

## Racine's *Esther*: In Praise of Historiographers and Historians

by  
Henry Cohen

The roles of the historiographer and the historian in state governance, and indeed the idea of history itself, are themes that contribute significantly to the meaning of Jean Racine's *Esther*. My aims in this article are to review the connections that critics have perceived between Racine's plot and characters and some well-known events and people in contemporary French history, to relate François Jaouën's observations about notions of history in the two Biblical tragedies to Esther's strategy as a historian, to contrast Racine's role as a royal historian to Louis XIV and Esther's role as the history instructor of Assuérus, to point out Racine's emphasis on the importance of historiography in the plot, and to demonstrate that the playwright portrays Esther, as a historian, and Assuérus, as a student of history, and not divine intervention, as agents in the liberation of the enslaved Jews in Persia. I use the term "historiographer" to mean a chronicler of events, either observed personally or reported by witnesses, when such information may be used as seen fit by the authority that orders its collection. By "historian," I mean a person who weaves a purposefully selected set of human events into a coherent narrative in order to illustrate a thesis that serves to enhance the stature of an individual, a group, or a political entity or to promote a course of action related to one of these.

Many scholars have written about the historical circumstances surrounding Racine's resumption of his career as a tragedian when, after serving several years as one of the royal historians of Louis XIV, he composed *Esther* and *Athalie*. Literary historians agree that Mme de Maintenon, Louis XIV's second wife and protector of the Maison de Saint-Cyr, commissioned Racine to pen edifying religious plays for the aristocratic girls of that school to perform following their staging of Corneille's *Cinna* and Racine's *Andromaque*, whose profane and amorous characters they portrayed with a degree of enjoyment that the prudish royal consort deemed morally disturbing (Turnell 279, Gregoire 178–182, Weinberg 298–99, Woshinsky 170–71, Marks 28, Knapp 193–94, Scholar 318–19).

Several commentators have speculated that some of the characters and certain elements of the plot are drawn from contemporary religious and political history and that Racine uses the play to express his personal views on people and events. Allen Wood summarizes the best-known examples of the conjectures of Racine's contemporaries:

IN PRAISE OF HISTORIOGRAPHERS & HISTORIANS

Even as the play was first performed, Mme de Lafayette wrote that everybody thought the play an allegory. And on one level, that of courtly society, the *pièce à clé* was easy to decode: Esther was Mme de Maintenon, Vashti the repudiated Mme de Montespan, and the king was the king. ... Other interpretations identify the Jews as either Racine's Jansenist co-religionists or Mme de Maintenon's Protestant ancestors. The closing of the Jansenist Maison des Filles de l'Enfance in Toulouse in 1686 may not have been far from Racine's mind. (216–17).<sup>1</sup>

Assuérus's planned extermination of the Jews in the Persian Empire must have reminded French audiences of Louis XIV's revocation, a mere four years earlier in 1685, of the Edict of Nantes that had guaranteed religious freedom to Protestants since Henri IV had proclaimed it, especially since a violent persecution of the Huguenots had followed that royal policy change. René Jasinski cites a work of the playwright's son Louis Racine, *Remarques sur les tragédies de Jean Racine*, as an important source of the idea that Aman's false denunciations to Assuérus of the Jews' untrustworthiness were meant to serve as his father's warning to Louis XIV not to heed his Jesuit advisors who were urging him to persecute the Jansenists of Port-Royal ("Sur un theme" 77–78). Having reviewed the historical evidence, Jasinski agrees with that interpretation:

Que l'on suive l'évolution des conflits entre Jésuites et Jansénistes ... on retrouvera ... la même conclusion: nécessité d'éclairer le roi, qui est sincère, équitable. Se voyant perfidement trompé, il reviendra de ses préventions contre ceux qu'il persécute injustement. ...[T]elle est en effet ... la leçon principale d'*Esther*" ("Sur un theme" 81).

Elsewhere, Jasinski goes as far as to identify the playwright with the heroine of his own play since each of them acts as a heroic defender of a persecuted group, Esther of the Jews and Racine of the Jansenists, and to identify Arnauld with the character of Mardochée since each of these entreats his protégé, Racine and Esther respectively, to dare to warn a king against heeding bad advisors (*Autour* 202). Pointing to another obvious analogy between the two kings, Elaine Marks reminds us that, as Assuérus

---

<sup>1</sup> The most detailed argument in favor of the notion that *Esther's* female chorus represents the girls in the Jansenist convent in Toulouse that the Jesuits caused to close is to be found in Jean Orcibal, *La Genèse d'Esther et d'Athalie* (29-34). The most persuasive refutation of that theory is made by Jean Pommier in *Aspects de Racine*. (225-31)

ended up doing, “n 1651 Louis XIV, unlike his predecessor, had placed the Jews of France under his protection” (28).

Françoise Jaouën, the only critic who has devoted an entire study to history in Racine’s Biblical tragedies, contrasts the two conflicting conceptions of history that are present in those works:

Si l’on considère ... l’histoire en tant qu’objet de connaissance, on s’aperçoit qu’elle est très présente dans les deux pièces, et qu’elle y joue un rôle important. Les deux tragédies s’appuient sur une vision de l’histoire entièrement soumise à la providence divine, conforme au *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* de Bossuet (1681) ... et conforme également au modèle privilégié par l’historiographie officielle, qui se fonde en large mesure sur la notion d’exemplarité et cherche à retrouver dans le passé des modèles de conduite. Mais Racine, qui occupe depuis douze ans la charge d’historiographe royal (ce qui l’obligeait pour le moins à réfléchir sur la nature de l’histoire, sur ses moyens et sur ses buts), choisit de confronter l’histoire providentielle et l’histoire exemplaire au niveau du dilemme tragique. ... Cette confrontation aboutit à réexaminer le rapport entre l’histoire profane et l’histoire sacrée. (124)

Jaouën claims that Racine’s application of the providential model has an important consequence. It implies that history remains open since its meaning can be found only in the future rather than in the past. As a result, she argues, exemplary history, the privileged model of official historiography during that period in France, loses a great deal of its value (130). In her speech to Assuérus, however, Esther exhorts him to imitate Cyrus in order to attain greatness and, in order to avert disaster, not to repeat the errors of Cambyse II. In this way, the queen constructs her argument primarily around positive and negative models of royal behavior rather than around a theory of providential history.

As he was composing *Esther*, as Jaouën asserts, Racine was probably reflecting on the writing of history since the latter task occupied much of his time. When in 1677 Louis XIV appointed Racine and the poet Nicolas Boileau, “es deux historiographes ont un mandat spécial. Ce sont eux ... ‘qui ont entre leurs mains le précieux dépôt de [la] gloire’ du Roi.... Cet effort pour éterniser la mémoire du Roi grâce à de grandes et sublimes paroles, Racine le poursuit...” (Picard 364–65). Despite his decidedly non-objective goal of “elater les hauts faits du plus glorieux des rois” (Jasinski, *Autour* 87), Racine’s methodology did include incorporating the testimony

of witnesses to the events of which he wrote. For example, when the king asked him to chronicle the military campaign against the Principality of Cambrai in the summer of 1677, "[O]n voit par ses lettres à Boileau avec quel soin il se documentait, quand il obtenait des explications précises de Vauban et du maréchal de Luxembourg..." (Jasinski *Autour* 88). Although many of his unpublished historical fragments were eventually destroyed in a fire in 1726 (Picard 366), Racine did finish and publish two texts whose style demonstrates that for him the writing of history was a work of literary creativity.

De l'ensemble, émergent ... l'*Éloge historique du Roi* et la *Relation* du siège de Namur... [T]ous deux sont des récits très suivis d'histoire guerrière, et tous deux sont imprégnés d'intentions encomiastiques que font reconnaître les procédés rhétoriques, la dramatisation, la recherche d'effets esthétiques ... de même les métamorphoses d'ordre "stratégique" opérées sur la réalité: focalisation sur les actions du Roi, dosages de mises en valeur de ses officiers et de ses ministres contribuant à inscrire le texte de Racine dans les jeux ambiants de l'amitié et de la prudence, estompage discret du détail bas ou choquant, et sur le tout, substitution du moral à caractère héroïque au politique ... une vision de l'histoire ... privilégiant les hauts faits du Roi de guerre plutôt que ceux du Roi de paix... (Hourcade 123)

Although Louis XIV prescribed Racine's courtly duties and manner of writing history for the primary purpose of enhancing the king's personal myth, in *Esther* the playwright demonstrates the usefulness of entirely different ways by which, and entirely different purposes for which, chroniclers and a historian practice their vocations, and how their uses of history help Assuérus to govern his realm.

The importance of historiography is stressed in the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the book of *Esther*, both of which Racine uses as sources.<sup>2</sup> When Mardochée learns of two palace eunuchs' plot to assassi-

---

<sup>2</sup> A second noteworthy affirmation of the value of historiography that for some reason Racine decides not to incorporate into his play is found at the very end of both Biblical versions of *Esther*. The writer of the Hebrew text bases the credibility of his narrative on its presence in the authoritative royal Persian chronicles, thus fulfilling his narrator's *fonction d'attestation*: "Le roi Xerxès fixa un impôt sur le continent et sur les îles de la mer. Tous ses actes de puissance et de vaillance, ainsi que les détails de la grandeur de Mardochée à qui le roi avait donné une haute situation, ces choses ne sont-elles pas inscrites dans le livre des Annales de rois de Médie et de Perse?" (*Traduction* 1073) The

## COHEN

nate Assuérus, he saves the king's life by warning him, directly in the Greek version and through the intermediary of Esther in the Hebrew. The Hebrew author specifies that after an inquest the two guilty men were hanged, while the Greek scribe writes that they confessed and were arrested. In the French translation from the Hebrew we read, "Et cela fut enregistré dans le livre des Annales en présence du roi" (*Traduction* 1067), which shows that the king believes the accuracy of the official chronicle to be so important that he himself oversees its writing. The translation from the Greek says that "Le roi fit mettre ces faits par écrit pour qu'on en garde mémoire; Mardochée aussi les mit par écrit" (*Traduction* 1198). The king requires the events of his reign to be chronicled so that they may be used as an instrument of governance. The champion of the Jewish people and the king's faithful subject Mardochée is identified here also as a careful chronicler. It is he, after all, who transmits to his niece the raw material that she will shape into her persuasive speech to be delivered to her husband.

While Racine does not dramatize the episode of the assassination plot, he does rework the passage in the Hebrew scripture where Assuérus, during a period of sleeplessness, has a portion of the annals read aloud to him. The playwright invents, in place of the insomnia, a nightmare in which the king senses a threat to his personal safety. In order to be able to identify his enemies, which he believes will make him more able to predict any possible conspiracy, he orders that the chronicle be read to him. The playwright alters the Biblical story by having Hydaspes recount this story to Aman, who realizes upon hearing it that he will be able to take advantage of the king's fears in order to denounce the Jews as his internal enemies. This strategy allows the playwright to give his audience further insight into the treacherous and unscrupulous character of the antagonist.

Le roi d'un noir chagrin paraît enveloppé.  
 Quelque songe effrayant cette nuit l'a frappé.  
 .....  
 Il s'est plaint d'un péril qui menaçait ses jours;  
 .....  
 Pour écarter de lui ces images funèbres,  
 Il s'est fait apporter ces annales célèbres  
 Où les faits de son règne, avec soin amassés,

---

Greek author uses the same language, although he omits the reference to Mardochée: "Le roi légiférait pour le royaume, sur terre et sur mer. Sa puissance et sa vaillance, la richesse et la gloire de son royaume, voilà qu'on les mettait par écrit dans le livre des rois de Perse et de Médie, pour qu'on en garde mémoire" (*Traduction* 1208).

*IN PRAISE OF HISTORIOGRAPHERS & HISTORIANS*

Par de fidèles mains chaque jour sont tracés.  
 On y conserve écrits le service et l'offense,  
 Monuments éternels d'amour et de vengeance.  
 Le roi, que j'ai laissé plus calme dans son lit,  
 D'une oreille attentive écoute le récit.

.....  
 Il revoit tous ces temps si remplis de sa gloire (II.1. 383–  
 84, 388, 393–400, 402)

Some of the pages read aloud retell the story of Mardochée's warning to the king, who realizes that he has never rewarded his subject's loyalty (*Traduction* 1069). Assuérus is as bothered by his forgetting an important past event as he is by his ingratitude. He then utters lines that underscore the usefulness of historiography as a repository of crucial information and a remedy against inevitable royal distractions:

O d'un si grand service oublié trop condamnable!  
 Des embarras du trône effet inévitable!  
 De soins tumultueux un prince environné  
 Vers de nouveaux objets est sans cesse entraîné.  
 Mais, plus prompt que l'éclair, le passé nous échappe. (II.3.  
 541–46)

Here, Racine is placing a high value on the practice and utility of chronicling. The royal historiographers are "faithful" to the king under a system of governance in which fidelity is the highest political value. He can count on the reliability of their notes because the scribes make their entries "each day" when the events are fresh in their minds. Historiography is so respected that these annals are "famous." They are "eternal" and "monumental," that is, written history will survive long after the massive architectural achievements of this civilization will have crumbled. Since Assuérus's administration of the vast Persian Empire is largely based on rewarding his allies and punishing his enemies, by carefully analyzing historical events the king is able to identify these individuals and groups and therefore to govern effectively.

The irony surrounding Racine's writing *Esther* while serving as a royal historian is that in the latter role he engaged in none of the above-mentioned implicitly desirable practices. He was called upon to be faithful to Louis XIV, but that fidelity manifested itself in subservience and adulation. He was not engaged in recording details of court life so that the king might read or hear them in order to detect the identity of his friends and foes and thereby prevent any potential betrayal. His historical accounts were meant to be lasting not because of their inherent value, but be-

## COHEN

cause—together with paintings, sculptures, and literary works that constituted a concerted propaganda program—they aimed at creating an image of Louis XIV as an effective warrior and a great ruler by divine right. In *Esther*, Racine creates a heroine who saves her people by being the type of historian that the playwright never had the opportunity to be.

Critics have tended to deprive Esther of her agency by attributing her persuasion of her husband to the force of a divine providence intent on saving God's chosen people (Jaouën 123, Goldmann 440, Jasinski *Autour* 202), to Assuérus's being so "faible, crédule, facilement manipulable et influençable" that he is easily swayed by "une 'actrice' de circonstance qui touche le cœur du roi" (Gregoire 177, 185), to the king's nightmare's "changing Ahasuerus's orientation and attitude," stimulating within him "the libido-current," "[giving] birth to new psychic contents," and "[generating] insights and revelations" that "[pave] the way for Ahasuerus' eventual illumination" (Knapp 200–01), to Assuérus's being so in love with his wife that that sentiment alone makes him bend to her desires (Scholar 321, 326, Ahmed 38), to Esther's persuasiveness's deriving solely from her channeling the strong will of Mardochee and the Jewish people (Weinberg 318), to the emotional king's being moved by his wife's tears (Malachy 143), or to the will of a patriarchal God operating through her in search of a sacrificial victim in the person of Aman (Howells 101). Only Elaine Marks acknowledges that Esther is a historian, writing "Esther then asks the king for the right to explain the situation of the Jews by giving a brief history of the Jews and their relationship to their omnipotent God" (32), but she does not analyze the strategies that the queen employs to persuade Assuérus to save her people.

While I shall argue that in *Esther* it is the queen herself whom Racine depicts as the chief agent of the change in Assuérus's policies toward the Jews, it is also true that in the playwright's dramatization of the Biblical story there are elements that suggest the presence of divine intervention. One such example is Elise's supposition about the queen's marriage, which she expresses in terms of a paradoxical power relationship:

Le fin Assuérus couronne sa captive,  
Et le Persan superbe est aux pieds d'une Juive!  
Par quels secrets ressorts, par quel enchaînement,  
Le ciel a-t-il conduit ce grand événement? (I.i. 27–30)

The queen herself reinforces this idea by referring to her adoptive father Mardochee as an agent of God's plan: "Le roi, jusqu'à ce jour, ignore qui je suis. / Celui par qui le ciel règle ma destinée / Sur ce secret encor tient ma langue enchaînée" (I.i. 90–92). She attributes to divine protection

*IN PRAISE OF HISTORIOGRAPHERS & HISTORIANS*

Mardochée's ability to surreptitiously enter her closely guarded palace: "Que vois-je? Mardochée! Oh mon père, est-ce vous? / Un ange du Seigneur sous son aile sacrée / A donc conduit vos pas, et caché votre entrée?" (I. iii. 156–58). As her uncle argues that his protégée must speak on behalf of her people, he even suggests that Aman's threat to ethnically cleanse the Persian kingdom of Jews may be part of God's grand design:

Et qui sait, lorsqu'au trône il conduisit vos pas  
Si pour sauver son peuple il ne vous gardait pas?  
.....  
S'il a permis d'Aman l'audace criminelle,  
Sans doute qu'il voulait éprouver votre zèle.  
C'est lui qui, m'excitant à vous oser chercher,  
Devant moi, chère Esther, a bien voulu marcher. (I. iii. 211–12,

229–32)

Portraying herself as alone and helpless, Esther prays to God to support her by softening Assuérus's heart and by making her speech so aesthetically pleasing that it will lower the usually stern king's resistance to her entreaty. What is important here is that she does not ask God either what she should say or how she should frame her arguments. Instead, she reserves those prerogatives to herself:

C'est pour toi que je marche. Accompagne mes pas  
Devant ce fier lion qui ne te connaît pas.  
Commande en me voyant que son courroux s'apaise,  
Et prête à mes discours un charme qui lui plaise. (I. iv.  
287–90)

These words are derived from the Greek version but are not found in the Hebrew text, from which this prayer, and indeed all mention of God, are absent:

Mon Seigneur, notre Roi,  
Toi, tu es le Seul! Porte-moi secours,  
à moi qui suis seule et n'ai d'autre secours que toi;  
.....  
Mets dans ma bouche un langage mélodieux en présence du  
lion et change son cœur  
pour qu'il déteste celui qui nous fait la guerre,  
pour qu'il achève celui-ci ainsi que ses partisans.  
Arrache-nous à eux par ta main et porte-moi secours,

## COHEN

moi que suis seule et qui n'ai que toi, Seigneur. (*Traduction*  
1203)

Richard Scholar sharply distinguishes between the two Biblical texts, arguing that the Greek version reduces Esther's agency while totalizing God's:

In the Greek version...the narrator depicts events as the result of God's direct intervention. The sacralizing interpretations added by the Greek narrator are absent from the Hebrew version....The Greek 'additions' to the Book of Esther do not complete the sense of the Hebrew narrative...but transform it....The narrator describes Assuerus smitten not by his wife but by God's direct action. (320–21)

And yet it is by her composition and her declamation of her climactic *tirade* addressed to Assuérus in Act III, scene iv that Racine makes Esther the principal agent of the salvation of the Jewish people. In this speech, an invention of the playwright that has no model in the Biblical texts, Racine causes the queen to rise to heights of heroism, majesty, and political domination by means of her eloquence, persuasion, and shaping of Jewish history. In fact, the triumph of Esther is the victory of history—not of historiography, the simple chronological recital of occurrences— but rather the interpretation of events, the telling of the story of the vicissitudes in the relationship between God and his people, and the insertion of Assuérus into a special place in that narrative with the result that he makes a conscious choice to be an active participant in Jewish history. She persuades the king that he will achieve greatness in the degree to which he participates in her people's history, not because he reigns over the vast Achaemenid Persian Empire that extends from India to Egypt and from Babylonia to Armenia.

Esther begins by teaching Assuérus that the Jews were a great people of a rich and sovereign land and that their freedom and prosperity were blessings bestowed on them for their faithfulness by God. In calling God “le maître absolu de la terre et des cieux” (III.4. 1045–51), she devalues the king's authority in comparison with God's. She establishes her own authority as a historian at the beginning of her speech in order to get Assuérus to understand his role not in the context of Persian history but in that of Jewish history. Her strategy is to shift the king into a frame of reference where he loses his present identity and redefines himself in a broader historical context. She calls God “le Dieu de leurs pères” (III.4.

1048), that is, the God of history, since he manifests himself in his engagement with his chosen people over time.

Next, Esther develops the idea of God as the overall author of human history: “L’Éternel est son nom, le monde est son ouvrage” (III.4. 1052). She informs the king that his personal greatness and that of his empire depend neither on his own exercise of power nor on his talent for governing, but on God’s will: “Des plus fermes États la chute épouvantable / Quand il veut, n’est qu’un jeu de sa main redoutable” (III.4. 1056–57).

In a brief third part, narrating chronologically, the queen attributes the Babylonian captivity of the Jews at the hands of the Assyrians (608–538) to her people’s faithlessness toward God in the form of their adoration of other deities. By asserting that that punishment was “le juste prix de leur ingratitude” (III.4. 1061), she defines God’s role as a distributor of justice. She thus suggests that Assuérus, in order to access greatness, ought to act justly rather than simply in his imperial self-interest.

Esther then recalls the liberation of the Jews by the Persian king Cyrus, who entered Babylon in 538. She defines that ruler as an instrument of divine justice who not only freed the Jews but also restored their sovereignty over their territory, their form of government, and their religious practices:

Dieu fit choix de Cyrus .....

.....

Babylone paya nos pleurs avec usure.  
Cyrus, par lui vainqueur, publia ses bienfaits,  
Regarda notre peuple avec des yeux de paix,  
Nous rendit et nos lois et nos fêtes divines. (III.4. 1063,  
1069–72)

By praising Cyrus’s favorable policies toward the Jews, the queen is suggesting that her husband should be magnanimous by imitating the earlier Persian monarch. She is using history to provide the king with a model of royal greatness that he might emulate. He too could be inscribed in the history of the Jewish people as a justice giver for whose protection they would be forever grateful.

Esther then suggestively establishes an alternating pattern of beneficent and maleficent kings, briefly evoking the reign of Cyrus’s son, King Cambyses II, who harmed the Jews by stopping their rebuilding of the temple (III.iv. 1075). In doing so, she positions Assuérus in the line of the good monarchs, ideally situated to be a potential liberator:

## COHEN

Mais, de ce roi si sage héritier insensé,  
 Son fils interrompit l'ouvrage commencé,  
 Fut sourd à nos douleurs: Dieu rejeta sa race,  
 Le retrancha lui-même, et vous mit à sa place. (III.v. 1074–  
 77)

Here, Esther does not attribute one recent period of her people's suffering to their infidelity toward God, but rather to a political decision made by Cambyses II, which suggests that Assuérus also enjoys absolute political autonomy and that Esther might, by means of a historical argument, be able to persuade him to protect the Jews.

By strategically situating Assuérus in this pattern of royal alternation, asserting that God has purposely substituted her husband for his cruel predecessor, and redefining the king's role in the wider context of sacred history, Esther suggests that his principal task is not so much to reign over the Persian Empire as to assure the continued existence of her people. She ends her speech by reminding the king that his past conquests of peoples and territories derive ultimately from the will of God, the God of her people:

N'en doutez point, Seigneur, il fut votre soutien.  
 Lui seul mit à vos pieds le Parthe et l'Indien,  
 Dissipa devant vous les innombrables Scythes,  
 Et renferma les mers dans vos vastes limites. (III.iv. 1114–  
 17)

When Assuérus vows to protect the Jews, he couches that decision in terms of inscribing himself forever in Jewish history. (Indeed, every year on the 14th of Adar in the Jewish calendar, at Purim services in every synagogue, the *Megillah*, the Hebrew *Book of Esther*, is read aloud in commemoration of Assuérus's emancipation of his captives and his queen's role in that event.) At the same time, he reaffirms his role as the king of Persia by granting the Jews political status equal to that of Persians:

Je romps le joug funeste où les Juifs sont soumis.  
 .....  
 À l'égal des Persanes je veux qu'on les honore  
 .....  
 Que vos heureux enfants, dans leurs solennités,  
 Consacrent de ce jour le triomphe et la gloire,  
 Et qu'à jamais mon nom vive dans leur mémoire. (III.viii.  
 1182, 1184, 1187–89)

*IN PRAISE OF HISTORIOGRAPHERS & HISTORIANS*

Esther's persuasive ability in narrating history can be measured by the degree to which Assuérus has, until this point, expressed his hatred of Jews in racist terms and has consented to Aman's genocidal plans. When the king resolves to publicly recognize Mardochee's denunciation of the would-be assassins, he singles him out as a blameless exception among a criminal people:

Jamais d'un tel honneur un sujet n'a joui.  
 Mais plus la récompense est grande et glorieuse,  
 Plus même de ce Juif la race est odieuse,  
 .....  
 On verra l'innocent discerné du coupable,  
 Je n'en perdrai pas moins ce peuple abominable  
 Leurs crimes... (II.vi. 624–26, 629–31)

Upon hearing Esther reveal her Jewish identity just before her climactic speech, her husband is incredulous that such a good and wise woman could be a part of such a loathsome ethnic group:

Ah! de quel coup me percez-vous le cœur!  
 Vous la fille d'un Juif? Hé quoi! tout ce que j'aime,  
 Cette Esther, l'innocence et la sagesse même,  
 Que je croyais du ciel les plus chères amours,  
 Dans cette source impure aurait puisé ses jours?  
 Malheureux! (III.iv. 1035–40)

The critics who have attributed Esther's success either exclusively to the power of divine providence or to the king's emotional susceptibility or psychological weakness have failed to fully appreciate the queen's intellectual and oratorical gifts, the king's rationality and self-control, and the royal couple's lucidity and free will. When Assuérus believes that his nightmare may be premonitory, he sensibly and systematically reviews the annals in order to identify any possible enemies. This process, Hydaspe tells us, has a calming affect: "Le roi, que j'ai laissé plus calme dans son lit, / D'une oreille attentive écoute ce récit" (II,1. 399–400). This is hardly a man whose emotional state has caused him to lose control of his judgment. Upon realizing that he has failed to properly reward Mardochee for warning him against the would-be assassins, he acknowledges his ingratitude, correctly attributes it to the distractions caused by his many governmental responsibilities, and corrects his error by publicly honoring his benefactor. He governs rationally. Esther appears frightened when in Act II, scene vii she enters the king's chambers to ask him to hear her speech the next day. It is he who, while being slightly troubled by her fear, does not succumb to the contagion of her fright. Instead, he tries to calm

## COHEN

her: “Je me trouble moi-même, et sans frémissement / Je ne puis voir sa peine et son saisissement, / Calmez, Reine, calmez la frayeur qui vous presse” (655–57). When, having learned of Aman’s infidelity toward him, Assuérus is infuriated, he leaves the throne room, retiring to a chamber where he can be alone in order to compose himself and collect his thoughts lest his anger cloud his reason: “Tout mon sang de colère et de honte s’enflamme. / J’étais donc le jouet...Ciel! daigne m’éclairer! / Un moment sans témoins cherchons à respirer” (III.iv. 1137–39). All these episodes serve to characterize Assuérus as a thoughtful and reasonable person who is quite open to rational argumentation.

The queen is characterized as intelligent, assertive, and calculating. In her Act I, scene iv monologue addressed to God, in order to establish her moral right to petition him Esther first contrasts her abstemiousness with the self-indulgent life style of the Persian courtiers. She then pointedly reminds God of his promise to preserve her people: “Même tu leur promis de ta bouche sacrée / Une postérité d’éternelle durée” (253–54). Finally, she places a special responsibility on God by arguing that he should not permit the annihilation of the only people who acknowledge him as the one true divinity:

Non, non, ne souffre pas que ces peuples farouches,  
Ivres de notre sang, ferment les seules bouches  
Qui dans tout l’univers célèbrent tes bienfaits,  
Et confonds tous ces dieux qui ne furent jamais. (269–72)

In her Act II, scene vii dialogue with Assuérus, after having flattered him by acknowledging his kind tolerance of her presumptuous entry into the throne room, the queen maneuvers her husband into inviting Aman to a dinner where she will denounce his terrible plan. In Act III, scene iv, after conducting her carefully constructed history lesson, she juxtaposes her devastating condemnation of Aman’s betrayal of the king and her passionate demonstration of the Jews’ loyalty to Assuérus. Justice would demand not only that the king punish Aman for being a mendacious advisor but also that he reward the captive Jews for being faithful subjects.<sup>3</sup> Racine

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Bénichou believes that when political conflict has ceased to be an important element in Racine’s later tragedies, he restores politics to a place of prominence in his Biblical plays precisely because religion remains the only institution from whose perspective one can criticize absolute monarchy: “La politique tient peut-être une place plus réelle dans *Esther* et dans *Athalie*, où l’on trouve repris avec insistance et chaleur le thème du souverain victime de ses mauvais conseillers. Mais la nuance est nouvelle: il s’agit de sujets religieux, et la religion pouvait moraliser la royauté avec moins de scandale que n’auraient pu faire les grands; elle était censée parler au nom d’intérêts

characterizes Esther as capable of mounting carefully crafted, rational arguments aimed at persuading personages whose authority vastly exceed her own.

It is therefore perfectly consistent with their characterization that in the climactic scene the king listens carefully to Esther's exposition, follows her arguments attentively, is persuaded by her reasoned command of historical events and her interpretation of their meaning, and accepts his new role as an actor in her construction of that history.

Given that ancient history, classical mythology, and the Bible were the three standard sources of plots for neoclassical French theater, that Mme de Maintenon wished Racine to write plays for the St-Cyr convent school-girls that would be morally edifying, and that a heroine would be a suitable model for the students to emulate, the story of the Jewish queen Esther was a perfect choice. Perhaps Racine initially chose to write a classical tragedy based on the Hebrew and Greek books of *Esther* because, having thought about his own role of royal historian over the preceding several years, he realized that historiography and history played such a significant part in the Biblical stories' plot and he wanted his audience to reflect on those themes. Or perhaps, also thinking about his royal duties, he developed the themes of historiography and history as he recognized their significance while he was transforming the Biblical texts into his play. Whatever his motivation, the result is a work in which the characters and the audience are made to appreciate the importance of historiographers and historians in the governance of the state.

**Kalamazoo College**

### Works Cited

Ahmed, Ehsan. "Ethnic Difference and Mimetic violence in Racine's *Esther*." *Romance Notes* 40.1 (1999): 33–40. Print.

Bénichou, Paul. *Morales du grand siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948. Print.

---

moins violents et plus généreux. Elle était la seule source de culpabilité désormais possible pour l'absolutisme. S'il y a des maximes un peu fortes dans les deux dernières pièces de Racine, elles opposent généralement aux abus du despotisme, au nom de la loi chrétienne, le bonheur du peuple entier et la justice." (247)

## COHEN

- Goldmann, Lucien. *Le Dieu caché: Étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959. Print.
- Gregoire, Vincent. "Esther, une pièce biblique au caractère didactique ambigu." *Cahiers du dix-septième An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 6.1 (1992): 177–94. Print.
- Hourcade, Philippe. "Sur racine historiographe: interrogations et points de vue." *Dalhousie French Studies*. 65 (2003): 121–31. Print.
- Howells, R.J. "Racine's *Esther*: Reintegration and Ritual." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 20, 2 (1984), 97–105. Print.
- Jaouën, Françoise. "*Esther/Athalie*: Histoire sacrée, histoire exemplaire." *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*. 21 (1999): 123–31. Print.
- Jasinski, René. *Autour de l'Esther racinienne*. Paris: Nizet, 1985. Print.
- . "Sur un thème d'Esther." *Littératures*. 9–10 (1984): 75–82. Print.
- Knapp, Bettina L. *Jean Racine: Mythos and Renewal in Modern Theater*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1971. Print.
- Malachy, Thérèse. "*Esther*: une tragédie de Racine et l'Ancien Testament." *Les Lettres romanes* 43,3 (1989): 143–48. Print.
- Marks, Elaine. *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. Print.
- Orcibal, Jean. *La Genèse d'Esther et d'Athalie*. Paris: Vrin, 1950. Print.
- Picard, Raymond. *La Carrière de Jean Racine*. 4th ed. Paris: Gallimard, 1956. Print.
- Pommier, Jean. *Aspects de Racine*. Nizet, 1966. Print.
- Scholar, Richard. "Je ne sais quelle grâce: Esther before Assuérus." *French Studies*. 56, 3 (2002): 317–27. Print.
- Traduction oecuménique de la Bible comprenant l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament traduits sur les textes originaux hébreu et grec*. Paris: Société biblique française et Éditions du Cerf, 2nd ed. 1988. Print.
- Turnell, Martin. *Jean Racine, Dramatist*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972. Print.
- Weinberg, Bernard. *The Art of Jean Racine*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963. Print.

*IN PRAISE OF HISTORIOGRAPHERS & HISTORIANS*

Woshinsky, Barbara R. "Render unto Caesar: Sacred Representation in *Esther*." *Homage to Paul Bénichou*. Eds. Sylvie Romanowski and Monique Bilezikian. Birmingham: Summa, 1994. 167–73. Print.

Wood, Allen. "Racine's *Esther* and the Biblical/Modern Jew." *Papers in French Seventeenth Century Literature*. 36, 70 (2009): 209–18. Print.