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# "Like Another Esther": Literary Representations of Queen Esther in Early Modern England

Saralyn Ellen Summer

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“LIKE ANOTHER ESTHER”: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF QUEEN  
ESTHER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

by

SARALYN ELLEN SUMMER

Under the Direction of Paul J. Voss

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the significance of Queen Esther in early modern England by examining her literary representations in light of historical, religious, political, and social contexts. Although she is often linked to Deborah and Judith, Esther’s multifaceted character allows for greater flexibility in representation than is the case with other biblical heroines. The differing aspects of her character – obedient orphan, beautiful virgin, clever and courageous queen, savior of Diaspora Jews – inspire multiple, at times even contradictory, depictions of Esther in early modern literature. Whether Protestant or Catholic, male or female, Queen or commoner, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers appropriate Esther in ways that paradoxically challenge *and* support women’s traditional roles in society.

Chapter One introduces the Esther narrative as presented in the Old Testament and Apocrypha. Chapter Two examines Esther in relation to female authority, focusing specifically on references to Queen Elizabeth as an Esther figure. Chapter Three studies the dramatic interlude *Godly Queen Hester*, while Chapter Four

analyzes works of prose featuring Esther as an exemplum for virtuous and heroic women. Chapter Five studies poetic depictions of Esther, and Chapter Six concludes the study by noting briefly how women authors engaged in the *querelle des femmes* enlist Esther to refute their opponents.

INDEX WORDS: Queen Esther, Hester, Deborah, Judith, Queen Elizabeth, Diaspora Jews, Querelle des femmes

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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SARALYN ELLEN SUMMER

Major Professor: Paul J. Voss  
Committee: Stephen B. Dobranski  
Paul H. Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
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## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Saralyn Rice Summer and James Lowman Summer, who inspired in my sister and me a love of learning and offered generous support as we pursued our dreams.

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Biblical Sources of the Esther Narrative**

When Queen Elizabeth I prayed that God would give her the strength to prevail over her nation's enemies and thus become "like another Deborah, like another Judith, like another Esther,"<sup>1</sup> she was invoking the memory of three biblical women celebrated for their leadership, courage, and piety. According to their respective Old Testament narratives, each woman engineered the defeat of powerful enemies intent on destroying the Jewish people. Confronted with her own "multitude of Idumeneans, Ishmaelites, Moabites, and Muhammadans,"<sup>2</sup> Queen Elizabeth presumably drew inspiration from these courageous women who exercised power and took extraordinary measures to preserve the nation of Israel. The model of successful female leadership they provided for the English queen comports with Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe's assertion in *Women's Bible Commentary*:

Because of its religious and cultural authority, the Bible has been one of the most important means by which woman's place in society has been defined. Throughout the centuries, of course, the Bible has been invoked

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<sup>1</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000) 157.

<sup>2</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 157.

to justify women's subordination to men. But it has also played a role, sometimes in surprising ways, in empowering women.<sup>3</sup>

If Elizabeth attained a sense of empowerment through the examples of these Old Testament women, her subjects also found analogies between their queen and Deborah, Judith, and Esther to be meaningful as well since the Bible enjoyed a unique social authority for monarchs and subjects. Just as God raised up these heroines of old to preserve the Hebrew people, so, too, did he raise up Elizabeth Tudor to rule her people wisely and to protect England from her enemies. Typical of the biblical analogies employed throughout her reign are those found in a 1603 poem commemorating the Queen's death. The poet refers to Elizabeth as the "Nurse of all our Land, / That sway'd a Sword like Judeth's, in her hand. / The Debora that iudged Israell."<sup>4</sup> Such comparisons celebrate Elizabeth's effective governance at home and her martial success abroad.

In this dissertation, I examine early modern representations of the third biblical heroine most often associated with Queen Elizabeth: Queen Esther. The story of the young woman of the Jewish Diaspora resonated not only with Elizabeth and her supporters but also with writers, both male and female, searching for models of virtuous wives and heroic women. As my later summary of the Esther narrative will reveal, Esther embodied a variety of roles that made her story applicable to ordinary women as well as to the Queen of England. The Esther character first appears in the Book of Esther

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<sup>3</sup> Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox P, 1998) xix.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Rowlands, *Aue Caesar . . . . The ioyfull Ecchoes of loyall English hartes, entertayning his Maiesties late ariuall in England. With an Epitaph vpon the death of her Maiestie our late Queene.* Rpt. in *England's Eliza* by E. C. Wilson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1939) 372.

as an innocent young orphan living with her caring older cousin and surrogate father Mordecai. Through her subsequent marriage to the king of Persia, she assumes the role of a loyal and respectful wife, unlike her predecessor Queen Vashti. When a scheming courtier threatens to annihilate all the Jews in Persia, she cleverly devises a plan to expose his treachery to the king, emerging, finally, as an effective leader in her own right. Because of this multiplicity of roles, Esther could variously exemplify a dutiful daughter, a submissive wife, a strong and decisive leader, and a faithful Jew who prefigures Christian obedience and faithfulness. Depending on the author's intention, then, the character of Esther could be appropriated to serve a variety of purposes ranging from the didactic to the political to the inspirational.

When early modern writers refer to Esther, they frequently associate her with Deborah and Judith. For example, in *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World* (1640), Thomas Heywood designates Deborah, Judith, and Esther as the three Hebrew women worthies (the others being either pagan or Christian). Such connections are not surprising, for all three women perform heroic deeds that save the Jewish people from certain annihilation.<sup>5</sup> Mentioned together, they

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<sup>5</sup> The story of Deborah is recounted in the Book of Judges, chapters four and five, while the Book of Judith is included in the Apocrypha. Deborah exercises authority as a judge of the Israelites and speaks on behalf of God. In the biblical narrative, she summons the Hebrew general Barak and announces God's appointed time to attack the enemy. Barak balks and declares he will fight only if Deborah accompanies him. She agrees, but because of his failure to take decisive command, he is denied the opportunity to slay the opposing general, Sisera. That honor falls to Jael, a woman who drives a tent-peg through the Sisera's brains as he lies sleeping. The story concludes with the celebrated Song of Deborah, among the most famous of Old Testament poems.

Unlike Deborah and Esther, Judith does not hold office in her community. A beautiful, wealthy widow, she is recognized for her piety. As the narrative opens, her town is besieged by the enemy and about to surrender. Judith takes charge and infiltrates the enemy camp, dazzling Holofernes, the army's general, with her charm and beauty. He hopes to seduce her, but when he falls into a drunken stupor, she cuts off his head. Emboldened by Judith's action, the Israelites rally and conquer their enemy.

present a forceful argument for female courage and resourcefulness, and, more importantly, they demonstrate the providential selection of certain women to positions of authority. However, the biblical depiction of Esther in both the private sphere as a wife and the political sphere as a queen distinguishes her from Deborah and Judith. Although both of these women were wives, their husbands play no role at all in their respective narratives. In the case of Deborah, the only reference to her husband in the Book of Judges occurs when the narrator identifies her as a prophetess married to a man named Lappidoth. When Judith is introduced in the book of the Bible that bears her name, she is a beautiful, wealthy widow whose husband has been dead for several years. In neither instance are the two women portrayed in a domestic context, unlike Esther who first lives with her cousin Mordecai, then with her husband Ahasuerus. In this regard, Esther offers a potentially more versatile paradigm for early modern audiences than do her biblical sisters. Furthermore, her character evolves over the course of the narrative, which cannot be said of Deborah and Judith, both of whom are already confident, mature women when their stories begin.

That the story of Esther had a wide-ranging appeal during the English Renaissance is indicated by the variety of genres in which she appears. As noted earlier, Queen Elizabeth cites Esther in one of her own prayers. She was represented on stage in a dramatic interlude and portrayed in a pageant during the Queen's 1578 progress. Various authors featured her in conduct books for women as well as treatises defending female

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governance. Her name was invoked in poems and pamphlets celebrating England's defeat of the Spanish Armada. One of the most popular poets of the seventeenth century even composed an epic heroic poem recounting the story of Esther. Finally, she served to refute misogynistic arguments in the pamphlet wars instigated by Joseph Swetnam in 1615. Poems, pamphlets, prayers, and plays – the story of Esther inspired a multitude of authors writing in a variety of genres.

Any analysis of early modern representations of Queen Esther must begin, of course, with the narrative presented in the Book of Esther in the Bible, the primary source for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers. However, the story of Esther is complicated by the fact that there are *two* versions of Esther in the Bible, the canonical Hebrew account in the Old Testament as well as the deuterocanonical version in the Apocrypha. Early modern writers sometimes used both versions depending upon their rhetorical purpose. Following my summary of the original Old Testament narrative, I thus provide an account of the Greek additions to the Book of Esther found in the Apocrypha. I will follow my discussion of biblical sources with an overview of the typological significance of Esther in the Middle Ages as a foundation for my subsequent study of her depiction in the early modern period in England.

### The Story of Esther in the Old Testament

The Book of Esther opens with two long and lavish banquets hosted by the Persian king, Ahasuerus, in his palace at Susa. After six months of drinking and feasting, the king summons his wife, Queen Vashti, to the second banquet so all the male revelers

might observe her beauty. Vashti refuses to appear before the king and his courtiers for reasons not explained in the text. Angry with his wife's disobedience and fearful of her subversive example to all the women of Persia, Ahasuerus issues a decree banishing Vashti from his court forever. Eventually, the king launches a nationwide search for a new bride. Officers travel throughout Persia to bring the most beautiful young virgins to the palace harem. Among the maidens selected from Susa is Esther, an orphan raised by her elder cousin and guardian, Mordecai. A Jew of the Diaspora, Mordecai instructs his cousin not to divulge her Jewish identity. The narrator gives no explanation for Mordecai's command.

Supervised in the harem by the king's eunuchs, the young women prepare themselves for their respective encounters with the king. They spend "six months [anointing themselves] with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women" (2:12).<sup>6</sup> Esther wins the favor of Hegai, the head eunuch, who provides her with seven maids from the palace and the most desirable place in the harem. When her turn finally comes to spend the night with the king, Ahasuerus is captivated by Esther and chooses her, over all other women, to be his bride. Esther honors Mordecai's instruction and does not reveal her ethnic identity to the king.

In the meantime, Mordecai sits at the palace gates each day to glean news of his cousin. One day he overhears two eunuchs plotting to kill the king and gets word to Esther of their impending treachery. She informs the king of the plot, and the eunuchs

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations in this dissertation come from *The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, gen. ed. Wayne A. Meeks (New York: HarperCollins P, 1993).

are executed. Mordecai's role in saving the king's life is subsequently recorded in the court annals. Though loyal to Ahasuerus, Mordecai refuses to show obeisance to the king's chief advisor, Haman, who expects Mordecai to bow down in his presence. Enraged by Mordecai's disrespect, and aware that he is a Jew, Haman plots his revenge. He tells the king of "a certain people" whose "laws are different from those of every other people" (3:8) and who do not abide by the laws of Persia. Such a people, Haman argues, must be destroyed, and he convinces the king to order their execution. Haman chooses the date for this systematic pogrom, the first in Jewish history, by casting lots, or *pur*. Twelve months hence, on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, the Jews of Persia are to be slaughtered, men, women, and children. Unaware of the consequences to his queen, Ahasuerus ironically orders couriers to publish his decree throughout the kingdom.

When he learns of the impending disaster, Mordecai dresses himself in sackcloth and ashes and wails aloud at the entrance to the palace. Through an attendant, Esther learns the reason for Mordecai's distress, but tells him she is powerless to plead with the king to save her people. By law, anyone who comes before him without being summoned is killed, and, she explains, Ahasuerus has not sent for her in thirty days. Mordecai then admonishes his cousin not to think herself safe. In the most famous passage of the book, Mordecai challenges the young queen:

Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but



you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. (4:13,14)

Bravely, Esther resolves to approach Ahasuerus in supplication for her people. She first asks Mordecai and all the Jews in Susa to fast on her behalf for three days and nights, and she and her maids do likewise. When the fast ends, Esther adorns herself in her royal robes and, unbidden, goes to the hall where Ahasuerus sits on his throne. To her relief, the king welcomes her and offers to grant any request she has, even promising her half his kingdom. Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet that very day. After they have eaten, the king again promises to give his young queen whatever she requests. Esther responds by inviting both him and Haman to a second banquet the following day. Haman is overjoyed, assuming that the queen has singled him out for recognition, and he boasts of his good fortune to his wife and his friends. His happiness is marred, however, by his recollection of Mordecai, and he resolves to have the recalcitrant Jew executed as soon as possible. Haman orders a gallows eighty-three feet high be constructed for that very purpose.

That night, Ahasuerus cannot sleep and requests that his servant bring him the historical annals to read. There he finds recorded Mordecai's role in saving his life from the murderous eunuchs. He determines to reward Mordecai for his loyalty and summons Haman for advice. Ahasuerus asks Haman, "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" (6:6). Certain that the king means to reward *him*, Haman proposes that such a man be paraded through the city on the king's own horse. To his dismay, Haman discovers that the king intends to honor his nemesis Mordecai; humiliated but

obedient nonetheless, Haman leads the Jew, adorned in royal robes and seated upon the king's horse, throughout Susa.

When Ahasuerus and Haman later arrive at the queen's second banquet, Ahasuerus offers for a third time to give Esther anything she desires. Then Esther replies, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me – that is my petition – and the lives of my people – that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated" (7:3,4). When the king asks who is responsible for such a calamity, Esther dramatically answers, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" (7:6). Beside himself with rage and grief, the king storms out. Terrified, Haman throws himself upon Esther's couch to beg for her mercy. At that moment the king comes back into the room and, seeing the prostrate Haman, believes him to be attacking the queen. Ahasuerus orders that Haman be put to death. In a stunning reversal, Haman is hanged on the very gallows he had constructed for Mordecai's execution. The king gives Esther Haman's estate, which she, in turn, bequeaths to Mordecai.

Though Ahasuerus regrets his decree to kill the Jews, royal edicts cannot be rescinded in Persia, even by the king himself. At the urging of Esther, and with the assistance of Mordecai, the king subsequently decrees that the Jews may defend themselves against anyone who seeks to harm them. When the designated date of the pogrom arrives on the thirteenth day of Adar, Jews throughout the land rise up and slay hundreds of Persians, including Haman's ten sons. Esther asks Ahasuerus to extend his decree and allow the Jews a second day in which to kill their enemies. She also requests that he hang the dead

bodies of Haman's sons upon a gallows, and he agrees. On the second day, the Jews slaughter seventy-five thousand Persians.

To commemorate the Jews' victory over Haman and his evil intentions, Mordecai encourages the Jews to keep the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar a holiday, for they were

the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies,  
and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow  
into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they  
should make them days of feasting and gladness, days of  
sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. (9:22)

Queen Esther authorizes the holiday, to be called *Purim*, in recollection of the lots or *pur* Haman had cast in his effort to destroy the Jews. Ahasuerus promotes Mordecai to a position of power second only to the king himself. Thus, the Book of Esther concludes with two Jews of the Diaspora – the beautiful orphan Esther and her resolute cousin Mordecai – wielding power in the most unlikely of places, the very heart of the vast Persian empire.

#### Greek Additions to the Hebrew Narrative

The Old Testament version of Esther recounted above is based upon the original Hebrew narrative, one of the most popular, though controversial, stories in the Jewish

canon. The *Megillah*, as Jews typically call the Scroll of Esther,<sup>7</sup> merits the distinction of being the only book in the Hebrew Bible that never refers to God explicitly nor mentions any essential aspect of Jewish belief and worship. As Bible scholar Katheryn Darr notes, the anomalous features of the narrative

prompted debate in at least some Jewish quarters: Why was it lacking even a single reference to YHWH, the God of Israel? Where was mention of Torah, prayer, covenant, or dietary restrictions? Of the biblical books, Esther alone is not represented among the scrolls and fragments found at Qumran. And while Josephus [in his *Jewish Antiquities*] . . . regarded the book as canonical, the Talmud bears witness that Esther's status was debated into the third or fourth centuries C.E.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, scholars believe that Jewish leaders had already approved the Book of Esther as canonical by A.D. 90 when a council was convened at Jamnia after the Romans had destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> In her commentary on Esther, Sidnie White Crawford concludes, “The probable reason for Esther's final inclusion in the

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<sup>7</sup> See the introduction to *Megillat Esther* by Robert Gordis (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1974) for a discussion of Esther's ongoing relevance to contemporary Judaism. According to Gordis, “The age-old campaign to annihilate the Jewish people, which was initiated by the Egyptian Pharaoh at the dawn of Jewish history, was given global dimensions by Haman in Persia, and was brought to its peak of efficiency in our century by Hitler. It has now focused upon the State of Israel and world Jewry. The war for survival is not over, but the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps” (63). For an overview of rabbinic commentaries, see *The Megillah/The Book of Esther: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, eds. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *ArtScroll Tanach Series* (Brooklyn: Mesorah P, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox P, 1991) 166.

<sup>9</sup> Carey A. Moore, introduction, *Esther, The Anchor Bible* (7b), gen. ed. William F. Albright and David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1971) xxii.

Hebrew canon is its connection with the festival of Purim, an extremely popular festival which began to be celebrated in the Diaspora and later was accepted in Judah.”<sup>10</sup> Its canonical status, she writes, “was probably the result of popular pressure.” However, the leaders at Jamnia rejected as non-canonical the version of Esther found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced by Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria in the third and second centuries B.C.

What distinguished the Septuagint Esther from the original Hebrew? The Greek version incorporated six passages that scholars have named Additions A-F. Apparently, the new passages were added to correct the absence of religious references in the Hebrew version, as noted above. In the Septuagint Esther, “God is mentioned over fifty times, as well as prayer, the Temple, its cult, and the practice of dietary laws. The role and importance of Mordecai are heightened, while Esther becomes more ‘Jewish’ by claiming to have followed the dietary laws and . . . declaring her loathing for her heathen environment.”<sup>11</sup> For example, Addition C includes a long and passionate prayer by Esther, while Addition D supplements the details of her encounter with Ahasuerus when she asks him to intervene on behalf of the Jews. As Adele Reinhartz observes, “These changes, while not altering the plot, influence the reader’s interpretation of the story. By introducing and emphasizing the notion of divine agency, Greek Esther places its own particular story in the larger context of the covenantal relationship between God and

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<sup>10</sup> Sidnie Ann White Crawford, “Esther,” *Women’s Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox P, 1998) 133.

<sup>11</sup> Crawford 133-34. For further analysis of the Septuagint version of Esther, see Carey A. Moore’s commentary in *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions, The Anchor Bible* (44), gen. ed. William F. Albright and David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 153-252.

Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the heightened religiosity of these additions, the council at Jamnia rejected them as non-canonical, along with other books included in the Septuagint which were not Hebrew in origin, such as Judith, Tobit, and Ecclesiasticus, among others.

Ironically, the Septuagint, with its expanded number of books, proved enormously important to the early Church. The authors of *The Bible as Literature* explain,

as the Church moved outward from its original base in Palestine and became increasingly gentile, it increasingly employed the Greek Bible rather than the Hebrew. All of the New Testament writers quoted the Jewish scriptures in their Greek form. The reason for the appeal of the Septuagint to Christians outside – and even inside – the Holy Land was a simple one: A great many of them read Greek, very few of them read Hebrew.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the early Christians accepted as canonical books of scripture that Jews rejected as such. When Jerome undertook his Latin translation of the Bible in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, he called those books *apocrypha*, meaning “hidden,” in recognition of their “uncertain status” compared to other books in the Old Testament.<sup>14</sup> He also “attached prefaces to his Latin translations indicating that these particular books should

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<sup>12</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “The Greek Book of Esther,” *Women’s Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox P, 1998) 286.

<sup>13</sup> John B. Gabel, Charles B. Wheeler, and Anthony D. York, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 195.

<sup>14</sup> Gabel, Wheeler, and York 198-99.

be considered less than canonical, although useful for Christian edification.”<sup>15</sup> In his edition of Esther, Jerome placed the six additional Greek passages from the Septuagint at the end of the original narrative, setting them apart from the version of the story he believed to be canonical.

Nearly a thousand years later, another biblical translator, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, would remove the apocryphal books altogether from the Old Testament, grouping them instead between the Hebrew books deemed canonical and the New Testament. His decision proved enormously influential: “Luther’s Bible was not the very first to have the Apocrypha isolated in this way; but the reputation of the man and his translation being what it was, his practice influenced what was done in many Protestant versions in other languages thereafter.”<sup>16</sup> In his edition of the Bible, Luther removed the Greek additions to Esther, which Jerome had included at the end of Hebrew Esther, and put them instead in the Apocrypha. Protestant translations in England followed suit. For example, the Geneva Bible located “The Bookes Called Apocrypha” between the Old and New Testaments. The Geneva translators included the Hebrew version of Esther in the Old Testament and put the Greek additions in the Apocrypha, referring to them as “Certeine porcions of the storie of Esther, which are founde in some Greke and Latine translations.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gabel, Wheeler, and York 199.

<sup>16</sup> Gabel, Wheeler, and York 199.

<sup>17</sup> *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1969) 416.

This rather complicated history of the Book of Esther accounts for some of the differences found in early modern works seemingly based upon the same story. For instance, when Thomas Bentley writes about Esther in *The Monument of Matrones* (1582), he generally follows the Old Testament narrative in the Geneva Bible. However, he also incorporates two passages from the Apocrypha (Greek Esther) to strengthen his didactic goal of presenting Esther as a woman worthy of emulation. On the other hand, Francis Quarles relies on the Old Testament version alone when he recasts the Esther narrative as an epic heroic poem called *Hadassa* (1621). In “A Preface to the Reader,” Quarles explains, “As for the matter [the subject of his poem] . . . it is Canonick,” indicating that he has not used the apocryphal version at all.<sup>18</sup> Thus, “Esther’s history of substantial textual instability,” in the words of one recent scholar,<sup>19</sup> is reflected in the varying practices of early modern writers as they appropriate the narrative for their respective purposes.

### Typological Significance of the Esther Narrative

Never one to mince words, Martin Luther announced his dislike of the Book of Esther when he wrote, “I am so hostile to the book [II Maccabees] and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too much and have much heathen perverseness.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Francis Quarles, *Hadassa: or The History of Queene Ester: With Meditations thereupon, Diuine and Morall. The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles*, ed. A. B. Grosart, vol. 2 (New York: AMS Press, 1967) 42.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Alan Gustafson, “Aelfric Reads Esther: The Cultural Limits of Translation,” diss., U of Iowa, 1995, 41.



Luther is not alone among Christians in his assessment of Esther. Only fifty-five years ago, Bernhard W. Anderson, influential scholar and author of *Understanding the Old Testament*, argued,

Since the veil has been lifted, as Jesus himself lifted it at Emmaus, many passages in the Old Testament have been superseded or understood in a new light. This is true of [among other Old Testament passages] . . . the Book of Esther. If a Christian minister is faithful to the context, he will not take his text from Esther; and, if the leader of a church-school class shows any Christian discernment, he will not waste time trying to show that the heroes of the book are models of character, integrity, and piety.<sup>21</sup>

While Luther in the sixteenth century and Anderson in the twentieth reject the Christian efficacy of the Book of Esther, their voices remain in the minority when considered alongside typological interpretations from the early Church, the Middle Ages, and the English Renaissance.

In his survey of patristic literature on Esther, Timothy Gustafson notes that the response of early Christian writers to the Book of Esther was largely shaped by the Greek additions described above: “Although the translators of the Septuagint could not know it, their pious recasting of the story would give the book a general religious appeal that Christians could accept.”<sup>22</sup> Because the Greek version emphasizes Esther’s extraordinary

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in “The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible” by Bernhard W. Anderson, *Journal of Religion* 30 (1950): 131.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson 140.

<sup>22</sup> Gustafson 87.

faithfulness, patristic writers often interpreted the narrative typologically with Esther representing the Church. In a late fourth century letter, for example, Jerome offers a typological reading of the story. Esther is a type of the Church, he writes, who “frees her people from danger and, after having slain Haman whose name means iniquity, hands down to posterity a memorable day and a great feast.”<sup>23</sup> Gustafson cites other Christian writers with similar interpretations, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Rabanus Maurus.

In the Middle Ages, another typological understanding of the book emerged based upon Esther’s role as the intercessor for her people. As devotion to the Virgin Mary increased in the medieval church, perceptions of Esther as a type of the Blessed Virgin developed concomitantly: “In the later Middle Ages, Esther’s destruction of Aman became a type of the Virgin’s triumph over the Devil in her Immaculate Conception, and her pleading for the Jews before Assuerus became a type of the Virgin’s intercession for mankind at the Last Judgment.”<sup>24</sup> Religious medieval lyrics reveal the typological association between Esther and the Virgin Mary, as indicated in the following examples of early English carols:

O meke Hestere so fayre of face,  
Kyng Assuere for loue of the

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<sup>23</sup> Qtd. in Gustafson 70.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin J. Harty, “The Reputation of Queen Esther in the Middle Ages: The Merchant’s Tale, IV (E). 1742-45,” *Ball State university Forum* 19.3 (1978): 67. Harty notes that Chaucer alludes to Esther in *The Merchant’s Tale*, *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The Legend of Good Women*. “In referring to Esther . . . in his works,” Harty writes, “Chaucer is emphasizing the admirable, virtuous and constructive aspects of her story as the Middle Ages understood it” (65).

Hath take mankynd vnto his grace,

*Mater misericordie.*

As Holy Writte thus concludith,

For cause oure helthe is wone by the

Thou art bothe Ester and Judith,

*Mater misericordie.*

Aman alsoo, the fende, oure foo,

Thou hast hangyd vppon a tre;

Thus thou hast brought mankynd fro woo,

*Mater misericordie.*<sup>25</sup>

The interpretation of Esther as a type both of the Church and the Virgin Mary would continue among Roman Catholics into the early seventeenth century with the publication of the Douai Old Testament (1609). The Douai annotations to Chapter Nine of the Book of Esther offer a typological reading congruent with Catholic theology:

It hath moreouer two special mystical senses. First, as saftie of temporal life was procured to one nation by Esthers intercession to king Assuerus, so general saluation is procured to al mankind by mediation of the blessed virgin Marie, crushing the serpents head . . .

Esther also, as likewise Iudith, in figure of the Church . . . killed the aduersaries, and deliuered Israel from dauger [sic] of perishing.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Richard L. Greene, ed., Carols 209 and 210, *The Early English Carols*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1997) 136-37.

For medieval Christians and early modern Catholics, Esther would be inextricably linked to the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary as well as the salvific role of the Church in the cosmic struggle between God and Satan.

For early modern Protestants, however, typological readings of Esther were predicated on “the identification of England as an elect nation [that] developed late in Elizabeth’s reign.”<sup>27</sup> England became a new Israel, God’s chosen people, believing in the true faith as revealed in scripture rather than discredited (according to Protestants) Roman Catholic theology. As a modern-day Esther, Elizabeth saved her people from Roman tyranny and established true Christian piety throughout her kingdom. In this scenario, England’s Catholic adversaries, namely France and Spain, were perceived as contemporary Hamans, threatening the very survival of this new English Israel. As Steven Zwicker explains, “The application of Scripture to the progress of God’s elect as a political body is based on the theology of federal grace. The idea of corporate election developed in Reformation theology through a reinterpretation of the relationship between the Old Testament faithful and the present-day elect.”<sup>28</sup> This typological reading of England as Israel, Elizabeth as Esther, and enemy nations as Haman will inform many of the literary depictions of Esther in early modern England, as will become evident in the following chapters of this dissertation.

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<sup>26</sup> *The Douai Old Testament* (Douai, 1609) 1051. I am grateful to the Special Collections staff at Emory University’s Woodruff Library for allowing me access to their copy of the Douai Old Testament.

<sup>27</sup> Steven N. Zwicker, “Politics and Panegyric: The Figural Mode from Marvell to Pope,” *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 117.

<sup>28</sup> Zwicker 116.

Understanding how Esther was appropriated by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers, whether Protestant or Catholic, male or female, Queen or commoner, fosters a greater understanding of the political, social, and religious concerns of early modern England. Despite the prevalence of allusions to Esther in such varied forms of discourse, there has not yet been a systematic study to determine her meaning within a larger cultural context. Indeed, few studies of any biblical women in early modern England have been conducted. Michele Osherow observes, “To date, only a small portion of Renaissance references to biblical women [other than Eve] have been explored,” even though “these women are continually referenced in Renaissance texts.”<sup>29</sup> Osherow’s own study of the songs of Deborah, Miriam, and Hannah, and Margarita Stocker’s book on Judith in western art and literature, for example, have been valuable additions to the scholarship on Old Testament women in early modern England.<sup>30</sup> The topic of this dissertation, representations of Queen Esther in Tudor and Stuart literature, will, I hope, contribute to the body of knowledge in this area. In Chapter One, I have identified the biblical sources of the Esther narrative and provided an overview of the genres in which she appears. Chapter Two examines Esther in relation to female authority and focuses specifically on references to Queen Elizabeth as an Esther figure. Chapter Three studies the dramatic interlude *Godly Queen Hester*, while Chapter Four analyzes works of prose featuring Esther as an exemplum for virtuous and heroic women. Chapter Five presents

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<sup>29</sup> Michele Osherow, “‘Even I Will Sing’: Biblical Women’s Voices in Early Modern Texts,” diss., U of Maryland, 2000, 24. See also Osherow’s essay “‘Give Ear O’ Princes’: Deborah, Elizabeth, and the Right Word” in *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 30.1 (2004): 111-19.

<sup>30</sup> Margarita Stocker, *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998).

poetic depictions of Esther, particularly the epic poem *Hadassa*. Chapter Six concludes the dissertation by noting briefly how women authors engaged in the *querelle des femmes* enlist Esther to refute their opponents. Together, these depictions demonstrate both the prominence and the singularity of Queen Esther in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

## Chapter Two:

### “A Worthie President”: Esther and the Tradition of Female Authority

If Esther was represented as a type of the Church by Jerome and other patristic writers, she was also perceived as a queen worthy of emulation by medieval and Renaissance women who wielded power. The connection between Queen Elizabeth I and Esther continued a tradition that encouraged aristocratic women to model their behavior on that of the Hebrew queen. When such women were commended for their brave deeds or noble character, they were often compared to Esther and other Old Testament heroines. For example, Rabanus Maurus, the Bishop of Fulda during the ninth century Carolingian empire, wrote commentaries on the Book of Esther as well as the Book of Judith. He dedicated both works to the Empress Judith, the controversial wife of Louis the Pious, the son of Charlemagne. In the preface to each commentary, he encourages the Empress to imitate the noble Queen Esther. In his dedication to *Expositio in librum Judith* (834), Rabanus extols Judith’s virtues, adding, “Also Queen, always place Esther, likewise a queen, imitable in every action of piety and chastity, before the eyes of your heart, until, equalling the merit of her sanctity, you are able to climb from the earthly kingdom to the peak of the celestial kingdom.”<sup>31</sup> The Bishop again presents Esther as an appropriate model for the Empress in *Expositio in librum Esther* (836), the earliest extant Christian commentary on the Book of Esther: “May Almighty God, who encouraged the

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in *Aelfric Reads Esther: The Cultural Limits of Translation* by Timothy Gustafson, diss., U of Iowa, 1995, 92. Gustafson’s dissertation examines Aelfric’s translation of the Book of Esther into Anglo-Saxon near the end of the tenth century. As the first English translation of Esther, Aelfric’s version “survives only in a seventeenth century transcription by the Anglican scholar William L’Isle (1569?-1637)” (8).

mind of that queen to deliver her people from disaster, deign to guide you likewise, eagerly laboring toward eternal joys.”<sup>32</sup> When the Empress Judith was succeeded by her daughter-in-law Ermengard, Rabanus rededicated *Expositio in librum Esther* to the new empress and composed a poem comparing Ermengard’s sense of compassion to that of Queen Esther.<sup>33</sup>

Another priest, a monk named Donizo, alludes to Esther in his biography of the Countess Matilda of Tuscany (1046-1115). A cousin of two emperors, Henry III and his successor Henry IV, the Countess was a wealthy, literate, and powerful woman, acting at times as intermediary between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII.<sup>34</sup> In characterizing Matilda, Donizo variously compares her to biblical women ranging from the queen of Sheba to Martha and Mary. When he wants to praise her courage in defying the emperor, an enemy of the Church, Donizo offers pertinent analogies to Old Testament heroines, including Esther: “When Henry’s second wife, Praxedes, left her husband and took refuge with Matilda, the countess was a Deborah and a Jahel defeating Sisara . . . when Henry’s son Conrad left his father and put himself under the broad wings of Matilda, she was an Esther to Henry’s Haman.”<sup>35</sup> According to her biographer, Matilda demonstrated the same courage in defying the emperor as Esther had done in confronting her nemesis Haman.

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Gustafson 95.

<sup>33</sup> Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997) 228, n. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ferrante 87.

<sup>35</sup> Ferrante 89.



Among the female writers in the Middle Ages who cite Esther as a worthy exemplum for aristocratic women is Christine de Pizan, famous for her spirited and erudite defense of women, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). In that witty treatise, Christine retells the Esther narrative to demonstrate how God employed a woman to save the Jews.<sup>36</sup> She also refers to Esther in a letter to the queen of France, Isabel of Bavaria, in 1405. Christine appeals to Isabel to save her nation from impending civil war, just as Esther had intervened on behalf of the Jews in Persia:

As these virtues [pity, charity, clemency, and benignity] are a natural part of the feminine condition they should rightfully abound in a noble lady, inasmuch as she receives a greater gift from God, so it is to be expected that a noble princess or lady should be the means of bringing about a treaty of peace, as can be seen in the cases of the valiant ladies praised by the Holy Scriptures: the valiant and wise Queen Esther, who by her good judgment and kindness appeased the wrath of King Ahasuerus so that he withdrew the sentence against the people condemned to death.<sup>37</sup>

Christine's perspective is at once traditional and radical. The virtues she ascribes to women reflect the gentleness and mercy typically associated with the feminine, rather

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<sup>36</sup> After recounting Esther's story, Christine concludes, "Thus, as with Judith, in this instance God wished to save His people through a woman. And do not think that these two ladies are the only ones in the Holy Scriptures through whom God cared to save His people at various times, for there are plenty of others whom I am omitting for the sake of brevity, such as Deborah, . . . who also delivered her people from servitude, and others have acted similarly." *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl J. Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982) 146-47.

<sup>37</sup> Christine de Pizan, "Letter to the Queen of France, Isabel of Bavaria," *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard (New York: Persea Books, 1994) 271.

than the masculine, personality. If women display those qualities in the private sphere of home and family, Christine argues those same virtues equip noblewomen to act as peacemakers in the public, political sphere. Indeed, she asserts that such women have a responsibility to effect “a treaty of peace” in a time of conflict. Christine displays a feminist sense of *noblesse oblige* in urging Queen Isabel to save her nation, with Queen Esther serving as her biblically-sanctioned model for such an action. In this regard, the figure of Esther transcends the traditional role of obedient wife to become a symbol of female empowerment.

Christine’s appropriation of Esther to inspire feminine engagement in the usually masculine preserve of power and politics was not unusual among her contemporaries, as Joan M. Ferrante discovered in her study of medieval women’s correspondence and other writings. Ferrante concludes that, despite the prevailing misogynistic attitudes, women were more involved in public life than previously recognized. Moreover, she argues,

What is particularly striking in the letters and in texts commissioned by women is how much women, even those playing male roles in secular government or rising above sex in their religious lives, are aware of themselves as women and identify with powerful or effective, not oppressed, women in history – with Mary as queen of heaven or mother of God; with Judith and Esther, who saved their people; with the queen of Sheba, who traveled far to hear Solomon’s wisdom. . . These

are women to be reckoned with, women for a woman in power to identify with. Such models are [also] evoked by friends and counselors . . .<sup>38</sup>

Ferrante's study demonstrates that the Bible and its stories of "women to be reckoned with" could inspire medieval aristocratic women to exercise authority in spite of the pervasive antifeminist attitudes based upon Eve's role in the Fall or St. Paul's stern pronouncements on female submission. It should come as no surprise, then, that a century later Queen Elizabeth and her supporters looked to Esther, as well as other biblical women, as prototypes of legitimate female authority. Not only was Esther a proper role model, she also represented a clearly defined tradition.

In fact, Elizabeth was not the first queen of England to be perceived in terms of Queen Esther. In 1392, Londoners welcomed the return of Richard II and Queen Anne from their sojourn in York following a rift caused by the city's refusal to give the King a loan. Their return was marked by a dazzling pageant featuring music, gifts, decorations, and staged tableaux. Near Westminster, the King and Queen were each presented with tablets engraved with scripture: "The Queen's tablet told her that as Esther mediated between the wrath of Ahasuerus and his subjects so she too should mediate between the King and the citizens when the need arose."<sup>39</sup> More than a century later, Catherine of Aragon was represented on stage through the character of Esther in a dramatic interlude titled *Godly Queen Hester*, as the following chapter will discuss. Even Elizabeth's rival for the throne, Mary Queen of Scots, reportedly said at her trial for treason in 1586 that "she had

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<sup>38</sup> Ferrante 7.

<sup>39</sup> Glyne Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300-1660*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 71.

rather play Hester than Judith, make intercession to God for the people, than deprive the meanest of the people of life.”<sup>40</sup> In each instance, Esther’s intercessory role in the biblical narrative offers a model of behavior for these latter-day queens.

It was Elizabeth Tudor, however, who time and again inspired comparisons with Queen Esther and other biblical heroines. That the young queen would be associated with valorous women of the Old Testament became apparent during the Queen’s procession through London the day before her coronation. Thousands of people crowded the streets as Elizabeth and her entourage journeyed to Westminster, stopping periodically before various pageants honoring the new queen. As recorded in the pamphlet *The Quenes maiesties passage through the citie of London to Westminster the daye before her coronacion* (1559), the last pageant along the way featured “Debora the judge and restorer of the house of Israel.”<sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth stopped before the tableau, a child stepped forward “to open the meaning of the pageant” and recited a poem celebrating the achievements of Israel’s female judge:

In war she, through god’s aide, did put her foes to flight,  
 And with the dint of sworde the bande of bondage brast.  
 In peace she, through god’s aide, did alway mainteine right  
 And judged Israell till fourty yeres were past.

A worthie president, O worthie Queene, thou hast,

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<sup>40</sup> *Record of the State Trial of Mary Queen of Scots*, ed. William Cobbett, *The Trial of Mary Queen of Scots: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Jayne Elizabeth Lewis (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999) 105.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *Elizabethan Backgrounds: Historical Documents of the Age of Elizabeth* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1975) 32. For a detailed analysis of the coronation procession, see *The Queen’s Majesty’s Passage & Related Documents* by Germaine Warkentin (Toronto: CRRS, 2004).

A worthie woman judge, a woman sent for staie.

And that the like to use endure alway thou maist

Thy loving subjectes wil with true hearts and tonges praie.<sup>42</sup>

In this pageant, the figure of Deborah triumphs in war as well as peace, providing a biblical precedent for the new queen in exercising authority both at home and abroad. More importantly, Deborah derives her authority from God, as, by implication, does Elizabeth, the English Deborah. Underscoring the legitimacy of a female sovereign, the pamphlet's author explains, "god oftimes sent women nobly to rule among men, as Debora which governed Israell in peace the space of xl. yeres."<sup>43</sup> His assertion here challenges the traditionally negative view of female governance, demonstrated most famously by the Protestant reformer John Knox in his treatise *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*.

Knox published his pamphlet in 1558 just prior to Elizabeth's accession to the throne. While his specific targets are the Catholic queens, Mary Tudor, Mary of Guise, and Mary Queen of Scots, he unequivocally condemns the notion of *any* female wielding political power: "To promote a Woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion, or empire above any Realme, Nation, or Citie, is repugnant to Nature; [and] contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance."<sup>44</sup> If a woman exercises authority over men, Knox believes, she subverts the hierarchical order of relationships ordained by

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<sup>42</sup> Kinney 32.

<sup>43</sup> Kinney 33.

<sup>44</sup> John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, vol. 4 (Edinburgh, 1855; New York: AMS Press, 1966) 373.

God and delineated by St. Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth: “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor. 11: 3,4). Furthermore, Knox argues, women are patently unfit for rule: “Nature, I say, doth paynt them furthe to be weake, fraile, impacient, feble, and foolishe; and experience hath declared them to be unconstant, variable, cruell, and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment.”<sup>45</sup> Though Knox may have been more vituperative than most writers in expressing his hostility toward women rulers, his attitude was nonetheless shared by many men who considered female rulers “shocking anomalies.”<sup>46</sup> As J. E. Neale observes, “However they disguised their belief, statesmen held government to be a mystery revealed only to men.”<sup>47</sup> Such were the patriarchal sentiments with which Elizabeth Tudor had to contend as queen regnant.<sup>48</sup>

Yet those very patriarchal beliefs regarding female sovereignty posed a problem for England’s Protestants, who supported Elizabeth and anticipated a national return to Reformation tenets following the death of her Catholic sister, Queen Mary. How could Protestants, whose theology was grounded in *sola scriptura*, justify a woman ruler when the Bible, or at least St. Paul, expressly forbade such an occurrence? The English Protestant and Marian exile John Aylmer addressed the problem in his response to John Knox titled *An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Svbiectes, agaynst the late blowne*

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<sup>45</sup> Knox 374.

<sup>46</sup> Stocker 67.

<sup>47</sup> J. E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth* (London: Reprint Society, 1942) 66.

<sup>48</sup> For an analysis of the impact of gender on Elizabeth’s reign, see Carole Levin’s “*The Heart and Stomach of a King*”: *Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994).

*Blaste, concerninge the Gouernment of Wemen. wherin be confuted all such reasons as a straunger of late made in that behalfe, with a breife exhortation to OBEDIENCE (1559).*

Aylmer argues that sometimes, for God's own reasons, God appoints women to leadership positions, just as he did in the Old Testament when he lifted up Deborah and Judith to save the Hebrews: "He saued his people by the hande of a woman poore Deborah. . . . He cut of the head of the proude captayne Olophernes by the hande of a weake woman [Judith]." <sup>49</sup> And, according to Aylmer, God more recently used a woman to save England from the "dungeon of deuelishe doctrine, couered with the rotten bones of Romyshe Martirs, synfull Sayntes, and conterfaited Confessores" (B4<sup>v</sup>). The woman who rescued England from Roman heresy was none other than Queen Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn: "Was not Quene Anne the mother of this blessed woman, the chief, first, and only cause of banyshing the beast of Rome, with all his beggerly baggage? was there euer in Englande a greater feate wrought by any man: then this was by a woman?" (B4<sup>v</sup>). Aylmer then identifies Queen Anne with Queen Esther:

but if God had not gyuen Quene Anne fauour in the sight of the kyng, as he gaue to Hester in the sight of Nabucadnezar: Haman and his company. The Cardinall, Wynchester, More, Roches [sic]: and other wold sone haue trised vp Mardocheus with al the rest that leaned to that side. Wherefore though many deserued muche praise for the helping forward of it: yet the crophe and roote was the

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<sup>49</sup> John Aylmer, *An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Svbiectes, agaynst the late blowne Blaste, concerninge the Gouernment of Wemen*. Reprinted in *The English Experience: Its Record in Early Printed Books Published in Facsimile*, No. 423 (New York: Da Capo P, 1972) sig. B3<sup>v</sup>.

Quene, whiche God had endewed with wisdome that she coulde,  
and gyuen hir the minde that she would do it. (B4<sup>v</sup>)

Aylmer claims that the restoration of the true faith in England originated with an English Esther, Anne Boleyn, who rescued her nation from Roman Catholic heresy. “For the Elizabethan,” writes Michelle Ephraim, “Esther is an allegorical figure who saves the Protestant church from Catholic threat.”<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, Aylmer affirms, because God commands obedience to civil authorities, as St. Paul himself instructs in the Book of Romans,<sup>51</sup> Englishmen have a duty to obey the new queen, whom God has surely established to protect the nation from a return to Catholicism. Aylmer concludes his work with a rousing call for loyalty to Queen Elizabeth and the Protestant faith she represents: “Let vs daylye call to God with lifted vp heartes and handes, for her preseruacion and long lyfe: that she may many yeares cary the sworde of our defence, and there with cutt of the head of that Hydra, the Antichrist of Rome, in suche sort, as it neuer growe againe in this realme of England” (R3<sup>r</sup>). Aylmer conflates Elizabeth with English Protestantism and the preservation of the true Christian faith; in this regard, Elizabeth, like her mother Anne Boleyn, becomes an Esther figure who delivers the faithful from their enemies. Thus, by indirectly associating Elizabeth with the eponymous heroine of the Book of Esther, Aylmer and other English Protestants could justify biblically the “shocking anomalie” of female authority.

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<sup>50</sup> Michelle Ephraim, “From Jewish Monarch to Virgin Queen: Elizabeth I and *The Godly Queen Hester*,” *Women’s Studies* 30.5 (2001): 615.

<sup>51</sup> See Romans 13: 1,2: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”



Elizabeth's own perception of her capacity to rule rested upon her belief in God's providential guidance and protection, as revealed in the numerous prayers she composed throughout her reign. She invariably confesses her dependence upon God; in one of her prayers, for example, she writes, "I acknowledge, O my King, without Thee my throne is unstable, my seat unsure, my kingdom tottering, my life uncertain."<sup>52</sup> Though she recognizes the gifts that set her apart from other women,<sup>53</sup> she typically refers to herself as God's handmaid who must rely upon him to overcome the limitations of her sex. If Solomon admitted his inability to govern without God's help, she wonders, "how much less am I, Thy handmaid, in my unwarlike sex and feminine nature, adequate to administer these thy kingdoms of England and of Ireland, and to govern an innumerable and warlike people."<sup>54</sup> She cannot hope to shoulder so immense a burden unless God provides for her "freely and against the opinion of many men,"<sup>55</sup> an acknowledgment of masculine antagonism toward her legitimate exercise of authority.

If the queen believed herself lacking in martial prowess by virtue of her sex, she need only look to the Bible for inspiration. In a prayer composed and printed during the first decade of her reign,<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth prays for strength to prevail against the enemies of the

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<sup>52</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000) 320.

<sup>53</sup> In a prayer composed between 1558 and 1572, Elizabeth writes, "Indeed, I am unimpaired in body, with a good form, a healthy and substantial wit, prudence even beyond other women, and beyond this, distinguished and superior in the knowledge and use of literature and languages, which is highly esteemed because unusual in my sex." *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 141.

<sup>54</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 142.

<sup>55</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 142.

Christian faith, enemies whom she does not specify but associates rather with the enemies of God's chosen people, the Israelites. She opens her prayer by offering thanks to God, not only for the saving grace of Jesus Christ, but

more yet because Thou hast done me so special and so rare a mercy that, being a woman by my nature weak, timid, and delicate, as are all women, Thou hast caused me to be vigorous, brave, and strong, in order to resist such a multitude of Idumeneans, Ishmaelites, Moabites, and Muhammadans, and other infinity of peoples and nations who have conjoined, plotted, conspired, and made league against Thee, against Thy son, and against all those who confess Thy name and hold to Thy holy Word as the only rule of salvation.<sup>57</sup>

Presumably, her allusion to Christians who hold to God's "holy Word as the only rule of salvation" refers to Protestants. One can only speculate about the identity of her enemies in the context of this prayer, especially since its precise date of composition is unknown beyond the decade of its origin. Several possibilities come to mind, however, all of which involve Catholic intrigue against Elizabeth and the Protestant state she governed.

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<sup>56</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 157. The editors explain that this prayer is one of only three she wrote in Spanish (see Note 1 on pp. 143-44). It was part of a collection printed in 1569 titled *Christian Prayers and Meditations in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Latin* (STC 6428). Though Elizabeth's name does not appear in the publication, the editors conclude, "Her authorship of these prayers, and perhaps of one of the verses, is indicated, however, by a variety of strong evidence" (143). They cite, for example, the frontispiece, captioned *Elizabeth Regina*, depicting the Queen at prayer. She kneels before a private altar upon which rests her crown. Furthermore, the first and last leaves of the book feature the Queen's royal arms. The editors assert that such a book could only have been published with Elizabeth's approval. Regarding the book's purpose, they speculate that it "may well have been intended as a Tudor Protestant substitute for the illuminated Books of Hours that had been so popular as an aid to lay piety in England under Catholicism" (144).

<sup>57</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 157.

The multitudes who had “made league” against England might well suggest the Catholic League, organized to stem the spread of Protestantism in Europe. The Queen had also had to contend with France’s support of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots and had deployed English troops to fight the French in Scotland in 1559. Moreover, Mary’s claim to the English throne had fomented unrest in the north of England, “where old manners and the old faith and old loyalties persisted, where men were reluctant to know any prince but a Percy or a Neville.”<sup>58</sup> By the end of 1569, that unrest would erupt into the Northern Rebellion, instigated by Mary Queen of Scots and members of England’s Catholic nobility. Her island nation was clearly vulnerable to the great powers of Europe.

Threatened both at home and abroad, Elizabeth presumably sought strength through her faith in God and inspiration in biblical women who had triumphed over their enemies. In the same prayer, Elizabeth entreats God to “persist – persist for the glory of Thy name, for the honor of Thy Son, for the repose and quietude of Thine afflicted Church – in giving me strength so that I, like another Deborah, like another Judith, like another Esther, may free Thy people of Israel from the hands of Thy enemies.”<sup>59</sup> The Old Testament typology that informs her prayer is significant not only because it elevates England to the same status as Israel, God’s chosen nation, but also because it allows Elizabeth to see herself in terms of three powerful women who provide paradigms, sanctioned in the Bible, for female authority.

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<sup>58</sup> Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I* 164.

<sup>59</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 157.

The Queen was not the only person to interpret her role as monarch in terms of the Esther narrative. In 1572, when Parliament was debating the appropriate punishment for the Duke of Norfolk, convicted of treason for his part in the Ridolfi Plot, Nicolas St. Leger, the MP for Maidstone, delivered a speech advocating the Duke's execution, a sentence the Queen was reluctant to endorse. "Although her Majesty be lulled asleep and wrapped in the mantle of her own peril," he claimed, "yet for my part I cannot be silent in the uttering of my conscience."<sup>60</sup> St. Leger subsequently compared the Duke of Norfolk to "wicked Haman" and Queen Elizabeth to "godly Queen Hester."<sup>61</sup> (The duke was eventually executed, though Elizabeth continued to vacillate over the fate of her cousin and rival, Mary Queen of Scots.) In commenting on St. Leger's use of the Esther story, Michelle Ephraim concludes,

The figure of Esther thus allows St. Leger to hold up Elizabeth as a virtuous victim who takes violent measures against her enemies for the sake of protecting her country from rebellion. A model of a ruler who represents violence taken, honorably, in self-defense, Esther in Elizabeth's reign connotes a powerful combination of feminine virtue and martial success against enemies of the Protestant state.<sup>62</sup>

Esther's decisive leadership in thwarting Haman provides an example not only for the Queen herself but also for her subjects in representing their monarch. While other Elizabethans such as Thomas Bentley emphasize Esther's role as obedient wife, that

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<sup>60</sup> J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1559-1581* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1958) 277-78.

<sup>61</sup> Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1559-1581* 278.

<sup>62</sup> Ephraim 616.

aspect of her character applies less to Elizabeth, the virgin queen, than does Esther's determination to save her people.

Three years later, in 1575, Edward Hake composed a poem titled *A Commemoration of the most prosperous and peaceable Raigne of our gracious and deere Soueraigne Lady Elizabeth by the grace of God of England, Fraunce and Irelande, Queene &*. The title page announces that the poem is “newly set foorth this xvii day of Nouember, beyng the first day of the xviii. yeere of her Maiesties sayd Raigne.”<sup>63</sup> Written in ballad meter, the poem pays tribute to the Queen on her Accession Day, a holiday which became increasingly popular after the Northern Rebellion in 1569. According to her biographer, J. E. Neale, the anniversary was “made a day of national thanksgiving and festival, and continued throughout the reign to be one of the great days of the year.”<sup>64</sup> Alexandra Walsham notes that every year on 17 November, “preachers and poets rehearsed the narrative of [Elizabeth's] steadfast faith in the midst of tribulation.”<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, Hake's poem honors the Protestant queen by comparing her, albeit briefly, to biblical women who remained faithful to God and prevailed over their enemies. Elizabeth, he writes, is a “mylde Susanna in her lookes / and Hester in her cheere [expression or behavior].”<sup>66</sup> Hake's comparison is rather unusual because it not only extols, by

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<sup>63</sup> Edward Hake, *A Commemoration of the most prosperous and peaceable Raigne of our gracious and deere Soueraigne Lady Elizabeth by the grace of God of England, Fraunce and Irelande, Queene &*. (London: William How, 1575). *STC* 12605.

<sup>64</sup> Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I* 191.

<sup>65</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “‘A Very Deborah?’ The Myth of Elizabeth I as a Providential Monarch,” *The Myth of Elizabeth*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 145.

implication, Elizabeth's "steadfast faith in the midst of tribulation," but it also praises the appearance and demeanor of the Queen. The analogy suggests that Elizabeth, like Susanna and Esther, is the beautiful heroine of an exciting narrative (albeit one of her own creation) who inspires others with her resolute faith.

A more extended analogy between Elizabeth and Esther occurred during her royal progress in the summer of 1578. The account of her visit to Norwich, *The Ioyfull Receyuing of the Queenes most excellent Maiestie into hir Highnesse Citie of Norwich*, describes the various pageants and entertainments presented on her behalf. The second pageant featured five performers representing the City of Norwich; the Old Testament heroines, Deborah, Judith, and Esther; and Martia, who "sometime rulde this land, / As Queene for thirtie three yeares space."<sup>67</sup> Each character in turn addresses the queen and her entourage in a short poem written by Bernard Garter. After recounting her triumph over Sisera, Deborah draws an analogy between herself and Elizabeth. Just as God had appointed her to deliver the elect from their enemies, so, too, has he chosen Elizabeth: "So mightie prince, that puisaunt Lord, hath plaste thee here to be, / The rule of this

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<sup>66</sup> Hake sig. Aviii<sup>r</sup>. The story of Susanna is found in the Apocrypha as an addition to the Greek version of Daniel. As the beautiful and virtuous wife of a prominent Jew living in Babylon, Susanna is the object of desire of two elders serving as judges. When they attempt to seduce her, she refuses their advances, and they subsequently accuse her of committing adultery with another man. She is tried, found guilty, and condemned to death. She maintains her faith in God, however; he hears her fervent prayer and inspires Daniel to argue on her behalf. Daniel cleverly exposes the two elders of bearing false witness, and they, in turn, are executed. Like Esther, Susanna was the subject of both drama and poetry. Thomas Garter's play, *The commody of the moste vertuous and godlye Susanna*, was printed by Hugh Jackson in 1578 (STC 11632.5). Robert Aylett's poem, *Susanna: or, The arraignment of the two vnjust elders*, was printed in 1622 by John Teage (STC 1003.5).

<sup>67</sup> Bernard Garter, "The Second Pageant," *The Ioyfull Receyuing of the Queenes most excellent Maiestie into hir Highnesse Citie of Norwich: The things done in the time of hir abode there: and the dolor of the Citie at hir departure* (London: Henrie Bynneman, 1578) sig. Ciii<sup>r</sup>. STC 11627.

triumphant Realme alone belongth to thee”(Ci<sup>v</sup>). Similarly, Judith relates how God helped her to slay Holofernes and concludes,

If this his grace were giuen to me poore wight,  
If widowes hand could vanquish such a foe:  
Then to a Prince of thy surpasing might,  
What Tirant liues but thou mayest ouerthrow. (Cii<sup>r</sup>)

Their respective speeches recall how God chose a woman to vanquish Israel’s external enemies, demonstrating that, with God’s help, female authority is not incompatible with military victory. They claim, unequivocally, that God will likewise empower Elizabeth to conquer those nations which threaten the new Israel represented by Protestant England.

Although Esther’s speech also deals with threats to national security, she focuses instead on internal enemies, those courtiers who, like Haman, appear loyal but are, in fact, traitors. Deception, or “fraud,” is the theme of her poem, as the opening lines reveal: “The fretting heads of furious foes haue skill, / As well by fraude as force to finde their pray”(Cii<sup>r</sup>). Three times within four stanzas she mentions fraud, warning that smiles can conceal malevolent intentions. Esther acknowledges that Elizabeth herself has experienced this hard truth:

The proofes I speake by vs haue erst bin seene,  
The proofes I speake, to thee are not vnknown.  
Thy God thou knowest most dread and soueraigne Queen,  
A world of foes of thine hath ouerthrowen,

And hither nowe triumphantly doth call

Thy noble Grace, the comforte of vs al. (Cii<sup>v</sup>)

Elizabeth certainly had good reason to fear courtiers who deceptively “shewde a face a subject to [their] liege” (Cii<sup>v</sup>) but who in reality engineered her destruction. The Northern Rebellion of 1569, and the discovery in 1571 of the Duke of Norfolk’s treasonous role in the Ridolfi Plot, underscored the dangers she faced internally. Esther assures the Queen, however, of God’s providential care: “But Force nor Fraude, nor Tyrant strong can trap, / Those whiche the Lorde in his defence doth wrap” (Cii<sup>v</sup>). The implication here, as in the speeches of Deborah and Judith, is that God has chosen Elizabeth as his instrument of governance and will therefore protect her from enemies both at home and abroad.

Along with the obvious goal of validating female rule through biblical exempla, other concerns regarding events in the Netherlands as well as Elizabeth’s marriage negotiations with the Duke of Anjou may have inspired this pageant. According to Donald Stump, “As early as the mid-1570s, Spain had replaced France as the primary threat to England and the Reformation.”<sup>68</sup> In January of 1578, the Spanish army nearly vanquished rebel Protestant forces in the Netherlands, and the Queen and her advisors had debated whether to send English troops to help their Protestant allies. Leicester advocated military intervention, fearing that France would come to their assistance if England did not act. Susan Doran explains, “Elizabeth herself wanted if possible to avoid this course of action; instead she began to think in terms of reviving marriage negotiations with Anjou

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<sup>68</sup> Donald Stump, “Abandoning the Old Testament: Shifting Paradigms for Elizabeth, 1578-82,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 30.1 (2004): 100.



in order to control his actions.”<sup>69</sup> Rather than sending troops to the continent, Elizabeth sent her representative to France to discuss marriage to the Duke of Anjou. Many Protestants opposed the idea, but French ambassadors nonetheless accompanied the Queen on her progress that summer and were present as Elizabeth viewed the special entertainments in Norwich.

In this context, writes Donald Stump, the speeches by Deborah, Judith, and Esther may have been oblique warnings to the Queen to crush the threat posed by Catholic Spain and to abandon plans for marriage with the Catholic Duke of Anjou. Citing Deborah’s claim that the “rule of this triumphant Realme *alone* belongeth to thee” and her admonition to “Continue *as thou hast begon*” [his emphasis], Stump argues that her speech sounds “suspiciously like advice not to marry but to remain a virgin and stand up to the King of France and his warlike brother Anjou, as Deborah had stood up to Jabin and his military commander Sisera.”<sup>70</sup> Her entreaty to “weede out the wicked route” urges the Queen, indirectly, to launch an attack against Catholic enemies in Europe as well as in England.<sup>71</sup> Viewed in this context, then, the familiar biblical trio not only serves to legitimize, yet again, Elizabeth as queen regnant, but their martial achievements also provide a template useful to Protestants desirous of military intervention abroad. Thus, these women play a crucial role in the debate over such complex matters as the Queen’s marriage and the direction of England’s foreign policy.

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Doran, “Juno Versus Diana: The Treatment of Elizabeth I’s Marriage in Plays and Entertainments, 1561-1581,” *The Historical Journal* 38.2 (1995): 269.

<sup>70</sup> Stump 103.

<sup>71</sup> Stump 103.

Concern over the queen's possible marriage to Anjou led, however, to a pronounced shift in the representation of Elizabeth from Old Testament heroine to virgin queen. The fear inspired by this marriage evoked an increased emphasis on the Queen's continued chastity. Even as the second pageant performed at Norwich featured comparisons between Elizabeth and Deborah, Judith, and Esther, other masques and entertainments that same week offered analogies between Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary. In her discussion of one particular pageant celebrating the Queen's chastity, Susan Doran concludes, "The political point should have been obvious to the queen and the French ambassadors in the audience: Elizabeth might send out overtures of marriage to Anjou but her true destiny was chastity."<sup>72</sup> The entertainments performed at Norwich in 1578 were particularly significant, for they were "the first recorded public occasion where the appearance of the cult of the Virgin Queen can be seen."<sup>73</sup>

In his article "Abandoning the Old Testament: Shifting Paradigms for Elizabeth, 1578-82," Donald Stump explores at length the change noted by Doran and other scholars. He also attributes the change in imagery to the marriage controversy, but notes as well that the queen's unmarried state ultimately precluded comparisons to married women:

After the French marriage scheme foundered in the winter of 1580-81, it became increasingly awkward to praise the aging Elizabeth with comparisons to Judith, the enticing widow who tempted an enemy

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<sup>72</sup> Doran 272.

<sup>73</sup> Doran 272.

commander by plying him with wine in his tent; to Esther, the concubine and later the wife of an Eastern potentate; to Susannah, the vulnerable spouse falsely accused of adultery; or even to Deborah, the faithful wife of Lappidoth.<sup>74</sup>

Though writers might still flatter the Queen with compliments to her beauty, “they had good reason to avoid comparing her with wives and temptresses.”<sup>75</sup> Stump also argues that scriptural analogies had become increasingly distasteful to Elizabeth herself, for they were sometimes used to advise her, though indirectly, on a particular course of action that she did not want to take, as in the case of the Norwich pageant and English military intervention in the Netherlands.<sup>76</sup>

While it is true that representations of Elizabeth as an Old Testament heroine were less common during the latter years of her reign, being supplanted instead with images of the Virgin Queen and figures from classical mythology,<sup>77</sup> the Esther narrative continued to offer a useful prototype on a number of levels for English commentators eager to interpret contemporary events in the context of biblical revelation. Allusions to the Book of Esther were deemed especially apt in describing England’s defeat in 1588 of the mighty Spanish Armada, as indicated, for example, in a prose meditation by Oliver Pigge

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<sup>74</sup> Stump 104.

<sup>75</sup> Stump 104.

<sup>76</sup> Stump 104.

<sup>77</sup> For a study of Elizabeth’s association with the Virgin Mary, see *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* by Helen Hackett (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

and an elegiac poem by John Lane. Both authors portray their Catholic enemy as a new Haman determined to vanquish God's chosen people.

Oliver Pigge commemorated the English victory over the Armada in his work *Meditations Concerning praieres to Almighty God, for the saftie of England, when the Spaniards were come into the narrow Seas. August 1588. As also other Meditations concerning thanksgiuing, for deliuering England from the crueltie of the Spaniards, and for their meruellous confusion and ouerthrow* (1589). For Pigge, the defeat of the Armada signifies more than a military victory for England; it also represents the triumph of English Protestantism over Roman Catholic tyranny. He proclaims that "The cursed agreement so many yeares agoe at the councell of Trent, for rooting out the professors of [God's] trueth, . . . is now turned to the destruction of these that fauoured it."<sup>78</sup> In this broader religious context, he equates the Spanish Catholics with the villain Haman in the Book of Esther, noting that God has justly punished both: "so as we may not unfitly say, that Haman and his be hanged upon the gallows, which he caused to be set up for Mordecay the Iew. That is, [God] hast rewarded these proud men, that which they thought to have done to others" (33). In the greater contest between true faith and false, the destruction that England's enemies thought to have wrought upon her has, instead, been turned against themselves.

Pigge attributes the Spanish defeat to Almighty God, who, he believes, went forth with the English ships and favored them in their encounters with the Spanish, just as he

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<sup>78</sup> Oliver Pigge, *Meditations Concerning praieres to Almighty God, for the saftie of England, when the Spaniards were come into the narrow Seas. August 1588* (London: Thomas Man, 1589) 33. *STC* 19916.

had empowered the Israelites to prevail over their respective enemies. Because God has saved England from so great a calamity, Pigge urges his countrymen and women to follow the example of the Israelites in offering hymns of thanksgiving, as did Moses and Miriam when the children of Israel had passed through the Red Sea, as did Deborah and Barach after the stunning defeat of Sisera. Moreover, he avers, England should commemorate her marvelous deliverance, just as Esther and Mordecai instituted the festival of Purim following the defeat of the Persians: “Hester, Mordecay, & other of the Jewes, in token of thankfulnesse and joy, keepe a feast the next daie, after the kings decree was frustrated, which Haman had procured for their destruction. Yea, they take order to haue that their deliuerance, solemnly remembred euerie yere” (31). Several pages later, Pigge again refers to the Book of Esther in urging his countrymen to remember God’s gracious deliverance:

Grant that it be not onely once euey yere, publikely & solemnlie remembred, after the worthie example, of that which was appointed to be done of the Jewes, for their deliuerance from the crueltie of Haman: But that also dayly and continually, wee may stir up our selues to thankfulnesse, and to speake of it to our children, & they to their childrens children, that so the memorie of this thy glorious facte, may be continued from generation to generation euen for euer. (36)

Pigge finds in the Book of Esther, then, an apt paradigm for representing the near-miraculous victory over the Armada, not only in the depiction of the Spanish Catholics as modern-day Hamans intent on the destruction of Protestant England, but also in the

providential intervention of God on the side of his chosen people, the new Israel embodied in contemporary England. Though Pigge does not explicitly equate Elizabeth with Queen Esther, he affirms that “all the faithfull subiectes of the land [England] inioie their soueraigne Prince, to their singular comfort, and under her gracious gouernment, we haue the use of the publike exercises of [God’s] word and Sacraments, things that shuld be unto us more deere than our owne liues” (29-30). The implication here is that Elizabeth has preserved and continues to protect the practice of the true faith, English Protestantism, among her people, just as Esther enabled the Jews to continue to practice their faith under the most threatening of circumstances. This, once again, displays the versatility of the figure of Esther.

Indeed, it is Elizabeth’s role as the savior of her nation to which John Lane alludes in his poem *An Elegie vpon the death of the high and renowned Princesse, our late Soueraigne Elizabeth* (1603). In reflecting on the Queen’s demise, Lane employs the now familiar analogy of England as a latter-day Israel. “Let Israel weepe,” he writes, “the house of Iacob mourne, / Syon is fallne, and Iudah left forlorne.”<sup>79</sup> The richly fertile land, once brimming with flowers, fruits, and vines, is now become as barren as the desert. He recalls Elizabeth’s wondrous reign, “so bright of late, and glorious to behold,” and eulogizes her as England’s own Queen Esther:

The royall daughter of that royall King . . .

*Esther* our *Queene*, whose fame (with triumph crownd)

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<sup>79</sup> John Lane, *An Elegie vpon the death of the high and renowned Princesse, our late Soueraigne Elizabeth* (London: John Deane, 1603). Rpt. in *England’s Eliza* by E. C. Wilson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1939) 376.

*Haman of Spaine* had neuer force to wound,  
 In spight of whom although he dar'd to striue  
 She has preserued her people all alieue.<sup>80</sup>

Like Oliver Pigge, the poet characterizes England's greatest enemy, Philip II of Spain, as a sixteenth-century Haman, that most evil, though ultimately vanquished, enemy of God's chosen people. In commemorating the Queen's passing, Lane focuses on her singular contribution as a woman who, like Esther, saved her nation in the time of its greatest peril.

If, in the latter years of her reign, Elizabeth was more often depicted as a mythical fairy queen surrounded by adoring courtiers, the association with Queen Esther and other biblical heroines such as Deborah and Judith never entirely faded, as revealed in the two works by Pigge and Lane. The analogies were useful in helping to undergird her legitimacy as a female ruler, just as Aylmer had attempted to do in the first year of her reign by emphasizing God's providential selection of female rulers at various times in Israel's history. Nearly thirty years after her accession, John Ferne would still refer to Elizabeth as "our soueraigne Lady, the high and mightie Empresse of great Britaine, and the north Islands, *Elizabeth* our *Hester*, *Delbora* [sic], and *Iudith*, and by the grace of God Queene of England, Fraunce and Ireland, defendres of the true and Apostolike faith, . . . the very direct and lawfull heyre."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Qtd. in Wilson 376.

<sup>81</sup> John Ferne, *The Blazon of Gentry: Deuided into two parts. The first named The Glorie of Generositie. The second, Lacyes Nobilitie. Comprehending discourses of Armes and Gentry* (London: John Windet, 1586) 129. *STC* 10824.

### Chapter Three:

#### “How Say You, Hester”: Esther in Performance

The features that make the biblical version of Esther such a compelling narrative – the exotic setting, the beautiful young heroine, the ironic reversals of fortune – appealed to English and continental playwrights who recognized the story’s inherent dramatic qualities. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century audiences in England, Germany, and France witnessed multiple adaptations of the Esther story. In France, ten plays based upon the Book of Esther were written between 1556 and 1689.<sup>82</sup> At least six playwrights in Germany dramatized the biblical narrative in the sixteenth century, two of whom wrote more than one Esther play.<sup>83</sup> Dramatic adaptations in England ranged from an early interlude, to a lost play recorded in Henslowe’s *Diary* in 1594, to a pageant performed for Queen Elizabeth during a royal progress.<sup>84</sup> An English acting company touring the Continent even included an Esther play in its repertoire, performing *Queen Hester and Proud Haman* in Dresden in 1626.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Frank Ardolino, “Hans and Hammon: Dekker’s Use of Hans Sachs and *Purim* in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 14 (2001): 151. In addition to his analysis of *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Ardolino provides a useful overview of the Esther plays written in England, France, and Germany during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>83</sup> Ardolino 150-151.

<sup>84</sup> Ardolino 152-155.

<sup>85</sup> Ruth Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 182-188. Blackburn includes a plot summary and an analysis of this play, the text of which was first published in Germany in 1620 in an anthology titled *Englische Comödien und Tragödien*. The German title of the play is *Königen Esther und Hoffärtigen Haman*. To my knowledge, this play has not been printed in English.



The multiple dramatizations in several languages attest to the wide-ranging appeal of the Esther narrative. Its popularity may also be attributed to the potential, inherent in the story itself, for political interpretation based upon current events. The perilous status of the Jews as a people targeted for persecution and annihilation resonated with other groups who also felt threatened by religious and political authorities. Consequently, during the turbulent years of the Reformation, both Protestants and Catholics could identify their own precarious status with that of the Jews in the Book of Esther. According to Frank Ardolino, “In Germany, France, and England during the sixteenth century, the Book of Esther primarily was used by Protestants to promote Reformation values and to depict themselves as God’s chosen people in the struggle against their Hamanlike Catholic enemies.”<sup>86</sup> At the same time, however, playwrights such as Cornelius Laurimannus in Germany and Pierre Matthieu in France also appropriated the Esther story in defense of the Roman Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation.<sup>87</sup>

The earliest, and the only extant, dramatization of the Book of Esther in sixteenth-century England is a short piece titled *The Enterlude of the Vertuous and Godly Queene Hester*. As the one complete text of an Esther play surviving from the Tudor period, it merits careful analysis, not only because of its anachronistic depiction of the Jewish heroine, but also because of its relevance to Catholic and Protestant concerns as well as the history of English Renaissance drama. In order to recognize its sectarian

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<sup>86</sup> Ardolino 150.

<sup>87</sup> Ardolino 151-152.

implications, an overview of its history and content are in order.<sup>88</sup> The title page announces the text as

A newe enterlude  
drawen oute of the holy scripture  
of godly queene Hester, verye necessary  
newly made and imprinted, this pre  
sent yere. M.D.L.X.I.

It was printed in London by William Pickerynge and Thomas Hacket in a quarto edition. The author is unknown, though John Skelton and William Roy have been suggested as possibilities.<sup>89</sup> Based upon internal evidence, discussed later in this chapter, scholars generally agree that the interlude was actually written much earlier, sometime between 1525 and 1529.<sup>90</sup> The circumstances surrounding its performance -- where, when, and by whom it may have been acted -- are unknown.

As a work of dramatic art, *Godly Queen Hester* belongs to that sometimes-reviled genre known as the interlude.<sup>91</sup> Though lacking the artistry and sophistication of later Elizabethan plays, interludes are significant for their role in the development of sixteenth-

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<sup>88</sup> For a bibliographical overview, see the Introduction to W. W. Greg's edition, *A New Enterlude of Godly Queene Hester. Materials for the Study of the Old English Drama*, ed. W. W. Greg, vol. 5 (1904; rpt. Louvain, Belgium: Uystpruyst, 1963) v-xvi. Unless otherwise noted, references to the text are from this edition.

<sup>89</sup> Greg xi.

<sup>90</sup> Greg vii-x.

<sup>91</sup> A. B. Grosart, for example, calls the contrast between dramatic interludes and the later works of Marlowe and Shakespeare "almost grotesque." Introduction, *Two Interludes: Jacke Jugeler and Godly Queen Hester. Miscellanies of the Fuller Worthies Library*, ed. A. B. Grosart, vol. 4 (1872-1876; rpt. New York: AMS, 1970) 458.

century English drama. Derived from the Latin words *inter* (between) and *ludus* (play or game), the term may have denoted a brief performance presented between courses of a banquet or in the interval of an entertainment. Or it may simply have referred to conversational “play” or dialogue between performers.<sup>92</sup> Regardless of the original meaning of the word, interludes emerged as a dramatic form in the late fifteenth century and continued into the reign of Elizabeth I. They were distinguished by their brevity (*Godly Queen Hester* is only 1180 lines, approximately half as long as *Macbeth*, for example); their blend of secular as well as religious subjects; and their emphasis on moral values.<sup>93</sup> Interludes contained elements common to the medieval morality plays, as David Bevington explains:

The genre was characterized primarily by the use of allegory to convey a moral lesson about religious or civil conduct, presented through the medium of abstractions or representative social characters. . . . Its emphasis became increasingly secular in the mid-sixteenth century, preaching lessons of civil rather than religious conduct . . . .<sup>94</sup>

*Godly Queen Hester* combines characters from the Book of Esther with allegorical figures named Ambition, Adulation, and Pryde. In this way, it represents what Bevington terms “hybrid moralities” or “hybrid plays,” which “set abstractions and concrete figures

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<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of the origins and characteristics of interludes, see the General Introduction to Glynne Wickham’s *English Moral Interludes* (London: J. M. Dent, 1976) v-xv.

<sup>93</sup> Wickham vii-x.

<sup>94</sup> David Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962) 9-10.

side by side in the same play.”<sup>95</sup> In assessing the impact of such hybrid plays, Bevington concludes that they were crucial “to the development of the popular theater in its transition from the medieval drama of allegory to the later Renaissance drama of secular concern.”<sup>96</sup>

In *Godly Queen Hester*, the foremost “secular concern” is the question of effective governance and the qualities necessary to ensure its success. The differences between the interlude and the biblical version of Esther underscore the playwright’s interest in promoting political order and stability. The Book of Esther begins with the king, Ahasuerus, hosting a six-month long banquet in the opulent environs of his Persian palace, revealing a sovereign intent on hedonistic pursuits. *Godly Queen Hester* also opens with actions taken by the king (here named Assuerus), but in a very different context. Rather than introducing the king at a sybaritic entertainment, the interlude presents him engaged in what one scholar calls “a debate on the humanist topic of kingly responsibility.”<sup>97</sup> King Assuerus asks three of his counselors, “Which is [the] most worthy honoure to attayne” (16), to which they reply that virtue exceeds wealth, power, wisdom, and nobility as the greatest of all honors. A king cannot govern effectively without virtue, they argue, noting that rulers as powerful as Nebuchadnezzar and Nero lacked virtue and, consequently, “to vice dyd fall, / To theyre owne distruction & theyre

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<sup>95</sup> Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe* 10.

<sup>96</sup> Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe* 10.

<sup>97</sup> Murray Rosten, *Biblical Drama in England* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968) 72. Lily Campbell similarly observes, “It is a typical Renaissance *débat* with the question formally proposed and discussed, and the decision rendered.” *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961) 208.

subjectes all” (41-42). Furthermore, his advisors conclude that justice is the virtue most essential to a prince:

For all thinges it orderith in such wyse,  
That where it is, is peace and tranquillitie,  
Good order, hygh honour, wealth and plentye,  
And where it fayleth in the prince or kynge,  
The common weale decayeth withoute tarynge. (52-56)

King Assuerus concurs “That Justis mainteneth the common weale” (89), reflecting that “the prince muste nedes him selfe applye, / Unto the same, or els utterly / Shall folowe decay by warre or els death” (88-92). The emphasis on order in the body politic is, of course, a recurring *topos* of sixteenth century English thought. Consider, for example, Sir Thomas Elyot’s warning in *The Booke Named the Governour*, published in 1531: “More over take away ordre from all thynges what shulde than remayne? Certes nothyng finally, except some man wolde imagine eftsones *Chaos*. . . .where there is any lacke of ordre nedes must be perpetuall conflicte.”<sup>98</sup> One of the most famous, albeit later, expositions on order is Ulysses’s speech in *Troilus and Cressida*, in which he laments, “Oh, when degree [order] is shaken, / Which is the ladder of all high designs, / The enterprise is sick!” (1.3.101-03).<sup>99</sup> The sober ruminations of King Assuerus and his counselors in *Godly Queen Hester* project the Tudor abhorrence of political disorder and

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas Elyot, *The Booke Named the Governour*, ed. Foster Watson (New York: Dent, 1907) 3.

<sup>99</sup> William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, 1968) 983.

threat of civil war onto a biblical story that has more in common with the fantastical *A Thousand and One Nights* than with the didactic treatises of early modern England.

Assuerus's preoccupation with the stability of his kingdom is also apparent in his desire to marry. Though he yearns for the joy and comfort of marriage, he also acknowledges another motivation, the need to produce an heir. "It hath not been oft seene," he notes, "But the prince with a princes matched hath beene / Leaste defaulte of issue shoulde be" (119-21). A wife may provide comfort and companionship, but the *real* business of marriage is to produce a legitimate heir and thus ensure order and stability in the kingdom. The Book of Esther makes no such mention, however, of the king's desire for an heir, another difference between the biblical story and the interlude that underscores Tudor political concerns. If the interlude was, in fact, written in the late 1520s, as scholars generally believe, then the reference to "defaulte of issue" would clearly evoke Henry VIII's desperate machinations to produce a male heir.

Just as their reasons for marriage differ in the two versions, so, too, does the basis upon which the kings choose their respective brides. In the Book of Esther, the search for a new queen is permeated with an exotic sensuality absent from *Godly Queen Hester*. The prospective brides, beautiful young virgins all, are brought to the king's harem where they are entrusted to a eunuch named Hegai. Before ever meeting Ahasuerus, the women spend a full year undergoing beauty treatments, "six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women" (2:12). Having prepared themselves in this manner, each of the women is sent to the palace for a night with the king; afterwards, they return to a different harem under the charge of another eunuch

responsible for the king's concubines. When her turn comes, Esther's beauty and winsome personality charm King Ahasuerus, who "loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (2:17). In the biblical account, beauty and charm and sex determine the king's choice of a bride. During the selection process, however, the narrator does not reveal Esther's thoughts and feelings; not until the fourth chapter, nearly halfway through the story, are her own words recorded.

*Godly Queen Hester* eliminates the more exotic elements of the original version; absent from the interlude are eunuchs, harems, and concubines, not to mention the king's serial deflowering of Persia's most lovely virgins. Instead, a messenger charged with finding young women for the king's consideration encounters Mardocheus and Hester (Mordecai and Esther) and brings them to Aman (Haman), along with many other maidens. Aman then escorts the women to Assuerus, who notices Hester and engages her in conversation. If the interlude simplifies the selection process, it nonetheless amplifies the instruction Mardocheus offers Hester before she meets the king. In the Book of Esther, Mordecai merely advises Esther not to reveal her Hebrew heritage. In *Godly Queen Hester*, however, Mardocheus lectures his cousin on how to behave as a wife and a queen. If Assuerus graciously chooses her as his bride, she must repay him with "obedience / Trew love and kyndnes, above personnes all / Not forged nor fayned, but with affection cordiall" (174-76). Of course, a wife's obedience to her husband is axiomatic, but Mardocheus then advises her on how to comport herself as a queen:

Breake not the course that queenes have hadde  
 In this noble region most part of all,  
 They have aye bene good, and none of theym badde,  
 To their prince ever sure, just and substanciall  
 And good to the commons when they dyd call  
 By mekenes for mercye, to temper the fyre  
 Of rigors justice in fume or in yre. (177-83)

His claim that all the queens of Persia have been “good” is surprising, to say the least. In the Bible, the story unfolds precisely because of one queen’s unequivocal disobedience: Queen Vashti’s refusal to appear at the king’s banquet when she is summoned. The narrator emphasizes the magnitude of her transgression when an advisor declares, “Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus” (1:16). She has wronged the *entire nation* by her disobedience. Fearful that other wives will follow Vashti’s example, the king and his counselors banish Vashti and decree that “every man should be master in his own house” (1:22).

The interlude omits any reference at all to Queen Vashti, instead giving the impression that Hester will be Assuerus’s first and only wife. The playwright may have deleted this episode due to dramatic constraints; after all, interludes are characterized by their brevity, and other episodes in the Book of Esther are also omitted, such as the plot to murder Ahasuerus. But perhaps the omission has something to do with the verses included on the title page of the interlude:



Com nere vertuous matrons & womenkind  
 Here may ye learne of Hesters duty,  
 In all comelines of vertue you shal finde  
 How to behave yourselves in humilitie. (A1)

We cannot know whether the playwright composed these verses or whether they were added by the printers, Pickerynge and Hacket. It is clear, however, that they announce a didactic intent: the interlude will instruct women in virtuous behavior through the example set by Queen Esther. If that behavior includes humility, then surely the arrogance of Queen Vashti runs counter to the purpose of the interlude. Perhaps the playwright concluded that Vashti ought to be excised, lest her example inspire similarly rebellious behavior by English women. This interpretation is entirely speculative, but it may account for the complete elimination of a character whose actions set in motion the plot of the biblical narrative.

While the heroine of *Godly Queen Hester* shares the purity and appeal of her scriptural counterpart, she possesses other noteworthy attributes, as Mardocheus tells the king. She is, he says, “Sober, sad, gentill, meke and demure, / In learninge and litterature, profoundly seene, / In wisdom, eke semblante to Saba the Quene” (257-59). (The Bible makes no mention of Esther’s intellectual achievements.) Furthermore, Hester’s conversation with Assuerus reveals her as eloquent and assertive. To test Mardocheus’s claim regarding Hester’s wisdom and knowledge, the king poses a “probleme of hye dubitation,” asking, “Howe saye you Hester have you ought reade or seene / Of vertues that be best, and fittest for a queen” (265-68). She responds with a

twenty-four line oration on a queen's responsibilities. After tactfully acknowledging that "the jurisdiction of the whole province, / To the kyngge pertaineth" (275-76), Hester delineates the role a queen must assume when her nation is threatened:

But eftsons it may chaunce at sundrye season  
 The kyngge wyth hys counsell most parte of all  
 From this realme to be absente, when warre doth call.  
 Then the Quenes wysdome, sadly muste deale,  
 By her greate vertue, to rewle the common weale.  
 Wherfore as many vertues be there muste,  
 Even in the Quene as in the prynce,  
 For feare lest in warre, sume treason unjust,  
 The realme shoulde subdewe, and falsely convince.  
 The Quene muste savegarde all the hole province . . . (285-91)

The Book of Esther contains no such discourse by its heroine, making its inclusion in *Godly Queen Hester* all the more remarkable by adding, in a way, to the sacred text.

Here, Hester asserts that a queen must be every bit as virtuous as her husband, advocating a moral equality that challenges the commonplace notion of female treachery. Apparently persuaded of her suitability to be his wife and consort, Assuerus concludes that together they will reign "By truth and Justice, law and equitye"(299-300), suggesting again the playwright's concern with good governance. Hester has more to say, however, and siezes the opportunity to advise Assuerus on the welfare of the poor within his kingdom. When hospitality decays and alms-giving declines, wealth becomes concentrated in a small

portion of the kingdom, ultimately jeopardizing the strength of the body politic. “Let God alway therefore have hys part,” she urges, “And the poore fedde by hospitalitie / Eche man his measure” (318-20).

In this, her first, appearance in the interlude, Hester distinguishes herself as an eloquent and politically savvy young woman. She delivers, in effect, two orations whose rhetorical effectiveness convinces the king of “Her lernynge and her language eloquent” (204). The emphasis on Hester’s linguistic gifts as a measure of her suitability for the king contrasts sharply with the biblical Esther, whose initial conversation with Ahasuerus can only be surmised. (Esther will later demonstrate rhetorical gifts not initially discernible when she persuades the king to punish Haman and allow the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies.) Hester’s ability to speak persuasively gives her an authority not contingent upon the king’s selection of her as his bride. Moreover, her willingness to wield power is reflected in her commentary on a queen’s role in protecting the kingdom. She understands that when the king goes off to war, his enemies might seize the opportunity to undermine his authority and commit “sume treason unjust” unless the queen exercises her power. She further reveals her political acumen by linking the nation’s security with the prosperity of its citizens: when most of the people “Neither have meate nor money,” then neither do they have “strength substancial” to serve their king when the need arises (315-16).

In his analysis of *Godly Queen Hester*, Kent Cartwright interprets the interlude and its heroine in the context of early sixteenth-century humanism, when “humanist writers such as More, Vives, Ascham, and Mulcaster advocated and participated in women’s

education, challenging doubts about distaff mental capacity.”<sup>100</sup> The humanist dedication to female scholarship can be seen, for example, in the classical education Thomas More provided for his daughters; in *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, the influential treatise by Juan Luis Vives; and in Roger Ascham’s rigorous tutelage of the young Princess Elizabeth. Hester’s learned eloquence reflects humanists’ confidence in woman’s intellectual capacity and the belief that education facilitates her moral and spiritual development. And, though not advocated unequivocally in humanist circles, a woman’s capacity to govern also merited consideration. Cartwright observes in the interlude notions of female virtue and competence put forth by Sir Thomas Elyot in his treatise, *The Defense of Good Women*, which, he argues, “reads like a humanist philosophical gloss on *Godly Queen Hester*.”<sup>101</sup> For Cartwright, Hester represents a new humanist woman [who] inspires a fantasy life that cuts across class boundaries, as spectators are invited to engage with a learned, articulate, and politically skillful female advancing by merit. The defense of women thus achieves a stimulating embodiment on stage.<sup>102</sup>

If the portrait of Queen Hester provides a “defense of women,” as Cartwright contends, scholars generally agree that the interlude obliquely defends one woman in particular, Catherine of Aragon. A. B. Grosart was the first critic to interpret *Godly*

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<sup>100</sup> Kent Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism: English Drama in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 136. For an in-depth analysis of humanism’s impact on theatrical depictions of women, see Chapter 5, “Humanism and the Dramatizing of Women,” 135-166.

<sup>101</sup> Cartwright 144.

<sup>102</sup> Cartwright 136.

*Queen Hester* in the context of Henrican politics, followed by W. W. Greg, who identifies Aman as a satirical depiction of Cardinal Wolsey.<sup>103</sup> If understood in this light (and most critics accept this interpretation), then Hester may well represent Queen Catherine, as various allusions in the play seem to suggest. The portrayal of Hester as a “woman of learning, administrative talent, and compassion for the poor” mirrors attributes famously associated with King Henry’s first wife.<sup>104</sup> As the daughter of Isabella of Castile, herself a patron of Renaissance scholarship, Catherine’s education not only included religious instruction but also classical Latin, which she spoke fluently.<sup>105</sup> As the Queen of England, she welcomed scholars to her court, particularly the Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives, who directed the education of Princess Mary and dedicated his treatise *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* to his patron, Queen Catherine. Erasmus, the continental avatar of the new learning, believed that Catherine’s knowledge of humanist scholarship exceeded that of her husband, Henry VIII.<sup>106</sup>

Additionally, Hester’s speech regarding a queen’s obligation to defend her nation mirrors a particular event which occurred in 1513. Before leaving his kingdom to invade France, King Henry appointed his wife as Regent during his absence. Catherine had earned the King’s confidence, according to one biographer, because of her “intelligence

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<sup>103</sup> Grosart 13; Greg ix-x. For a more detailed discussion of the Aman/Wolsey connection, see Chapter 4 in *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* by Greg Walker, and Chapter 7 in *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* by David Bevington.

<sup>104</sup> David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968) 88.

<sup>105</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 12.

<sup>106</sup> Garrett Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1941) 182.

and diplomatic ability which had been well demonstrated in the first years of her husband's reign."<sup>107</sup> David Bevington writes that

Katharine actually administered the realm in 1513, when Henry was chasing the French in the chivalric but profitless siege of Therouenne and the Battle of the Spurs. She saw to her responsibilities well, and could justifiably claim some credit for the decisive victory over the Scots at Flodden Field.<sup>108</sup>

While Henry was in France, the Scots invaded from the north. As Queen Regent, Catherine acted to defend her nation and rallied her English troops, who subsequently defeated their enemies and killed the Scottish king, James IV. As evidence of England's great victory, "the Queen sent the King of Scots' coat without the body to France. 'In this your Grace shall see how I can keep my promise,' she wrote, 'sending you for your banners a King's coat'."<sup>109</sup> As if to underscore the Catherine/Hester connection, the playwright anachronistically refers to England's traditional enemies when another character worries "yf warre should chaunce, eyther wyth Scotland or Fraunce" (479).

Of all her characteristics, however, Catherine of Aragon was renowned for her piety and her charitable deeds, earning her the respect and admiration of her nation.<sup>110</sup> Her faith was grounded in the teachings and traditions of Roman Catholicism. Indeed, she

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<sup>107</sup> Fraser 63.

<sup>108</sup> Bevington 90.

<sup>109</sup> Fraser 65-66.

<sup>110</sup> Fraser 80.

served as a lay member of the order of St. Francis and was particularly attentive to the plight of the indigent:

she always had inquiries made into the needs of the poor in whatever neighborhood she was living; and used, herself, to spend much time in visiting them unostentatiously, garbed perhaps simply as a lay sister of her order. Hundreds of poor families were to remember that they owed to her money and clothes and food . . . .<sup>111</sup>

This aspect of Catherine's personality is reflected in Hester's desire to provide hospitality to the poor, as indicated in her first encounter with Assuerus. With no further prompting from the king, who has already announced his choice of her as his bride, Hester advocates the practice of hospitality and almsgiving, neither of which is mentioned in the Book of Esther, but both of which are services traditionally offered by monastic orders. Critics see in her speech allusions to the plight of English monasteries during the 1520s, even before the nationwide suppression instigated by Thomas Cromwell a decade later. In order to fund the new Cardinal College at Oxford University, Cardinal Wolsey had initiated a series of monastic closures in 1524 that continued until his death in 1529. In that five-year interval, twenty-nine monastic houses were suppressed and their inhabitants turned out.<sup>112</sup> "It is in light of these suppressions," asserts Greg Walker, "that the defence of the religious contained in Hester's ostensible defence of the Jews is to be

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<sup>111</sup> Mattingly 178-79.

<sup>112</sup> Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 105. See also David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics*, 91-92. For a study of the suppression and eventual dissolution of the monasteries, see *Bare Ruined Choirs: The Dissolution of the English Monasteries* by David Knowles (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976).

read.”<sup>113</sup> If understood in this context, then, Aman’s intended destruction of the Jews in *Godly Queen Hester* suggests allegorically Wolsey’s destruction of institutions which dispensed the hospitality and almsgiving advocated by Hester and performed by Queen Catherine.<sup>114</sup>

When Hester learns of Aman’s plan to destroy the Jews, she immediately resolves to petition the king on their behalf, unlike the biblical Esther, who doubts at first her power to intervene. Only through the continued prompting of Mordecai does Esther determine to approach the king unsummoned, a transgression punishable by death, to plead for her people. Whereas Esther initiates a three-day fast to prepare for her confrontation with Ahasuerus (and possibly lose her life), Hester prays and summons a choir to sing: “Call in the chapell to the intent they maye / Syng some holy himpne to spede us this day” (860-61). (The stage direction in the margin notes, “than the chappell do singe.”<sup>115</sup>) Missing from the interlude is the suspense of the biblical narrative – will Ahasuerus welcome Esther or will he order her execution? In *Godly Queen Hester*, the king lovingly embraces Hester, who invites him to a banquet where she reveals Aman’s perfidy and consequently saves her people from annihilation.

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<sup>113</sup> Walker 105.

<sup>114</sup> Biographer Garrett Mattingly offers a different interpretation of Catherine’s position regarding the suppressions: “However strongly she might disapprove of some of Wolsey’s policies, his suppression of decayed religious houses to endow his new colleges at Ipswich and Oxford, a course which horrified thoughtless conservatives, drew no protest from her.” *Catherine of Aragon*, 185.

<sup>115</sup> The reference to the chapel choir has led to speculation about the setting in which the interlude was performed. Bevington writes, “Perhaps *Hester* was written specifically for the queen’s own chapel, to encourage and console her with a scriptural vindication of her cause” (*Tudor Drama* 94). Walker muses that a monastic house, with its “choir well used to devotional singing,” may have been the setting (*Plays of Persuasion* 131).



Like the Hebrew queen, Catherine of Aragon reportedly intervened with her husband on behalf of citizens whose lives were threatened with execution. On May 1, 1517, the infamous “Ill May Day,” English apprentices resentful of foreign merchants and artisans rioted throughout London. Order was finally restored, the riot’s instigators were hung, and some four hundred participants awaited judgment by the king.<sup>116</sup> Would Henry order their execution for taking part in the disturbances? According to tradition, “it was Queen Catherine who, with her hair loosened in the traditional gesture of a suppliant, knelt before the King for the lives of the young men whose riot had spilled the blood of her Spanish countrymen.”<sup>117</sup> A popular ballad by Tudor poet Thomas Churchyard pays tribute to Catherine’s alleged role in securing clemency for the apprentices.<sup>118</sup> The image of the English queen beseeching her husband for mercy on behalf of her countrymen underscores the perceived connection between Catherine and the interlude’s eponymous heroine.

Nothing so violent as a riot motivates Aman to condemn the Jews in *Godly Queen Hester*. Rather, he plots to destroy them because they did “Not feede the poore by hospitalitie / Their possessions he sayde, were all but hydde, / Amonge them selves lyvyng voluptuouslye” (944-46). Hospitality again comes to the fore, though not as Aman charges. If hospitality is not being dispensed to the poor and needy, the Jews are not to blame, as the playwright has already informed the audience. The role of Aman in

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<sup>116</sup> Mattingly 181.

<sup>117</sup> Mattingly 181.

<sup>118</sup> Mattingly 181.

this matter is revealed through the three Vices (Ambition, Adulation, and Pryde), allegorical characters who harken back to medieval morality plays. They appear together in one scene, separately from the biblical characters, then exit. Ambition bemoans the fact that so many people now go hungry who once found sustenance through hospitality:

And many that be pore, though not from doore to doore  
 A begginge they dyd goe:  
 Yet had they releefe, bothe of breade and beefe,  
 And dryncke also.  
 And nowe the dore standes shet, and no man can we get  
 To worcke neither to fyghte. (473-78)

And who is to blame for this miserable state of affairs?

Beggers now do banne [curse], and crye out of Aman,  
 That ever he was borne.  
 They swere by the roode, he eatyth up all their foode,  
 So that they gett no good, neyther even nor morne. (469-68)

Thus, the charges Aman makes against the Jews are, in fact, the very deeds of which he himself is guilty. Ambition gives voice here to the sentiments not only of his countrymen, but also, indirectly, of those affected by Wolsey's actions, for "Wolsey's suppressions do seem to have aroused an unusual amount of protest and opposition, both at the time and subsequently, at his fall."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Walker 110-11.

In his analysis of the Aman / Wolsey connection, Greg Walker explains how the charges levelled against Aman in this passage reflect accusations directed against Wolsey. Monasteries performed the charitable offices of hospitality and almsgiving that gave succor to those in need. When Wolsey began suppressing monasteries, he disrupted this safety net of support for the poor. Walker cites an excerpt from the “Lords’ Articles,” written in 1529, which chronicled the unhappy results of Wolsey’s actions:

where good hospitality hath been used to be kept in houses and places of religion of this realm, and many poor people thereby relieved, the said hospitality and relief is now decayed and not used, and it is commonly reported that the occasion thereof is, because the said Lord Cardinal hath taken such impositions of the rulers of the said houses . . . as they be not able to keep hospitality as they were used to do, which is a great cause that there be so many vagabonds, beggars and thieves.<sup>120</sup>

If one interprets Aman in light of Cardinal Wolsey, then the Jews in *Godly Queen Hester* represent the monastic orders impacted by suppression. When Hester defends the Jews and their tradition of hospitality, her words might also be interpreted as a defense of the ancient Catholic system of monastic charity.<sup>121</sup> Unlike the Book of Esther, which never mentions the Jewish patriarchs, much less hospitality, Hester reminds Assuerus that hospitality has always been part of Jewish tradition, beginning with Abraham and continuing through Isaac and Jacob, “Of whom the twelve tribes descended be, /

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<sup>120</sup> Walker 109.

<sup>121</sup> Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* 90.

Which ever dyd maintaine hospitallite” (962-63). Therefore, she concludes,

Sinse god therfore hath begunne theyre housholde,  
 And ay hath preserved theyre hospitallite,  
 I advise noman to be so bolde,  
 The same to dissolve what so ever he be,  
 Let God alone for he shall orderly,  
 A fine ad finem, both here and there  
 Omnia disponere suaviter. (964-70)

The playwright’s use of the word “dissolve” alludes to the suppressions undertaken by Wolsey in the 1520s. That Hester speaks in defense of a religious institution threatened by change further underscores her association with the devout Catherine of Aragon, who, according to one critic, “epitomized to embattled Catholics not only the old faith but also matronly virtue and charity.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, adherents of the “old faith” had cause for alarm, as the winds of Reformation swept across the Channel, encouraging men like William Tyndale to challenge Church authority with his English translation of the New Testament. Radical theology was not the only threat to Roman Catholicism, however. Desperate for a male heir, King Henry decided in 1527 to seek an annulment of his marriage to Catherine, the consequences of which shattered the unity of western Christendom and threatened the lives of English Catholics. In her analysis of the interlude, Ruth Blackburn concludes that *Godly Queen Hester* “was written by someone

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<sup>122</sup> Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* 95.

loyal to the old faith,”<sup>123</sup> someone determined to defend a pious queen and the traditions of Roman Catholicism. If Blackburn’s supposition is true, one can only imagine the playwright’s distress when, a decade later, Catherine would be banished, Henry would assume authority over the Church, and the new queen, Anne Boleyn, would embrace what Catholics perceived as the Protestant heresy.

While scholars have speculated about the religious allegiance of the anonymous playwright, they have largely ignored another mystery pertaining to this interlude. If *Godly Queen Hester* was written in the 1520s, as the evidence suggests, why was it published decades later in 1561? By that time, Catherine, Henry, and Wolsey were dead, and Thomas Cromwell had long since authorized the dissolution of England’s great monastic houses. The Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, promulgated by Parliament in 1559, had established Protestantism as the national religion. Why, then, publish a play whose religious and political relevance were apparently passé? If one considers the issues of greatest import in the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, several possible answers come to mind.

One such issue was the queen’s marriage. According to J. E. Neale, “Suitors, statesmen, everyone, talked of marriage. They assumed, as a matter of course, that Elizabeth would marry. All women did, who could; and the political reasons in Elizabeth’s case seemed overwhelming.”<sup>124</sup> In spite of suitors at home and abroad, not the least of whom was Philip II of Spain, Elizabeth had yet to decide upon a husband. As

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<sup>123</sup> Blackburn 76.

<sup>124</sup> J. E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth* (1934; London: Jonathan Cape; London: Reprint Society, 1942) 72.

early as 1559, the House of Commons had petitioned her to marry, hopeful that marriage would produce an heir to the throne and thereby ensure political stability. As previously noted, Assuerus voices a similar concern in *Godly Queen Hester*. His search for a bride is largely motivated by his desire for an heir (“the prince with a princes matched hath beene / Leaste defaulte of issue shoulde be”). Noting the correlation between Assuerus’s marital intent and Parliament’s petition to Elizabeth, Mary Martha Purdy suggests that the original interlude may have been revised with the new queen in mind, for the title page advertises the play as “A newe enterlude . . . newly made.” Purdy surmises, “If the play had been written and presented before 1558, it is quite possible that a revival of interest in it because of its new significance, or a clever dramatist’s seeing how it could be rewritten to make a current appeal, led to its being printed.”<sup>125</sup> Purdy’s theory seems plausible in light of the fact that other plays of the period, such as *Gorboduc* and *The Play of Patient Grissell*, also reflect public concern regarding the Queen’s marriage.<sup>126</sup>

Another possible reason for the interlude’s 1561 publication lies in the Queen’s close relationship with Sir Robert Dudley and the scandal surrounding the death of his wife Amy. Less than a year into her reign, Elizabeth’s intimate friendship with the married Dudley was fomenting gossip at home and abroad. For example, the Count de Feria, Philip II’s ambassador to England, observed in April 1559 that

Lord Robert has come so much into favour that he does whatever he likes with affairs and it is even said that her Majesty visits him in

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<sup>125</sup> Mary Martha Purdy, “Elizabethan Treatment of the Proposed Marriages of Queen Elizabeth,” diss., U of Pittsburgh, 1928, 198.

<sup>126</sup> Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 1996) 51-57.

his chamber day and night. People talk of this so freely that they go so far as to say that his wife has a malady in one of her breasts and the Queen is only waiting for her to die to marry Lord Robert.<sup>127</sup>

Gossip, however malicious, did not deter Elizabeth from enjoying the friendship of Robert Dudley. She even dismissed the warning of her former governess and good friend, Katherine Ashley, that her behavior was tarnishing her reputation. Moreover, Dudley had inspired the enmity of other courtiers, including William Cecil. His was perceived as “a cold and calculating nature to whom neither individuals nor ideals were of any account, and try as he might to cultivate a more upright image, he could never shake off the unenviable reputation of being an unprincipled opportunist.”<sup>128</sup> According to Anne Somerset, “More sinister still, however, was the fact that the men who worked with him could never be certain that, even while his demeanor to them was outwardly friendly, he was not denigrating them behind their backs.”<sup>129</sup> Admired by the Queen, Dudley was detested by his contemporaries.

Elizabeth’s relationship with Dudley continued until the mysterious death of Dudley’s wife in September 1560. Although an inquest subsequently ruled Amy’s death accidental, speculation about Dudley’s involvement nonetheless flourished, along with serious questions about the Queen’s role in the affair. Furthermore, the implications of the scandal proved damaging to Elizabeth’s credibility abroad, as indicated in a letter

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Neale, *Queen Elizabeth* 77.

<sup>128</sup> Anne Somerset, *Elizabeth I* (New York: Knopf, 1991) 113.

<sup>129</sup> Somerset 113.

from Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, England's ambassador to France, to the Marquess of Northampton:

I wish I were either dead or hence, that I might not hear the dishonourable and naughty reports that are made of the Queen, and the great joy among the French princes for the success they take it they are like to have in England . . . . If these slandrous bruits [rumours] be not slaked, or if they prove true, our reputation is gone forever, war follows, and utter subversion of the Queen and country.<sup>130</sup>

Clearly, by the end of 1560, Elizabeth's association with Robert Dudley was not only undermining her authority at home but also threatening the security of the nation.

For an Elizabethan audience familiar with the biblical story of Esther, the crisis at court may have suggested parallels between Robert Dudley and Haman, the scheming courtier whose ambition nearly destroys a young queen. As noted earlier, *Godly Queen Hester* explores the connection between virtue and good governance; "Iustis," affirms King Assuerus, "mainteneth the common weale." And just as the prince must exhibit justice, so, too, must his subordinates. When Assuerus names Haman as his chancellor, he cautions Haman, "See ye doe iustice and trueth euer approue / Or to your destruction, we shall you soone remoue" (111-12). The interlude elevates justice as the seminal virtue for rulers *and* their advisors, a virtue no less consequential for Elizabeth and her courtiers. However, her involvement with Dudley had blighted the Queen's reputation at

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<sup>130</sup> Quoted in *The Life of Elizabeth I* by Alison Weir (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998. New York: Ballantine, 1998) 110.



home and abroad. Was the 1561 publication of *Godly Queen Hester* a warning, then, to the young Queen to select her confidants and councillors more carefully? Scholars have overlooked such a possibility, yet it bears investigation.

The connection between Haman and Dudley becomes more plausible when one considers the three Vices in the interlude: Ambition, Pryde, and Adulation. During their one scene in *Godly Queen Hester*, these allegorical characters lament that Aman has absorbed all their respective marks of distinction into his own personality. If this trio represents aspects of Cardinal Wolsey's character, as critics generally believe, they also reflect qualities exhibited by Robert Dudley. From the first day of her reign, when Elizabeth named him Master of the Horse, Dudley held a position of prominence and power, requiring regular contact with the Queen. Although he enjoyed Elizabeth's approbation, others were less sanguine in their regard for him, as one of his biographers observes:

The man who was to hold the centre of the social and political stage for three decades was proud and more than a little vain. He was a showman capable of exploiting to the full his not inconsiderable talents. Rivals frequently complained of his arrogance and even close members of his family feared that *hubris* might be his undoing.<sup>131</sup>

Dudley's vanity found expression in his love of fashionable attire; he possessed an extensive wardrobe and spared no expense in ordering luxurious fabrics from Europe.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Derek Wilson, *Sweet Robin: A Biography of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, 1533-1588* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981) 79.

<sup>132</sup> Wilson 80-81.

In *Godly Queen Hester*, Pryde has been reduced to wearing rags, for, he complains, “Aman that newe lorde, / Hathe bought vp all good clothe, / And hath as many gownes, as would serue ten townes” (372-73). Adulation is likewise bereft, since Aman “doeth al that he can . . . / To take vp al flatteres, & al crafty clatterers / That dwell fourtye myle aboute” (393-96). Similarly, Dudley’s privileged position at court and rumors of his impending marriage to the Queen attracted a following: “many Englishmen, wishing to court the favour of the man they believed might one day be their king, acknowledged Dudley as [their] leader.”<sup>133</sup> Pryde and Adulation suggest features of Dudley’s character, but the third of the Vices, Ambition, manifests most closely contemporary perceptions of Robert Dudley.

In *Godly Queen Hester*, Adulation inquires of Ambition, “How say you ambition, haue ye not prouision, for to / get promotion, as ye were wonte to do?” (486-87).

Unfortunately not, replies Ambition:

No by my holydame, for my lorde Aman  
Handelles all thynges so,  
That euery office and fee, what so euer it bee,  
That maye bee sene and fonnde:  
By his wit he wyl it featche, and or it fal he wil it catche  
That neuer commeth to the grounde. (488-93)

Like the other two Vices, Ambition complains that Aman now mirrors his own distinctive behavior to such an extent that nothing remains for him, Ambition, to obtain. Aman

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<sup>133</sup> Weir 86.

ambitiously grasps for every position, “office and fee,” within his reach. Certainly, ambition was one of the distinguishing features of Robert Dudley’s character. Susan Doran observes, “He was particularly resented as a *parvenu* whose family contained three generations of traitors, but he was also feared as a potential faction-leader whose ambition knew no bounds.”<sup>134</sup> Dudley already occupied a powerful and prominent office as Master of the Horse, but his contemporaries believed the position he most desired was that of husband to the Queen. To that end, he undermined Elizabeth’s other marital prospects, as Anne Somerset explains:

When it looked as though the Queen was contemplating marriage with someone other than himself, he was utterly unscrupulous about working against this. Either he would discredit his rival in underhand ways, or he would seek to distract the Queen by interesting her in another candidate for her hand. Alternatively, if she was being pursued by a Catholic, he would oppose the match on religious grounds, concealing his real objections to it under an enlightened mask of concern for his nation’s spiritual well-being.<sup>135</sup>

After his wife’s death in September 1560, Dudley embarked upon a campaign to win support for his marriage to Elizabeth, a match fervently opposed by William Cecil and other influential advisors. Knowing of their opposition, Dudley tried to enlist the aid of Philip II, through the Spanish ambassador in London, “in the hope that Habsburg

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<sup>134</sup> Doran, *Monarch and Matrimony* 42.

<sup>135</sup> Somerset 113.

advocacy of the match might well win over to his side religious conservatives within the English peerage like Norfolk, Arundel and Lord Howard of Effingham, who were long-standing friends of the Spanish king.”<sup>136</sup> Ultimately, his machinations with the Spanish failed, and although Elizabeth continued to embrace Dudley’s friendship and remained loyal to him for the rest of his life, she did not marry him nor, finally, anyone else.

If Pryde, Adulation, and Ambition embody the characteristics of Aman in *Godly Queen Hester*, then so, too, do they reflect the personality of Robert Dudley, widely perceived by his contemporaries as possessing all three qualities. In the interlude, as well as in the biblical narrative, it is the queen herself who recognizes, and then exposes to the king, Aman’s treachery, thereby saving her people, the Jews, from annihilation. As Hester explains to Assuerus,

It is Aman that by cruell enuy  
 Is oure mortall enymye and wold vs enterrupt  
 That our lyfe and godes from vs were adempte [taken away]  
 Then wold he rule all and if he myght to all get  
 And all shoulde not suffice, so hie his heart is set.  
 Hys pompe and his pryde, so mucche is in dede,  
 That yf he had all, it coulde him not suffice . . . . (924-930)

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<sup>136</sup> Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony* 46. For a more detailed discussion of Dudley’s marital maneuvers, see Chapter 3, “The Dudley Courtship,” 40-72.

If Hester represents Queen Elizabeth, as Kent Cartwright and Michelle Ephraim have also suggested,<sup>137</sup> then this speech summons the English queen to recognize Robert Dudley's Haman-like qualities and the threat he posed to her and her kingdom. For those loyal to the Queen, Dudley's unbridled ambition was dangerous enough, but coupled with the treachery of his father and grandfather, it could very well destroy the nation. In this regard, then, the 1561 publication of *Godly Queen Hester* invites Elizabeth to discern the motives of her closest advisors and, like Hester, eschew those whose ambition might subvert her authority.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, the conclusion of the interlude models the *right* relationship between sovereign and councillor when Assuerus appoints Mardocheus to replace the disgraced Aman as chancellor. Presenting Mardocheus his ring and seal, Assuerus proclaims, "It is our truste ye wyll with iustice deale, / we commytte therefore vnto youre wyse discrecion, / Of all thys prouince iudgemente and corection" (1077-79). A humble Mardocheus replies, "I thanke youre grace trustinge ye shall not heare, / In all thynges but as iustice doth requyre" (1080-81). The reference to justice by both men emphasizes once again the theme introduced at the beginning of the interlude: that justice must be the cardinal virtue for any sovereign as well as for those who advise and serve him or, in the context of Elizabethan England, her.

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<sup>137</sup> Kent Cartwright speculates that the publication of *Godly Queen Hester* in 1561 "may celebrate the new queen Elizabeth, who might be imagined as Hester saving her people from religious persecution," *Theatre and Humanism*, 292, note 40. In her essay "From Jewish Monarch to Virgin Queen: Elizabeth I and *The Godly Queen Hester*," Ephraim argues, "In this transformation of Old Testament narrative into sixteenth-century drama, the Jewish monarch becomes a revisioned persona that is also a viable model of Elizabeth Tudor" (619).

<sup>138</sup> Such an interpretation distinguishes *Godly Queen Hester* from that of two other dramatic works supportive of Dudley's marriage to Elizabeth, *The Play of Patient Grissell* and *Gorboduc*. For a discussion of those plays and related works, see Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony* 52-58.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **“In This Glasse of Holie Liues”: Esther as Exemplum**

If playwrights in England and on the continent recognized the inherent dramatic appeal of the Esther narrative, other writers perceived the didactic possibilities in the story of the young Jewish exile who saves her people from annihilation. For authors seeking models of godly womanhood, models worthy of emulation by female readers, Esther embodies two important but very different qualities: courage and submissiveness. To exhibit courage in the midst of danger requires initiative, a summons of resolve and determination. Submission, by comparison, connotes a more passive response to one's environment, a suppression of one's own will to that of another. Paradoxically, both qualities come together in the person of Queen Esther as recounted in the biblical narrative. When she decides to approach the king uninvited, Esther exhibits genuine courage, for she knows the penalty for this transgression is death. Later, she boldly confronts Haman and unflinchingly reveals his murderous plans to the king. Even as she summons the courage to challenge male authority, however, Esther submits to male leadership at various points in the narrative. She obeys Mordecai's admonition not to divulge her Jewish identity to the Persians, and she follows the advice of the eunuch Hegai when she arrives at the harem. In pleading with Ahasuerus to save the Jews, she prefaces her request with words of submission as she lies prostrate before the king: "If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the

king, and I have his approval . . .” (8:5). Although Esther may be the queen of Persia, she nonetheless recognizes her precarious status in a world governed by masculine self-interest.

Christian authors have long noted Esther’s unusual combination of courage and submissiveness, citing either one or both aspects of her character depending upon their rhetorical purpose. The earliest recorded Christian reference to the Book of Esther occurs in *The First Epistle of Clement*, written by a first century pope, Clement of Rome.<sup>139</sup> Addressed to the church at Corinth, the letter admonishes the congregation to resolve a serious dispute involving presbyters, and he cites Esther as an example of someone who acts heroically on behalf of her community. Acknowledging that “Many women have been enabled by the grace of God to perform deeds worthy of heroic men,” Clement describes Esther’s decisive course of action:

Likewise Esther, perfect in faith, exposed herself to no less danger, in order to deliver the twelve tribes of Israel from the brink of destruction; for by her fasting and self-humiliation she implored the all-seeing Master, the eternal God, and he, when he saw the humility of her soul, delivered the people for whose sake she had endangered herself.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Gustafson 58. Gustafson identifies and discusses patristic references to the book of Esther in Chapter Two of his dissertation, “The Jewish and Christian Reception of Esther from the Septuagint through Rabanus Maurus,” 38-111. He notes that both Clement and Augustine, as well as other patristic authors, interpret Esther’s character according to the narrative additions in the Septuagint.

<sup>140</sup> Robert M. Grant and Holt H. Graham, eds., *First and Second Clement* (New York: Nelson, 1965) 87-88, vol. 2 of *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*. Quoted in Gustafson 58.

Although he recognizes her humility, twice in this brief passage Clement alludes to the danger Esther faced, and twice he refers to the Jews' deliverance. His rhetorical use of repetition serves to emphasize Esther's courage and the providential impact of her actions. For Clement, Esther's heroic faith transcends the limitations of her sex and makes her worthy of emulation by all Christians, male and female alike.

Some three centuries later, Augustine of Hippo also recognizes Esther as a spiritual exemplum, praising her piety in the midst of grave danger. Unlike Clement, however, his focus centers less on Esther as heroic female than upon her role as submissive wife. In a letter to a Christian woman named Ecdicia, who had sought guidance regarding her troubled marriage, Augustine advises her to imitate Esther's relationship with Ahasuerus:

Surely, in the time of the patriarchs the great Queen Esther feared God, worshiped God, and served God, yet she was submissive to her husband, a foreign king, who did not worship the same God as she did. And at a time of extreme danger not only to herself but to her race, the chosen people of God, she prostrated herself before God in prayer . . . and God "who seeth the heart" heard her prayer at once because He knew that she spoke the truth.<sup>141</sup>

For Augustine, Esther's value as a role model lies not so much in her heroism as in her submission both to God and husband. In this regard, Esther conforms to St. Paul's instructions to married women in his letter to the Ephesians: "Wives, be subject to your

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<sup>141</sup> Sister Wilfrid Parsons, trans., *Saint Augustine: Letters, Volume 5* (Washington: Catholic U of America P, 1956) 268, vol. 13 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*. Quoted in Gustafson, "Aelfric Reads Esther," 73-74.



husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands” (Eph. 5:22-24).<sup>142</sup>

Augustine finds in Esther an Old Testament illustration of a New Testament commandment addressed specifically to women.

Both aspects of Esther’s character, her courage and submissiveness, resonated with early modern writers and their reading audience, just as they did with Clement and Augustine. Like those patristic writers, authors in the early modern period cited Esther when it suited their rhetorical purpose, particularly if their intention was to instruct women on how to behave. In her survey *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640*, Suzanne Hull concludes that most of the books published for women before 1640 were written by men, who were perceived by both sexes as authoritative regardless of the subject under consideration. According to Hull,

male authors gave women directions on how to dress (with decorum befitting their rank), how to talk (as little as possible), how to behave toward their husbands (with subservience, obedience), how to walk (with eyes down), what to read (works by and about good and godly persons, not romances), and how to pray (frequently).<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Commentators sometimes overlook St. Paul’s subsequent command to husbands calling on them to love their wives in the same sacrificial manner that Christ loved the Church, even to the point of death: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . .” (Eph. 5:25). Furthermore, St. Paul addresses *both* husband and wives in verse 21: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

<sup>143</sup> Suzanne Hull, *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino:

Protestant authors of conduct books for women typically based their precepts upon Scripture, invariably citing the aforementioned passage from Ephesians as well as other pertinent verses. Robert Cleaver's 1598 treatise, *A Godlie Forme of household Government, carefully to bee practised by all Christian householders*, reflects the prevailing attitudes regarding marital relationships. That his treatise was printed seven times between 1598 and 1630 suggests its popularity and influence.<sup>144</sup> In the section of his book detailing the duties of a wife to her husband, Cleaver asserts,

This dusie [sic] is comprehended in these three poynts. First, that she reuerence her husband. Secondly, that she submit herselfe, and be obedient vnto him. And lastly, that she do not weare gorgeous apparrell, beyond her degree & place, but her attire must be comely and sober, according to her calling. (213)

As Cleaver expounds upon these particular duties, he cites the book of Esther twice to support his argument. In discussing obedience, the second of his three duties for wives, Cleaver writes, "The obedience that the wife oweth to her husband, dependeth vpon this subiection of her will and wisdome vnto him. As 1 Pet. 3.6 Ephes. 5.33 Ester. 1.1.2 & 12" (222).<sup>145</sup> The verse he cites from the book of Esther refers to Vashti's disobedience to the king: "But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the

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Huntington Library, 1982) 135.

<sup>144</sup> Robert Cleaver, *A Godlie Forme of household Government, carefully to bee practised by all Christian householders* (London: Felix Kingston, 1598). STC 5383-5388.

<sup>145</sup> 1 Peter 3:6 states, "Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him Lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you." Ephesians 5:33 also includes an admonition to husbands: "Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband."

eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.” Therefore, Cleaver later writes, “Assuerus made a lawe, that euery man should beare rule in his owne house, and not the woman.” The marginal annotation cites Esther 1: 20-22, in which the king issues a decree throughout the land proclaiming men to be masters in their own homes. Though Cleaver does not mention Esther herself in these references, he indirectly presents her as a model of wifely submission by focusing on the disobedient behavior of her predecessor, Queen Vashti.

At the same time, however, various writers engaging in the *querelle des femmes* celebrate Esther’s heroic effort to save her people from certain death. For authors seeking to affirm womanhood within a sometimes hostile, patriarchal culture, this aspect of Esther’s character proved useful. For example, Anthony Gibson’s 1599 pamphlet, *A Womans Woorth, defended against all the men in the world*, asserts that Esther, along with Deborah and Judith,

wrought meruailes for conseruation of their people, euen to the enterprise of so high actions, as the issue of them could not be apprehended, their beginnings were so dreadfull, their effects beyond comparison, and their vertue bounded within no equalitie, to the confusion of men, amazement of the Gods, and perpetuall memorie of the feminine sexe.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Anthony Gibson, *A WOMANS Woorth, defended against all the men in the world. Proouing them to be more perfect, excellent and absolute in all vertuous actions, then any man of what qualitie soeuer. Written by one that hath heard much, seene much, but knowes a great deale more* (London: John Wolfe, 1599) 7. STC 11831.

Esther's "enterprise of so high actions" with "effects beyond comparison" – effects realized in the public, political sphere of a nation – contrasts vividly with the private, domestic sphere to which wives were typically consigned in early modern England. Similarly, in *The Choyse of Jewels* (1607), Ludovic Lloyd includes Esther in his catalogue of women who "haue gouerned countries and kingdomes, subdued Realmes, ruled States, and brought vnder their obeysance both Kings and kingdomes."<sup>147</sup> His description of Esther emphasizes her remarkable achievements:

Esther an Hebrew maide, married to Ahashuerosh the great King of Persia, a Jewell of God not only appointed to saue Mardocheus her vnkle, but all the Iewes her country-men within an hundred seauen and twenty Prouinces, with the daunger of her owne life, and the destruction of Seauenty and fiue thousand Persians, and the hanging of Haman, and his ten sonnes. (B2<sup>r</sup>)

Like Clement of Rome, Lloyd notes Esther's willingness to put herself in harm's way in order to rescue her people and destroy their enemies.

Esther's paradoxical image of heroic woman and submissive, obedient wife makes her one of the most unusual female characters in early modern literature. Two prose works in particular demonstrate the duality of her representation: *The Monument of Matrones* by Thomas Bentley (1582) and *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World* by Thomas Heywood (1640). These works are significant for several reasons. Nearly fifteen hundred pages long, *The Monument of Matrones* ranks

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<sup>147</sup> Ludovic Lloyd, *The Choyse of Jewels* (London: T. Purfoot, 1607) sig. B. STC 16618.

among the longest books printed in Elizabethan England.<sup>148</sup> Esther is prominently featured in the pages of this massive devotional text targeted to female readers. Unlike Thomas Bentley, about whom relatively little is known, Thomas Heywood was one of the most prolific writers in early modern England. It is noteworthy that such a popular author designates Queen Esther as one of the most important women in the history of the world. The remainder of this chapter will examine how Thomas Bentley and Thomas Heywood depict the figure of Esther in their respective works.

#### Thomas Bentley and *The Monument of Matrones*

In 1582, London printers Henry Denham and Thomas Lawson produced a fifteen hundred page book titled *The Monument of Matrones: Conteyning seuen seuerall Lamps of Virginitie, or distinct treatises; whereof the first fiue concerne praier and meditation: the other two last, precepts and examples . . .*<sup>149</sup> Designed to aid women in their devotional practices, *The Monument of Matrones* “was the first comprehensive prayer book for women and a major devotional publication of Elizabethan England.”<sup>150</sup> According to the title page, Thomas Bentley compiled the massive text “for the necessarie use of both sexes out of the sacred Scriptures, and other approoued authors.”

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<sup>148</sup> Colin B. Atkinson and Jo B. Atkinson, “The Identity and Life of Thomas Bentley, Compiler of *The Monument of Matrones* (1582)” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31.2 (2000): 327.

<sup>149</sup> Thomas Bentley, *THE MONUMENT OF MATRONES: conteyning seuen seuerall Lamps of Virginitie, or distinct treatises; whereof the first fiue concerne praier and meditation: the other two last, precepts and examples, as the woorthie works partlie of men, partlie of women; compiled for the necessarie use of both sexes out of the sacred scriptures, and other approoued authors by Thomas Bentley of Graies Inne Student* (London: Henry Denham, 1582). STC 1892-1894. All future references to the text are from this edition.

<sup>150</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, “The Identity and Life of Thomas Bentley” 348.

His preference for quoting from the Geneva Bible of 1560 rather than the authorized Great Bible (1539) or the Bishops' Bible (1568) suggests that Bentley "leaned toward the Puritan side of the Anglican Church."<sup>151</sup>

The seven lamps of virginity in the title allude to Christ's parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25: The wise virgins obtained enough oil to keep their lamps lighted until the return of the bridegroom, who, allegorically, represents Christ himself.<sup>152</sup> Bentley refers to each of the seven sections or "distinct treatises" of his book as a lamp, designed to illumine the Christian walk of his readers as they prepare themselves for ultimate union with Christ. Biblical women, including Esther, frame the work as a whole, with the first lamp including their prayers and songs and the seventh lamp presenting accounts of their lives.<sup>153</sup> The five lamps in between contain meditations by Protestant queens and noblewomen, hundreds of prayers for every aspect of a woman's life, and examples of both godly and wicked women. Bentley dedicates *The Monument of Matrones* to Queen Elizabeth, whom he refers to as the mother and nurse of the Church.

Although the title page announces the book's usefulness to both sexes, Bentley's preface addressed "To the Christian Reader" indicates that women of all types

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<sup>151</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "The Identity and Life of Thomas Bentley" 328. For an overview of sixteenth-century English Bibles, see Chapters Four and Five of *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* by Alister McGrath (New York: Doubleday, 2001). Also see Chapter One of *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* by Naseeb Shaheen (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1999).

<sup>152</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the parable's imagery in the context of Bentley's work, see John King, "The Godly Woman in Elizabethan Iconography," *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985): 70-71, and Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987) 64-65.

<sup>153</sup> Colin B. Atkinson and Jo B. Atkinson, "Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582): The First Anglican Prayer Book for Women," *Anglican Theological Review* 74.3 (1992): 281.

(presumably literate, middle- and upper-class women) are his foremost audience, whether married or single, young or old.<sup>154</sup> He describes his book as “a domesticall librarie” containing “the best approued presidents of christian praiers and diuine meditations, . . . [as well as] perfect precepts of holie scripture concerning the christian duties of all degrees and estates of women in their seuerall callings” (B2<sup>v</sup>). According to Bentley, his *Monument of Matrones* is “a delectable Diall . . . for all women generally to haue recourse unto as to their homelie or domestical librarie” (B1<sup>v</sup>). Though the book’s treatises are “not so portable” (presumably due to their size), they are, he explains, “so delectable, profitable, and readie prepared to lie in your secret chamber or oratorie” where he hopes they will “deligentlie be read and fruitfullie practiced” (B2<sup>v</sup>).

Bentley’s repeated reference to his book as a “domestical librarie” for women, available for use in the privacy of their homes, reflects an awareness of women’s expanding literacy. Patricia Crawford asserts that “women’s rate of literacy increased faster during this period than did that of men, albeit a smaller proportion of the female population could read.”<sup>155</sup> In her study of early modern books written specifically for women, Suzanne Hull reports, “There is interesting evidence that authors and booksellers became increasingly conscious of women readers, particularly in the 1570s and 1580s.”<sup>156</sup> That Henry Denham and Thomas Dawson invested the resources to print a

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<sup>154</sup> For an analysis of the role of prefatory pages in printed texts, see Paul J. Voss’s article “Books for Sale: Advertising and Patronage in Late Elizabethan England,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 29.3 (1998): 733-56.

<sup>155</sup> Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720* (London: Routledge, 1993) 79.

<sup>156</sup> Hull 10.

book as large and elaborate as *The Monument of Matrones* indicates their confidence that a market actually existed for women's devotional books.<sup>157</sup>

Who was Thomas Bentley, and what inspired him to produce such a massive book for women readers? The title page identifies him only as "Thomas Bentley of Graies Inne Student." Colin B. Atkinson and Jo B. Atkinson believe him to be the same Thomas Bentley who served as the churchwarden of St. Andrew Holborn, the wealthy parish church affiliated with Gray's Inn.<sup>158</sup> His duties in that capacity were extensive, from managing parish finances and upkeep of the church building to ensuring liturgical compliance with the Act of Uniformity approved by Parliament in 1559. Furthermore, "the wardens were in one way or another responsible for almost all public and private aspects of parishioners' lives, and under threat of excommunication for not doing so properly."<sup>159</sup> They were charged with reporting sexual improprieties, illegitimate pregnancies, and other proscribed behaviors such as usury and drunkenness. Considering the strict ecclesiastical laws in Elizabethan England, a conscientious churchwarden might well have instructed his female parishioners in appropriate Christian behavior. As one scholar observes, "Religious education was the most important element in what was taught to girls. They were expected to be devout, to provide spiritual leadership in the

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<sup>157</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "The Identity and Life of Thomas Bentley," 326. According to the Atkinsons, "Denham was a major printer, especially of religious books, active from 1560 to the early 1590s. In the 1570s he acquired the privilege of printing the Psalter and all books of private prayers both in Latin and English from the printer William Seres (who had the royal monopoly for prayer books)" (325). Dawson also enjoyed success as a printer, specializing in religious books and holding various offices in the Stationers' Company (326).

<sup>158</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "The Identity and Life of Thomas Bentley" 335-338.

<sup>159</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "The Identity and Life of Thomas Bentley" 347.



household [for children and servants], and to know how to conduct themselves in a moral fashion.”<sup>160</sup> With its hundreds of prayers and exempla of virtuous biblical women, *The Monument of Matrones* would have been a valuable guide for literate women seeking to fulfill their spiritual and moral obligations.

Bentley not only perceives women as readers; he also recognizes women as writers, capable of producing edifying texts worthy of study. In his preface, Bentley acknowledges that he himself has found comfort by “the reading and perusing of diuers verie godlie, learned, and diuine treatises, or meditations and praier, made by sundrie right famous Queenes, noble Ladies, vertuous Virgins, and godlie Gentlewomen of Al ages” (B1<sup>r</sup>). Unfortunately, he explains, their works have been “dispersed into seuerall pamphlets, and in part some thing obscured and worne cleane out of print, and so out of practise” (B1<sup>r</sup>). He concludes that if he had benefited by reading these texts, so, too, would others, and he could do nothing better with his time than to collect their works into one volume to preserve them for posterity. Thus, in Lamp Two Bentley includes *The Lamentacion of a Sinner* and *Prayers Stirryng the Mynd unto Heavnye Medytations* by Queen Katherine Parr; Elizabeth Tudor’s prose translation of a poem by Margaret, Queen of Navarre; prayers and verses by Lady Jane Grey composed while awaiting execution; and devotional works by various gentlewomen. By literally giving space within the text itself to female writers, Bentley metaphorically makes a space for women’s voices to be heard in a culture dominated by masculine discourse.

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<sup>160</sup> Anne Laurence, *Women in England, 1500-1760: A Social History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) 165.

Unexpectedly, perhaps, Bentley links Esther with three of the authors included in Lamp Two. Each of the lamps is introduced by an emblematic title page, four of which depict the figure of Queen Elizabeth along with three other biblical women.<sup>161</sup> The title page for Lamp Two pictures Queen Elizabeth, Queen Katherine Parr, Queen Margaret of Navarre, and Queen Esther. That Katherine and Margaret appear with Elizabeth on this page makes sense, for Lamp Two contains selections of their respective writings. But why does Bentley associate Esther with this particular trio of women? Typically, commentators link her with Deborah and Judith, so one might expect to find her picture with theirs on the title page of Lamp Three. Perhaps Bentley depicts Esther with Katherine and Margaret, not only because she, too, is a queen (Deborah and Judith are not), but also because Esther is one of the few, if only, women in the Bible credited with writing. In the ninth chapter of the book of Esther, the narrator reports that two official letters establishing the Purim commemoration were circulated throughout Persia. Of the second letter, the Geneva Bible states, “And the Quene Ester the daughter of Abihail & Mordecai the Iewe wrote with all autoritie (to confirme this letter of Purim the seconde time)” (9: 29). When Bentley tells Esther’s story in Lamp Seven, he modifies the Geneva text, writing instead, “by the speciall comaundement of Mordecaj and the Q. Ester, who *herselfe* [emphasis added] wrote with all authoritie to confirme those letters of Purim” (155). The biblical version suggests that Esther and Mordecai wrote the letter together, while Bentley’s version portrays Esther as the singular author of the letter. In addition to

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<sup>161</sup> For a detailed discussion of the title pages introducing each section of *The Monument of Matrones*, see John King, *The Godly Woman in Elizabethan Iconography*, 70-79. See also *Title-page Borders Used in England and Scotland, 1485-1640* by R. B. McKerrow and F. S. Ferguson (London: Oxford UP, 1932), xxiii-xxvii.

her other virtues, then, *The Monument of Matrones* presents an Esther who is literate, a skill especially valued among Protestant women for whom reading the Bible was an integral part of their faith.

Bentley announces other, more traditional virtues of Esther in his preface “To the Christian Reader” when he describes the contents of his book. He will present “mirrors” of biblical women, he writes, so that “looking in this glasse of the holie liues of their foremothers, [readers] may christianlie conforme and adorne themselues after their good examples, and become for their rare vertues verie beautifull spouses in the sight of their spirituall bridegroome Jesus Christ” (B2<sup>v</sup>). Bentley then provides a long catalog of spiritual virtues and the women who possess them. He mentions Esther several times in the preface, noting “the holinesse, deuotion, feare of God, iustice, uprightnesse, & of Hanna, Q. Hester, &.” (B2<sup>r</sup>); “the dutifull obedience towards their parents, of Q. Hester, Jephthas daughter, Orpha, Ruth, Sara, &” (B2<sup>r</sup>); “the great kindnesse and curtesie towards their freends, kindred, and aliance of Bethsheba, Elizabeth, Q. Hester, Jehosheba, Rizpah, &.” (B2<sup>r</sup>); and, finally, “the womanlie pitie & tender harted compassion and affection toward the distressed and persecuted members of Christ, of . . . Rachel, Pharaos daughter, Rizpah, Q. Hester . . .” (B2<sup>v</sup>). The virtues that Bentley associates here with Esther – holiness, obedience, courtesy, compassion – suggest Christian submission rather than heroic assertion.

Bentley’s mention of Esther in the preface, and his depiction of her on the title page of *Lamp Two*, hint at her more extensive appearance in *Lamps One* and *Seven*. In *Lamp One*, Bentley includes prayers and songs of Old and New Testament women, beginning

with Hagar, Sarah's maid and mother of Ishmael, and ending with the desperate prayer of the foolish virgins in Matthew 25. According to the Atkinsons, "Here Bentley sets out the biblical roots of the tradition of women at prayer, by implication justifying the present work."<sup>162</sup> To include a prayer by Esther, Bentley must turn to the Greek Septuagint as his source, for the Hebrew text of Esther omits any reference at all to prayer. In the Geneva Bible, Esther's prayer and the other additions to the Greek narrative are part of the Apocrypha.<sup>163</sup> Esther's prayer occurs prior to her uninvited appearance before Ahasuerus. Her words emphasize her utter reliance upon God's deliverance: "O my Lord, thou onely art our King: helpe me desolate woman, which haue no helper but thee" (14:3). Similarly, she entreats, "But deliuer us with thine hand, and helpe me that am solitarie, which haue no defence but onely thee" (14:14). Her prayer also reveals her fearfulness, as she concludes, "O thou mightie God aboue all, heare the voyce of them, that haue none other hope, and deliuer vs out of the hand of the wicked, and deliuer me out of my feare." (14:19). Esther conveys a feeling of helplessness in her prayer, which makes her appear less heroic and more submissive than her characterization in the Hebrew narrative. The focus on God's deliverance diminishes by contrast her own role in saving the Jews from persecution.

As he will do in Lamp Seven with his narrative of Esther, Bentley amplifies the text of the prayer, as it appears in the Apocrypha of the Geneva Bible, for emphasis. Within the

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<sup>162</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582): The First Anglican Prayer Book for Women" 281.

<sup>163</sup> Bentley also turns to the Apocrypha for prayers by Judith, Susanna, and Sarah, the wife of Tobias in the book of Tobit.

seventeen verses of Esther's prayer in chapter fourteen, Bentley adds words or phrases to the original version nearly thirty times.<sup>164</sup> For example, the Geneva text states in verse four, "For my danger is at hand." As if to intensify and dramatize her plight, Bentley writes, "For my danger, *miserie, and destruction is hard* at hand" (emphasis added) (46). Similarly, in verse sixteen of the Geneva edition, Esther confesses, "for I hate this token of my preeminence [her crown], which I beare upon mine head." Bentley states, "I hate this token of my preeminence, *worship and dignitie*" (emphasis added) (47).

Interestingly enough, Bentley incorporates what seems to be a mistake in the original Geneva text. The second half of verse eight in the Geneva edition reads "but they haue stroken hands with their idoles." Surely the correct version should be "they haue stroken idoles with their hands." Bentley does not correct the error even as he freely amplifies the original text of her prayer.

Of particular significance is verse thirteen of the Geneva text, wherein Esther entreats the Lord, "Giue me an eloquent speache in my mouth before the Lion," referring to Ahasuerus. The verse underscores Esther's unusual action as a woman not merely speaking to but also confronting masculine authority in an effort to save her people. Yet Bentley appears to temper the impact of Esther's brave eloquence by adding to the text, "Give me an eloquent *and pleasant* speech in my mouth before the lion" (emphasis added) (47). Is Bentley implying here that if a woman must speak, she ought to be pleasant and hence feminine, rather than strident and thus unfeminine? One remembers

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<sup>164</sup> The Apocrypha account of Esther in the Geneva Bible does not have the marginal annotations which one finds in the Old Testament version of the story. Thus, the words and phrases Bentley inserts are presumably his own.

Lear's description of Cordelia: "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman" (5.3.271-72).<sup>165</sup> Of course, both the Greek and Hebrew versions of the Esther story present a woman who smoothly disarms both the authority figure (Ahasuerus) and the enemy (Haman) through the pleasures of not one but two banquets, so perhaps Bentley merely alludes here to the pleasant, non-threatening method by which Esther achieves her objective.

The other section in *The Monument of Matrones* where Bentley portrays Esther in detail is Lamp Seven, which contains biographical summaries of numerous biblical women. According to the Atkinsons, the longest entry in Lamp Seven is fifteen and a half pages and features the story of Judith.<sup>166</sup> At ten pages, the entry for Esther is nearly as long, suggesting the importance Bentley attaches to her as a model of virtue for his female readers.<sup>167</sup> Bentley introduces each woman in Lamp Seven by explaining the meaning of her name. Esther, he writes, "signifieth dole, hidden, plucking down, the working or beholding of the medicine, the Turtles medine [sic]" (146). ("Medine" is apparently an error for "medicine," though the allusion to turtles is obscure.)

The story of Esther as related by Bentley in Lamp Seven generally follows the narrative in the Old Testament book of Esther in the Geneva Bible, based upon the

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<sup>165</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, 1968) 1182.

<sup>166</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582): The First Anglican Prayer Book for Women" 284.

<sup>167</sup> That the entry for the Virgin Mary is only four pages indicates the Protestant perspective represented throughout *The Monument of Matrones*, according to the Atkinsons in "Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582): The First Anglican Prayer Book for Women" (284). The emphasis upon the Virgin Mary in Protestant liturgical practice and devotion was greatly diminished following the Reformation, particularly among English Puritans.

original Hebrew text. He omits two episodes in the story relating to Haman: the second half of Chapter Five, in which Haman brags of his promotion to his family, and Chapter Six, which describes Haman's humiliation when the king honors Mordecai instead of him. The omissions serve to keep the reader's attention focused upon Esther rather than her adversary. Bentley periodically incorporates marginal annotations from the Geneva Bible into his text, as he explains in his preface "To the Christian Reader": "for the better understanding of the text, I haue inserted some notes out of the Geneua bible with some difference by parenthesis, verie necessarie for the simple reader" (B2<sup>v</sup>). However, Bentley does not indicate specifically where such additions occur. Thus, a reader "cannot know if she is reading God's Word and or [sic] some man's comment."<sup>168</sup> For example, in Chapter Two in the Geneva Bible, the marginal note for part of verse three, "Hege the Kings eunuche, keper of the women," castigates the immoral behavior of foreign kings. Bentley adds the annotation almost word for word into his own narrative in Lamp Seven:

For as the abuse of these country & heathen kings was great in  
 inuventing many meanes to serue the lusts of Princes, and ordaying  
 wicked lawes, that the king myght haue whose Daughter he would:  
 so had they three diuers houses appoynted for women to be kept  
 neere the King . . . . (147)

The Hebrew narrative includes no such commentary, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions about harems, concubines, and potentates.

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<sup>168</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582): The First Anglican Prayer Book for Women" 285.

Bentley incorporates marginal annotations into his narrative not only to highlight a moral lesson, but also to emphasize the role of God in the deliverance of the Jews. In their annotations, the Geneva editors typically interpret characters and actions in light of God's divine intervention, as the following examples demonstrate. The pivotal moment in the narrative occurs in Chapter Four, when Esther agrees to Mordecai's entreaty to save her people. In verse fourteen, Mordecai famously asks, "who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdome for such a time?" Bentley's version includes the marginal annotation for this verse: "For who knoweth whether thou art called of God to come to this glorye and kingdome, *for to deliuer Gods Church out of these present daungers*" (emphasis added) (151). When Esther resolves to go into the king's chamber unsummoned, she concludes in verse sixteen, "and if I perish, I perish." In Bentley's version, her words also include the Geneva annotation: "and if I perishe (quoth she) I perishe: yet will I *referre the successe to God, seeing it is for the glorye of his name, and the deliuerance of his Church*" (emphasis added) (151). Bentley's reason for weaving these annotations into the narrative is clear. In a book of devotions meant to inspire faith in God, the lack of explicit reference to God in the Hebrew narrative of Esther poses a problem. Bentley solves that problem by means of the marginal annotations in the Geneva Bible, though, as previously noted, the reader cannot discern where such additions occur unless she compares Bentley's text with the Bible.

The story as Bentley relates it also incorporates two passages from the Apocrypha in the Geneva Bible, based upon the Greek Septuagint version of Esther. The first passage is an excerpt from Mordecai's dream, which foretells Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus.



Bentley refers to verse four of Chapter Ten, but as he does with Esther's prayer in Lamp One, he amplifies his source. In the Geneva Bible, verse four states, "A little fountaine which became a flood, and was a light, and as the sunne, & as much water, this flood was Esther whome the King married, and made Queene." In Bentley's version in Lamp Seven, Mordecai

dreamed a little before, that a little fountaine became a floud of much water, & a light or lampe as bright & glorious as the sonne in his heighest orient: which floud & sunne in troth he found to be his cosin Esther, whom he saw thus exalted to the dignity of a Queene, and married to the great king Ashuerus, to his no little reioycing, & her & her peoples comfort, as after shal appeare. (148)

The inclusion of Mordecai's dream in Bentley's narrative serves to emphasize the providential aspects of the story without mentioning God explicitly. The reader is reminded of the biblical tradition of revelation through dreams. One recalls, for example, Joseph's dreams in the book of Genesis which predict his future success and the role he will play in saving his family (who become the twelve tribes of Israel) from starvation.

The second passage that Bentley includes from the Apocrypha describes Esther's preparation for and encounter with King Ahasuerus in her effort to protect her people. This version of Esther's meeting with Ahasuerus expands upon the concise narrative in Chapter Five of the Old Testament Book of Esther. It provides a more dramatic and suspenseful account, but it also presents an Esther much more timid than in the Hebrew version. The addition from the Apocrypha weakens the characterization of the Queen by

highlighting her fear of approaching her husband, Ahasuerus. The Old Testament narrative only hints at her fear when she tells Mordecai she might be executed if she goes to the king unsummoned. Once she determines to act, however, the Hebrew narrative says nothing of her inner thoughts and feelings. She decisively assumes responsibility for rescuing her people.

By contrast, in the Greek version, Esther faints, not once but twice, during her encounter with Ahasuerus. As she approaches the king's chamber, the Greek version states, "The shine of her beautie made her face rose coloured: and her face was chearful & amiable, but her heart was sorowful for great feare" (15:8). Furthermore, Bentley himself intensifies her fearfulness by revising that specific verse. Instead of repeating "her heart was sorowful for great feare," he emends the text to read, "but yet with *a heauie and troubled soule*, sorowful heart, *pensiue minde*, and *weake body*, shee casting off all feare, and putting her onely confidence and trust in God, boldly went in thorow all the doores of the king's palace . . ." (emphasis added) (151-52). In Bentley's version, not only is her heart plagued by fear, but her soul, mind, and body are also affected.

Why does Bentley make this change? As suggested earlier, he displays a predilection for heightening the drama inherent in the story by frequently adding his own words and phrases. Also, emphasizing her fear in this way allows Bentley to magnify the power of her trust in God: the greater one's fear, the greater one's need to rely upon the Almighty. In this passage, Bentley inserts the phrase "putting her onely confidence and trust in God," indicating that Esther's courage derives not from her own strength but from her faith in God. She thus embodies the depth of trust all Christians are encouraged in

Scripture to develop. Her trust is not misplaced, for the Greek version affirms that “God turned the Kings minde,” and he welcomed Esther into his chamber rather than ordering her execution.

However, Bentley repeatedly attributes Esther’s fearfulness to her gender through his own additions to the text. For example, the Apocrypha relates that the young queen initially faints when she comes into the king’s presence and observes his fierce demeanor: “therefore the Quene fel downe, and was pale and faint” (15:10). According to Bentley, the king “loked fiercely upon Ester the Q. *which so daunted her womanly courage*, that it made her presently *for feare* to fall downe” (emphasis added) (152). Bentley previously alludes to Esther’s womanly timidity when Mordecai urges her to petition the king on behalf of the Jews. When Esther replies that the king has not summoned her in thirty days and that approaching him might mean death, Mordecai is “somwhat moued with her *too womanly tymerousness and feare*” (emphasis added) (150). There is nothing unusual or illogical about Esther’s initial fear of approaching Ahasuerus unsummoned; any of his male subjects would have been cautious as well, for they, too, would have suffered the same consequences. Yet Bentley ascribes her hesitancy not to common sense but to female timidity which makes her appear weak.

To be fair, Esther is not the only character whom Bentley portrays as more fearful than the original text relates. When Esther reveals to Ahasuerus Haman’s intention to murder the Jews, the Hebrew narrative simply states, “Then Haman was afraied before the King & the Quene” (7: 6). In Bentley’s version, though, “Hamans conscience barked, his heart quaked, his body waxed wan & pale, his fleshe trembled, and he was terribly

afraid of the king & Queens displeasure” (153). Note, however, that Bentley makes no judgment about the relationship between Haman’s fearfulness and his gender, as he does with Esther’s reluctance to approach the king.

If Bentley emphasizes Esther’s feminine timidity, so, too, does he highlight her obedience, a trait to be cultivated by the virtuous woman not only toward God but also toward her husband. Interestingly, Bentley’s comments about this virtue occur in a parental rather than a marital context. The Hebrew narrative explains that Esther did not reveal her Jewish identity at the Persian court, “for Mordecai had charged her, that she shulde not tel it” (2: 10). Bentley expands this explanation in his version:

And she, though nowe a royall queene, yet was as obedient unto Mordecay her poore kinsman, as when she was under his gouernment, & was nourished of him at home in his house: & kept al things close from the king for the space of 5 yeares, & did in euey thing after the counsel & aduise of her cosin Mordecay, to the good example of all children to their parents, & of one kinsman to another. (149)

Although Bentley does not limit the practice of obedience to females, noting that all children and kinsmen should emulate her example, one cannot help but notice the character traits that Bentley chooses to highlight in regard to Esther: obedience and feminine timidity. The Hebrew text presents a young woman who cleverly and even heroically manages to save her people from annihilation, a feat praised by Bentley at the conclusion of his entry on Esther. But in the preceding pages, Bentley emphasizes her stereotypical female weakness, rather than focusing on her resolve and ingenuity and her

willingness to risk her own life. Regarding Bentley's presentation of women in *The Monument of Matrones*, Colin and Jo Atkinson conclude, "Time and again we see Bentley subtly using the Bible to present models of submissive female behavior. He rearranges biblical texts, adds phrases, and shifts emphasis."<sup>169</sup> Even as he clearly admires Queen Esther, Bentley also highlights characteristics that conform to the perception of woman's nature current in the sixteenth century.

Thomas Heywood, *Tunaikeion*, and *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World*

If Thomas Bentley emphasizes the submissive aspect of Esther's character, Thomas Heywood presents an Esther distinguished for her "masculine and heroicke spirit."<sup>170</sup> Writing forty plus years after Bentley, Heywood refers to Esther in two prose treatises: *Tunaikeion: or, Nine Bookes of Various History Concerninge Women; Inscribed by the names of the Nine Muses* (1624),<sup>171</sup> and *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World* (1640). Heywood's reputation as one of the most prolific writers of the early seventeenth century is supported by the extensive listings of his publications in Pollard and Redgrave's *Short Title Catalogue*. Both an actor and shareholder in the Earl of Worcester's company (renamed for Queen Anne in

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<sup>169</sup> Atkinson and Atkinson, "Subordinating Women: Thomas Bentley's Use of Biblical Women in 'The Monument of Matrones (1582)'," *Church History* 60.3 (1991): 298.

<sup>170</sup> Thomas Heywood, *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World* (London: Printed by T. Cotes, 1640) sig. \*\*2. STC 13316.

<sup>171</sup> Thomas Heywood, *Tunaikeion: or, Nine Bookes of Various History Concerninge Women; Inscribed by the names of the Nine Muses* (London: Printed by A. Islip, 1624.) STC 13326. *Gunaikeion* is a variant spelling of the first word of this title.

1603), Heywood wrote twenty-four plays,<sup>172</sup> including comedies, histories, and tragedies, the most famous of which is his domestic tragedy, *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607). He also produced non-dramatic works of prose and poetry such as *An Apology for Actors* (1612), *England's Elizabeth* (1631), and *The Hierarchy of the Blessed Angels* (1635).

In 1624, Heywood joined in the *querelle des femmes* with the publication of *Tunaikeion*, “the earliest and most compendious of Heywood’s contributions to the controversy over women.”<sup>173</sup> Though never entirely quiescent in the sixteenth century, the woman controversy roared to life in the following century with the 1615 publication of Swetnam’s misogynistic pamphlet, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*. Heywood responded with a four hundred and sixty-six page folio he called “a Discourse of Women” (A4<sup>r</sup>).<sup>174</sup> In his preface “To the Reader,” Heywood describes *Tunaikeion* as “a Collection of Histories, which touch the generalitie of Women, such as haue either beene illustrated for their Vertues, and Noble Actions, or contrarily branded for their Vices, and baser Conditions” (A4<sup>r</sup>). Whereas Bentley’s subjects in *The Monument of Matrones* were limited to biblical women and Protestant queens and noblewomen, Heywood’s subjects range “from the Empresse in the Court to

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<sup>172</sup> Only twenty-four extant plays can be “safely attributed” to Heywood, according to Barbara J. Baines in her study *Thomas Heywood* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) 1. However, in his “Address to the Reader” in *The English Traveller*, Heywood claims to have “had either an entire hand, or at least a maine finger,” in two hundred and twenty plays. *The English Traveller. The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, R. H. Shepherd, ed. IV, 5.

<sup>173</sup> Marilyn L. Johnson, *Images of Women in the Works of Thomas Heywood*. Jacobean Drama Ser. 42, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Salzburg University, 1974) 27.

<sup>174</sup> Heywood may also have authored a theatrical response to Swetnam: “In 1619 Heywood’s company gave women their revenge in a play called *Swetnam, the Woman-hater Arraigned by Women*, possibly written by Heywood.” Barbara J. Baines, *Thomas Heywood* 3.

the Shepheardesse in the Village” (419). Not constrained by the familiar, Heywood also writes of goddesses, nymphs, and “other Poetical Fictions,” which, he notes, “to some Readers may appeare fabulously impossible” (A4<sup>r</sup>). Unlike other writers critical of women, Heywood assures his readers that his tone will not be censorious: “whereine expect not, that I should either enuiously carpe at the particular manners or action of any liuing, nor iniuriously detract from the Sepulchers of the dead; the first I could neuer affect, the last I did alwayes detest” (A4<sup>r</sup>). Heywood’s reluctance to carp about the living or detract from the characters of the deceased mark him as a moderate in the woman controversy, according to Marilyn Johnson. Heywood, she writes, is

on the side of those who take a relaxed and genial attitude toward questions of women’s worth and place in society. . . . unlike the bitter detractors of women, he is unwilling to see this class of Other as evil. In his prose he argues that women are capable of good, and backs up his assertions with stories of good women. Although he also tells stories of sinful women, he never attributes to the whole sex the faults of the few.<sup>175</sup>

Arthur Melville Clarke, author of *Thomas Heywood: Playwright and Miscellanist*, shares Johnson’s assessment, even calling Heywood an “admirer of women, loud in their praises, tender to their faults.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Johnson 27.

<sup>176</sup> Arthur Melville Clark, *Thomas Heywood: Playwright and Miscellanist* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1931) 91.

Indeed, Heywood certainly seems well acquainted with the female sex, based upon the number of women he mentions in *Tunaikeion*. In the dedication to his patron, the Earl of Worcester, Heywood states, “In these few sheets, I haue lodged to the number of three thousand” (A3<sup>f</sup>). Heywood organizes this vast array of women into nine books or chapters, each of which is linked to one of the nine muses. For example, the penultimate chapter is titled “The Eighth Booke, Incribed Vrania: Intreating of Women euerie way Learned; of Poetresses [sic], and Witches, &” (369). This apparently systematic presentation of women belies the text’s actual organization or, more accurately, its *disorganization*. One scholar calls the book “a hodge-podge of miscellaneous information, a gallimaufry of anecdotes,”<sup>177</sup> while another writes that Heywood threw in pell-mell fabliaux, jests, commonplaces, scraps from chroniclers and Renaissance epigrammatists, poets and compilers, theologians and magicians, as well as more original miscellanea of varying dates, remarks on poetry, reflections on life and marriage, astrology and kissing, snatches of verse, and personal anecdotes.<sup>178</sup>

Anticipating objections to the random nature of the book’s contents, Heywood explains in his preface that he hopes to engage the widest possible audience, a “uniuersalitie of Readers” (A4<sup>v</sup>). To that end, he has “inserted fabulous Feasts and Tales, sauouring of Lightnesse,” just as playwrights incorporate “some Zanie with his Mimick action” to

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<sup>177</sup> Robert G. Martin, “A Critical Study of Thomas Heywood’s *Gunaikeion*,” *Studies in Philology* 20 (1923): 161.

<sup>178</sup> Clark 93.



appeal to the multitudes (A4<sup>v</sup>). Obviously, Heywood's theatrical background influences his rhetorical choices in *Tunaikeion*.

The two authors discussed in this chapter, Thomas Bentley and Thomas Heywood, could scarcely be more different. One can well imagine a sober and sincere Thomas Bentley, poring over his Geneva Bible for hours at a time, cataloging the wise and wicked women of Scripture. This earnest churchwarden, eager to foster the spiritual development of his female readers, compiles a massive collection of prayers and devotional commentaries for their edification. By contrast, Thomas Heywood, actor and prolific playwright, seeks to entertain his readers as well as inform them about every possible sort of woman, both mortal and immortal, Christian and pagan. The astonishing number of women mentioned in his book might suggest many months, if not years, of diligent research and writing on his part. Yet Heywood reveals in his Latin colophon that his book was “planned, begun, carried out, and issued from the press within seventeen weeks. Thank God!”<sup>179</sup>

One should not be surprised, then, that each author emphasizes a different aspect of Esther's personality and character. Because biblical women are his primary subjects, Bentley writes of Esther at some length, incorporating a ten-page biographical narrative in one chapter and her prayer from the Apocrypha in another. Although he admires her courage, Bentley chooses to emphasize her roles of obedient virgin and submissive wife. Heywood's references to Esther in *Tunaikeion* are brief by comparison, but they foreground her role as heroic queen. He first alludes to Esther in Book Three in a poetic

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<sup>179</sup> Translated by Robert G. Martin, “A Critical Study of Thomas Heywood's *Gunaikeion*” 183.

elegy to Queen Anne, who had died in 1619. “A Funerall Oade upon the death of Anna Panareta” honors the late queen by comparing her to Esther and Judith:

In this great barrenesse were we  
 Our plenty made to smother:  
 But what might this rare iewell be?  
 A Saint, a Queene, a Mother,  
 An Hester faire,  
 A Iudith rare;

These dead, oh point me out another! (124)

Though conventional in its context, Heywood’s allusion to Esther suggests her importance as a symbol of female governance, as indicated in the earlier discussion of *Godly Queen Hester*. Heywood mentions her again in Book Nine of *Tunaikeion* in a section titled “Of Women for their Pietie and Deuotion remembred in the sacred Scriptures” (427). Here Heywood highlights the young woman’s heroism:

Esther hauing commiseration of her people (when a seuere Edict was published to destroy them all, and sweepe them from the face of the earth) she exposed her selfe (with the great danger of her owne life) to the displeasure of King Ahashuerosh, purchasing thereby the freedome of her nation, and her owne sublimitie. (427)

Not only does Heywood focus on Esther’s willingness to put her life in jeopardy, but he also presents her as a national leader whose courage purchased “the freedome of her nation.” For such an achievement, Heywood calls her “sublime.” Sixteen years later,

Heywood would elevate Esther even further by selecting her as one of the most outstanding women of all time.

In 1640 Heywood produced a second treatise about women called *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World*. As Frederick Boas wryly notes, “It might have been thought that with the 466 folio pages of [*Tunaikeion*] Heywood had exhausted what he had to say on its subject.”<sup>180</sup> So what is his professed motive for writing another book about women? In short, filial obligation: “it is a kinde of duty in all that have had mothers, as far as they can to dignifie the Sex” (\*\*4<sup>f</sup>). However, Marilyn Johnson suggests a less sentimental reason for this, his second foray into the *querelle des femmes*:

Heywood’s purpose in writing this work is twofold. First of all he wished to write a work that would sell, and he knew from experience with *Gunaikeion* that biographies of worthy women would meet with favorable reception, especially among women. Accordingly he took care to dedicate the work to women – two specific dedicatees and women in general. Secondly he set out to show that women from all ages are capable of illustrious deeds, or, as he puts it, of “masculine and heroicke spirits.”<sup>181</sup>

Whether his motivation is idealistic or pecuniary (or perhaps both), Heywood affirms female strength and competence in *The Exemplary Lives*. Indeed, he announces to his

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<sup>180</sup> Frederick S. Boas, *Thomas Heywood* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1950) 120.

<sup>181</sup> Johnson 50.

readers, “we shall finde them [women] to parallell men, as well in the liberall Arts, as in high Facinorous Acts” (\*\*<sup>r</sup>). Such a claim strikingly refutes the conventional belief in women’s inferior status.

In his preface “To the Generall Reader,” Heywood distinguishes his two books by calling the first “a meare miscelaine” (\*\*4<sup>r</sup>) of every conceivable sort of woman. In the second treatise, he explains, “I have onley commemorated the lives and memorable Acts of nine (alluding to the number of the Muses.) Three Iewes, three Gentiles, three Christians” (\*\*4<sup>r</sup>). Eugene M. Waith calls Heywood’s reference here to the muses “disingenuous or absent-minded, for the primary allusion is not that at all. . . . Heywood is invoking worthies, not muses.”<sup>182</sup>

By 1640, the concept of the Nine Worthies had had a long and distinguished literary history. Ann McMillan traces the origin of the Male Worthies to an early fourteenth century courtly poem, *Les Voeux du paon (The Vows of the Peacock)* by Jacques de Longuyon, which celebrates the chivalric virtues of three Christians, three Jews, and three Pagans.<sup>183</sup> The concept gained in popularity, and the Nine Worthies (whose members varied) were represented in the visual arts such as tapestries and illuminations.<sup>184</sup> Two centuries later, Shakespeare included a comedic pageant of the Nine Male Worthies in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. According to McMillan, “The Nine Female

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<sup>182</sup> Eugene M. Waith, “Heywood’s Women Worthies,” *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Ed. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975) 224.

<sup>183</sup> Ann McMillan, “Men’s Weapons, Women’s War: The Nine Female Worthies, 1400-1640,” *Mediaevalia* 5 (1979): 113.

<sup>184</sup> McMillan 128.

Worthies, Nine Heroines, or *neuf preuses*, ‘sprang up’ to parallel the better-known Nine (male) Worthies.<sup>185</sup> A contemporary of Chaucer, Eustace Deschamps, was the first to write a *balade* about Nine Female Worthies, featuring warrior-women such as Semiramis, Thamyris, and Penthesilea. In 1586, *The Blazon of Gentry* by John Ferne mentioned Nine Women Worthies, among whom were Jael, Deborah, and Judith.<sup>186</sup> When Heywood selected *his* Female Worthies in 1640, he omitted Jael and substituted Esther.

The nine women Heywood celebrates in *The Exemplary Lives* include Deborah, Judith and Esther (three Jewish Worthies); Boadicea, Penthesilea, and Artemisia (three Gentile Worthies); and Elflida, Margaret, and Elizabeth (three Christian Worthies). Heywood introduces each woman with a poem printed alongside an engraving of her respective portrait.<sup>187</sup> Each worthie is clothed anachronistically in the elaborate gowns fashionable at the time of the book’s publication. In the portrait of Esther, the seated queen is magnificently dressed in a low-cut gown with a flowing skirt. Adorned with pearl bracelets, earrings and necklace, she holds an orb and scepter in her right hand while an ermine cloak is draped over her left arm. The hair framing her heart-shaped face is curled in ringlets, and a coronet sits atop her head with a decorative feather elegantly attached. She appears confident and strong, accustomed to command. The orb and the

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<sup>185</sup> McMillan 113.

<sup>186</sup> McMillan 113.

<sup>187</sup> For a discussion of the engravings, see Eugene M. Waith, “Heywood’s Women Worthies.” Noting the visual tradition of the Nine Worthies, Waith explains, “Heywood’s book seems to have been inspired by the illustrative engravings, which already existed as a series called *The Nine Woemen Worthys. Three Jewes. Three Heathens. Three Christians.*, by George Glover . . .” (232).

scepter, ceremonial items used in the coronation of England's monarchs, symbolize her power and authority. That two different crosses appear in the portrait – one atop the orb, another atop her coronet – indicates the extent to which Esther, a young Jewish heroine, had been appropriated by English Christians. No longer is she depicted as Jewish; rather, in this engraving she reigns as a Christian.

The poem that accompanies her portrait consists of twenty-four lines of pentameter couplets. It recounts the essential elements of the Esther narrative, characterizing her as the redeemer of her nation:

Instead of Vasthi, a proud insolent Queene,  
 Esther, a captiv'd Virgin is next seene  
 In the throne Royall, and being there plac't  
 By King Ahashuerus lov'd and grac't,  
 Who when all other earths asistance fail'd,  
 Her beauty so far with the King prevail'd  
 (Ioyn'd with her prayer, and fasting) she redeemd  
 All her sad Nation, then, most dis-esteemd. (44)

Heywood relates the Haman/Mordecai conflict, noting the ironic reversal in which Haman and his ten sons are executed on the very gallows constructed for Mordecai. "Such was their sad fate," he concludes, "whilst Mordecai and she, guide the whole state" (44). Heywood's reference in the poem to Esther as her nation's redeemer echoes his earlier characterization of her in *Tunaikeion*, in which he writes that she purchased "the freedome of her nation." For Heywood, Esther transcends the role of exemplary wife

ascribed to her by Bentley and, even earlier, by Augustine. She takes her place as one of the Nine Female Worthies based upon her achievement in the public, political sphere: saving her people from annihilation and effectively guiding “the whole state.”

Following the introductory poem and engraved portrait is a twenty page prose narrative in which Heywood tells the story of Esther as recounted in the Old Testament. Like Bentley, Heywood bases his narrative upon the text of the Geneva Bible. Though not a word for word transcription, Heywood’s version extensively incorporates the Geneva text. In fact, he begins his narrative with words from that Bible’s introductory preface to the Book of Esther and one of its first marginal annotations. That Heywood relies upon the Geneva Bible is not surprising; although the Authorized Version had been published in 1611, the Geneva Bible continued to be enormously popular well into the seventeenth century.<sup>188</sup> At various points in the narrative, Heywood incorporates almost verbatim marginal notes from the Geneva Bible. For example, when the Jews prepare to turn the tables on their enemies in Chapter Nine, the Geneva annotation for verse one states, “This was by Gods great guidance, who turneth the ioye of the wicked into sorow, & the teares of the godlie into gladnes.” At the same point in his narrative, Heywood writes, “It is worthy observation, that Gods great providence, turneth the joy of the wicked into sorrow, and the teares of the godly into gladnesse . . .” (64).

Although Bentley and Heywood both rely upon the Geneva Bible as the source of their respective narratives, their characterizations of the young queen differ significantly. Whereas Bentley inserts passages from the Greek additions found in the Apocrypha,

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<sup>188</sup> McGrath 280.

Heywood does not. As previously discussed, those passages, which relate Esther's prayer and her fainting spells before the king, dramatize her timidity and suggest a stereotypical feminine reaction – the helpless maiden who faints in the face of danger. Bentley's Esther thus conforms more closely to the traditional perception of women's weakness. Heywood, on the other hand, omits the Greek additions, preferring instead the Hebrew account in the Old Testament. His Esther thus appears more confident than does the Esther of Lamp Seven in *The Monument of Matrones*.

Moreover, Heywood reinforces the heroic image of Queen Esther as a Female Worthy at several points in his narrative. In the ninth chapter of the Book of Esther, the Geneva text states, "And all the rulers of the prouinces, & the princes and the captaines, and the officers of the King exalted the Iewes: for the feare of Mordecai fell vpon them" (9:3). Heywood emends the verse to read "for the feare of *Queene Esther* and Mordecai was upon them" (emphasis added) (64). Rather than focusing on Esther's own fearfulness, Heywood depicts her as *inspiring* fear, a significant reversal from Bentley's portrayal. In the same chapter, Heywood amplifies a subsequent verse to highlight Esther's role in saving the Jews. Verse twenty-one states, "Inioining them that they shulde kepe the fourtente day of the moneth Adar, and the fiftente day of the same, euerie yere," which Heywood modifies as follows: "So they kept solemne, the foureteenth and the fifteenth dayes of the moneth Adar, (which was the twelfth moneth) *in memory of their great deliverance, by the hand of Esther*" (emphasis added) (65). Heywood once again foregrounds her decisive role in saving the Jews from slaughter. Finally, Heywood revises the last chapter of the Hebrew narrative to include a reference to Esther.



Ironically, the three verses of Chapter Ten in the Book of Esther make no mention at all of the eponymous heroine. Instead, they extol the authority of Ahasuerus and the elevation of Mordecai to political prominence, a summation Heywood deems incomplete and perhaps unfair to the queen. He therefore inserts an acknowledgement of Esther's significance to Jewish history: "Thus rained shee a blessed Mother in Israel" (66). Only then does he mention Mordecai and Ahasuerus. For Heywood, Esther is inextricably linked to the fate of her nation.

## Chapter Five:

### Prose into Poetry: Poetical Representations of Esther

The exciting story of a young Jewish woman who summons the courage to expose and destroy a ruthless enemy captured the imagination of early modern dramatists and writers of prose, as the previous chapters demonstrate. The Book of Esther also appealed to poets. That contemporary writers interpreted the Esther story in three different literary genres – drama, prose, and poetry – indicates the popularity of this Old Testament narrative in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It also suggests the importance of the Bible as a source of literary inspiration. In a period of flourishing and sometimes competing biblical translations, it is not surprising that poets began to translate and paraphrase Scripture into the poetic forms and meters of the English language.<sup>189</sup>

Among the most widely paraphrased books of the Bible were the Psalms.<sup>190</sup> Some of the most important poets of the era offered their own versions of David's sacred poems, including the great innovators of English verse, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey. According to Lily Campbell, "Wyatt put the Psalms into the stream of English literature, using the verse forms which he had brought from the continent to

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<sup>189</sup> For an overview of biblical sources in early modern poetry, see Lily Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1959).

<sup>190</sup> See Rivka Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer 1535-1601* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987). See also Hallett Smith, "English Metrical Psalms in the Sixteenth Century and their Literary Significance," *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 9 (1946): 249-71.

England.”<sup>191</sup> Henry Howard, the creator of blank verse, paraphrased psalms as well as excerpts from Ecclesiastes while imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting execution. Sir Philip Sidney had begun a translation of the Psalter prior to his death, and his sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke, completed the project in 1599, revealing her own talent for literary composition. Edmund Spenser translated the seven Penitential Psalms, and even Queen Elizabeth and King James joined the host of poets who penned translations.

William Samuel and *An Abridgement of all the Canonical Books of the Olde Testament*

While the Psalms inspired numerous translations and paraphrases, poets also discovered a wealth of sources in other books of the Bible, including the Book of Esther. Among the poets who paraphrased the Esther narrative were William Samuel, Michael Drayton, and Francis Quarles. While Drayton translated only the prayers of Esther and Mordecai, Samuel and Quarles both paraphrased the entire Old Testament narrative, though in considerably different styles and to very different effect. The earliest of these three texts is *An Abridgement of all the Canonical Books of the Olde Testament* by William Samuel, printed in 1569. This work was apparently the culmination of a project Samuel described in the dedication to an earlier work called *The Abridgement of Goddes Statutes in Myter* (1551). Samuel’s Protestant perspective informs his overall objective as presented in the 1551 dedication:

My mynd is that I wold have my contrey people able in a smale  
some to syng the hole contents of the byble, & where as in tymes

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<sup>191</sup> Campbell 35.

past the musicians or mynstrells, wer wont to syng fained myraclēs,  
 saints lives, & Robin hode, in stede thereof to sing, undoutyd truthes,  
 canonycall scryptures, and Gods doynge.<sup>192</sup>

He refers to his book as an abridgement because, he writes, “it is a summe or short rehearsal of things done at large in the Byble booke, whych may be called the kyng of al kinges actes.”<sup>193</sup> Samuel undertook the ambitious task of writing a metrical paraphrase of all the canonical books of the Old Testament.

Samuel’s poetic rendering of the Book of Esther consists of nine stanzas that correspond to the nine chapters in the Bible, along with a final stanza that looks ahead to the Book of Job. Each stanza is eight lines of alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter with a rhyme scheme of abcbdefe. The short lines create a fast-paced, sing-song effect that reinforces Samuel’s goal of presenting a “short rehearsal of things done at large.” Samuel may have been familiar with the popular metrical psalms of Thomas Sternhold, for the 1569 edition of *An Abridgement of all the Canonical Books of the Old Testament* was described as “written in Sternholds meter.”<sup>194</sup> He follows the biblical narrative closely, albeit tersely, offering no commentary upon the original text. His diction is plain and void of rhetorical flourish. For example, Stanza Seven describes Esther’s second banquet, in which she reveals to the king Haman’s plan to annihilate the Jews:

Gon to banket is Haman now,  
 to drink his last carrouse:

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<sup>192</sup> Quoted in Campbell 67.

<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Campbell 67.

<sup>194</sup> Quoted in Campbell 68.

The Queen then tolde her doleful hap,  
to her and to her house.  
Unto the King, who rose in wrath  
gainst Haman for the fact:  
His gallous for another made,  
his neck therin it crackt.<sup>195</sup>

If the poetry lacks sophistication, it has the virtue of being accessible to readers more interested in biblical narrative than in the elements of English prosody.

Michael Drayton and *The Harmonie of the Church*

Rather than composing a paraphrase of the entire Book of Esther, Michael Drayton translated the prayers of Esther and Mordecai found in the Septuagint but not in the canonical Hebrew text. A prolific poet, unlike William Samuel, Drayton wrote sonnets, odes, elegies, histories, and divine poetry, earning him the praise of his contemporaries: “In his own time he was one of the most widely influential and admired of writers: Ben Jonson likened one of his epic poems to Homer’s; Edward Phillips ranked him just below Spenser and Sidney.”<sup>196</sup> His paraphrases of the two prayers are included in his

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<sup>195</sup> William Samuel, “The Book of Esther,” *An Abridgement of all the Canonical Books of the Old Testament, English Poetry Database*, Stanford University, 30 June 2004 <<http://dlib.stanford.edu/depts/hasrg/hdis/engpo.html>>.

<sup>196</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, editor’s note, *Michael Drayton Revisited*, by Jean R. Brink (Boston: Twayne, 1990) vii.

first published work, *The Harmonie of the Church*, printed in 1591. The title page describes the work as a collection of

The Spirituall Songes and  
Holy Hymnes, of godly men, Partriarkes and  
Prophets: all, sweetly sounding to the praise  
And glory of the highest.<sup>197</sup>

The songs and hymns are “Now (newlie) reduced into sundrie kinds of / English Meeter: meete to be read or sung, / for the solace and comfort of the godly” (1). Drayton’s anthology is noteworthy for containing paraphrases of texts other than the Psalms. According to one scholar, Drayton “went father afield and achieved an originality of choice in using the lesser known prayers of the prophets and other holy men and women.”<sup>198</sup> In his preface addressed “To the Curteous Reader,” Drayton explains that he has translated the songs “so exactly . . . as the prose would permit, or sence would any way suffer me” (3). He dedicates the *The Harmonie of the Church* to Lady Jane Devereux, entreating her to “endeavor your selfe with this good Debora, Hester and Judith, (whose songes of praise I here present to your Ladiship) to the advancing of Gods glorie, and the beautifieng of his Church” (2). His anthology contains twenty paraphrases of prayers and songs of biblical characters, ten from the canonical books of the Bible and ten from the Apocrypha. As the dedication indicates, Drayton includes the songs and prayers of biblical women: the familiar trio of Deborah, Judith, and Esther as well as the

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<sup>197</sup> Michael Drayton, *The Harmonie of the Church, The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel, vol. 1 (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1961) 1. All references to the text are from this edition.

<sup>198</sup> Joseph A. Berthelot, *Michael Drayton* (New York: Twayne, 1967) 111.

song of Hannah from the Book of Samuel. For reasons never fully explained, *The Harmonie of the Church* was confiscated by church officials and subsequently burned, though some copies were preserved at Lambeth.<sup>199</sup>

Drayton paraphrases the two prayers in different poetic forms and meters. His paraphrase of Esther's prayer is forty-six lines and written in fourteeners (iambic heptameter couplets), a common verse form of the period. He follows the biblical text very closely, as revealed by a comparison of his version with the corresponding verses in the Geneva Bible. For example, the first lines of Esther's prayer in the Geneva Bible state, "O my Lord, thou onely art our King: helpe me desolate woman, which haue no helper but thee. For my danger is at hand" (14: 3,4). In Drayton's paraphrase, Esther prays, "O mighty Lord, thou art our God, to thee for aid I crie, / To help a woman desolate, sith danger now is nie" (37, lines 1-2). Like Samuel, Drayton does not interject any commentary on the text. By contrast, "The Praier of Mardocheus" consists of five six-line stanzas (sixains), written in iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme of ababcc. Again, a comparison of Drayton's paraphrase with the Geneva Bible shows that he "so exactly translated [the text] as . . . sence would any way suffer [him]." In the biblical version, Mordecai begins to pray, "O Lord, Lord, the King almightie (for all things are in thy power) and if thou hast appointed to saue Israel, there is no man that can with stande thee. For thou hast made heauen and earth, and all the wonderous things vnder the heauen" (13: 9,10). Drayton renders those same verses as follows:

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<sup>199</sup> Berthelot 113.

Oh Lord, my Lord, that art the King of might,  
 Within whose power all things their being have:  
 Who may withstand that liveth in thy sight,  
 If thou thy chosen Israell wilt save.

For thou hast made the earth and heaven above,  
 And al things else that in the same do moove. (38, ll. 1-6)

Although Drayton does not present an interpretation of these passages, the fact that he includes the prayers at all suggests the appeal of the Esther narrative not only to him as a poet but also to his readers. Drayton would continue to write poems based upon Old Testament characters; subsequent works include *Moyses in a Map of His Miracles* (1604), *Noahs Floud* (1630), and *David and Goliah* (1630). According to Joseph Berthelot, “Unlike *The Harmonie of the Church* Drayton’s later religious works were very free adaptations of the original and not translations. Rather they were amplifications and variations based upon the biblical stories.”<sup>200</sup> In this regard, these later works have a greater affinity with the presentation of biblical narrative in the works of Francis Quarles.

Francis Quarles and *Hadassa: or The History of Queene Ester*

The most prominent author of heroic-biblical poetry prior to John Milton was Francis Quarles. Indeed, Horace Walpole once quipped that Milton “had had to wait until the world had done admiring [Quarles].”<sup>201</sup> Although infrequently studied today, Francis

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<sup>200</sup> Berthelot 113.

<sup>201</sup> Cited in Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948) 114-15.



Quarles achieved his greatest renown as the author of the seventeenth-century best-seller, *Emblemes, Divine and Moral* (1635).<sup>202</sup> At least five thousand copies of a combined edition of *Emblemes* and *Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man* were printed within two years (1639 and 1640), with subsequent editions being printed well into the next century.<sup>203</sup> Multiple editions of his other works also potentially attest to Quarles's popularity: by 1676, nine editions of his *Divine Fancies* had been printed, along with eight editions of his narrative poem *Argalus and Parthenia*.<sup>204</sup> Unknown today except by literary scholars, in his own time Quarles enjoyed considerable acclaim by a reading public receptive to biblical paraphrase and moral instruction.

Educated at Cambridge and the Inns of Court, Quarles combined his literary endeavors with various positions in public service. For example, he served as Cup-Bearer to the newly married Princess Elizabeth when she traveled to Germany with her husband, the Elector of Palatine, in 1613. In 1626, Quarles began a three-year appointment in Ireland as the secretary to the Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher. He followed in the footsteps of Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson when he was appointed London City Chronologer in 1639. With the advent of the Civil War, he defended the royalist cause in 1644 by publishing controversial pamphlets such as *The Loyal Convert* and *The Whipper Whipt*, resulting in the enmity of his Puritan opponents who accused

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<sup>202</sup> For a detailed history and analysis of the emblematic tradition, see *English Emblem Books* by Rosemary Freeman, and the Introduction to *The Comely Frontispiece: The Emblematic Title-Page in England, 1550-1660* by Margery Corbett and Ronald Lightbrown (Routledge: London, 1979) 1-47.

<sup>203</sup> Freeman 114.

<sup>204</sup> Arthur H. Nethercot, "The Literary Legend of Francis Quarles," *Modern Philology* 20 (1923): 225.

him of being a Roman Catholic.<sup>205</sup> Agents of Cromwell subsequently broke into Quarles's home and destroyed his library and his manuscripts. Quarles died six months later on 8 September 1644.

If his literary works were destroyed, so, too, was his literary reputation, not by Oliver Cromwell but by Edward Phillips, the nephew of Cromwell's Latin Secretary, John Milton. Arthur Nethercot describes the "death-blow" to Quarles's reputation administered in 1675 by Phillips, who, he writes,

succinctly characterized Quarles as ". . . the darling of our plebeian judgements; that is, such as have ingenuity enough to delight in poetry, but are not sufficiently instructed to make a right choice and distinction." He then went on to mention "the wonderful veneration" of the *Emblems*, etc., "among the vulgar."<sup>206</sup>

John Dryden was likewise dismissive of his ability, as was Alexander Pope, who attributes the success of *Emblemes* not to Quarles's verse but to the engravings they accompanied. In Book One of the *Dunciad*, Pope writes, "Or where the pictures for the page atone, / And Quarles is saved by beauties not his own" (I, 140).<sup>207</sup> The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* concluded in 1797, "His works both in prose and verse are numerous, and were formerly in great esteem, particularly his Divine Emblems: but the

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<sup>205</sup> I. M. Smart, "Francis Quarles: Professed Royalist and Puritanical Poet," *Durham University Journal* 39 (1978): 192. Smart's essay discusses the poet's allegiance to the Crown as well as his commitment to English Protestantism: "He particularly 'wished all his friends to take notice, and make it known, that as he was trained up and lived in the true Protestant Religion, so in that Religion he dyed' " (192).

<sup>206</sup> Nethercot 228. Nethercot traces the uneven reputation of Quarles's work from the time of his death in 1644 until the early twentieth century.

<sup>207</sup> Quoted in Nethercot 231.

obsolete quaintness of his style has caused them to fall into neglect, excepting among particular classes of readers.”<sup>208</sup> In 1880 the prolific editor and bibliographer A. B. Grosart attempted to revive Quarles’s reputation by compiling *The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles*. Yet even in his “Memorial-Introduction” to Volume One, Grosart himself acknowledges the author’s shortcomings: “His piety I value, his inevitable aspiration under the stir of Scriptural themes and words I find myself lifted up by. But over and over he says and says, not because he has something to say, but in order to say something.”<sup>209</sup> Despite his good intentions, Grosart hardly makes a case here for a Quarles comeback.

Regardless of his later reputation, the works of Francis Quarles clearly appealed to seventeenth-century readers, as indicated by the multiple editions of his texts. The extraordinary success of *Emblemes* and *Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man* reflect that era’s continuing appreciation of allegorical modes of discourse. In discussing the contemporary popularity of emblem books, Rosemary Freeman explains, “It shows how persistent and how deep-rooted was the Elizabethan and Jacobean taste for allegory.”<sup>210</sup> According to Freeman, “the pleasure of the reader lay in identifying the significant details [in the picture] and correlating them with the moral doctrines taught in the accompanying

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<sup>208</sup> Cited in Nethercot 238. According to Rosemary Freeman, *Emblemes* was “enthusiastically admired for their religious teaching by eighteenth century evangelical ministers” (117).

<sup>209</sup> A. B. Grosart, “Memorial Introduction,” *The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles*, vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1967) xxvi.

<sup>210</sup> Freeman 1.

poem.”<sup>211</sup> The process of drawing moral conclusions from pictorial images is not unlike the method Quarles had used a decade earlier in his four heroic-biblical poems. Rather than writing didactic poetry based upon allegorical pictures, Quarles instead had gleaned lessons from stories in the Bible, specifically from the lives of four Old Testament figures: Jonah, Esther, Job, and Samson. His first such work, printed in 1620, was *A Feast for Wormes. Set Forth in a Poem of the History of Ionah*. Quarles’s presentation of moral lessons based upon the Bible reflects contemporary practice, as Burton O. Kurth explains: “The reformers had attempted to counter the traditional fourfold scholastic interpretation of Scripture by placing greater emphasis upon the literal sufficiency of the Word of God, but they could not root out the long-established habit of reading the Bible for secondary meanings.”<sup>212</sup> In his heroic-biblical poem *Hadassa*, Quarles presents a variety of “secondary meanings” based upon the biblical narrative, as this chapter will demonstrate.

Perhaps inspired by *Judith*, the divine epic poem penned by Du Bartas in 1574 and translated into English a decade later, Francis Quarles’s second biblical poem features another Old Testament heroine, Queen Esther. Originally printed in 1621 as *Hadassa: or The History of Qveene Ester: with Meditations thereupon, Diuine and Morall*, it was later included in the *Divine Poems*, a collection of Quarles’s four poetic biblical narratives.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Freeman 19.

<sup>212</sup> Burton O. Kurth, *Milton and Christian Heroism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1959) 19.

<sup>213</sup> Francis Quarles, *Hadassa: or The History of Qveene Ester: With Meditations thereupon, Diuine and Morall. The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles*, ed. A. B. Grosart, vol. 2 (New

Like *Emblemes*, this anthology proved enormously popular, with multiple editions being printed in 1633, 1634, 1638, 1642, 1643, 1664, 1669, 1674, and 1680.<sup>214</sup> Esther stands as the lone female subject in Quarles's quartet of biblical heroes. Such a distinction suggests the author's high regard for Esther's noble character. Yet Esther herself seems of secondary concern to Quarles, especially when compared to Heywood's depiction of Esther in *Tunaikeion* and *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World*. That Quarles will use the Esther narrative to explore topics other than female heroism is intimated in his preface to *Hadassa*.

Quarles systematically presents a hermeneutics for his audience in "A Preface to the Reader," announcing his intention to explain both "the matter" and "the manner" of his history of Esther (42). "As for the matter," he writes, "(so farre as I haue dealt) it is Canonically, and indighted [written] by the holy Spirit of God, not lyable to errour, and needs no blanching" (42). Quarles indicates here that his history of Esther is based upon the Old Testament narrative, the "Canonically" version, excluding the Greek additions found in the Apocrypha. In his account, he asserts, "Theologie sits as Queene, attended by her handmaid Philosophy: both concurring, to make the vnderstanding Reader, a good Diuine, and a wise Moralist" (42). Quarles's purpose is essentially didactic: he hopes to cultivate theological understanding in his audience as well as impart moral instruction, which he terms "the wholly practicke part of Philosophy" (42). Ever systematic, Quarles then classifies practical morality into the categories of ethics, politics, and economics.

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York: AMS Press, 1967). All references to the text are from this edition. Because the lines of verse are not numbered, the parenthetical citations refer to page numbers.

<sup>214</sup> Pollard and Redgrave's *Short-Title Catalogue (1475-1640)* 259; Wing's *Short-Title Catalogue (1641-1700)* 148.

For each category, he refers to specific passages in the biblical narrative that pertain to that aspect of moral philosophy.

Personal behavior, “the Manners of a private man,” constitutes the “Ethical part” of morality (42). Quarles documents the manifestation of such classical virtues as fortitude, temperance, and liberality in the biblical narrative; for instance, the king’s lavish banquet for his ministers demonstrates liberality. The “Political part (the object whereof is Publike Society) instructs, first, in the behaviour of a Prince, to his Subject . . . Secondly, in the behaviour of the Subject to his Prince . . . Thirdly, in the behaviour of a Subject to a Subject” (42). Quarles again cites particular passages in the Book of Esther relating to these matters. For example, the allegiance a subject owes his or her sovereign is apparent, according to Quarles, in verse 2:22, when Mordecai overhears the eunuchs’ plot to assassinate the king and subsequently reports the plan to Queen Esther, who in turn informs Ahasuerus and thereby saves his life. Finally, the “Oeconomicall part (the object whereof is Priuate Society)” pertains to family relationships: “the carriage of the Wife, to her Husband, in obeying . . . [and] of the Husband, to his Wife, in ruling” (42), as well as the respective obligations between fathers and sons and masters and servants. This third aspect of moral philosophy receives the least attention in *Hadassa*, with the ethical and political receiving the greatest emphases.

Quarles models his paradigm of practical morality upon Aristotle. Marginal references to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Ethics* suggest their role in shaping the poet’s interpretative approach to the Esther narrative. According to Kenneth Taylor,

the greater part of his discussion of “Ethicks, Politicks, and Oeconomicks” is based upon the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and he may also have read the *Politics* and the *Oeconomica*, or at least have been acquainted with them from his university training or through a commentary on Aristotle.<sup>215</sup>

Evidence of Aristotelian influence may be found, for example, in the “Catalogue of Morall vertues” Quarles cites in his preface to *Hadassa* (42). The virtues he includes parallel most of those discussed in Books Three, Four, and Five of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>216</sup> The marriage of Old Testament narrative with classical Greek philosophy contributes to the author’s goal of making his reader “a good Diuine, and a wise Moralist.” As Burton O. Kurth observes, “the heroic poem’s primary purpose was conceived to be moral instruction, setting forth historical examples of valor and virtue.”<sup>217</sup> The lessons Quarles hopes to elucidate in *Hadassa* are intended for a general audience, unlike the specifically female audience Thomas Bentley envisioned for *The Monument of Matrones* or Thomas Heywood for *Tunaikeion*.

The manner in which Quarles formats or structures his history consists “in the Periphrase, the adiournment of the Story, and the interposition of Meditations” (42). He divides the Book of Esther into twenty “Sections” (unlike the Old Testament narrative, which has ten chapters) that paraphrase the biblical text. The conclusion of each section

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<sup>215</sup> Kenneth Taylor, “Francis Quarles and the Renaissance Heroic-Biblical Poem: A Study of *A Feast for Wormes*, *Hadassa*, *Job Militant*, and *The Historie of Samson*,” diss., Boston U, 1970. 214. To date, Taylor’s study offers the only in-depth, critical analysis of *Hadassa*.

<sup>216</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. William Kaufman (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998) 34-97.

<sup>217</sup> Kurth 54.

is marked by the marginal notation “Explicit. Hist.” denoting the end of the biblical material. Quarles then reflects on the meaning of the preceding section in a “Meditatio,” drawing moral, theological or political lessons from that part of the biblical narrative. Concerned, perhaps, about the efficacy of his “manner” of presentation, he states, “I hope it hath not iniured the Matter: For in this, I was not the least carefull, to use the light of the best Expositors . . . not daring to goe vn-led, for feare of stumbling” (42). In his study of *Hadassa*, Kenneth Taylor identifies the primary “Expositors” consulted by Quarles, one of whom was Johannes Brentius, whose Latin treatise *A Right Godly and Learned Discourse Vpon the Booke of Ester* was translated into English by John Stockwood in 1584. The other was an anonymous translation printed in 1599 of *A Most Plaine and Profitable Exposition of the Booke of Ester, Deliuered in 26. Sermons* by Pierre Merlin.<sup>218</sup> Quarles thus reassures the reader that his meditations have been informed by the work of creditable scholars, in keeping with “the long tradition of exegesis and commentary . . . as a necessary adjunct to Biblical interpretation.”<sup>219</sup> To those who object to his versification of Holy Scripture (“Some say, Diuinity in Verse, is incongruous and vnpleasing”), he cites the Psalms of King David and the Song of Solomon, not unlike the argument Philip Sidney makes in *A Defence of Poesy*.<sup>220</sup> Moreover, he claims, poetry facilitates the remembrance of such worthy texts. *Hadassa*

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<sup>218</sup> Taylor 202-208.

<sup>219</sup> Kurth 19.

<sup>220</sup> Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poesy*, ed. Jan Van Dorsten (1966; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). Sidney argues, “And may I not presume a little further . . . and say that the holy David’s Psalms are a divine poem? If I do, I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men, both ancient and modern. But even the name of Psalms will speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but songs . . .” (22).



is written in iambic pentameter couplets, the metrical form widely favored by his Neoclassical successors.

Just as classical moral philosophy influences Quarles's hermeneutical approach, the features of classical epic also inform his narrative technique. Quarles incorporates familiar epic conventions: an invocation seeking divine inspiration, prefatory arguments, rhetorical tropes (extended similes and personification), and episodes of national consequence. Quarles offers an invocation to the "Great Director of the hearts of men" (43), imploring him to

Still my disquiet thoughts, Direct my Pen

No more mine owne, if thou adopt it thine:

Oh, be thy Spirit All in All to me,

That will implore no ayde, no Muse, but thee. (43)

Quarles presents a half-page prose summary of the Book of Esther titled "The Argvment of the History," and each of the twenty sections is preceded by a four-line argument, consisting of two couplets announcing the content of that section. Like his classical predecessors, the poet makes use of extended similes; to ensure that his reader recognizes them, he annotates the margins with "Simile" each time he incorporates one into the text. The extended simile in Meditation Ten recalls Virgil's famous analogy in Book One of the *Aeneid* comparing the thriving, new city of Carthage to the lively productivity of bees. Quarles also constructs a simile based upon bees, but, unlike Virgil,

his purpose is didactic. Just as “Each winged Burger acts his busie part,” so, too, must each of us

. . . suit his deare indeuour to his might:

Each one must lift, to make the burthen light,

Prouing the power, that his gifts afford,

To raise the best aduantage for his Lord,

Whose substitute he is, and for whose sake

We liue and breathe: each his account must make. (57)

Rather than using analogy to heighten descriptive imagery and intensify the reader’s aesthetic enjoyment of the text, as does Virgil, Quarles employs analogy in this case to instruct his audience to do their best in the service of God. Similarly, the personification of fierce Envy in Section Seven of *Hadassa* recalls the malevolence of Rumor in Book Four of the *Aeneid*, another instance of Quarles modeling his own poem upon epic conventions. His mythological allusions to Morpheus, Titan, and Astraea are further examples of his use of classical imagery.

The epic poet typically relates events central to a particular nation or people, as does Homer in the *Iliad* and Virgil in the *Aeneid*, events martial in nature that test the courage and resolve of an heroic figure such as Achilles, Odysseus, or Aeneas. Quarles attempts to do the same for the nation of Persia in a two and a half page, verse “Introduction” that precedes the main body of *Hadassa*.<sup>221</sup> By presenting the historical

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<sup>221</sup> In addition to biblical sources, Quarles relies primarily on Heroditus as his historical source for the events recounted in “The Introduction,” according to Kenneth Taylor. For an overview of Quarles’s use of Heroditus and other sources, see Taylor, *Francis Quarles and the Renaissance Heroic-Biblical Poem* 220-223.

events that precede the story proper, “Quarles succeeds in creating the impression that his paraphrase begins *in medias res*.”<sup>222</sup> Drawing upon extra-biblical sources such as Heroditus, he relates the destruction of Babylon by the Persian army, comparing that army to a “Harvester, with bubbling brow” whose sickle leaves behind only a field of stubble:

Euen so the Persian Host it selfe bestur’d,  
So fell great Babel by the Persian sword,  
Which warme with slaughter, and with blood imbru’d,  
Ne’r sheath’d, till wounded Babel fell, subdu’d. (43)

Quarles describes the tyrannical reign of Cambysis following the death of the great King Cyrus, and the political instability that ensues when Cambysis himself dies. Finally, a process is determined for choosing a new king of Persia. Quarles relates the subsequent gathering of candidates for the throne with the martial imagery typical of epic poetry:

When Phoebus Harbinger had chac’d the night,  
And tedious Phospher brought the breaking light,  
Complete in armes, and glorious in their trayne,  
Came these braue Heroes, prauncing o’re the playne . . .  
Into the royall Palace now they come:  
There sounds the martiall Trump, here beats the Drum,  
There stands a Steede, and champes his frothy steele,  
This stroaks the ground, that skorn’s it with his heele. (45)

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<sup>222</sup> Taylor 220.

Though greatly condensed by comparison, this gathering of “braue Heroes” suggests the catalogue of warriors Homer presents in Book Two of the *Iliad*. Assuerus is crowned the new king of Persia, and Quarles concludes his introduction by anticipating the events related in Section One of the poem proper: “To morrow goe we to his royal Feast.” (45).

A problem arises, however, with Quarles’s epic framing of *Hadassa*. His meditations or commentaries on the narrative passages never identify unambiguously the hero of the poem – surely the central feature of any classical epic. At the conclusion of “The Introduction,” Assuerus seems poised to assume that mantle. Yet in the ensuing narrative, Assuerus never overcomes the kind of challenges typically faced by epic heroes. In fact, according to “The Introduction,” he becomes the king only because his horse is the first to neigh when all the “heroes” gather together. Early in the poem, Quarles condemns the king’s inebriation, lust, and decadence – hardly the qualities one would expect in the protagonist of an heroic-biblical poem. Clearly, the hero of *Hadassa* ought to be Queen Esther. After all, it is she who resolves to sacrifice her life, if necessary, in an heroic attempt to rescue her people from certain annihilation. Not only does she succeed through wit and courage, but she saves the king’s life as well by revealing the eunuchs’ plan to assassinate him. While Quarles’s narrative paraphrase faithfully recounts the Queen’s actions as presented in the Old Testament, he virtually ignores her in all of his meditations except one. Time and again, when he relates some praiseworthy action or aspect of her character in his biblical paraphrase, the meditation that follows makes no mention of the Queen. This virtual “blackout” of Esther in the

meditations diminishes the reader's sense of Esther's heroism and leaves a void where an epic hero belongs.

Quarles introduces Esther in Section Four of *Hadassa*. In his paraphrase, Quarles expands upon the biblical description of the young woman as "fair and beautiful" (Esther 2:7) to feature her modesty as well:

Bright beames of beauty streamed from her eye,  
 And in her cheekes sate maiden modesty;  
 Which peerelesse beauty lent so kinde a rellish  
 To modest vertue, that they did imbellish  
 Each other's ex'lence, with a full assent,  
 In her to boast their perfect complement. (50)

Having just introduced the title character of the poem, however, Quarles virtually ignores her in Meditation Four. Instead, he expounds upon the problems that arise when either a king or his counselors are young and immature. (Meditation Four will be discussed at greater length in the latter part of this chapter.) Similarly, Section Five describes Esther's experience in the harem and how she won the favor of Hegai, the chief eunuch:

She sought not (as the rest) with braue attire,  
 To lend a needlesse spurre to foule Desire,  
 Nor yet indeuours 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 gaue her:

Her sober visage daily wan her honour:

Each wandring eye inflam'd, that look'd vpon her. (51)

Rather than commenting on Esther's womanly modesty and sobriety – her virtue – in the subsequent meditation, Quarles instead discusses God's creation of Man, the Fall, the corruption of free will, and the abuse of pleasure. He overlooks the young woman who conducts herself with dignity in the decadent world of an oriental harem.

The pivotal moment in the Esther narrative occurs when she resolves to enter the king's presence without being summoned, thus putting her own life at risk. Quarles relates her decision in Section Ten:

Then to the King (vncall'd) will I reparaire,

(How-e'r my boldnesse shall his Lawes contraire,)

And brauely welcome Death before mine eye,

And skorne her power: If I dye, I dye. (57)

Esther's language resonates with the heroic spirit typically found in male heroes. Yet Quarles diminishes the thrilling effect of her words in the ensuing meditation by discussing the "winged Common-wealth of Bees" in the extended simile previously noted. Rather than presenting Esther as a hero worthy of emulation or even acknowledging her courage, Quarles warns his readers that each will have to give account of his life: "each his account must make, / Or more, or lesse; and he whose power lacks / the meanes to gather honey, must bring waxe" (57). More prosaic than heroic, the admonition to bring wax if one cannot bring honey diminishes the life and death urgency of the queen's decision.

The only instance in which Quarles refers to Esther by name in one of his meditations occurs near the end of the poem. In Section Eighteen, the Queen requests that the Jews be granted a second day to defend themselves against their enemies. Furthermore, she entreats the king,

. . . let that cursed brood  
 (The sonnes of Haman, that in guilty blood,  
 Lye all ingoar'd, vnfit to taint a Graue)  
 Be hang'd on Gibbets, and (like co-heires) haue  
 Like Equall shares of that deserued shame,  
 Their wretched father purchas'd in his name. (64)

Assuerus agrees to her request, the Jews slay their enemies, and Haman's dead sons are hanged, just as their father had been. Quarles's commentary on this section examines the tension between grace and nature, explaining that faith requires a willingness to accept God's will even when we cannot make sense of circumstances. Referring to Samson, Jonah, and Esther, he wonders about God's ultimate purpose in each instance:

I dare not taske stout Samson for his death:  
 Nor wandring Ionah, that bequeath'd his breath  
 To raging Seas, when God commanded so;  
 Nor thee (great Queene) whose lips did ouerflow  
 With streames of blood; nor thee (O cruell kind)  
 To slake the vengeance of a woman's mind,  
 With flowing riuers of thy subiects' blood. (65)

As noted in Chapter One, the violent conclusion to the Book of Esther has long troubled Christian commentators who, in some cases, have argued against its canonicity on that basis. In this regard, Quarles's unease with Esther's vengeful request to the king reflects a common Christian response to the story. However, of all the episodes in the narrative, this is the only one that prompts him to allude specifically to Esther in any of the meditations. His representation here of the Queen, "whose lips did overflow / With streames of blood," is hardly flattering and appears at odds with his reference earlier in the text to "her perfit Grace" (50). He also appears to criticize Assuerus for agreeing to "slake the vengeance of a woman's mind, / With flowing riuers of [his] subiects' blood."

Esther's assertive role in initiating the Jews' militant response, as well as Assuerus's complicity in permitting it to occur, perhaps suggest to Quarles an inappropriate reversal of gender roles in the marital relationship. The only instance in which Quarles discusses marriage occurs in Meditation Three, following the account of Vashti's banishment and the king's subsequent decree commanding the subjection of wives to their husbands. Like other sixteenth and seventeenth century writers, Quarles uses the Vashti episode to underscore societal expectations of a woman's obedience to her husband. In this meditation, Quarles develops an analogy between the proper role of wives and the rib from which Eve was created: "Since of a Rib first framed was a Wife, / Let Ribs be Hi'roglyphicks of their life" (50). Just as ribs surround and guard the human heart, so, too, should "tender Wiues . . . loyally impart / Their watchfull care to fence their Spouses' heart" (50). Furthermore, ribs are fixed in place and do not move; therefore, Quarles asserts, "Women (like Ribs) must keepe their wonted home, / And not (like



Dinah that was rauish't) rome."<sup>223</sup> A woman's rule should extend only to her domestic household and her emotions. Otherwise, Quarles warns,

Ill thriues the haplesse Family, that showes  
 A Cocke that's silent, and a Hen that crowes.  
 I know not which liue more vngodly liues,  
 Obeying Husbands, or commanding Wiues. (50)

Based upon Quarles's prescription for a godly marriage, one could plausibly assume a certain reservation or even disapproval in his assessment of Esther's influence over her husband in condoning the slaughter of his own people at the hands of the Jews. That Quarles ignores Esther in nineteen out of twenty meditations, combined with the unflattering depiction of her in this one instance, indicates that she does not fulfill the role of epic hero in Quarles's poem. Although the title of the poem bears her name, Quarles is far more interested in commenting on contemporary social and political circumstances than in representing a heroine worthy of emulation. In fact, if the poem presents any hero at all, that figure would be King James I, as the following discussion will demonstrate.

Quarles dedicates *Hadassa* to King James, whom he calls that "Most High and Mighty Prince, Renowned for Learning, Piety, and All Graciovvs Governement" (41). As Quarles has indicated in his Preface, his history will explore the "Politically part" of moral philosophy: the proper obligation of a prince to his subjects and subjects to their prince.

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<sup>223</sup> The story of Dinah occurs in Genesis 34. Quarles alludes here to the first verse: "Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region." A local prince sees her, rapes her, then determines to marry her. Quarles implies that Dinah was at least partially responsible for her misfortune because she had ventured beyond her domestic boundaries. For a feminist reading of the Dinah narrative, see "The Dinah Affair" in *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* by Tikva Frymer-Kensky (New York: Schocken, 2002) 179-98.

To that end, Quarles not only comments on the behavior of Assuerus in the Esther narrative, but he also refers to James I throughout the meditations, praising his governance and offering prayers for his protection. According to biographer Karl Josef Höltgen, “In *Hadassa* (1621) Quarles already reveals himself as a staunch Royalist and an advocate of the divine right of kings.”<sup>224</sup> For example, in Meditation Sixteen, Quarles writes, “God sets the Princely Crowne / On heads of Kings; Who then may take it downe? / No iuste Quarrell, or more noble Fight, / Than to maintaine, where God hath giu’n a Right” (63). Again, in Meditation Nineteen, the poet decrees, “A Lawfull King / Is God’s Lieu-tenant; in his sacred eare / God whispers oft, and keepes his Presence there” (66). That Quarles affirms such God-given authority for his sovereign would have pleased King James, whose political treatises, *Basilikon Doran* (1603) and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1603), asserted a king’s – and hence his own – divine right to the throne.

Like the sixteenth-century interlude *Godly Queene Hester*, the meditations in *Hadassa* emphasize the importance of kingly justice and wise counsel. As noted earlier in Chapter Three, King Assuerus proclaims in *Godly Queene Hester*,

Justis mainteneth the common weale,  
And namely the prince muste nedes him selfe applye,  
Vnto the same, or els vtterly  
Shall folowe decay by warre or els death. (89-92)

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<sup>224</sup> Karl Josef Höltgen, *Francis Quarles, 1592-1644: Meditativer Dichter, Emblematiker, Royalist* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1978) 341. Although the biography is written in German, Höltgen includes a five-page “Summary” in English of Quarles’s life and work.

Quarles echoes that sentiment in Meditation Thirteen:

There's nothing vnder heauen more glorifies  
 The name of Kings, or in a subiect's eyes  
 Winnes more obseruance, or true loyalty,  
 Than sacred Iustice, shared equally:  
 No greater glory can belong to Might,  
 Than to defend the feeble in their right;  
 To helpe the helplesse, and their wrongs redresse,  
 To curbe the haughty-hearted and suppressse  
 The proud . . . . (60)

When kings manifest “sacred Iustice” throughout their kingdom, they “aptly may deserue the name / Of Gods, inshrin'd in an earthly frame” (60). Quarles concludes this meditation by praising King James for having studied the ways of righteousness and justice since the early days of his childhood.

Meditation Four affirms the necessity of wise and mature councillors and celebrates the excellent advisors whom James has selected. According to Quarles,

The strongest Arcteries that knit and tye  
 The members of a mixed Monarchy,  
 Are learned Councils, timely Consultations,  
 Rip'ned Aduice, and sage Deliberations;  
 And if those Kingdomes be but ill be-blest,  
 Whose Rule's committed to a young man's brest;

Then such Estates are more vnhappy farre,  
 Whose choycest Councillors but Children are. (50)

Quarles cites the biblical example of King Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam, whose "rash, and beardless Councill" (51) led to his downfall.<sup>225</sup> Turning from Hebraic to English history to illustrate his point, he alludes to Richard II, ignominiously deposed by his cousin Bolingbroke in 1399:

Thou second Richard (once our Brittain King,  
 Whose Syr's, and Grandsyr's fame the world did ring)  
 How was thy gentle nature led aside,  
 By greene aduisements, which thy State did guide,  
 Vntill the title of thy Crowne did crack,  
 And fortunes (like thy Father's name) were black? (51)

(A marginal annotation reminds the reader that Richard II was the son of the Black Prince, one of medieval England's great warrior-princes.) Quarles is not the first poet to connect Richard's downfall to his ill-chosen councillors. Most notably, William Shakespeare dramatized the disastrous consequences of Richard's dependence upon immature advisors. In *Richard II*, the wayward king's dying uncle, John of Gaunt, tells the Duke of York, "Though Richard my life's counsel would not hear / My death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear" (2.1.15-16), to which the Duke replies,

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<sup>225</sup> See 1 Kings 12 for the story of Rehoboam's confrontation with his challenger, Jeroboam. "The king [Rehoboam] answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men . . ." (12:13-14).

No, it is stopped with other flattering sounds,  
 As praises, of whose taste the wise are fond,  
 Lascivious metres, to whose venom sound  
 The open ear of youth doth always listen. (2.1.17-20)<sup>226</sup>

And yet, Quarles asserts, such problems do not threaten the well-being of contemporary England, “In all things blest, that to a State pertaine” (51). The poet credits this sanguine state of affairs to England’s noble king:

Thrise happy in my dreaded Soueraigne,  
 My sacred Sou’raigne, in whose onely brest,  
 A wise Assembl’ of Priuy Councils rest,  
 Who conquers with his princely Heart as far  
 By peace, as Alexander did by War,  
 And with his Olife branch more hearts did boord,  
 Then daring Cesar did, with Cesar’s sword:  
 Long mayst thou hold within thy Royall hand,  
 The peacefull Scepter of our happy Land. (51)

The references to Alexander and Caesar recall the poem’s epic context, but Quarles characterizes James as a champion of peace rather than of war in accordance with the King’s own self-perception: “James’s vision of himself as *rex pacificus* and international peacemaker dominated his conduct of English foreign policy.”<sup>227</sup> If James presented

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<sup>226</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, 1968) 443.

<sup>227</sup> Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age: England, 1603-1714*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1992) 124.

himself as a latter-day Caesar Augustus, he was assisted by “Poets and divines [who] throughout the reign expanded on the role of ‘Our Augustus,’ and drew parallels between Jacobus Pacificus’ peace with Spain and Augustus’ pax Romana.”<sup>228</sup> Quarles puts his own spin on “Jacobus Pacificus” in *Hadassa*.

The reign of James I may have been marked by a prolonged period of peace, but it is puzzling why, in 1621, Quarles should praise the king’s choice of advisors. James was indeed well served in the first half of his reign by Robert Cecil, his principal secretary. Following Cecil’s death in 1612, however, the advisors to whom James turned, primarily the Howard family, were far less capable.<sup>229</sup> Moreover, the king became famously enthralled, sexually and politically, to George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham and a member of the Privy Council. As private secretary to the king, he controlled patronage and thus exercised enormous power at court. By 1618, he was arguably the most intimate and influential of the king’s advisors. However, “his ascendancy increased the debauchery at court,”<sup>230</sup> as Alvin Kernan explains:

In the time of James Stuart the English court increasingly appeared to sober people of all ranks a shabby place of epicures, perverts, thieves, beggars, quarelers, and sycophants. . . . A dotting king playing with himself and his minions in public, young men of

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<sup>228</sup> Alvin Kernan, *Shakespeare, the King’s Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603-1613* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) 121.

<sup>229</sup> Stuart E. Prall and David Harris Wilson, *A History of England*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, 1991) 345-48.

<sup>230</sup> Prall and Wilson 346.

good families prostituting themselves to get ahead, the peers and great ones of the realm falling down drunk, rioting, gambling, and whoring their substance away.<sup>231</sup>

Indeed, Quarles unequivocally condemns such decadent behavior in Meditation One: “How doe our wretched times degenerate / From former Ages! How intemperate / Hath lauish custome made our bed-rid Age” (48). Contemporary culture, he laments, is filled “with obsceane delights, and foule ebriety” (48). In the following meditation, he mourns the disappearance of “Chastity, the Flowre of the soule” and roundly condemns the products of drunkenness: “Anger, contentious Wrath, and wrathfull Hate / Attend the Feast, where Wine’s immoderate” (48-49). In this regard, it is difficult to reconcile the poet’s disgust for debauchery with his effusive praise for a king whose court was rife with immorality.

While Quarles’s intention here may not be readily discerned, it *is* apparent that the Esther narrative provides him with a paradigm for addressing his concerns about the King’s unsuitable courtiers. The biblical story presents courtiers both loyal and treacherous: Modecai epitomizes the former and Haman the latter. Furthermore, the long, drunken revelry at the palace which opens the narrative suggests the kind of behavior at the English court deplored by Quarles. Through his retelling of the Esther narrative, Quarles could indirectly warn of the dangers incurred by relying upon ignoble and deceitful councillors. In this context, *Hadassa* bears a resemblance to *Godly Queen Hester*, as discussed in a previous chapter. In that interlude, the figure of Haman can be

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<sup>231</sup> Kernan 120.

understood as representing Cardinal Wolsey or Robert Dudley, two powerful councillors to their respective monarchs. In Quarles's poem, Haman as a treacherous courtier represents those at James's court who undermine the King's prestige because of their flagrant immorality. Thus, the Esther narrative clearly resonates with authors like Quarles and the anonymous author of *Godly Queen Hester* who find in its characters parallels to contemporary problems at court.



## **Chapter Six:**

### **“Esther Hath Hanged Haman”: Women Writing Esther**

In order to recapture the meaning and significance of Queen Esther in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, this study has identified primary sources featuring the once-prominent heroine and discussed her literary representation in light of historical, political, social, and religious contexts. As the previous chapters demonstrate, the figure of Queen Esther played a unique role in the discourse of the early modern period. The differing aspects of her character – obedient orphan, beautiful virgin, clever and courageous queen, savior of Diaspora Jews – allowed for multiple, at times even contradictory, depictions of Esther in early modern literature. She was at once a model of wifely submission in the private sphere and female governance in the public sphere. She was celebrated for her modesty and chastity as well as her initiative and heroism. To Protestants, she symbolized the salvation of God’s chosen people, the new Israel inaugurated by the English Reformation; to Catholics, she evoked the traditional, intercessory role of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Remarkably, Esther could represent either a devoutly Catholic queen, Catherine of Aragon, or a determinedly Protestant queen, Elizabeth Tudor, in the same dramatic interlude. So various was her image that Queen Elizabeth alluded to the martial aspect of Esther when contemplating England’s enemies, while her cousin Mary of Scotland embraced the Esther who served her people prayerfully instead of militarily.

If one looks beyond the figure of Esther herself to the narrative as a whole, one discovers in its setting rich possibilities for Elizabethan and Jacobean writers intent on criticizing the court. In her analysis of the Book of Esther, Sidnie White Crawford labels part of the narrative a “royal courtier tale” based upon “the court setting, the struggle between royal courtiers, the relationship of Esther to Mordecai as the adopted child of the wise courtier, and the portrayal of Ahasuerus as the type of the foolish king.”<sup>232</sup> The conflict between Mordecai, the honest, loyal courtier, and Haman, his scheming, ambitious counterpart, provided a paradigm by which early modern writers could attack courtiers or councillors deemed arrogant or dangerous. The anonymous author of *Godly Queen Hester* could satirize Cardinal Wolsey through Haman and the allegorical characters representing aspects of his personality: Ambition, Pryde, and Adulation. If interpreting the characters after the play’s 1560 publication, one could draw comparisons between Haman and Robert Dudley, as Chapter Three has indicated. In the next century, Francis Quarles manifested a similar concern for wise and trustworthy councillors in the meditations pertaining to James I in his poem *Hadassa*. The Esther narrative, with its contrast between good and bad courtiers, thus served as a cautionary tale to royal advisors in the Henrican, Elizabethan, and Jacobean courts.

As this brief review demonstrates, Queen Esther was an extraordinarily versatile figure in early modern England; the fluidity of her representation was matched by few female characters in that era. Writers appropriated her image in multiple contexts for varying purposes. Up to this point in my study, however, almost all of the primary

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<sup>232</sup> Crawford 132.

sources discussed have been written by men. To be sure, male authors invariably praise Esther, contrasting her with such Old Testament queens as Jezebel, the pagan wife of King Ahab and enemy of the prophet Elija.<sup>233</sup> How ironic that male authors should appropriate this strong female character to signify *their* political, social, and religious concerns. As recent feminist scholarship has demonstrated, various early modern women writers also employed the Book of Esther, along with other biblical narratives, to rebut misogynistic charges and argue on behalf of women's spiritual equality with men. According to Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus, "The period is especially significant for readers today because the silent half of humankind finally began to write in their own defense, and the female debaters infused the [woman] controversy with passion, conviction, and a new sense of purpose."<sup>234</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine in detail the differences between male and female appropriations of the Esther narrative, two works in particular by women should be noted.

Among the most revisionary defenses put forth by a woman was Aemilia Lanier's in her poem *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, printed the same year as the Authorized Version of the Bible. Hers was the first collection of poems by a woman printed in England.

Moreover, according to Susanne Woods,

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<sup>233</sup> Opponents of female rule frequently cited Queen Jezebel, depicted in 1 Kings 16-22, as a warning of the disaster that befalls a nation when women take command. For example, when John Knox excoriates the Catholic queens in *The First Blast of the Trumpet*, he compares them to Jezebel twice in one paragraph: "In them we also finde the spirit of Jesabel and Athalia [her daughter]; under them we finde the simple people oppressed, the true religion extinguished, and the blood of Christes membres most cruellie shed." In short, "these Jesabelles" are "the uttermoste of [God's] plagues." *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (404).

<sup>234</sup> Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1985) 20.

the book is dedicated and addressed only to women, assumes a community of intellectual women, and makes no serious apology for a woman poet publishing her own work.

This unapologetic creation of a community of good women for whom another woman is the spokesperson and commemorator is unusual and possibly unique in seventeenth century England.<sup>235</sup>

In her account of Christ's Passion, Lanyer famously reinterprets Eve's culpability in the Fall, as presented through the words of Pilate's wife.

Allusions to Esther occur twice in the poem, the first in the prefatory letter addressed "To the Vertuous Reader" and later in an encomium to Lanyer's patron, Margaret Clifford, the Countess of Cumberland. In her address to the reader, Lanyer claims that men have so exasperated God that he sometimes "gave power to wise and virtuous women, to bring downe their [men's] pride and arrogancie."<sup>236</sup> She then identifies biblical villains overthrown by women, including "wicked Haman, by the divine prayers and prudent proceedings of beautiful Hester."<sup>237</sup> In this context, Lanyer employs Esther to support her argument that God does, in fact, choose women to rule over men when men become displeasing in his sight.

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<sup>235</sup> Susanne Woods, introduction, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) xxxi.

<sup>236</sup> Aemilia Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 49.

<sup>237</sup> Lanyer 49.

Lanyer subsequently refers to Esther when celebrating the virtue of Margaret Clifford, who had invited the poet to reside for a time at Cooke-ham, the Clifford family home. In praising the Countess, Lanyer compares her to Esther, concluding

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.<sup>238</sup>

In a poem celebrating the “community of good women,” in the words of Susanne Woods, Esther serves as a model of feminine piety as she fasts and prays in an effort to save her people from annihilation. That Margaret Clifford exceeds such a paragon in her own devotion and service to God is, for Lanyer, high praise, indeed.

Perhaps the most memorable reference to Esther by a woman author occurs several years later in 1617 with the publication of a pamphlet titled *Esther Hath Hanged Haman*, a spirited response to Joseph Swetnam's vitriolic attack upon women two years earlier.<sup>239</sup> In contrast to the typical depiction of Haman as a scheming courtier, here he represents a misogynistic author who has publicly denounced the female sex. The author, whose

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<sup>238</sup> Lanyer 116.

<sup>239</sup> For an overview of the woman controversy in early modern England, see Part One of *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* by Henderson and McManus. See also *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* by Linda Woodbridge (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1984).

pseudonym is Esther Sowernam, explains in her prefatory letter addressed “To all Right Honorable, Noble, and worthy Ladies, Gentlewomen, and virtuously disposed of the Feminine Sex” her method of defending women against Swetnam’s scurrilous charges. In the first part of her apology, she writes, she intends to “plainly and resolutely deliver the worthiness and worth of women both in respect of their Creator as in the work of Redemption. Next I do show in examples out of both the Testaments what blessed and happy choice hath been made of women as gracious instruments to derive God’s blessings and benefits to mankind.”<sup>240</sup> Sowernam subsequently refers to Esther and other women of the Old Testament in Chapter Three of her pamphlet, while Chapter Four presents New Testament women favored by God.

The references to Esther by Aemilia Lanyer and Esther Sowernam clearly demonstrate a strong familiarity with the biblical narrative, suggesting once again the prominence of the Esther character in the literature of the period. Indeed, Sowernam was so confident of her readers’ knowledge of the story that she named her pamphlet for its main characters. In a larger sense, however, these allusions to Esther by women authors indicate something even more important than familiarity with the text. With their greater access to vernacular Bibles, women of this period could find for themselves confirmation of their worth in Scripture rather than the centuries-long condemnation of their sex based upon Eve’s disobedience. As the authors of *Half Humankind* observe, “All of these instances [in the Bible] of God’s favor toward individual women serve to suggest the

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<sup>240</sup> Esther Sowernam, *Esther Hath Hanged Haman, Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640*, ed. Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1985) 219.

moral and spiritual worth of women in general. Thus feminist authors counter the negative stereotypes of women found in the misogynistic treatises with different, positive stereotypes.”<sup>241</sup> With its array of heroines chosen and blessed by God, among whom was Queen Esther, the Bible served to empower women. In the end, Esther not only helped to save the Jewish people from destruction, but she also helped to free Christian women from the misperception of their spiritual unworthiness.

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<sup>241</sup> Henderson and McManus 49.

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