to the East, only further compounded by the distorted gaze of the Persian crowd, their corrupt taste reflecting their cultural inferiority.

Esther's Suit of 1753 underlines the justice of Haman's death, asserting that God 'doth always observe a great Proportion betwixt Crimes and Punishments' (Anon. 1753: 14). The pamphlet *A Defence Against Calumny* against Christopher Ellery, an American democrat, calls for a just punishment. Charged with falsely accusing a man named Rutledge, he is as such likened to Haman: 'Ought not Ellery to be hung on the same gallows of public infamy which he erected for his neighbour?' (Rutledge 1803: 13). When Haman is condemned in Rita Benton's play, he reminds the king of his initial decree demanding male rule and challenges him: 'Thou art as the veriest slave, O King [. . .] Slave of his low-born queen!' (1922: 156). When the king looks 'disturbed' at the astute observation, Esther kneels and praises him, thereby appeasing him (156).

8:1–6 ‘How can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?’

After the climax of the previous chapter’s revelation, Haman is defeated; yet the Jews are still subject to annihilation, the irreversible law condemning the Jews still intact. Esther’s speech is very popular among late medieval Jewish exegetes as a model of a subject’s approach to a ruler: namely, that a successful request should emphasize the ruler’s benefit, cite any favour the petitioner can draw on, assert the appropriateness of the request and the worth of the person asking (Walfish 1993: 53). Zechariah ben Saruk (fifteenth century, Spain and Morocco) even calls Esther *medinit*, a good stateswoman, for her skillful rhetoric.

Lawson advocates the femininity of her request:

Her beauty, her tears, the strong emotions of her heart apparent in her gestures, the amiable virtues which shone forth in her generous concern for her poor friends, were sufficient to have melted the most marble-hearted prince in the world. (1804: 178)

He asks his readers to ‘Observe with what humility and modesty, yet earnest importunity, she presents her request to the king’ and upholds Esther as having ‘those amiable qualities which must endear a wife to her husband [. . .]’. Submission becomes for Lawson the only laudable feminine mode of attack:

Pride and petulance can obtain nothing without reluctance on the part of him that grants. Humility and submission are the weapons by which a wise woman will encounter opposition in her husband, and the means by which she will obtain what can be obtained by methods fit to be used by a wife. (180)

Levenson is equally admiring of the queen’s ‘highly rhythmic and parallelistic alternation’ between referring to her attractiveness and the king’s welfare (1997: 108).

8:7–14 The Irreversible Decree

Although the king is willing for Esther and Mordecai to write ‘as it liketh’ them, he reminds them that it is a law ‘may no man reverse’. The king’s willingness to avert the genocide is commended by John Brentius as a model of humility: ‘this is in deede true vertue, to acknowledge and amende thine errour, not stubbornly to defend it’ (1584: 154). Samuel Kem in his sermon of 1644 sees

the lesson of Esther to 'show [. . .] where the Kings heart is, and who hath the ordering of it', namely God. That the decree is irrevocable is dismissed, because 'a decree sealed by the King is nothing to oblige Ahashuerosh, if God will have it reversed concerning his people' (20).

In Tyler's play, the king authors the second decree, and in Cushing's the king dictates to Esther and Mordecai his plan for Jewish self-defence, arguing that people won't dare stand against the Jews, for

Powerful are Israel's sons, and few will dare
Rush forth to meet them, if prepared to strike.

(Cushing 1840: 100)

Arthur Jackson recognizes the limitations of the second decree – unlike many who ignore them:

in the new decree [. . .] no man is forbidden to offer violence to the Jews, nor is the magistrate commanded to assist them, onely the Jews are allowed to stand upon their guard; which shews that Mordecai was restrained to this, that he might not in expresse terms reverse what was published in the former decree. (1646: 806)

John Mayer writing in 1647 ponders on the civil war that the second edict allows, asking: 'how can it be justified, that without any legall proceeding so many should be slain by their fellow subjects of the same Kingdom, and that not onely men, but their wives and children, as *vers. 11*, among whom some doubtlesse were innocent?' He is perhaps here reflecting the claim of many Parliamentarians, that the Civil War and the attack on Charles I were a response to his association with the Irish slaughter of Protestants (see Lamont 2002). Thomas Scott responds to the law as 'absurd', in contrast, that it 'made it necessary to authorize a civil war throughout the vast empire; both parties acting *by* and *against* the king's authority at the same time!' He commends instead British government and its legislation that 'no act can be framed, but that the same authority which enacted it may repeal it', a law 'immensely more suited to the state of human nature' (1827: 4R6).

George Lawson, in contrast, spells out the complex relation of the first to the second decree:

as the first decree retained its force, the king could not legally punish those wicked enemies of the Jews, who might take advantage of it to gratify their malice. Their murders were already legalized by a decree that could not be altered. But a law for the protection of the Jews, which did not rescind the former, might possibly be devised by the wisdom of Mordecai[.] (1804: 183)

One obvious response to the complexities of the decree is simply to ignore it, as Tennant does. In his play the king merely states: 'For Persia's evil laws may be revers'd' (1845: 222).

Alexander Symington judges the king for his own ambition to godly omnipotence and construes that 'he must find means to undo the effects of that constitution whereby his empire had arrogated to itself Divine infallibility' (1878: 154). In Matson's play, when Esther asks the king for a reversal, the king responds:

[. . .] if the guardian of the law should pamper
His private humours in the law's despite,
The whole order of the state were jeopardised,
And no man's individual rights secure.
[. . .] This is beyond me.

(1890: 14)

Irrevocable laws may be beyond the whim of an individual, yet the king's disinclination is exposed as failure when Esther steps in, the play becoming a celebration of authoritative queenship under Victoria's reign. She brushes the king's reluctance aside:

Loan me, a little space, your royal signet,
I'll show you what a woman's wit can do.

(*ibid.*)

The queen orders the priest, Esdras, to return to Palestine:

Tell him a Jewess doth bear sway in Shushan,
And the king's heart is with her, whose swift vengeance
Shall, like the lightning, shoot forth to destroy
And wither up the caitiffs would molest him.

(*ibid.*)

The king is all too aware of the value of his queen, crying: 'O happy monarch, owning such a consort!' (*ibid.*), and refuses to take the ring back from her, suggesting that she hands it on to Mordecai. Memucan the adviser interrupts, asking, 'sure this is all a jest', reminding the king of his decree that 'men should have predominance', contending that 'woman governs here, and that to most / Effectual purpose'. The king scorns him, and the play ends in – arguably sycophantic – celebration of Esther as a natural leader:

But seest thou not that she was born to govern?
Heaven hath imbued her with a queenly soul.

Would she might reign forever! as her name
 Along the echoing corridors of Time,
 Shall ring for evermore, ESTHER THE QUEEN!
 (General festivity).

(Matson 1890: 14)

Mordecai and Esther pen the decree authorizing Jewish self-defence, their fate now secure. The Greek text renders this decree in full (Addition E: 16:1–4), signed by the king, and presenting, to Levenson's gaul, a 'rather philosophical monarch, possessed of great eloquence' (1997: 75), setting him at odds with his characterization in Jewish tradition. The king is distanced from the genocide, his rule unquestioned. Ahasuerus also submits to the Jewish God, accentuating the triumph of Jewish religion.

Modern attention to textuality and interpretation has led some critics to point to the edict's irreversibility as indicating the stability of texts. Clines, for example, asserts that 'reality tends towards inscripturation, and attains its true quality only when it is written down. What is written is valid and permanent; what happens merely happens and is thereupon cast to the winds—unless it is recorded' (1984b: 24). For Levenson the permanence of Purim 'comes from Mordecai and Esther's own setting of the events and the new norms into writing' (1997: 133). Derrida counters the association of writing with permanence, instead suggesting that, in writing the second edict, Esther 'arrests, she intercepts [. . .] she substitutes' (1987: 72). He analyses the effect of the second edict: it works not on the text of the first edict but instead on its context – it arrests or intercepts the trajectory of the first edict. Whilst the first edict enabled attack on defenceless Jews, now that they can legally defend themselves, the first decree loses its force and is thereby read differently. A strange civil war is authorized in which attackers and defenders are equally able to 'kill and destroy'.

That Mordecai is the author of the second decree is an assumption undermined in *Megillah* illustrations that depict a writing Esther at this point in the story (Plate 15), a strand of interpretation not lost on Ester Sowernam, who alludes to the writing Queen Esther in her attack on the misogynist pamphlet-writer Swetnam (see further comments on Esther writing, at 9:29 and 9:32). Writing as weaponry is invoked in 1831 by the American C. F. Le Fevre, who presents the corrupt priesthood as defeated by 'A thousand FREE PRESSES' who have 'announced their infamy to the world', publication replicating the edicts as they work to undo the Haman-figure (1831: 12). He differentiates free speech from propaganda: 'Those *nameless, dateless, brainless* things, called Tracts, are another means of furthering the purposes of mental bondage' (ibid.), and despises them because they 'make *God* our *enemy* and the *priest* our *friend*', leading people to 'trust the *priest* rather than *God*' (13). Writing outside of the constraints of censorship represents, for Le Fevre, a rational democracy:



PLATE 15 Esther writing the edict. *Megillah* (Italy, eighteenth century). JTS S37. Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

People go not to the Scriptures to see if these things are so – they consult neither reason nor common sense, but they derive their sentiments from the pulpit and listen to the delusive expositions of those, whose peculiar craft it is to keep them in fear and ignorance. (13)

The edict/letter is both threatening and salvatory in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, and in George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Adam Bede* (1859). Dickens' novel centres on a bumbling legal system, demonstrating an ambivalence towards writing. The plot is propelled by legal wars over an estate, and the finding of the authentic Jarndyce will brings anticipated, yet short-lived, triumph to the ward, Richard. Love letters between Esther's parents threaten the livelihood of her mother Lady Dedlock and result in her death. In *Felix Holt* the 'light-footed, sweet-voiced Queen Esther' ([1866] 2000: 106) finds that she is heiress to a large estate through the complex wrangling of the legal system. In *Adam Bede*, letters and signs of affection move secretly between Arthur and Hetty, and later Adam is the bearer of the letter that contains Arthur's confession to her. On her way to the gallows, she is saved at the final hour by a letter that reverses her death sentence, invoking the second edict that saves the Jews:

It was a shout of sudden excitement at the appearance of a horseman cleaving the crowd at full gallop. The horse is hot and distressed, but answers to the desperate spurring; the rider looks as if his eyes were glazed by madness, and he saw nothing but what was unseen by others. See, he has something in his hand – he is holding it up as if it were a signal.

The Sheriff knows him: it is Arthur Donnithorne, carrying in his hand a hard-won release from death. ([1859] 1994: 438)

8:15–17 ‘The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour’

The chapter ends in Jewish triumph, their enemy and his genocide defeated. The whole of verse 16 is recited in Jewish homes over a cup of wine, along with Isa 12:2–3 and other verses, at the weekly Havdalah service at the end of the Sabbath on Saturday evening (Singer 1892: 216). It is possible that 8:17, a ‘festival and a holiday’ is the source of the now commonly used phrase *yom tov* (signifying a day of celebration) – it is found elsewhere only in 1 Sam 25:8 (see Goldman 1952: 234).

Targum Rishon interprets the handing over of law to Mordecai as an expression of a permissive attitude towards Jews generally, meaning that under the new regime they had permission to study the Law, ‘observe Sabbaths and Festivals, to circumcise the foreskin of their sons, and to put on the phylacteries upon their hands and their heads’ (82; see also comments on Esther 10 celebrating Mordecai’s rule). *Esther Rabbah* emphasizes the superfluity of the miracle: ‘Was there ever in history such a miracle that Israel should wreak vengeance on the other nations and do with their enemies as they pleased?’ (X.10). In his Introduction, Simon defends triumphalism, explaining that the book offered ‘comfort’ to Jews under persecution by representing a previous story of deliverance. He explains that most discourses in the Midrash *Esther Rabbah* are from the fourth century, and it is likely much was written under Roman rule at a time when the rabbis relished the idea of revenge (Simon and Freedman 1939: vii). *Esther Rabbah* praises God for the reversal: ‘How terrible are Thy wonders, for the slain slay their slayers and the executed execute their executioners, and those drowned in the sea drown those that drowned them’ (X.15).

Abraham Ibn Ezra, the author of the most widely read commentary in the middle ages, makes a distinction between *Shushan ha-birah* (the palace), and *Shushan ha-’ir* (the city) in verse 17 – with reference to the Arabic term *madina* (palace) and the Jewish *medinah* (province) – and locates the latter as the unwalled residences of the Jews. In doing so he reads this rejoicing to be by Jews alone, not by a sympathetic population (see Walfish 1993: 98–100 for a discussion of this interpretation and its problems).

The transformation of oppression into triumph is a familiar application for diasporic Jews and for Christian readers, in nationalist contexts especially. The community or nation under threat is provided with a promise of transformation, a promise retrieved from the previous triumph of the Jews over Haman and predicated upon the privileged stature of that group before God. Delgado gives his poem a utopian ending, overlaying the end of Esther on to

an imagined and as yet unrealized end of Spanish inquisitional persecution, informed by his personal escape from Spain to France and Holland. It is a release that is nonetheless tightly bound together with a desire for reckoning:

Those who the day before were poor and afraid
are now empowered, can make a living, can walk
with their heads high, while those who jeered and scoffed
must beg for mercy, their faces white as chalk,
knowing what depth of evil they've done and how
little they deserve the Jew's forgiveness now.

([1627] 1999: 86)

Heyricke in 1646 reads the reversal as the promise of God's rewarding of faithful subjects. The Civil War is a divine drama equivalent, or even superior, to that of God's fight over Israel and as such invokes a promise of victory. The recent surrender of Charles I to Parliament pre-empt's ultimate triumph, and is the realization of God's intervention in history:

God never did more by *Joshua*, by *Macchabeus*, by *Alexander*, by the King of *Sweden*, then by the *Parliaments Army* this year; wilt thou destroy what thine hand hath done? What will the Atheists, the Papists, the Malignants say, Surely God was not able to save them? *Save them for thy great Names sake.* (Heyricke 1646: 26)

England's preservation will be for the safeguarding of 'the Protestant Churches throughout the world' (28). As such, success is guaranteed: 'the *Esthers*, the *Mordecais* shall be advanced; the *Hamans* the common Enemies shall be destroyed; Religion shall be established, the Peace and safety of the Country shall be secured [. . .]' (31).

In 1643 Obadiah Sedgwick invokes both the Gunpowder Plot and Esther's story to promote God's sovereign protection in his sermon at a 'solemn Thanksgiving', drawing from the assertion that 'God can and will make unsuccessfull the bloodiest contrivances, and the hopefullest confidence of his Church-destroying adversaries' (Sedgwick 1643: 5), but even further that God can make them 'also *Pernicious* or *Hurtfull* to themselves' (18). He even argues that the more dire a situation is, the more fit it is for God's intervention: 'The wicked are not alwayes high enough to be destroyed, & the people of God are not alwayes low enough to be delivered: but *eminent Extremities* have ordinarily beene *Gods Opportunities*' (18).

For Case, England is the clear subject of a triumph narrative such as Esther, as it is '*Emmanuel's land*', the land of the chosen people, Protestants (1679: 1). Case compares the events of the biblical story point by point with the Gunpowder Plot, highlighting the nobility of the conspirators (Haman becomes Sir Everard Digby), and Haman's offering of money for the Jews becomes the

Pope's giving of 'one million of Monie to compleat the Spanish Armada' (2). The unbowing Mordecai becomes the Protestant Church refusing to bow before the Pope (4). As in many other such allegories, Case confers a biblical chosenness on England: 'As God wrought marvellously in the delivering the Seed of *Abraham* from the cruelty of wicked *Haman*, so he *did deliver England* from the fate of Rome' (8). Like many after him, he reads the Gunpowder Plot as a conspiracy against both the king and Protestantism, thereby conflating the two, cleverly countering conventions that associate monarchy with Catholicism and republicanism with Protestantism. In his consternation that it is Popery 'whose practices are Stabbing, Strangling, and poysoning of Kings', he conveniently omits the method of beheading (6).

In the late seventeenth century Poole tempers Jewish triumph with his emphasis upon the delay that the Jews endure, interpreting their waiting as a refining process:

God suffered the Jews to lie under the terrour of this dreadful day, partly that they might be more thoroughly humbled for, and purged from those many and great sins which they lay; partly and particularly that they might be convinced of their great sin and folly in neglecting [. . .] returning to their native Country. ([1669–76] 1700: n.p.)

Jonathan Edwards, in his eschatological reading of Esther foresees the end time with parochial interests: 'Europe, which has been the house of the Antichrist, shall be in the possession of Protestants, and all power and dominion shall be given to the saints' (1998: 63).

Such triumph is echoed in later works. Brereton's translation of Racine's *Esther* (1715) depicts the king ordering the rebuilding of the Temple immediately after proclaiming Jewish self-defence and for Mordecai to take up Haman's 'Title and Estate' (45). Thomas Knagg's sermon that maps 5 November on to Purim ends with the association of national safety in the figure of the monarch: 'do you this Day rejoice and sing, and say, London is *safe*, Trade *safe*, Great Britain and Ireland *safe*, our Church *safe*, because KING GEORGE is *safe*; and whose Title to the Crown is fix'd upon him by the *Laws* of God and Man' (Knagg 1716: 30). Webster applies the triumph of Esther to the victory of the monarchy over the Jacobite rebels at Culloden in 1746. He considers the super-session of Protestant rejoicing unquestionable:

If we find the *Jews* so glad and joyful, – what Cheerfulness, what Elevation of Soul may be expected from us! – Did those who lived under the Old-testament Dispensation, the *Yoke of Bondage* (*a*), and were at this time scattered up and down the Dominions of a *Persian* Monarch [. . .] still in the Hands of ONE MAN, who might by some unforeseen Accident be misled to devote them once more

to Destructions! – And shall we the Members of the New-testament Church, so lately rescued from the Malice and Oppression of a savage barbarous Race, – again enjoying the precious *Liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free* (c) [. . .] visited with the pure Light of the everlasting Gospel[.] (Webster 1746: 42)

He challenges his readers, ‘the happy subjects of a *British Government*’: ‘shall we remain insensible of all this Happiness?’ (43). In the early nineteenth century, the youth group of the Reverend J. Price declare: ‘Jews, relying on the goodness of their God, and the justice of their cause, became conquerors over all their enemies’, their God being one who ‘takes of his own people wherever they are’ (1802: 8).

Active in rights for native Americans, Helen Jackson warns against the futility of plotting against the dispossessed, referring to Mordecai’s reversal of fortune:

Make friends with him! He is of royal line,
Although he sits in rags.
[. . .] for if in hate
Thou plottest for his blood, thy own death-cry,
Not his, comes from the gallows, cubits high.

(1892: 109, 110)

Modern responses vacillate between horror and defence of the slaughter necessary for the Jews’ triumph. *The Interpreter’s Bible* finds the slaughter irreprehensible: ‘Of course it is fantastic that a Persian king would allow a Jewish minority to take the law in its hands and massacre his subjects at will’ (1954: 866). Browne struggles not with the slaughter *per se*, but with the inclusion of women and children, rationalizing that it

probably means that an attack on the Jewish women and children would justify retaliation just as much as an attack on Jewish men. Probably it did not mean to authorise the Jews to murder Persian women and children, though either interpretation is possible. ([1962] 1975: 384)

Clines asserts that there ‘is no celebration of blood-letting here’, reasoning instead that ‘this is the ultimate dream of diaspora Judaism – to be allowed to live in peace’ (1984a: 324). He suggests that this chapter was the original ending of the book, identifying here a climax of the

triumph of brain over brawn, of Jewish flair over Persian bureaucracy, of Jewish cunning over Persian cunning (and stupidity), of Jewish resoluteness over foreign pliability, indeed of Jewish charm (Esther) over Jewish gaucherie (Mordecai). (1984a: 262–3)

Clines is representative in his ambivalence towards Jewish triumph; he considers it 'self-congratulatory' at the same time as defending it as the necessary state of 'an ethnic minority' in 'preserving its own identity'. Its chief function is to reassure the readers 'of their superiority', a 'work of serious entertainment in the cause of Jewish national fervour' (263). Warner (1995) reads the reversal as another example of transgressions that he sees as central to the whole story. Levenson notes that the king is moved only when his queen's life is threatened, 'so obtuse and morally insensate is he' (1997: 108). He defends the slaughter by arguing that it allowed 'self-defense and retaliation against the anti-Semites' (4).

For many, it is God who manipulates the triumph of his chosen people. White adds female to divine action:

This reversal has been accomplished by human action motivated by ethnic solidarity and an underlying faith in the providence of God, specifically by the action of the woman Esther, a powerless member of a powerless group. (1992: 129)

Cahn also emphasizes the human element, personalizing the triumph of the Jews, as it is transposed to 'the light and the darkness within ourselves':

It is about our constructive and destructive inclinations – the struggle between them and the Torah's prescription for light to prevail. While we cannot always achieve total victory, we can prevail at least most of the time, and we can prevail beyond time; while we cannot win all the battles, at least we can win the war, as exemplified in the lives of Esther and Yoseph. (1995: 15)

Levenson's focus, although primarily divine, is nonetheless Mordecai, the 'secular priest' in his royal clothes (1997: 116). Set in a post-Second World War German Displaced Persons Camp, Edith Pearlman's story expresses the relief these verses have communicated to generations of Jews. The main character, Ludwig, internalizes the hope of the Esther story when he reaches Palestine. His final words are 'We have been saved, again' (2005: 185).

That many 'people of the land became Jews' in 8:17 is taken by Webster to be a warning against trusting 'turn-coats', those who are '*Jews* outwardly, *Heathens* inwardly' (1746: 59). He asks rulers to consider the past actions of their subjects and commends Mordecai for his favour to his own:

too trifling a Pretext for their *Satrap*s to merit any Favour, or gain any Credit with the wise and prudent *Mordecai*; who without doubt considered discrediting *Summer-day Friends*, as one of the most effectual Means by which he sought the Wealth of his *real People*, and spoke Peace to all his *true Seed*. (69)

Esther 9 and 10

The reversal of fortunes in Jewish tradition is summed up in the two words *nahapok hu*, 'the reverse occurred' (see Levenson 1997: 8) and becomes a key trope for the celebration of Purim, here inaugurated by Esther and Mordecai. An early Jewish reading of this verse is in Bahya ben Asher's commentary (thirteenth century, Saragossa), which invokes the astrological significance of the characters' names, the story enacting a cosmic battle between the forces of evil represented by Ahasuerus (Saturn) and Haman (Mars), and good represented by Mordecai (Jupiter) and Esther (Venus). He concludes that the astrological wheel is a promise of reversal (*yit'happekh ha-galgal*): 'In the future, instead of our being trampled under foot among the Gentiles they will honour and revere us' (Walfish 1993: 59). The Orthodox Deutsch's novelistic elaboration of the Purim story accentuates reversal:

Haman's decree had sent many Jews running for cover; now their enemies were going into hiding. The Jews had trembled in fear; now the satraps, nobles, warriors and officials all feared the Jews. The enemies of the Jews had tried to buy them for money; now they minted and circulated coins in honor of Mordechai. The Jews who had once been like helpless sheep were transformed into roaring lions. (2002: 336)

Kenneth Craig's *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* offers an extended reading of Esther and its suitability for the topsy-turvy festival of Purim: 'Such action anticipates a new utopian world where hierarchy, authority and dogma are, to borrow an image from the story of Esther, hanged on the gallows' (1995: 49).

The scenes of slaughter have caused much disquiet, as noted in relation to Esther 8 above. Perhaps from a desire to relegate them, various critics separate them from the 'core' Esther story, appended they suspect to provide a genealogy for Purim (see, e.g., Clines 1984a: 253). The chapters indeed frame the story with a celebration of reprieve from threat, and many later readers invoke the instigation of Purim as a biblical precedent for annual celebrations. For English Protestants Purim is a model for 5 November, a day to celebrate 'so great Deliverance' from the Catholic Gunpowder Plot against the Protestant Parliament and king (see Case 1679: 19). Knagg defends this annual celebration in 1716, over a century after the event, 'lest so signal a Deliverance as that of this Day should be forgot'. Esther's and Mordecai's writing corresponds to the 'Act of Parliament' that instituted Guy Fawkes' Day.

William Beveridge, Lord Bishop of Asaph, in the publication of his sermon delivered before the 'House of Peers', 5 November 1704, builds upon previous allegorizing of Esther by calling the Gunpowder Plot

such a Conspiracy, and such a Deliverance, that the like is scarce to be met with in any History, sacred or prophane, except in this Book of *Esther*; where we have also a clear Precedent for making a Law for the Publick and Solemn Commemoration of such a Deliverance every Year. (Beveridge 1704: 16)

William III's entrance into England in the 'Glorious Revolution' on the same date is invoked to advocate monarchy, conferring divine favour on the Orange dynasty. One casualty of this allegorical move is Queen Esther, who is erased to create a masculine drama considered more fitting for this Parliamentary spectacle:

GOD had so ordered it, that the King's Mind was altered, *Haman* disgraced and hanged, *Mordecai* advanced, the former Decree revoked, and another granted, that the *Jews* might defend themselves, and [. . .] destroy all that were ready to destroy them. (17-18)

Beveridge notes that the Gunpowder Plot deliverance is so like Esther's reprieve 'as if it had been copied from it'. Yet, he asserts, 'in some things the Copy Exceeded the Original' (19). The Jews triumphant over 'the enemy' becomes a motif to prove the superiority of the Protestant faith against the 'Errors and Superstitions' of Rome (22).

Preaching on these verses in Bath on Guy Fawkes' Day in 1848, Edward Tottenham also links Purim to the arrival of William III at the so-called Glorious Revolution 'for the deliverance of our Church and nation from Popish tyranny and arbitrary power' (1848: 4). He overwrites Purim with England's history, and in so doing subsumes genocide (dismissed because of who it is against) beneath national security: 'The object of the one was simply the destruction of an obnoxious people, that of the other the subversion of government and religion of the state' (5). Nation is pre-eminent, and so he calls for revenge upon the perpetrators of both attacks upon England. In noting that the '*plotted mischief recoiled on the respected authors*' (and in doing so claiming Ps 64:5–9 as applicable to Esther), he indicts the 'Church of Rome'.

In a careful – and not altogether successful – negotiation of the notion of forgiveness, Tottenham condemns the Jews for their violence and curses, yet defends national defence, limiting forgiveness to 'personal injury' (1848: 15). He condemns the Roman Catholic Church as the source of the threat (17) and promotes England as the new chosen nation:

In the survey of God's dealings towards us, we may say, as was said of Israel, "What nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for?" And yet how great our shortcomings! how crying our national as well as our individual sins! (31)

The privilege that Tottenham aligns with this chosenness is constructed from a matrix of historical evidence for God's providence, aligned with England's Protestantism and in which (and in contrast to Protestant views of Roman Catholicism), 'You live under the clear light of the Gospel. The Bible is to you an open book' (32). The American Presbyterian A. H. Huizinga maps Purim's relation to Esther – the mutuality of festival and text – on to the relation between July 4th celebrations and the signing of the Declaration of Independence (c.1936: 408).

9:2 Scenes of Slaughter

The scenes of killing that bring the reversal to its fulfilment have provoked both repulsion and triumphalism. In the LXX God ordains the slaughter, thereby minimizing human responsibility. Abegg et al. suggest that it is the scenes of

revenge that may explain the absence of Esther from the Dead Sea Scrolls, citing as evidence a passage from the Community Rule that encourages restraint from vengeance (Abegg et al. 1999: 2). For *Esther Rabbah* the murdered are beyond redemption. It looks to a divinely ordained reversal of power: ‘The Emperor Hadrian said to R. Joshua: “How great is the sheep that preserves itself among seventy wolves!” He answered him: “Great is the shepherd who rescues her and crushes them before her”’ (X.11).

Jews in the Middle Ages demonstrate discomfort at the slaughter and justify it as reasonable self-defence. Walfish explains that the exegetes’ ‘absence of triumphalist expressions’ is itself ‘remarkable and unexpected’ (1993: 141). His supposition that ‘as much as they may have relished the thought of revenge’, they were restrained to avoid aggravating the wider society (135), merely asserts revenge as fulfilling a psychological need. Gersonides claims that the genocidal edict made possible – even necessary – the ensuing revenge, because the king would have undoubtedly avoided slaughter if possible (1993: 81). Abraham Ibn Ezra argues that Jewish attack is necessitated by the king’s irreversible decree, the salvation of the Jews tied up with the integrity of law (ibid.: 128). That the Jews’ enemies are Amalekites justifies the killing for Gersonides, because it was neither indiscriminate nor were the enemies innocent (ibid.: 133).

Joseph ibn Kaspi (1280–1340, Provence) relates this verse to the conquest in Joshua in which God enables the defeat of Israel’s enemies (ibid.: 83). That Mordecai does not request an earlier date for the slaughter proves to him that it was not a pre-emptive attack, but purely responsive (ibid.: 130). Joseph Hayyun, in fifteenth-century Portugal, maps the event on to his own exile, admitting that although enemies of the Jews may make public their hatred and violent intentions, ‘there are many others who love us and would not speak wicked or hateful things against us’ (ibid.: 134).

The 1462 Pfister printed book *Historie von Joseph, Daniel, Judith und Ester*, alongside the German text of the Greek Esther, includes a picture of Esther looking on the Jews slaughtering their enemies, wringing her hands in unmistakable glee (25). *Megillah* S37 (Italy, eighteenth century, Plate 16), housed at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, has its scenes of slaughter scratched out, seemingly offensive enough for the owner or reader to erase them. The same *Megillah* depicts Esther asking for the slaughter of the ten sons, and again, erased scenes are likely to be those of killing (Plate 17). In contrast, Brentius derides the Jews for celebrating the Book of Esther, who, if

any godly magistrate doo handle them sharply, & drive them out of his borders, they give him the name of Aman, and this only they hope and gape for, that it may be lawfull for them to be revenged of their enemies, that is, of the Christians, among whome they liue. (1584: 165)



PLATE 16 Massacre (etched out). *Megillah* (Italy, eighteenth century). JTS S37. Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.



PLATE 17 The hanging of Haman and his ten sons. *Megillah* (Poland, Pinczow, eighteenth century). JTS S54. Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Delgado has no qualms in representing a picture of revengeful Jews searching for those they previously feared as in their ‘righteous anger’ they enact a measure-for-measure vengeance so that: ‘The gutters run with freshets of bright red’ ([1627] 1999: 89). Anxious to distance Esther from violence, Delgado has Esther beg for mercy (80), the whole poem ending on an assertion of God’s love for mercy (94).

Scenes of revenge are distasteful to Quarles, not for their bloodiness *per se* but because they are requested by a woman. Quarles is challenged to fit the slaughter into his theological framework, perhaps voicing fears of the impending English Civil War. He ‘dare not taske’

[...] thee (great Queene) whose lips did ouerflow
With streames of blood; nor thee (O cruell kind)

To slake the vengeance of a womans minde.
 With flowing rivers of thy subjects blood;
 From bad beginnings, God creates a good,
 And happy end: What I cannot conceiue,
 Lord, let my soule admire, and beleuee.

(1621: sig M3v; 1642: 163)

Heyrick reads slaughter as a biblical principle of non-toleration: 'all Neuters Enemies, all that are not for you against you' (1646: 29). Mercy is located in the personal realm, so that attack on the nation is irreprehensible: 'as for Apostates that are false to their Covenant and to your State, let not your eye pittie them, let not your hand spare them, execute justice to the enemies of the Commonwealth, shew mercy with favour to your friends' (30).

Mayer pre-empts the question 'was not this a bloody minde in *Ester*, to desire that another day should be spent in killing and slaying?', and concludes that she must have been aware of planned revenge against the Jews for the previous day's slaughter who, he guesses 'had spoken some threatening words to that effect' (1647: 71). It is a matter of natural self-defence: 'to kill him, that would kill him'. Ultimately he falls back upon indisputable divine judgement: 'The justice thereof is not to be questioned, but he is to be looked at, that formerly would have all destroyed both male and female in *Canaan*, and destroyed them together in *Egypt* by his stupendous judgements' (70). Writing during the English Civil War he is unsurprisingly cautious about the slaughter of 'fellow subjects of the same Kingdom', 'without legall proceeding'.

In Case's application of the massacre of the Jews' enemy to the misfortunes of Catholics following the Gunpowder Plot, he contends that 'God turned their own Cruelties on their own Heads' (1679: 13) and cites the contemporary example of the collapse of a building housing a preaching 'Romish Priest', a prime example of 'that Judgment of God' (12). Case vindicates reciprocal violence through citation of the '*Popish Tortures*' of massacres, drowning and graphic mutilations, including the grisly: 'Some had their Brains taken out and fried in a Pan' (17).

Handel's oratorio triumphs in God's retribution. Declaratory trumpets in a fanfare introduce a high tenor calling upon God's 'ministers' who are 'flames of fire': 'Arise, and execute thine ire!' The fanfare of revenge and justice segues into the Arioso sung by the Priest of the Israelites:

He comes, he comes to end our woes,
 And pour vengeance on our foes.

A sense of triumph is evident as the choir entries ebb and flow against the strings' constant movement, tension created through the unbroken build up of sound in the orchestral accompaniment. The Arioso becomes chilling as the

abrupt notes of the strings accompany high-pitched urgent singing, the horror of 'earth trembles' made ominous by vocal shudders. The choir returns to the urgent, and repeated, lines of 'He comes / He comes / He comes [. . .]'. The Chorus's 'The Lord our enemy has slain' is the longest section of the oratorio, lasting more than eleven minutes. In contrast to the ominous Arioso, the chorus has a joyful, yet still triumphal, fugue, lively with overlaying voices. The anthem becomes more gentle and majestic (in praise), moving back to overlaid harmonies before latent triumph re-emerges emphatically with a striking unison of 'The Lord our enemy has slain.'

Webster in 1746 cites the slaughter to authorize the day of thanksgiving for the victory over Scots 'rebels' at Culloden. The male Haman–Mordecai dualism is mapped on to the battle between the Young Pretender and the Duke of Cumberland, 'the great Instrument in the Divine Hand of bringing Salvation to an oppressed People' (Webster 1746: 35). The supposedly miraculous slaughter of the Jews' enemies justifies the slaughter at Culloden: 'Thousands of the Rebels are slain, – many of them taken Prisoners, – all routed and dispersed: – While, on the other Hand, God remarkably preserved his Majesty's Forces; few of them were wounded, and fewer of them killed' (34). A pleasing argument for Webster, for some it can only ricochet back on to the Jewish massacre, turning it into a post-event rationalization following a cruel and mindless butchery.

Although he condemns revenge, Lawson asserts violence against an aggressor as vindicated in the Christian scriptures:

But self defence is licensed and required under the New [and] Old [. . .] Esther knew that there were still many deadly enemies of the Jews in Shushan, who might if they were suffered to live, harrass or destroy them. (1804: 210)

He goes on to dehumanize the Jews' enemies. Like Milton's fallen angels, they are serpents, vicious and vindictive creatures towards whom the godly not only may not but *should* not show mercy:

A worse curse may have come upon Esther, if she had neglected [. . .] the destruction of Haman's creatures. They were a race of vipers. Their venom was not diminished. If they had not been crushed, they might have found an opportunity to sting the man who had brought destruction on their companions in wickedness. (210–11)

Thomas Scott surmises that 'it cannot be supposed that Esther was actuated by revenge in this request'. She is merely protecting the state: 'it is probable she had learned from Mordecai, that Haman's retainers still formed a faction, not only dangerous to Jews, but to the state; and were prepared to renew the attack on the next day' (Scott 1827: 4S).

M'Crie draws more general conclusions about the scriptural teachings about penalty: 'In fine, from this history, we learn that punishments are not merely preventative and corrective, according to the narrow and erroneous views of some modern philosophers and politicians, but retributive and vindicatory' (1838: 215). He goes on to argue a philosophy of measure for measure, a notion that keeps recurring in relation to these scenes of slaughter. It is clear to 'common reason' that 'it is lawful to repel force by force, and to take arms against those that come in hostile array' (256). Violence is justified through the defence of the innocent, as M'Crie inhabits the role of the 'rescuer', aligning him with the unquestioned innocence of the victim, against the undeniable evil of the victimizer (see Karpman 1968). He argues emotively that the

tendency of the opposite doctrine, in the present state of human nature, would be to bind the hands of the innocent and peaceable, and expose them as a helpless prey to the turbulent and the mischievous. It is warrantable to employ carnal weapons against carnal violence as it is to use spiritual weapons against spiritual violence. (M'Crie 1838: 256)

He emphasizes the limits the Jews place on their attack, commending them for not taking plunder. Although the edict 'authorized them in their own defence to slay women and little ones, yet they slew only "those who sought their hurt"' (268). Cushing's Mordecai is free from such angst as he exclaims in triumph: 'Yea, He has fought for us and slain our foes' (1840: 101). Tottenham cites Purim as a model for Christian memorial, but warns against imitation of Jews who 'would have shown a more forebearing spirit if they had not taken advantage of the decree to slaughter their enemies' (1848: 12). He assumes here a strategic manipulation of the decree, advocating forbearance (against, one presumes, revengeful emotions).

That revenge is an assumed element of the story is carried over into the novel *Hester Kirton* (Macquoid 1864), in which the protagonist finds out that her husband married her for her money. Transposed to a personal level, her resolve and subsequent revenge are like Esther's: 'Hester's heart had hardened during this long abstinence for, in resolving not to love her husband or believe in him again, she forgot that she deliberately nourished Revenge' (97).

Symington in 1878 holds the Jews' enemies entirely responsible: 'If they had only ceased from hating their neighbours and resisting God, they would have been safe; but when they would not, there was nothing left but to kill them' (170). The call for further slaughter is emotively motivated, and thereby more suited to Esther: 'It was a case for passion even more than for reason, for Esther rather than for Mordecai, at least at this stage. Therefore, although he was present, it was Esther that pleaded' (159). Yet, echoing Quarles' sentiments nearly two centuries earlier, Esther's request offends his view of femininity. Yet again,

it is self-defence that is invoked as a rationale: 'Revenge, unwomanly cruelty, are suggested by this request; and some say, "We cannot vindicate Esther in this".' Yet Esther and Mordecai 'understood better than we can understand the case of feeling in the capital, and what measures were needed for stamping out the fires of persecution there' (172). The Rev Berliner in a sermon at St John's Wood Synagogue, London, defends the slaughter by arguing that 'in every age, thousands of men' would 'gladly wreak their vengeance upon the defenceless Jew', Horowitz suggesting that Berliner has in mind the persecution in Eastern Europe under Czar Alexander III from 1881 onwards (*The Jewish Standard*, 16 March 1888; cited in Horowitz 2006: 31). Claude Montefiore in 1896 describes it as a 'massacre of unresisting Gentiles', although because only a fiction, a 'paper slaughter', the author is excused (*Bible for Home Reading*, 2: 403; cited *ibid.*: 29). Paton in 1908 considers Esther to be motivated by 'a malignant spirit of revenge' (287).

The whole story of Esther is overcast by scenes of slaughter for Wilhelmina Stitch. She sums up her response to Esther: 'I like her not! Intrigue, deceitfulness, revengefulness, unforgiveness' (1935: 248). She considers the whole an 'ugly narrative', concluding that the only 'redeeming feature' of Esther is her 'If I perish, I perish' (251). She expresses a middle England liberal repulsion by extreme violence (but not moderate, it is to be noted):

We all like to see the underdog released from the steel trap of injustice, and we like to see a bully punished, and Haman was a bully; but, oh! how dreadful to hear Esther [. . .] actually asking for a free licence for a second day's slaughter. (253)

As with Tottenham, it is revenge, not necessity, that dictates the Jews' actions as she interprets the decree to be allowing 'as much murder as they can achieve' (253). 'Is she not a horrible character?' (253), she asks her readers.

Rather than decrying the violence, *The Interpreter's Bible* reads the story as an analogue of the Holocaust, defending 'natural vindictiveness' as a reasonable response to persecution. It moralizes:

their slaughter of the Persians went far beyond necessary measure of defence [. . .] There is in the book a spirit of revenge. But it is not necessary for us either to attempt to explain away that spirit, to say it is not there, or to defend it. (1954: 845–6)

It paints a psychological portrait of the consequences of persecution:

The writer was describing, perhaps better than he knew, how racial and cultural antagonisms arise, how they are fed, how they break out into violence. This was not the author's intended story. He wrote it as a simple tale of persecution that is averted and turned against the persecutor. But for us there is much more to it

than that: so long as racial antagonisms exist, this book will shed light on their nature and origin. (846)

Previous arguments advocating the protection of the innocent are echoed in Edith Deen's Texan book on biblical women: 'Esther has often been criticized for this, but it must be remembered that she was dealing with an implacable enemy. Moreover, she was seeking security for her people and not for herself' (1959: 151). Browne instead dismisses the slaughter, representing a voice of disbelief: 'The slaughter of 75,000 men in one day by the Jews, who were everywhere only a small minority, is an impossible exaggeration' ([1962] 1975: 385). The *New Catholic Commentary* assumes that the Jews are 'apparently taking the offensive' and 'pay[ing] off old scores', and deems Esther's request 'quite unacceptable' ([1969] 1981: 411). It judges the book to be a testament to Christian supersession:

A number of valid points may be made in defence of the morals of Esther but it is idle to pretend that the conduct of the Jews here narrated measures up to the Christian ideal. It would be surprising if it did; the Old Testament abundantly evidences the patience of God, his gradual revelation of ever purer ideals, his willingness to take men as they are and to build on what appears to be meagre foundations; this has been God's way of acting in the history of the Chosen People and in the lives of individuals, and we cannot quarrel with it. (408)

It nonetheless vindicates Esther and the Jews as God's chosen people; although they have 'a rather exclusive view of their own importance, they nevertheless desired vengeance not as a purely and always personal matter but as a vindication of God's honour' (408). The commentary also cites the Jews' refusal to plunder to prove that they 'acted from no sordid desire for gain but only from a strict sense of justice – a somewhat redeeming trait' (411). Salvador Espriu in his 1948 'improvisation for puppets', *Primera Història D'Esther*, rewrites Esther as a story that demonstrates how 'Power can turn the oppressed into the oppressor' (Espriu [1948] 1989: 10). The drama ends with Esther praying 'for the Jews and their enemies' (97), which Antoni Turull, in the Introduction, suggests aligns it with a Christian expression of brotherhood which the Franco regime could not thereby censor (11).

Modern critics both condemn and defend; Nancy Tischler describes the scene as 'female guerilla warfare' (1977: 88); Fox's Esther is 'harder, blunter, even crueller' ([1991] 2000: 115), whilst Barry C. Davies argues that her actions 'are appropriate for the situation that she and her people face' (1995: 330). Levenson considers the significance of the slaughter to lie in the Jews' new-found power and influence (1997: 120). He also invokes Haman's accusation against the Jews: 'It is not in Your Majesty's interest to leave them alone', finding consolation in the reversal of events: 'now the Jews are at long last able to be left alone' (126).

Deutsch, drawing on rabbinic tradition, defends the slaughter by explaining that the ‘rest of the populace did not mourn [the enemies’] impending demise’, because they had been ‘antagonized by Haman’s high-handed wielding of power’ (2002: 336). Haman’s fate is the just desert of a tyrant. His conclusion contains overtones of the new technological age of distanced, cold and efficient warfare: ‘There was no glee, no bloodlust, just the methodical elimination of the enemies of the Jews, regardless of age, gender or social status, each according to what he deserved, measure for measure’ (337). In fact, Mordecai ends the slaughter at midday to counter the idea that the Jews were bloodthirsty, instead showing them to be ‘sober-minded, responsible people doing their duty, unpleasant as it might be’ (337). The slaughter, as ‘duty’, becomes again the responsible actions of the able, defending the innocent against the brutal. That the Jews didn’t plunder is cited as evidence that ‘this was not a war in the classic sense but a nationwide act of self-defence’ (338).

The American evangelical Cheryl Ford, although explicitly condoning forgiveness in light of Esther’s calling for slaughter, nonetheless defends it. Dedicated to the ‘victims of the world’s worst act of terrorism and their families’, her book conflates restitution and conquest: ‘Out of the ashes of devastation may God bring hope, restoration, and triumph.’ When it comes to Esther, it is therefore perhaps not surprising that she reminds her readers of national threat to the chosen people:

we should remember that she was forced to contend with wicked and implacable foes who sought the genocide of her race. While we may not commend all of her actions, we still commend her daring heart that risked all for God’s people. Not only had God used her to overpower the mighty Haman but also to crush every wicked adversary of His people. (Ford 2002: 26)

It is a triumphalism soon applied to her own country: ‘Our national life begs for God’s people to bring their light and wisdom into the public arena as never before. We have recently suffered great national traumas. The world stands in the balance. You are God’s solution.’ Her call to sacrifice is chilling in its militaristic overtones: ‘How would you feel if God called you to do something that carried with it a strong possibility of losing your life? Are you prepared? Are you preparing?’ (133). She writes of her readers feeling ‘helpless and hopeless’ before the ‘wicked Hamans of this world’, Hamans that she asserts ‘will be felled’ (135–6). Esther’s celebration resembles Bushian rhetoric:

Finally when the enemies of her people had been mopped up, and when all seeds of violence and persecution had been uprooted, and when she saw that powerful empire kneel before her, only then did she dare to cease her triumphant campaign. Then she celebrated! (136)

Instead of merely commenting on revenge, a minority of readers take the book's scenes of slaughter as a dictate for violent action. One of the most extreme of recent years is the massacre of 29 Muslims by Baruch Goldstein on Purim 1994 at the Patriarch's Cave in Hebron. Avirima Golan in *Haaretz*, 28 February 1994, reported one response to the news: 'A Purim miracle, I'm telling you, Purim miracle' (cited in Shahak and Mezvinsky 1999: 108).

9:7–10 Ten Sons of Haman

There are liturgical rules concerning the synagogue reading of the verses listing Haman's sons: the cantor reads the names of the ten sons of Haman in one breath. The Talmud explains the tradition: 'What is the reason? Because their souls departed together' (*Meg* 16b). Deutsch relates other midrashic accounts. The single breath signifies that 'they had all breathed their last simultaneously'. In his pocket-sized guide to the Jewish festivals, Louis Jacobs offers a humane suggestion: 'The Jew is encouraged not to gloat over the defeat of his enemies, and, as it were, he rushes through at top speed the account of their downfall' (1961: 59).

The Talmud also dictates how the names are to be rendered in the scroll: 'R. Johanan said: The *waw* of *waizatha* must be lengthened like a boat-pole of the river Labruth. What is the reason? Because they were all strung on one pole' (*Meg* 16b). In other words, the *waw* ('and') that prefixes each name is lengthened, the name of the last son, *waizatha*, lengthened to depict the pole on which they hung. Deutsch also explains the rendering of the names in the *Megillah* on separate lines to indicate that they were hanged from the gallows in the same way (*Orach Chaim* 690: 15, 3; Deutsch 2002: 340; Plate 18). He explains the dual reference to the ten sons (in 9:7 and 9:14–15):

According to some, Haman's sons had been brought down the day before by archers but not killed. They were hanged from the gallows in one single string of Amalekites. The archers then simultaneously shot arrows into their hearts so that they should all die together. (340)

Deutsch links the killing of the ten sons to the injunction to obliterate the memory of Amalek. He writes that Haman, in pre-empting his usurpation of the throne, and to avoid further rebellion from within his own family, had ordered 'a decree to kill his entire family' (341). *Targum Rishon* renders the hanging in precise detail: the pole is 50 cubits high, stuck 30 cubits into the ground with each son a half-cubit from the next (85).

Symington pictures Haman's sons continuing his violence against Jews, thereby utterly at blame for their end. They, 'undeterred by his fate, had rushed



PLATE 18 Esther's petition and the hanging of Haman's ten sons. Esther Scroll. JTS S37b. Image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

on their own ruin, and were already dead'. Esther's request is vindicated as a call for public display of the already slaughtered sons. He concludes that 'Esther had no pleasure in these deaths; but she, as a queen, might well feel that she was working with the judge of all the earth in allowing sin to bring its own punishment and in making that punishment as conspicuous as possible' (1878: 172). In Louise S. Maxwell's play, Jewish violence is iterated when Esther asks the king to slaughter the ten sons of Haman. He replies: 'O Esther! Methinks thy request

is overbloody for a woman! And yet I did promise to fulfill it, even unto the half of my kingdom.' He insists: 'But this blood shall be upon *thine* head, O Queen Esther, not upon that of the king' (1923: 43). Wilhelmina Stitch, appalled by the book's slaughter, considers the hanging of the ten sons a result of Old Testament generational responsibility, the sons 'hanged for the sin of their father' (1935: 253). In contrast, Deutsch interprets the hanging of the sons as an act of deterrence: 'To strike fear into the hearts of the populace and to deter them from any hostile thoughts against the Jewish people' (2002: 340). Soltes links Purim with Passover and the taking of revenge in the Book of Esther with that of the ten plagues at Passover, because they 'share a numerological focus on the suffering of others as the price of Israelite-Judean redemption' (2003: 138).

Targum Rishon interprets 9:20, 'Mordecai writes', as pertaining to a decree he sends to 'Jewish men' to observe 14 Adar (86). Although, for Symington, pleading was 'a case for passion' (1878: 159) and was Esther's role, when it comes to writing, 'it was Mordecai's time to be busy' (161). The writing to instigate Purim 'could scarcely be anything else than the Book of Esther', and he explains that it would be 'a wonderful story for the delivered people and the many recent proselytes to read' (177). Critics have also pondered over what the 'it' in 9:25 ('it came before the king') refers to. Ibn Ezra explains that it is Haman's decree or deed; Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen and others argue that it refers to Haman's evil plot, and Abraham Hadidah thinks it refers to Mordecai's warning to the king about assassination (Walfish 1993: 23). Many English translations of the Hebrew insert Esther's name here (the Hebrew is feminine; see discussion on p. 203).

9:26 Purim

In Jewish tradition it is Purim that makes the Book of Esther meaningful. It is called the 'Day of Mordecai' in 2 Maccabees, highlighting the hero's triumph, but the festival is privileged in the Greek colophon (11:1 in the Vulgate), which calls the book the 'Letter of Purim' (see Levenson 1997: 136). It is a celebration of the reversal of fortunes and is commonly known as a day of the 'topsy-turvy' or often called the Jewish Mardi Gras or Hallowe'en. It is suffused with transgression: cross-dressing, gambling and trickery are all associated with it, if not always practised. Childrens' street carnivals may include gambling; seminars and schools indulge in the mocking substitute of student for teacher known as the 'Purim Rabbi', and in contemporary New York Chasidic sects the most popular childrens' choices for dressing up are the normally prohibited 'goyish' costumes of army and police uniforms (Plate 19). Its transgressive qualities are established in *Targum Rishon*, which echoes the biblical text in considering the



PLATE 19 Chasidic Purim, Williamsburg, New York, 2005. © Jo Carruthers.

festival a day of community-wide commemoration: 'they observe it annually so that they would publicize the days of the miracle and the words of this scroll, to be made known to all the people of the House of Israel' (87). *Esther Rabbah* explains the institution of Purim as God's response to Haman's accusation that in not keeping the king's laws the Jews do not celebrate Calends nor Saturnalia. God says to Haman: 'I will overthrow you before them, and they will observe an additional festival for your downfall, namely, the days of Purim' (VII.12). As

such, Purim becomes the Jews' own Saturnalia. The Talmud's *Megillah* is largely concerned with instituting the laws and *mitzvot* (good deeds) for the celebration of this day-long festival. It does this in incredible detail, noting for example that the plural of 'sending portions' in 9:22 means that two portions should be given to one man (*Meg* 7c). The practice is evident in contemporary celebrations in which families fill the streets, travelling between houses carrying gifts of food.

Abraham Saba, reflecting on the different rules for walled and unwalled cities (in 9:18–19), explains that the different day for village-dwellers is due to an error caused by their lack of learning. Although this appears prejudicial, his preference is clearly for the unlearned, zealous fulfilment of the commandments in distinction to superior learning and rhetoric, which was often used to avoid religious obligation (Walfish 1993: 35).

Purim practices have evolved over the centuries, the influence of Italian carnival leading to masked balls in early modern Europe. The *purimshpil*, for many communities the only dramatic activity permitted, has its roots in the skits of yeshiva students, performing from house to house in the hope of food or monetary recompence (for more on the *purimshpil*, see Berkowitz 2003). In his novel, *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), the 'Jewish Dickens', Israel Zangwill, paints a picture of a Victorian, English Purim:

At Purim a gaiety, as of the Roman carnival, enlivened the swampy Wentworth Street, and brought a smile into the unwashed face of the pavement. The confectioners shops, crammed with "stuffed monkeys" and "bolas", were besieged by hilarious crowds of handsome girls and their young men, fat women and their children, all washing down the luscious spicy compounds with cups of chocolate; temporarily erected swinging cradles bore a vociferous many-coloured burden to the skies; cardboard noses, grotesque in their departure from truth, abounded. [...] *Shalachmonos*, or gifts of the season, passed between friend and friend, and masquerading parties burst into neighbours' houses. (Proem 6–7)

Zangwill notes that as a result of the anglicization of the festival, 'respectability crept on to freeze the blood of the Orient with its frigid finger, and to blur the vivid tints of the East into the uniform grey of English middle-class life' (Proem 7).

In the Purim issue of *The American Hebrew* (91.21, 1913), Gabriel Costa describes a present-day English Purim: "There are donkey-rides in the ghetto, ample supplies of "Hamans ears" [*Hamantaschen*] and flags depicting the Amalekite and his sons suspended from the gallows [...] Flour-throwing is still a favorite Purim pastime, and there are many streets in the ghetto that resemble the millers' yards when Purim day is over' (cited in Goodman [1949] 1988: 43).

David Clines returns to the text of the biblical book to prescribe proper

Purim attitudes: ‘the letters of Mordecai and Esther perform a critical function upon the nature of that celebration by insisting that survival is properly a matter of “rest” or relief from danger and not of victory over enemies’ (1984a: 262). Rabbi Yitzchak Sender reminds his readers of contemporary application of the commemoration of aversion of catastrophe, a ‘promise given us by Hashem Himself that when we petition Him and cry out for help He will listen to our cries and save us from all danger’ (2000: 49). The Orthodox Deutsch argues that the purpose of Purim is a ‘continual stimulus to inspired Torah learning’, because it was the ‘slackening of Torah study’ that had made the Jews vulnerable to Amalek and then Haman (2002: 351).

Edith Pearlman’s short story ‘Purim Night’ evokes the frenetic activity of Purim as celebrated in a post-war German Displaced Persons Camp:

In the barrack Rooms, behind the tarps and curtain strips that separated cubicle from cubicle, costume makers rustled salvaged fabrics; in stairwells, humorists practiced skits; in the West Building raisins fermented and a still bubbled. In the village Persons were exchanging cigarettes and candy bars for the local wine. (Pearlman 2005: 189)

Three men rehearse a *purimshpil*: ‘a Mordecai with a fat book, an Ahasuerus in a cloak, and a Fool, in a cap with a single bell. A Fool? The Purimspiel had a long connection to the *commedia dell’arte*, Roland had mentioned. This Fool played a harmonica, the King sang *Yedeh hartz hot soides* – Every heart has secrets – and Mordecai, his book open, rocked from side to side and uttered wise sayings’ (193). In contrast to Belkin’s Yiddish *purimshpil*, in which Mordecai is popularly represented as a lewd fool, he is here rendered in rabbinic seriousness.

Pearlman describes the costumes that the children and adults wear at the ball. As well as Mordecais and Esthers, common was the ‘occasional hero: cigar stubs identified Churchill, a cigarette holder Roosevelt’. Alluding to the convention of dressing up as the enemy, she observes that in this case no one dressed as Haman. He is present instead on the ‘yellow walls’: ‘He was painted in green, painted in black tar, drawn in pencil, cut from brown paper [. . .] Many Hamans were rendered feet up, head down. Every one wore a little black mustache’ (197).

The Talmudic injunction that it is ‘the duty of man to mellow himself [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai”’ (*Meg* 7b), has caused unease amongst later generations. Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohav, for example, contextualizes the injunction in a time when drinking was not common:

It must be understood, however, that the strong intoxication mentioned in the Talmud applies only to the Sages who did not drink their fill of wine all year; their

drinking was clearly for the celebration of the mitzvah. In our time, people like to make their whole life one long celebration; they drink their fill of wine every day. Therefore, the main celebration should be through presents and gifts, with only a slight increase in food and wine for the sake of the celebrations of *Purim*. (1986: 56)

Pearlman's 'Purim Night' teases out the fluidity of authoritative and sexual identities: 'where you must drink until you cannot distinguish the king from the villain, the queen from the village tart' (2005: 183). Shifra Epstein (1994) has studied the practice of the Chasidic Drinking Banquet (*trink-siyde*) in Bobover communities in New York, in which drinking is a practice of spiritual ecstasy.

Protestant writers were not slow to find in this practice fuel for their anti-Semitic polemic, a marker of what they see as a general Jewish lasciviousness. It is clear from marginal notes in the Geneva Bible and from contemporary commentaries that many writers in the early modern period were aware of rabbinical writings on the practices of Purim, even if they did not observe any themselves. Unsurprisingly, the carnival activities of Purim were provocative for Puritan sensibilities of religious decorum. In the late sixteenth century the German John Brentius judges the practices of Purim, declaring: 'This is the thankfulness of the wicked Jewes' (1584: 165). He berates them because he avows that 'they have not to reioyce at this time of the story of Ester. For this story perteyneth vnto the people and Church of God' (166). In an astounding rhetorical move, Brentius likens the Jews to Haman, and Christians to the chosen people:

because they haue cast of christ, the true seede of Abraham, they are no more the people, nor his Church, but they apperteine vnto Ismael, and Esau, who alwayes persecuted the true seede of Abraham. And because that they hate the true Israelites, which are the Christians, with the same hatred, wherwith Aman in times past hated them, it is plain, that they are coosins and kinred of Aman the Amalechite, which nation alwayes with extreme hatred thirsted after the vtter destruction of the Israelites. (ibid.)

It is in fact far from 'plain' that the Jews are Haman, as Brentius' awkward appropriation of the term 'Israelites' shows in its reference to Christians and Jews respectively. Brentius asserts that Jews should see in Haman 'a manifest example, that in as much as once they have begun to fall before the Church of Christ, they can neuer rayse up themselues againe, vnlesse they conuert vnto Christ, who only is our saluation' (166–7).

Quarles (1621) questions Purim's authenticity because it is 'Vnmentioned in the Law, and vncreated' (1621: sig M4v; 1642: 165) by God. He argues for authoritarian quashing of such unlawful celebration:

[. . .] It lyes in Kings,
 To act, and to inhibit all such things
 As in his Princely wisdom shall seem best,
 And most conduce vnto the publike blisse.

(1621: sig Nr; in 1642 the latter line becomes 'vantagious to the publicke rest', 166)

Heyrick reveals that specific Purim customs were familiar in early modern England. In his sermon he mentions that Jews 'stamp with their feet, frown, knock with their hands, shout and make an hydeous noyse' (1646: 16). Mayer rails against Jewish celebration of Purim, linking it to Jewish violence against Christians. At Purim they would

make noises with voyces and knockings, as being moved with great indignation at the hearing of *Hamans* attempts, and then to take up a crosse, representing that whereupon *Haman* was hanged, and after they had some time carried it about, to burn it.

He then links this specific Purim practice to that of Jewish mockery of the crucifix:

Let the Governours of Provinces forbid the Jews to carry about a cross and burning it remembrance of *Hamans* punishment, to the contempt of Christ and Christians, so to do anymore, or to mingle any thing of ours with their rites, or else they shall not be permitted as hitherto they have been. (Mayer 1647: 71)

Mayer asserts the innocence of the Jewish ritual crucifixion of Haman, but ultimately condemns the Jews because they cross a boundary into Christian territory: the cross and its signification belong to Christianity. Samuel Young in 1696 records Purim celebrations without the negative judgements of the writers cited above: 'In this Feast, the *Jews* read this Book, and when they hear the name of *Haman*, they knock with their Feet, or Fist, as if they would knock *Haman's* Head' (19). Ross in 1653 condemns the specific practice of cross-dressing, attesting to the awareness of this practice in early modern England, as well as illustrating normative Christian responses to it. The 'Men wear Women's apparel and the Women Men's, against the Law of God which they think at this time of mirth they may lawfully violate' (Ross 1653: 30).

In 1706 Symon Patrick, Lord Bishop of Ely, describes the fasting, reading of the scroll and prayers that typify Purim festivities. But after they have 'done with Religion and Piety'; he contends they 'spend the two Days, in Idleness, and Eating and Drinking.' He continues:

And then they indulge themselves so far, that they think it not unlawful to drink so much, as not to be able to distinguish between the Blessing of *Mordecai*, and

the Curse of *Haman*, as they themselves speak. In so much that our learned Primatmate *Usher* calls the Feast, *The Bacchanals of the Jews*. (1706: 747)

Webster warns against ‘running with *many* of the *Jews* to the same Excess of Riot’:

lest instead of the manly religious Joy of the CHRISTIAN, you taste only the low, earthly Gratifications of the HEATHEN or JEWISH Sensualist, whose grovelling Pleasure, baser than that of the Brute Creation, loses itself amidst the Fumes of intoxicating Liquors. (1746: 45)

George Lawson contrasts the festival as biblically prescribed and as practised by present-day Jews. The intention behind Purim was that ‘when they thought of their deliverance, and the mercy of God in their deliverance, they would eat their bread with gladness, and drink their wine with a merry heart’ (1804: 221). In order to accentuate his disgust, he transposes his own repulsion on to Esther and Mordecai as he imagines them responding to present-day celebrations:

They probably thought that whilst the memory of the wonders of the month of Adar continued, all posterity would abound in thanksgiving to God. The reverse has been the case. The feast of Purim has long since been turned into a drunken revel. The blinded Jews, it is said, lay it down as a maxim, That they ought to be drunken with wine in remembrance of Esther’s banquet. How strange it is for human creatures to think that they are delivered to work abomination! (229)

Thomas Scott, in his hugely influential commentary, reflects similar sentiments, considering the original feast to be ‘according to the mind of the Spirit of God’, ‘but the feast has long since degenerated into a season of riot and excess’ (1827: 4S3). He makes the not very subtle, yet implicit, point that contemporary Jewish behaviour is out of line with the Spirit of God. His condemnation is pointed towards Christians:

the best institutions are liable to be perverted by human depravity; and to degenerate, not only into a form, but into an occasion of sin. Holy joy in God is supplanted by sensual indulgence and carnal mirth; under pretense of celebrating great deliverances, or even of commemorating the mysteries of redemption, professed Christians behave as if they were the devotees of Bacchus or Momus. (ibid.)

The Rev J. W. Niblock, with his hyper-allegorical tendencies, suggests that the Christian Purim is ‘*our Christmas and Easter*’ (1837: 53) and asks: ‘What is the “good day”, the “day of feasting, joy and gladness” (viewed apart from the real occurrence), but the Gospel?’ (56). M’Crie identifies the contemporary festival as a ‘secular feast’, characterized by ‘eating and drinking, rejoicing and sending

of portions to one another, and gifts to the poor' (1838: 280). It is for him a matter of principle to avoid such festivals as he upholds the austere practices of the Reformed Church of Scotland as exemplary (it celebrates only the Sabbath). To celebrate in such a manner is 'to doat on shadows – to choose weak and beggarly elements – to bring ourselves under a yoke of bondage which the Jews were unable to bear, and interpretively to fall from grace and the truth of the gospel' (284). The celebration of Purim is posited as an activity that disengages Jews from truth, who fall from grace 'interpretively'.

Tottenham, although appropriating Purim for the purposes of celebrating the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, judges modern Purims for their spirit of revenge. In these he claims there is 'much that is objectionable. There is often great intemperance, and a spirit of revenge displayed, not merely in the record of Haman's cruelty [. . .] but in the curses they pronounce on him' (1848: 13). Symington, like commentators before him, contrasts the Purims of Old Testament days with the present day: 'the excess which, we are told, sometimes accompanies the feast now, would have no place in the better days of Judaism' (1878: 12).

In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's masque 'The Nativity: A Miracle Play' (1854), Rabbi ben Israel is the teacher of Jesus and Judas, who favours Judas' rabbinical knowledge. The play sets up a dichotomy between Old Testament judgement and New Testament mercy, and ben Israel's corrupting of Judas is expressed through his Purim licentiousness:

My fame extends from West to East,
And always, at the Purim feast,
I am as drunk as any beast
That wallows in his sty;
The wine it so elateth me,
That I no difference can see
Between "Accursed Haman be!"
And "Blessed be Mordecai!"

(1854: 216)

In Thomas Sturge Moore's poem *Judas* the protagonist's betrayal is aligned with Purim festivities, and the crowd's hostile, even hysterical, behaviour towards Jesus is explained by the Purim festival being delayed by the Sadducees, 'To use the rabble's weight against the pious' (1931: l. 707). It describes the celebration: 'Men veiled like women, women girt like men, / Dancing the Purim revels'; a festival usable by the Sadducees because it is essentially a mob activity:

Like mud that clouds up in a limpid cistern
When ill-intentioned rascals stir the depths,

All that to Israël's reproach resembled
The unseemliest festivals of pagan towns.

(ll. 709–12)

Modern approaches privilege anthropological and psychological interpretations of Purim. Purim is commonly traced to a pre-Lenten carnival (see *New Catholic Commentary* [1969] 1981: 409), or its purpose identified as dispelling the fear of the persecuted (see *The Interpreter's Bible*, 1954: 829) or as a 'safety-valve' explosion of repressed Jewish resentment (see Troy 1995; Belkin 1996), an interpretation challenged by Horowitz's (2006) identification of historical accounts of Purim violence against Gentiles.

Abraham Ettleson bizarrely, yet suggestively, links Purim to the absurdity of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Through convoluted means (changing *w* to *m*) he understands Tweedledum as represented by his repeated term 'nohow' (representing in anagram, Homon) and Tweedledee by 'contrariwise' (again rearranged as 'Mortecai'). He reads props as representing elements of the Esther story (for example, bolsters represent the hanging of Haman and his sons). Alice helps the brothers to dress, reflecting the practice of dressing up at Purim festivities. With regard to Tweedledum and Tweedledee as wax figures, Ettleson refers to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* entry that refers to the custom of burning wax figures of Haman at Frankfurt-am-Main. Their rattle and stamping represent the synagogue practices to eliminate the name of Haman from hearing. Tweedledee is described as a fish, evoking Haman's astrology (often represented by the sign of the zodiac on Esther scrolls, Ettleson 1970: 46–9).

If Esther was written for Purim, it would compromise the book's status as divinely inspired, according to Barry C. Davies, who quite seriously asks the question as to whether the 'Holy Spirit could rightly be expected to author a book designed with the specific purpose of being read by those who are inebriated' (1995: 372).

9:29 & 32 'Then Esther the Queen . . . wrote with all authority'

That Esther writes an edict confirming the institution of Purim is (undoubtedly deliberately) ignored by many who prefer to focus on Mordecai's role as author. *Megillot*, including one from Italy (eighteenth century) held at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, which depicts her writing (Plate 15, p. 248), reinscribe her centrality to the narrative (that in the Hebrew in this verse erases her) and highlights female authority. Ester Sowernam, in her pseudonymous pamphlet, invokes the authority of Esther specifically as a woman writer in her attack on the misogynist pamphlet maker, Joseph Swetnam (see Carruthers

2003: 337). Sowernam maps Haman (the biblical archetype of the evil writer of genocidal writings) on to the author of the misogynist pamphlet that she is rebuking, Joseph Swetnam. As Haman is undone by his own gallows – the title-page contains the proverb ‘Neque enim lex iustior ulla – Quam necis Artificem arte perire sua’ (for there is no law more just – that the creator of violence should perish by his own art) – so Swetnam is undone by Sowernam’s pamphlet. Her introductory remarks (in which she disparages Swetnam) express her expectation that ‘the discourse’ of a pamphlet is in its ‘performing what the Title promised’ (1617: sig A2). Her pamphlet functions performatively in the act of hanging her own Haman through her attack in writing. She paints a court scene, writing:

Joseph Swetnam, thou art endited by the name of *Ioseph Swetnam of Bedlemmore*, in the Countie of *Onopolie* [pamphlet-maker]: for that thou [. . . d]idst most wickedly, blasphemously, falsly and scandalously publish a lewd Pamphlet, entituled *The Arraignment of Women*. (29)

That Esther is an educated woman, an authoress of imperial edicts, even, is emphasized in *A Newe Enterlude of Godly Queene Ester* (1561) in which Mordecai vouches for Esther before the king by describing her purity, but adds to this learning (see p. 95).

Novelistic Esthers were often writers, suggesting a common association of Esther with the authoress. Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852–3) is partly narrated by Esther, disrupting conventions of female piety, *The Spectator* declaring that ‘Such a girl would not write her own memoirs’ (cited in Dyson 1969: 57). ‘Esther’s Narrative’ was contentious but central to understanding Dickens’ characterization. Just as the Hebrew narrator gives Esther independent identity and agency through her writing of laws and, in tradition at least, religious decrees, Dickens confers on Esther Summerson agency through her writing of her own story within a culture in which a female’s acquisition of power, agency and voice is still a somewhat precarious venture. In Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage* (1899), Hester is the woman novelist with heterodox views, her brother, a minister, burning the manuscript of her second novel because he judges it irreverent. Her rejection by society as an independent, vocal woman – through her writing – parallels her position outside of church orthodoxy. Her extremes and sharpness are, like those of many other Esthers, due to her Oriental colouring of the ‘black and white of the wagtail’ ([1899] 1985: 54). The arrogance of Mr Gresley, Hester’s brother, is both religious self-righteousness and a disavowal of Hester because of her gender. He asks Hester to ‘proof-read’ an article he has written rather than admitting he would like her opinion: ‘It gave the would-be author a comfortable feeling that after all he was only asking advice on the crudest technical matters on which Hester’s superiority could be admitted without the loss of masculine self-respect’ (56).

Levenson associates Esther's authority here with the command given to Vashti in Esther 1 and Mordecai's commanding of her in Esther 2. His emphasis is still the obedient Esther:

We have gone from a disobedient queen who is on the receiving end of a command that is not observed, to an obedient queen who is able to issue a command that is observed. (1997: 131)

10 The Greatness of Mordecai

The story of Esther ends on the king's 'declaration of the greatness' of Mordecai, as the AV renders it. Mordecai is also held up by readers as an exemplar of the minister who works on behalf of his people. Esther's absence is striking, although the LXX Additions rectify this lack as it interprets Mordecai's dream, highlighting Esther's central role.

Isaac Arama (fifteenth century, Spain) applies Mordecai's role as an exemplar of good leadership. He cites three qualities that Mordecai demonstrates. Admired by the population, he fulfils the ideal of ruling through respect not force (although, he fails to note that, being second-in-command, Mordecai also has force to fall back upon). He also leads the people to their absolute good (not his own in seeking their welfare) and spoke peace to his people (Walfish 1993: 48).

The focus on Mordecai in this final chapter enables many to read Mordecai as the manly hero of the book instead of the female Esther. He is the instrument of salvation in Webster's sermon after the Battle of Culloden (see p. 260). For the 'Poet in Paisley', James Maxwell, Mordecai's elevation is expressed in superlative spiritual terms as he fulfils the promise of the defeat of the serpent in Genesis 3: 'Thus did he, as it were tread on the neck / Of this most cruel haughty enemy' (Maxwell 1784: 30).

Esther and Mordecai, as imperially reigning Jews, are doubly relevant for English self-identification, because they not only resemble the nineteenth-century British in their binary relationship with the Persians, but are also like the British in their worth and ability for 'swaying the sceptre of the Empire' (41), as M'Crie describes it in his 1838 lectures. For Lawson it is the good that can be done through influence – so exemplified in Mordecai – that redeems such a responsible position of power:

the greater part of men are fitted to enjoy happiness in middling, than in a high condition. But, when men are furnished with talents and opportunities for public usefulness, and when their pleasure lies more in doing good to others, then in the enjoyment of ease and social delights, a station that enables them to gratify their

wishes, and to exert their power for the public welfare, must afford them more exquisite and sublime pleasure than they would have enjoyed in domestic felicity, or in the endearments of friendship. (Lawson 1804: 191)

Mordecai's status as 'a Saviour to Israel', as M'Crie calls him, lends to him the standing to be the author of the book, and he states that 'in the course of this lecture we have seen grounds for believing that, in addition to his other honours, he was employed as the penman of this portion of inspired Scripture' (1838: 282). The Brethren J. Harrad notes that this book that 'bears the name of a woman' is nonetheless 'mostly taken up with a man, *the man to whom, under the hand of God, she owes everything*' (Harrad n.d.: 3).

In 1949 David Daube argues for the cohesion of the Esther story, explaining that chapter 10 is 'a conclusion worthy of the whole', as he reads the book as modelling good political practice: 'that a government has more to gain by orderly taxation than by giving over the Jews to massacre and indiscriminate plunder' (140). He pre-emptively Raoul Walsh's 1960 film *Esther and the King*, in which Haman's evil rule is exemplified in the hanging of a Jew for not paying his taxes. When Queen Esther (Joan Collins) becomes queen, her good influence is demonstrated through the king introducing a new form of taxation, replacing a fixed levy with a taxation of affordability. In a film that maps the Persian Empire on to the globally influential USA, government is measured economically, not militarily. The film ends with the warrior-king Ahasuerus defeated by Greece returning to a well-governed and nonetheless prosperous nation, the privileging of economy eliding concerns over military prowess (something the film and the king certainly do not challenge).

The book's final lines lead many to reflect on the importance of patriotism. Mordecai seeks the 'wealth of his kingdom' and speaks 'peace to all his seed', a suggestion of racial privileging that provides for some a defence of patriotism as a spiritual condition, biblically authorized. John Stockwood's preface to the German John Brentius' commentary of 1584 is dedicated to Francis Walsingham, and its primary purpose is to induce patriotic action in the queen's adviser. He advances the Book of Esther, echoing the books' final words, to encourage those in high places to 'adventure to speake for the wealth of the church, and welfare of Israel' (1584: 2; see further p. 45). He is keen to highlight to Walsingham that the book promises the blessings of God towards those who 'use their places to countenance the godly, against the pestilent policies of all proud and ambitious Amans' (2).

Lawson presents a more general defence of patriotism, 'certainly a virtue recommended to us by the best of saints. The apostle Paul was perhaps worse treated by his contrymen than ever any other man, and yet he would willingly have died for them a thousand deaths' (1804: 241). Such patriotism is as

often interpreted as a religious privileging than as a racial or national one. The verse is taken to encourage partisan attention towards the church by the state by Thomas Scott: 'Rulers should consult the advantage of all their peaceable subjects: but they are peculiarly required to seek the welfare of the church, by protecting it from oppression, and encouraging the worship and ordinances of God' (1827: 4S4).

Modern commentators see Mordecai's elevation as a triumph of Jew over Gentile (see Browne [1962] 1975: 385) or conversely as endorsing Jewish-Persian co-operation (see Clines 1984a: 262). Levenson focuses on mutuality and imagines a scene not dissimilar to the status of Jews in his own United States: 'Jews living in harmony and mutual goodwill with the Gentile majority, under Jewish leaders who are respected and admired by the rulers, yet who are openly identified with the Jewish community and unashamed to advance its interests and to speak out in its defense' (1997: 134).

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