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Adina Van Etten
Seattle University

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Esther, the Christian Queen of Persia: *Godly Queene Hester* (1529) and the Appropriation of Jewish Narratives on the Tudor Stage

Adina Van Etten, History

Faculty Mentor: Theresa Earenfight, PhD, History

Faculty Content Editor: Allison Meyer, PhD, English

Student Editors: Nicole Beauvais and Melat Ermyas

Abstract

This paper discusses how the 1529 play *A New Enterlude of the Godly Queene Hester* uses the story of Esther, the Jewish Queen of Persia, to create a model for good Christian queenship and monarchy. Previous scholarship has focused on how this play served as an allegory for contemporary political events, specifically the scandals surrounding Cardinal Wolsey and the very public decay of the marriage between Catherine of Aragon and King Henry VIII of England. Building on previous scholarship, this paper will focus on how these allegories serve to present the play's Jewish characters and Jewishness in general. This paper will also discuss the meaning of the story of Esther to Jews in the late medieval and early modern periods and how the contemporary situation of Jews in Europe—specifically in England and the Iberian Peninsula—could have informed the way they are presented in this play. I argue that the way Jewishness is transformed into allegories in *Godly Queene Hester* allows the play to focus on good rulership and contemporary politics, while effectively removing the story's Jewish nature and contemporary Jewish meaning, therefore exiling the Jews from the narrative—much like England and Spain exiled their actual Jewish populations in 1290 and 1492, respectively.

Introduction

In 1560, two years into the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, a little play called *A New Enterlude of the Vertuous and Godly Queene Hester* was published. The play had been written several decades prior in 1529, although it was likely deemed too scandalous a critique of the current monarch to publish.¹ One might expect such a sensational play to be a ribald parody or a nitty-gritty political takedown. What we find instead is a retelling of the biblical story of Esther.

The story of Esther is very old, dating to around the fifth century BCE with versions in Hebrew and Greek. For Jews, the story of Esther forms the basis of the holiday of Purim. Jews all around the world celebrate Purim in early spring with much pomp, circumstance, and—above all—joy. As part of the festivities, the story of Esther is told by reading the *Megillat Ester* (Scroll of Esther) and by putting on short, comical plays known as *Purim shpils*. My own account of the Book of Esther won't be nearly as fun as a *shpil*, but I hope it can entertain and inform all the same.

As the story goes, there was once a king of Persia named Ahasuerus who was more interested in throwing lavish parties than ruling his kingdom. At one of his parties, Ahasuerus asked his wife, Vashti, to dance naked before his guests. When Vashti refused, Ahasuerus decided to make an example out of her—how he does this is unclear, but exile and beheading tend to be the most popular versions of the story.

Unfortunately, this decision left the king without a wife. So, he rounded up the beautiful maidens of his kingdom and held an Ancient Persian beauty pageant to choose his next queen. One of the young women summoned to the palace was a beautiful and virtuous Jewish orphan named Esther who had been raised by her uncle, Mordechai. Before Esther meets the king, Mordechai warns her not to reveal that she is Jewish (the reason for this is also unclear, but it is often read as a way to avoid anti-Semitism). When Esther meets the king, he falls head over heels in love with her and immediately chooses her as his new queen.

Fast forward a few years into their marriage and Ahasuerus has gotten himself a new advisor, a devious and ambitious man named Haman. Haman parades himself around the royal city on a white horse and orders the people to bow before him. Mordechai alone refuses to bow. When asked why, Mordechai states that he will not bow because he is a Jew. Exactly what being a Jew has to do with not bowing has been debated by rabbis for centuries, but regardless he doesn't bow, and Haman doesn't take it well. He takes it so poorly, in fact, that he makes it his mission to kill the entire Jewish population of Persia.

Mordechai races to inform Esther of Haman's plot and she devises a plan of her own. After fasting for three days, Esther goes to the king's chambers uninvited (which could mean death if he did not love her so much) and requests a dinner with him and Haman; Ahasuerus agrees. At the end of the first dinner, Ahasuerus asks Esther what she wishes. Esther requests

only that the two come back for a second dinner. She has the same request at the end of the second dinner. However, at the third dinner, Esther dramatically reveals that she is a Jew, that there is a plot to kill her people, and that Haman has tricked the king into signing off on it! The king promptly cancels Haman's genocidal order and has him executed instead—a happy ending as far as Jewish history is concerned (Marcus).

The story of Esther is an important cultural touchstone, and like all good stories, it is malleable—that is to say, it has many facets and can be read in many ways. So, as the story is retold every year, it is also *reinvented*.² For example, *The Forward*, one of America's longest running Jewish newspapers, puts out a slew of modern interpretations of Esther each spring and no two tell exactly the same story. An article that asks Jews to become invested in contemporary human rights violations emphasizes very different aspects of Esther than one that explains how queer Jews might relate to Esther as a coming out story (Harris; Sheinerman).

The broad appeal of the Esther story is much the same for Jews today as it was for Christians in the Middle Ages. Medieval European Christians found that the same elements that made the story compelling for Jews—"the exotic setting, the beautiful young heroine, the ironic reversals of fortune"—could be just as exciting in a Christian context (Summer 47-48). Put simply, they retold Esther for the same reason we still retell the Trojan War: a good story is a good story.

And yet, stories are malleable, and no two retellings are the same. *Godly Queene Hester* is no exception; it is as much its own story as it is Esther's. As previous scholars have made clear, *Godly Queene Hester* is wholly political and strives to use the story of Esther as an allegory for contemporary politics. In this way, the play transforms Esther from a Jewish heroine empowered by righteous fury into a model for good Christian queenship and monarchy—a model that, in this case, is specifically aimed to address the very public problems between Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII of England. In order to construct this model, many aspects of the Esther story are reduced in importance or thrown out altogether. Namely, it is Esther's Jewishness that is sacrificed as *Godly Queene Hester* takes a story firmly rooted in Jewish identity and reworks it to conform to an allegory for Tudor politics.

Catherine of Aragon as Godly Queene Hester

Why is this play different from all other plays? Well, while the plot of *Godly Queene Hester* generally follows the Megillah (Scroll), it is not your typical Esther story. Instead of opening with a drunken king making demands of his steadfast wife, *Godly Queene Hester* opens with Assuerus (Ahasuerus) seated on his throne and engaged in civil debate with his noble courtiers. Assuerus asks the courtiers, "Which is [the] most worthy honoure to attayne?" They reply that virtue is the most worthy, even above wealth, power, wisdom, and nobility.

The purpose of opening with this “sober rumination” on kingly duty, as Saralyn E. Summer puts it in her dissertation on the multifaceted nature of Esther in Tudor England, is to prime the audience to view the play as a comment on both morality and monarchy (51-53).

One character is conspicuously absent from this new opening: Vashti is nowhere to be seen. Courtly debate concluded, Assuerus proclaims that something has been troubling him: his lack of a wife. As he says,

ASSUERUS. My lordes, as nowe, thus standes the case,
we are comfortles, for lacke of a Queene,
which shoulde be our joye, & chefe solace,
And to say truth, it hath not been oft seene,
But the prince with a princes matched hath beene,
Least defaulte of issue shoulde be, whiche God defende
therefore youre counsells firste had, to marry we do inted. (*A New Enterlude* 7)

This passage establishes two things; first, that Assuerus has never been married and second, that it is God’s will that he *should* be married as soon as possible just as the princes and princesses before him have been. Vashti is even further removed from the story when Mardocheus (Mordechai) gives Hester (Esther) her pre-wedding pep talk. Mardocheus cautions that Hester should “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” (*A New Enterlude* 9). Not only is Vashti removed entirely, but the *whole idea* of wifely disobedience is absent as well.

Now, this is an odd omission, even for a Christian version of Esther. However, Summer proposes that the play’s “didactic intent” could have something to do with it (56). After all, if the play means to “instruct women in virtuous behavior through the example set by Queen Esther” as it declares in its prologue (56), it would make sense to omit Vashti. But then, why not include Vashti as a counterexample, as medieval rabbis often did in their commentaries? In fact, as Barry Dov Walfish notes, while some rabbis criticized Ahasuerus’s proposition to Vashti, “there is complete unanimity among the exegetes” that Vashti’s punishment was justified (196). Since the punishment is thus justified, Vashti becomes the perfect counterpoint to Esther; we see the bad wife and what happens to her before we are awed by how the good wife is rewarded.

You could respond to this with ‘What does it matter if the rabbis agreed? This is a Christian play!’ However, there are quite a few good Christian reasons to include Vashti as a negative example. The first relies on an allegorical reading of the Book of Esther, which was first written about by Apherat (c. 270-350 CE), who reconfigured the Book of Esther into “a

tool for teaching a Christian triumphalist doctrine” (Bachmann 121). This specific doctrine is known as the ‘replacement doctrine’ or ‘supersessionism.’ Simply put, supersessionism is the idea that Judaism is obsolete, and Christianity has replaced it. For Apharat, the story of Esther is not a rescue of the Jews, but the salvation of Christianity in the face of “lost, misled or even obstinate” Jews (121). Apharat comes to this conclusion by recasting Vashti as the Jews. In this iteration of the replacement doctrine, “it is not Esther, the Judean woman, who stands for the Jewish people”—instead, it is Vashti, the discarded, disobedient wife who is made to represent the Jews, only to be replaced by Esther, whom Apharat transforms into the beacon of Christian triumph (120).

While supersessionism certainly held strong in the minds of Christians in the early 1500s, there is also a less theological and far more practical reason to include Vashti: to reinforce political power. We see this in another sort of early sixteenth century Christian one-act, the *autos sacramentales*, which were popular throughout Iberia and its colonies. According to Professor Emily Colbert Cairns, whose 2015 article in *Hispanofila* speaks at length about these plays, for the Church and monarchy who sponsored the *autos*, the most important part of the Book of Esther was that it allowed them to celebrate obedience to a strong empire and the punishment that can (and should) be visited on a disobedient subject. In these plays, “the punishment of Vashti is primary” and Vashti’s trial, in a nod to the Inquisition, is foregrounded (Colbert Cairns 186, 188). In this way, the *auto sacramental* became not simply a play, but “a tool of the Iberian empire” (189).

But for a Vashti-less *Godly Queene Hester*, which never even takes up the question of what to do with a disobedient wife, the question persists: *why not* include Vashti (Dillon 24)? As with most questions related to this play, the answer lies in the politics of the time. *Godly Queene Hester*, as we shall see, is pro-Catherine of Aragon in all things, but especially in its promotion of the ideal royal marriage (Earenfight 160-162). It seems to me that the inclusion of Vashti would have undercut the play’s pro-Catherine sentiment by seeming to endorse a king’s right to cast aside a wife he no longer wants. Better to pretend Vashti never existed at all than to risk even the barest implication that a royal marriage could ever go south.

In addition to Vashti, there is another character who is not omitted but is given short shrift by *Godly Queene Hester*. Here, Mardocheus is demoted from supporting character to exposition device as his role is reduced to about ten lines—at the beginning to introduce Hester, a brief appearance to tell her of Aman’s (Haman’s) plot, and once at the end to thank Assuerus for stopping Aman. There is no mention of Mardocheus’ defiance of Aman’s arrogance, and yet Aman still has it out for him. After Assuerus signs off on his plot, Aman gloats, saying, “We be glad we have attained our purpose, / I trust it shall abate the hie corage / Of Mardocheus” (*A New Enterlude* 32).

If Mardocheus’ role is reduced, how does the audience know that Aman is in fact

a downright, no good, untrustworthy scoundrel? To explain this, *Godly Queene Hester* innovatively employs a trope of Tudor interludes—the allegorical characters, who represent various vices and virtues. While they are traditionally onstage in relation to the non-allegorical characters, here the vices Pride, Adulation, and Ambition perform a self-contained “interruption to the main plot” that lasts almost eight pages (Dillon 135).⁴ Not only that, but as Janette Dillon, a specialist in early modern theater who has taken an in-depth look at *Godly Queene Hester*, points out, these allegories are also remarkable for the fact that they have been completely drained of the qualities they are meant to represent. For example, Pride, who is usually signified “through rich and extravagant clothes,” enters instead “poorly arrayed” (Dillon 135). What happened to him? Well, Pride tells us, it is all Aman’s doing, “For Aman that elfe, woulde no man but hym selfe / Should be proude in dede. / For as men say, all pryde he taketh away” (*A New Enterlude* 17). In this scene, the allegories tell us all we need to know about Aman; he is so prideful and ambitious, and demands so much adulation that he makes the vices themselves poor.

While the audience now knows that Aman is a villain, the non-allegorical characters in the play do not. This makes perfect sense for Hester, Mardocheus, and the king’s servants who leave the stage after Assuerus’s acceptance of Hester. However, it is a little more complicated when it comes to the king. The stage directions specify that “Here departith y queene & Aman & all y maidens,” but not the king, who declares that he shall instead “repose for our pleasure and ease” (*A New Enterlude* 15). This indicates that the king is most likely in his ‘traverse,’ a curtained booth or bed to one side of the stage, for the whole of the allegories’ interlude-within-an-interlude. The choice to stage the king curtained and resting off to the side while the vices vilify Aman is, like most things in this play, expressly political as it implicitly criticizes the king’s blindness to the activities of his own advisor (Dillon 136).

This is another departure from the usual Esther story as most versions of Esther—Christian and Jewish—paint Ahasuerus as a good king who simply got duped by a bad advisor (Walfish 195). Here, the king is implicated in Aman’s villainy. Yes, Assuerus still rails against Aman after Hester reveals him, shouting, “O kaytiffe moste crafty o false dissembler, / with thy flatteringe tongue thou hast deceyved me” (*A New Enterlude* 38). But, if we look back at the interaction between Aman and Assuerus, we see that this king was not nearly as much of a victim as he wants his wife to think:

AMAN. To your pleasure and proffitte substantial,
And to be playne this is fyrste of all.
A great number of Jewes with in this realme do dwell
A people not goode, nor for youre common weale...

ASSUERUS. My lorde Aman we have harde ryght well,
All your oration which is so elegante...
And as touchinge the Jewes which be so valiaunte,
Both of goodes and greate possession,
we do agree unto theyre suppression. (*A New Enterlude* 30-31)

So, while Ahasuerus of the *Megillat Ester* can easily claim he did not know Haman intended to harm the Jews specifically, Assuerus of *Godly Queene Hester* cannot say the same. With this in mind, Assuerus' "o false dissembler" line now seems more than a bit disingenuous and self-serving (Walker 80). And yet, as Greg Walker, one of the first to illuminate the political allegories in this play, has made clear, this less-than-innocent Assuerus may not make much sense in the context of the biblical story of Esther, but he most certainly does in the context of Tudor politics. A king turning a blind eye to his corrupt advisor would have rung more than a few bells for a Tudor audience familiar with Henry VIII and the meteoric rise and subsequent fall from grace of his own advisor, Cardinal Wolsey (73-74).

Henry's connection to Assuerus is underscored by how directly tied to Catherine of Aragon the character of Hester is. Now, connecting virtuous queens to Esther is nothing new; in fact, it goes back to at least the eleventh century in England and persisted through the Middle Ages. What did a queen have to do to be lauded as "a second Esther" (Huneycutt 134)? Above all, she had to be associated in some way with the idea of mercy (Huneycutt 127). For example, Matilda of Scotland (1080-1118) was often compared to Esther for the way she brokered peace between the Normans and the English (Huneycutt 130). But how do we get from the Esther of the Megillah who boldly accuses Haman of genocide and has him hanged, to a Christian Esther who is held up as the paragon of mercy?

The driving factor behind this Christian adaptation of Esther is the idea of prefiguration. 'Prefiguration' refers to the Christian idea that elements of the Hebrew Bible anticipated the New Testament. Like so many other Jewish heroines, from Eve to Miriam to Judith, Esther becomes a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary. For Esther, it is the scene of her "pleading with King Ahasuerus" for the salvation of the Jews that is connected most closely to the Virgin Mary, as Mary was both the intercessor on the Day of Judgement and the Queen of Heaven (Bohn 184). It is not surprising, then, that Catherine of Aragon was connected to Esther, as she was often lauded for stepping in (or rather kneeling in the traditional tableau of queenly mercy) to save the lives of those who would otherwise have faced her husband's notorious temper (Summer 64).

In *Godly Queene Hester*, the playwright makes this connection between Catherine and Hester through several unsubtle allusions. First, our heroine does not win the king's heart on beauty alone as in the Megillah. Instead, like Catherine, our Hester is a woman of learning, and

it is her intelligence that impresses the king. At Hester's first meeting with Assuerus, the king tests her queenly qualifications by asking her opinions on "some probleme of hye dubitation" (Summer 54; Dillon 121). Hester shows herself to be incredibly intelligent and articulate as she insists, in a rather radical take on marriage equality that the play itself seems to endorse, that a queen ought to be just as virtuous as a king (Summer 57). As she says,

HESTER. No quene there is but by marriage of a prince,
And under couert according to the lawe...
Albeit sometyme more for love than for awe
The king is content to be counselled by the queene...
The kynge wyth hys councill must parte of all
From this realm to be absente, when warre doth call.
Then the Quenes wysdome, sadly muste deale,
By her greate vertue, to rewle the common weale. (*A New Enterlude* 13)

Interestingly, not only does Hester speak here about a queen's virtue in general, she also specifically mentions a queen's duty to serve as regent when the king is off to war. This is the most explicit parallel between Hester and Catherine that appears in the play; having impressed Henry VIII with her "intelligence and diplomatic ability," Catherine was herself appointed regent in 1513 when Henry went off to fight in France (Summer 60-61). While Henry was in France, the Scots invaded from the north and Catherine acted decisively as Queen Regent to rally her troops and crush the Scottish army (60-61). The anonymous author of *Godly Queene Hester* was intimately familiar with this incident. Not only does Hester speak on the need for a virtuous queen regent, but the author makes the parallel explicit in the allegories' interlude-within-an-interlude. As Ambytion bemoans all that Aman has taken from him, he turns his ire towards the sorry state of Persia now that Aman has the king's ear. On top of the routine fears of famine and poverty, he is terrified that things could get even worse "wherefore yf warre should chaunce, eyther wyth Scotland or Fraunce, / Thys geare woulde not goe ryght" (*A New Enterlude* 20). One can't help but wonder if Ambytion's worries would abate if Hester/Catherine were on the throne instead of Assuerus/Henry.

Another direct parallel to Catherine comes with the emphasis on virginity. While the Megillah implies that part of the king's choice of queen depends on their sexual compatibility, here our Hester is introduced by Mardocheus as "a virgin pure, / A pearl undefiled and of conscience clear" (Summer 54; Walker 72). If this is an odd inclusion from a biblical perspective, it is once again unsurprising in the context of Tudor politics. In 1527, Henry VIII began seeking an annulment for his marriage to Catherine and by May 1529 their marital collapse merited a public trial. Henry's case at the Blackfriars trial rested on the question of

whether Catherine had consummated her previous marriage to Henry's late brother (Summer 67-68; Dillon 121-122). Catherine maintained that she had been "a pearle undefiled" before her marriage to Henry and tried to have the case thrown out (Walker 72). When this request was overruled, Henry began to address the court. Catherine, instead of letting him slander her, "acted decisively, crossing the hall to kneel before the King" (Dillon 122). Recalling contemporary Christian depictions of Esther before Ahasuerus (Bohn 184), Catherine delivered a speech from where she knelt that "combined humility...with a bold plea not for mercy, but for justice" (Dillon 122). It was clear to those watching that beneath her posture of submission lay unmatched determination and strength.

Careful but forceful speech, especially *feminine* speech, is a commonality between both Jewish and Christian understandings of Esther. There are differences in what feminine speech entails for Jews and Christians (which I will discuss later), but for now it is enough to note that Esther has long been praised by the rabbis as an accomplished rhetorician and politician (Gellis 129; Walfish 53-54). Our Hester is much the same, and with her specific mixture of "deference" and "determination" that mirrors Catherine's own position in 1529, she is the most driven and resolute female character to grace the Tudor stage until the 1580s (Dillon 131, 138). Although our hero is obviously Hester, the play does not end with her usurping her husband. Rather, the two have achieved the harmony of an ideal medieval marriage, wherein the wife offers temperance and mercy to balance out the husband's decisive masculinity, and vice versa (Huneycutt 129).⁵ We see this in the play as Hester grows more and more assertive. Yet she is only allowed to eclipse Assuerus in their scenes because he continues to encourage her to "speak her mind boldly and plainly" (Dillon 129). In the closing moments of the play, however, their back and forth becomes more equal, and the play ends as follows:

HESTER. But at the length I assure you in dede,
Theyr fauell and falsehed wyll come abrede,
whiche shall be to them more bytter than gall,
The hygher they clyme the deper they fall.

ASSUERUS. Let us then cesse thys convocatione,
And let this tyme dyssolve this congregation.

HESTER. That lyke as here they have lyved devoutly,
So god graunt them in heaven to lyve eternally.

ASSUERUS. To the which we committe all this company. (*A New Enterlude* 46)

At the end of the play, we see that their marriage is now balanced and that neither one is outdone by the other (though, the king gets the last line). The contrast between the end of *Godly Queene Hester* and the end of the Megillah is striking. While it is an end that celebrates the downfall of Haman, it is not necessarily a *Jewish* celebration. Rather, with Hester and Assuerus now fully united as king and queen(e) should be, we see it is instead the triumph of a balanced marriage that ousts that no-good villain Aman.

Godly Queene Hester and The Jews

Now that we understand more about *Godly Queene Hester's* plot and intended message, we must ask ourselves: what does it mean from a Jewish perspective to rework the story of Esther into a Christian political allegory? To answer this, we first must understand what the story of Esther means for Jews, both in 1529 and today. There are certain stories that have the power to connect us to the history and future of a group we identify with. These stories can turn individual actions into collective ones—no longer *I* did this, and *you* did that, but *we* did this (Carr 133-134, 157-158). Esther is one such story.

Beyond the general attitude present in most Jewish holidays (i.e., “A long [time] ago, some people tried to kill us; we’re here; they’re not; thanks, God; let’s eat!”), the Book of Esther is able to create a collective Jewish identity because of its unique setting (Gellis 132). Esther takes place in Ancient Persia; while the exact date is uncertain, it is clearly set some time after the Babylonian exile of 597 BCE, making Esther one of very few stories in the Hebrew Bible to take place in the Diaspora (Walfish 1). Despite this, none of the Jewish characters in the Megillah mourn the loss of a homeland (Gellis 126-131). Instead, they accept the realities of the Diaspora and find their own ways to live Jewish lives outside of a Jewish homeland, even if it means keeping their Jewishness a secret in the face of persecution and genocide. Furthermore, when prejudice (in the form of Haman) is defeated, the Jews of Persia rejoice in the fact that they can now live openly and unafraid, not just as Jews, but as *Persian* Jews—as exemplified by Mordechai, they are now participating citizens in Persian society and government, and they have not lost any of their Jewish identity in the process. In this way, Esther creates a stable, or rather, intentionally fluid Jewish identity, which is not located in a place, but in “the act of being Jewish itself” (Gellis 132). Unlike connections to contemporary human rights issues or queer readings mentioned in the introduction, the link between Esther and the Diaspora is not simply one meaning among many. The Diaspora is central to how Esther helps create and ground Jewish identity. This is as true today as it was in the early sixteenth century.

To understand exactly why Esther resonated with the Jews of Europe five hundred years ago, we first need a crash course in medieval Jewish history. Let’s start in Spain, the year 1474, when Isabella of Castille was married to Ferdinand of Aragon. Their marriage united Christian Spain, and together they made it their mission to (re)conquer all of Spain under the

sign of the cross. As part of this mission, the Holy Office of the Inquisition was established in 1478. The Holy Office was meant not for Jews, but for those who had converted to Christianity from Judaism (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 404). They feared that these conversos might be tempted back to Judaism—after all, most of them had not converted of their own free will but had been forced to convert on pain of death at times of periodic violence against Jewish communities, most notably in 1391 when Jews were blamed for the plague (382-385). To Old Christians, the conversos were always just one step away from damnation (i.e., Judaism). Thus, the Inquisition was formed to root out any Judaizing sentiment among the New Christians.

According to Simon Schama's vivid depiction of the Inquisition in the first volume of his *Story of the Jews*, what this meant, more often than not, was large-scale state-sanctioned violence that doubled as entertainment. The days of auto-da-fé, where the living and the dead burned side by side, were declared holidays so that as many people as possible could come watch the torture. Nobles made a day of it with fine food and drink and perfumes to hold to their noses in case the smell of burning flesh ever "became disagreeable" (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 405-406). Before we move on, let's not forget that it was Catherine of Aragon's own parents who often presided over these affairs. It is entirely possible that a young Catherine and her siblings were present themselves, watching these protracted plays of Jewish suffering as kids today might watch a Disney movie. The Inquisition! What a show!

Since the Inquisition was only authorized to delve into the affairs of conversos, those who were still openly Jewish were usually left alone. This 'live and let live' policy did not last long, however, and in 1483 Ferdinand and Isabella decided that as long as there were Jews in Spain, the conversos would always be tempted to renounce Christ. The solution was clear: expel the Jews. Ferdinand and Isabella started small in 1483, only issuing an expulsion order to Andalusia. This "internal expulsion" was not necessarily aimed at forcing the Jews out, but rather at forcing them into conversion or financial ruin by making them sell their houses for a pittance and then charging sky-high rents in the ghettos (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 403-404). But this was just a test run. In 1492, Isabella and Ferdinand, no longer needing Jewish money to bankroll their conquest of Granada, ordered that all Jews be expelled from Spain. Like the 1290 English Expulsion on which the 1492 order was based, it was not just the promise of a "uniformly pure" Christian Spain that motivated Ferdinand and Isabella, but also the delightful prospect of the annulment of their substantial debts to Jewish lenders (406-408).

Once ousted from Spain, thousands of Jews made their way to Portugal in search of refuge. Unfortunately, King João II was only interested in those families deemed "economically useful to the kingdom" (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 414). The other 80,000 uprooted Sephardi would simply have to "move along after eight months"—provided that they had paid the fee for the privilege of being allowed to stay for so long in the first place, of course (414). And if they couldn't pay? Well too bad, they were now the king's "enslaved personal

property” to give to his courtiers as he wished (414).

Things did not improve under João II’s successor, Manuel I. For the first few years of his reign, Manuel could not decide whether to segregate or exile the Jews of his kingdom. His mind was made for him by his decision to marry Isabella of Aragon, Ferdinand and Isabella’s eldest daughter. The price for this marriage, set by the power couple of the Reconquista, was the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal. Manuel complied with the wishes of his new in-laws and dates for the expulsion and the wedding were set. However, while Manuel had no love for the Jews, he did not wish to see their expertise and assets go to waste. So, on the eve of Passover, 1497, Portuguese soldiers swept through Jewish neighborhoods and took every child above the age of two from “the desperately imploring grip of their parents” (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 415-416). Rabbi Abraham Saba (c.1440-1508) was in Oporto at the time and his children were among those stolen, never to be seen again. While Rabbi Saba survived Portugal unconverted, he never forgot the horrors of 1497:

“ [...] they gathered some ten thousand Jews into a courtyard and they forced them and enticed them to convert and after four days no more than forty men or women were left. In the end they stripped me of my skin, and my sons and daughters and all that I owned remained there, and nothing was left me except my body.” (Walfish 123)

With all that he went through, it is no surprise that Rabbi Saba’s commentary on the Book of Esther, written in Morocco sometime after 1497, is both incredibly positive towards the Jewish heroes and ruinously pessimistic about relations with gentiles. For Rabbi Saba and his contemporaries who had survived so much horror and pain, the Book of Esther became not only a way to celebrate the salvation and persistence of their people, but also a way to express and process their own experiences with gentiles (which were not always as traumatic as Rabbi Saba’s) and their experiences with the Diaspora in general (Walfish 202).

For those who did convert in order to stay in Portugal, conversion was often less like salvation and more like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire as New Christians found themselves under constant surveillance. Some may have seen this surveillance as a godsend, a way to ensure others like them stayed faithful—João III’s spymaster, Enrique Nunes, was himself a converso (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 16-18). But evidence shows that there were those who did what they could to keep Jewish traditions alive in secret. These crypto-Jews passed publicly as New Christians but found their small rebellions in the food they cooked, the clothes they wore, the candles they lit and the prayers they sang, always trying to keep just one step ahead of the Inquisition (Colbert Cairns, “Esther Among Crypto-Jews” 98-99). It is here that the Christian infatuation with Esther comes back into play. Since Esther was so popular among Christians, especially in her role as a prefiguration of the Virgin,

it was easy enough for fasts^s to be held in her honor and for Purim to become the feast day of “Santa Esther” (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 397).

But the importance of Esther to crypto-Jewish communities does not end with her Christian appeal. Esther has been explicitly associated with the idea of passing, of staying in the Jewish closet in order to stay safe, for centuries. As Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote in the twelfth century, it was thought that Esther had to hide her Jewishness because “if the matter became known, the king might force her to transgress or even kill her” (Walfish 125). As crypto-Jews were, by definition, living double lives to avoid persecution, it is not surprising that this facet of Esther resonated so strongly with them (Colbert Cairns, “Esther Among Crypto-Jews” 98-103). We can see their feelings about Esther in converso versions of the story, such as João Pinto Delgado’s “Poema de la Reyna Ester” (1627). For Delgado’s Esther, identity is not “stable in compliance” with imperial regulations as it is in the *autos sacramentales*; rather, it is a “complex plurality” that is “constantly shifting,” just as it was for many early sixteenth-century Sephardi crypto-Jews who were able to use Esther as a model of how to balance safety with culture (Colbert Cairns, “Esther in Inquisitorial Iberia” 94). If there is one woman who exemplifies this precarious balance, it is Doña Gracia Nasi (c.1510-1569), also known as Beatritz de Luna. A prolific figure in early modern Jewish history, in 1528 Doña Gracia married into the House of Mendes, one of the great Portuguese New Christian trading companies, and by the time she died, she was the wealthiest woman in the world (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 43-46). Doña Gracia was no stranger to the double life of the conversos. Her family had fled to Portugal from Spain in 1492, almost two decades before her birth, and were wealthy enough to afford to stay there (Roth 6). But, as we saw with Rabbi Saba, the situation in Portugal could turn on a dime, and with the marriage of Manuel I to Isabella of Aragon came the forced conversions and eventual Expulsion of 1497 (7-8). The centuries-old Nasi family was no exception to the conversions, so when Gracia was born sometime around 1510, she was given both a public Christian name —Beatritz —and a private Jewish one —Gracia, the equivalent of the Hebrew *Hannah* (12-13). Little Beatritz would have grown up knowing the importance of concealing her second name, and it would not be until 1553 when she arrived in Constantinople at the age of 43 that she could finally live openly as a Jew (83).

Before she could live openly as Gracia Nasi, however, Beatritz de Luna and her fellow merchants found that the very same situation that constrained them and kept them one wrong move away from the Inquisition could also become a source of solidarity. Pooling their wealth, the richest Portuguese New Christians, who had used their Diaspora ties and knowledge of trade routes to become merchant titans in the newly globalized spice trade, created something extraordinary: a transcontinental escape network (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 31). Escapees fled from Lisbon, through English ports on to Antwerp, then overland through France and the Rhineland, to Italy where some of the city-states were

more accommodating than others, and if one were very lucky, to Constantinople and the “relative safety” of the Ottoman Empire (31). The route was dangerous, and safety was never guaranteed. Precautions were taken, of course—for instance, the London and Antwerp communities “coexisted in a push-pull relationship,” so that if something happened in London, it was easy enough to hop a boat to Antwerp and vice versa (44). But for the most part, the desperate people who made their way across the world through this network put their lives in the hands of men known as ‘Conductors.’ The Conductors were meant to guide refugees through the dangers of both road and sea, but not all of them shared the noble aims of their employers, so extortion begun by the expulsions followed refugees across the oceans. Nevertheless, they made the journey, and at ports across the route, converso communities began to grow (44-45).

For her work with the escape network and her reputation as a shrewd businesswoman, Doña Gracia became known as a sort of celebrity-philanthropist. To many of her Jewish and crypto-Jewish contemporaries, Doña Gracia could do no wrong. The author Samuel Usque referred to her as “the heart in the body of our people,” going so far as to say that her work protecting the Jews of Europe made her “the very eagle prophesied by Moses” who hovers over her children and protects them with her “outstretched wings” (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 63-65). For Usque and many others, Doña Gracia was the “embodiment of *eshet chayil*,” the woman of worth (48-49). The phrase ‘*eshet chayil*,’ the Woman of Worth or Valor, comes from Proverbs 31:10-31. This passage is often sung at Shabbat to give honor to the matriarch of the family. It is worth quoting the passage at length to see what exactly she is being honored for:

A woman of valor, who can find? Her worth is far beyond that of rubies. Her husband’s heart trusts in her, and lacks no treasures.
She is good to him, never bad, all the days of her life [...]
She rises while it is still night, and supplies provisions for her household [...]
She sees that her business thrives; her lamp never goes out at night [...]
She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is upon her tongue [...]
Her children stand and rejoice in her, her husband praises her [...]
Grace is falsehood and beauty is vapid; a woman who fears God is the one who shall be praised.
Give her from the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates. (“*Eishet Chayil*”)

In this passage, we see that it is not mercy or temperance that are feminine virtues; rather, willing support, protection, and stubbornness are valued. *Eshet chayil* is a domestic woman, yes—she is kind and loving, she has her children and her husband—but she is also strong.

Like Miriam, Deborah, and Judith, *eshet chayil* is a protector, a woman “to be reckoned with” (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 65). Esther is, of course, also a woman of valor, but her power does not lie in the type of force that a biblical warrior like Deborah or Judith might wield. Instead, it is Esther’s careful politicking and adherence to societal rules that give her power. Unlike Vashti, Esther does not “challenge the status quo”; she is a good wife in all respects (Colbert Cairns, “Esther Among Crypto-Jews” 100). And yet it is *because* she does not rock the boat that she holds so much influence in the end. While Esther’s choices are necessitated by her gender, for Jews in the Middle Ages, her careful speech and adherence to the status quo were not solely feminine qualities. A Survival Guide to the Diaspora would say that sometimes the best way stay alive is to follow the rules—something Doña Gracia and her fellow crypto-Jews were intimately familiar with (Gellis 126, 129-130). For the Tudor Christians watching *Godly Queene Hester*, however, Hester’s carefully deferential rhetoric would have been unequivocally feminine and directly correlated to Catherine of Aragon’s own actions at the Blackfriars trial.

This shift in the meaning of careful speech from when the story of Esther was told for Jews and by Jews versus in a Christian play brings us back around to the question posed at the beginning of this section: what does it mean to rework Esther into a political allegory without Jewish context? To answer this, we still need a bit more context, specifically for Jewish theatre in the 1500s. In rabbinic Jewish cultures, especially European cultures (both Ashkenazi and Sephardi), as Simon Schama puts it, there is a certain “hostility” to theatre (*Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 68). Stories that are written or told orally are valued higher than those performed. Because of this, the first Jewish playwright, Leone de Sommi,⁷ did not begin his career until a decade after *Godly Queene Hester*. And even then, his brilliant combination of Italian theater and Jewish culture, *Tsahot Bedihuta Deidushin (A Comedy of Betrothal)* (c. 1550-1560), did not exactly catch on, and “true Jewish drama” would not appear until the Yiddish plays of the nineteenth century (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 2* 75). But there is one exception to the rule: the *Purim shpil*. Since the early Middle Ages, the “anything goes” attitude of Purim has been extended to theatre, and each year amateur players would perform their own unique versions of the Esther story (68). It was not just Jews who enjoyed the *shpils*—in places where some level of integration was still possible, Christians came to enjoy the plays as well, and there is even record of a Venetian troupe being asked to play before a wealthy patrician audience in 1530 (69).

While some Christians in integrated parts of Europe did enjoy Jewish stories written and performed by Jews, more often than not Jews were simply the butt of the joke. From the crowds who gathered to watch the parade of destitute Jews leaving Spain in 1492 to the grand spectacle of the auto-da-fé, Jewish humiliation and suffering were all the rage (Schama, *Story of the Jews Vol. 1* 412). The *Purim shpil*, then, was one of the few places in 1529 where Jews

could be “the authors, rather than the objects [...] entertainers rather than the entertainment” (Schama, *Story of the Jews* Vol. 2 70).

In contrast to Spain and Portugal, England in 1529 had no visible Jews to be found and a small converso community which, while free from the Inquisition, was nonetheless extremely cautious. So, while there were very few targets of wholesale physical violence, the conditions were ripe for epistemic violence. As Geraldine Heng has shown, Christian stories about Jews written about a hundred years after the 1290 Expulsion tended to focus more on the idea of Christian community and less on that of Jewish evil (Heng 84-88). Some of these stories, like the one of the little Jewish boy who is saved from an oven by the Virgin Mary, even held out the possibility of conversion as a wholesome Christian cure-all, purposefully glossing over “the horrors of political theology and state violence” and choosing to focus instead on “visions of love and welcome” for Old as well as New Christians (Heng 96).

By the time we get to the Tudor stage, however, Jewish evil is back in fashion, although this time it is placed outside of England and wrapped up in extra layers of xenophobia to stay warm. Robert Wilson’s *Three Ladies of London* (1584) is one such Tudor example and is, in the words of Janete Adelman, a “fiercely xenophobic play” (Adelman 12). Relevant to our purposes is the fact that the villainess allies herself directly with a coterie of allegorical vices, chief among them being Usury. Almost 60 years after *Godly Queene Hester*, this Usury is a fully fledged character who interacts directly with the main cast. In fact, Usury even has a lineage, one he shares with the villainess, a Venetian one—the implied connection here between Jewishness and Venetian usury would not have been lost on the audience (Adelman 13-14).

A decade later, Shakespeare’s Shylock would take the place of Usury in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1600). Shylock is, however, a far more nuanced character than Usury. Shylock “inhabits the position both of victim and of victimizer,” simultaneously “a spurned dog and a knife-wielder” (Adelman 10). It is the same “mixture of poor stranger and Judas-Jew that contemporary English saw in their own local conversos,” because, as happened in Iberia, conversion was not the magical bandage some had hoped for (Adelman 11). And yet in the end, while more nuanced than most Jewish caricatures at the time, Shylock is still the bloody Jewish villain. His insistence on revenge, to the point where he refuses to take the money offered at the trial, leads to his ruin. This is all to say that post-Expulsion Christian authors still wrote at length about Jewish evil and Christian triumph, but it was done in such a way as to make it foreign—Jews were no longer an English problem; they were Portuguese or Venetian, surely, but they were never *English* (Adelman 17).

But the examples above are not the same as the story of Esther in *Godly Queene Hester*. All the above are stories by Christians, for Christians that involve their imagination of Jews. Esther, on the other hand, is a Jewish story that has been transformed for a Christian audience. With this difference in mind, I now return to an idea introduced in the introduction of this

paper—that every time a story is retold, its emphasis and emplotment shift. As we have seen, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but we must keep in mind that, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, “seeing one thing is not seeing another” (452). When the emphasis of a story shifts, something else is always left by the wayside, forgotten. This forgetting can be “a passive forgetting,” just something that happens, nothing purposeful or harmful (449). There are instances, however, when shifting the emphasis of a story is a purposeful act of epistemic violence, done to avoid things (or people) one would rather not think about. This “active” forgetting can become an especially “devious form” of power as it masquerades itself as being the natural way that stories work, when in reality it turns the beautiful malleability of narrative into a tool for ensuring that certain people no longer have the “power to recount their actions themselves” (448-449).

As discussed previously, this play uses Hester as an allegory for Catherine of Aragon, presents an unsubtle critique of Henry VIII, and concludes with the hope that the two will come together as a proper husband and wife should. This shifts the story’s focus, changing its meaning from one of Jewish triumph into the triumph of a balanced marriage. Let me be clear: it is an active forgetting that we see with *Godly Queene Hester*. When a story that “initially celebrated the Jewish people” (Colbert Cairns, “Esther in Inquisitorial Iberia” 188-189), one of the few that expresses life in the Diaspora and the only one to be played out on stage, gets transformed into a political allegory in their absence, one which erases any Jewish meaning from the story, it cannot be simply glossed over as passive or accidental. And yet, someone could still look at the play and say, ‘But the Jews are still there! Mardocheus and Hester are both Jewish! Aman has a whole monologue full of anti-Semitic stereotypes!’ It is true that Mardocheus and Hester do declare themselves to have been “borne and eke brede in Jerusalem”, and Aman’s speech to Assuerus does smack of some suspiciously anti-Semitic rhetoric that is not far off from what Shylock endures in *The Merchant of Venice* (*A New Enterlude* 8, 36). But let’s take a closer look at what exactly Aman says to the king:

AMAN. A greate number of Jewes with in this realm do dwell
A people not goode, nor for youre common weale,
They be dispersed over all youre province [...]
By theyr new lawes they think to convince,
And eke draw unto theyr conversation,
And unto theyr ceremonies and faction
Of our people as many as may be [...]
More over the preceptes of your law,
They refuse and have in great contempte [...]
For theyre possessions be of substaunce,

So greate and so large that I feare at the length,
They wyll attempte to subdewe you by strengthe. (*A New Enterlude* 30)

There are three unique accusations here: first, that the Jews do not follow the laws of the king; second, that they intend to convert all of Persia to Judaism; and third, that they are so wealthy they will overpower the king. All of these are anti-Semitic stereotypes that were well established by 1529 (Jews keep to themselves, they hoard their wealth, they want to take over the world, etc., etc.). In the context of Tudor politics, however, they can also mean something else, and it is this exchange between Hester and Assuerus that gives it away:

ASSUERUS: He signified unto me that the Jewes did
Not feede the poore by hospitalitie
Their possessions he sayde, were all but hydde,
Amonge them selves lyving voluptuouslye [...]

HESTER: Noble prince as for hospitalitie.
Of the Jewes dwellinge in your regyon
It is with them as alwayes hath bene [...]
Is not of Abraham the hospytallyte,
In scripture noted and of noble fame [...]
Both Isaake and Jacob had a lyke name,
Of whom the twelve tribes descended be,
which ever dyd maintaine hospitablyte,
Sinse god therefore hath begunne theyre housholde.
And ay hath preserved their 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 New Enterlude* 37-38)

The preoccupation with hospitality here is not simply an extension of the ‘Jews are hoarding their wealth’ argument;⁸ it also directly correlates to contemporary debates in Parliament over Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey’s plans to dissolve the monasteries—institutions which coincidentally were also accused of hoarding their wealth and refusing to share with the commonweal (though, for my money I’d bet the accusations against the church were far more accurate than those against the Jews). Hester’s defense of the Jews’ long history of hospitality then becomes the argument against the dissolution of the monasteries. Her talk of hospitality ordained by god and institutions that “noman” can “dissolve” speak more to a defense of the

church as a god-given and “socially beneficial” institution than anything having to do with the Jews (Walker 74, 87). And just like that, all of Aman’s accusations of a community “dispersed” which follows its own laws and hoards its wealth, Assuerus’s own active role in Aman’s schemes, and Aman’s comeuppance (which would no doubt have been seen to mirror Wolsey’s own 1529 fall from grace) have an entirely different context, one that any contemporary viewers would have been intimately familiar with. And just as Hester became Catherine and Assuerus became Henry, Aman became Wolsey (Walker 71-72, 74, 80-81; Summer 64-67).

In this way, the Jews become the monasteries and the story of Esther is no longer a Jewish story, but one of marriage, queenship, and Tudor politics.

Conclusion

The past is not a dead thing. It is very much alive in how we come to think of ourselves, our world, and our place in that world. Not only that, but the stories we tell about our collective pasts are not inert; they are constantly changing and shifting to fit the needs of new people and new times. This shifting is a double-edged sword. It can be a beautiful way to make an old story meaningful to new people, but it can also shift the focus so drastically as to make a story no longer recognizable to the people who once held it dear.

In the case of *Godly Queene Hester*, the changes made to the original Esther story were meant to make it relevant to English Christians in the year 1529. By focusing on the main issues of the time, such as what it means to be a good monarch, what makes a good marriage, and the scandals surrounding Wolsey and the monasteries, it certainly achieved its goal. *Godly Queene Hester* is not simply a poor retelling of Esther, but rather a product of its time with specific political goals and satirical targets. And as the playwright focuses on politics, the Jews are no longer the focus of the story.

However, it would be irresponsible of me to downplay this exclusion, to classify it with Ricoeur’s passive forgetting as a sort of ‘Oops, oh well! That’s just what happens when you write a story.’ To do so would be to disconnect this exclusion and erasure from the long history of Christian violence against Jews, both physical and epistemic. Not to mention it would disconnect it from the idea of Christian supersessionism, an ideology which makes it almost a moral necessity for those who believe in it to engage in such violence, particularly when it comes to rewriting Jewish stories as their own.

There is a specific pain that comes from the sort of epistemic violence that Ricoeur classifies as active forgetting, especially when that intentional shifting of the lens is applied to a story such as Esther’s that has such deep roots in communal identity. These stories function as a “temporal link” between the past and the present, allowing members of a community to connect to each other in the present as the story is shared, to their past trials, tribulations, and

joys, and to the future they wish to build together (Gellis 131). It is because stories like this mean so much at such a deep level that the kind of erasure *Godly Queene Hester* engages in is not a victimless crime. Personally, it hurts to read this play and know that the people who wrote it and watched it did so without any concern for my people other than as allegories for their own politics; I can feel it as a tightness in my chest while writing this.

But what does it matter if I feel this way five hundred years after the fact? What does it matter if there were no Jews (openly, at least) to see the play in its own time? What worries me about this sort of erasure is not necessarily the pain it causes to those who are erased—though make no mistake, that pain is incredibly real. No, what worries me is what happens to those of the dominant group who see nothing wrong with such epistemic violence. What happens to a people who only see another group through allegory? Or, worse, only see them as foreigners or villains? What happens when a people are not allowed to tell their own stories?

I'm afraid I do not have the answers, but I do know this can never lead to anything good.

But, in the end, one thing is for sure—the Christians writing Esther plays as queenship manuals, like Haman before them, couldn't quite get rid of us. *Purim shpils* still abound each spring and, as Monty Python's *Spamalot* put it best, we all know you won't succeed on Broadway if you don't have any Jews.

Notes

1. There has been much debate regarding the exact date this play was written. Please see Dillon 119-120 and Summer 49, 68-70 for more detail regarding this topic.
2. For a semiotic perspective on the malleability of stories, please see Culler 184-185.
3. It should be noted that “Enterlude” in the title of the play references a specific type of brief Tudor drama that tended to blend secular and religious subjects and focus on moral values. Please see Summer 49-50 for more on the specifics and importance of interludes.
4. It is worth noting here that there is another non-Biblical character in *Godly Queene Hester*, a court fool named Hardydardy who interacts solely with Aman. Hardydardy is more of a comic relief than anything else, and he ridicules Aman in a scathing back and forth over the course of five pages. See Walker 93 and Dillon 137-139 for more information.
5. For a concise but in-depth analysis of how the play’s depiction of a balanced marriage would have been perceived by Tudor courtiers watching it in 1529, please see Earenfight 160-162.
6. For more information on how fasting became an important part of crypto-Jewish celebrations of Esther, please see Colbert Cairns, “Esther Among Crypto-Jews” 99-101.
7. The term “first Jewish playwright” does not mean that no Jews wrote plays before Leone de Sommi, but rather refers to a specifically European understanding of high drama and a Renaissance understanding of the status of the artist.
8. For more on withholding hospitality in an anti-Semitic context and how that could play out on the Tudor stage, please see Adelman 13-15.

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