

# ESTHER

## Racine

**Overview** One of Racine's two last plays, *Esther* was first staged in 1689, at an institution for impoverished daughters of the nobility, an institution supported by the second wife (formerly mistress) of King Louis. The intention behind the play was moral uplift—the play is an inspirational one, taking off from a noble text of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther, and though not the best received of Racine's plays, in this work Racine pays final tribute to his lasting concern with the moral fragility, and room for heroism, in the human condition. It is worth noting that this three act drama— his other plays have five acts—was dressed up by interludes of musical chorales, and sung as well as performed by the pupils of Mme. Maintenon, the King's wife.

**Story** One of Racine's last two plays, *Esther*, was first staged in 1689, at an institution for impoverished daughters of the nobility, an institution supported by the second wife (formerly mistress) of King Louis XIV. The intention behind the play was moral uplift—the play is an inspirational one, taking off from a noble text of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther, and though not the best received of Racine's plays, in this work Racine pays final tribute to his lasting concern with the moral fragility, and room for heroism, in the human condition. It is worth noting that this three act drama— his other plays have five acts—was dressed up by interludes of musical chorales, and sung as well as performed by the pupils of Mme. Maintenon, the King's wife.

The subject of the play is the deliverance of the Jews who had remained behind in Babylon, after the Captivity. The prime minister of the ruling Persian Empire, Aman, has been deeply offended because one of the leading Jews, Mardochee, has refused to show him sufficient respect; sufficient cause, it seems, for the Empire to bring down its whole punitive weight against the Jewish people. Mardochee, however, is determined to intervene on behalf of his people, and he has two strong cards to play. Esther, the wife of the imperial ruler, Assuerus, is Mardochee's niece, and in the past, as it turns out, Mardochee has had occasion to save Assuerus from a plot against his life. Both of these strong cards, plus Esther's character, will eventually save the day.

Like *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, in the Racinian plays associated with those heroines, Esther finds herself in a moral bind, married to the king of the Persians, Assuerus, but privy to a plot, at the Persian court, to kill all the Jews in the kingdom. The genius of Esther lies in her ability to win her husband over to the cause of the Jews—to whom he finally declares lasting amnesty and praise—and in her ferreting out of the evil plotters, within the Persian court, who are determined to overcome their racial enemies. She achieves her ends with unbending integrity, conscientious to all parties. Mardochee is essential to her success.

At just this time, as it turns out, King Assuerus is going through a dream inspired awareness of the debts he owes to the Jews, and it seems to him fitting to celebrate, with a triumphal procession, the benefactions he has in the past received from Mardochee. He asks Aman to take charge of this celebration—a terrible affront to the proud and ruthless minister, who prepares a vengeance which will be a disaster to the Jews. It is here that Esther brings her full moral weight on behalf of her own Jewish people—Assuerus does not realize Esther is Jewish—and works in collaboration with her uncle Mardochee, to address King Assuerus himself about the fate of the Jewish people. She, now fully disclosed as Jewish, reveals her identity to her husband, invites him to dine with her in her native Jewish home, and brings tears to her husband, as he realizes how faithfully Esther has stood by her own origins. The edict of proscription against the Jews is withdrawn, and the vengeance Aman had reserved for Mardochee is reversed, and applied to the wretched Aman.

### Themes

**Fidelity** The power of fidelity is a dominating theme. Esther has a spotless reputation, both at court and with her Jewish cohorts at home, and thus is able to prevail over both her husband and his court, and to win justice for the Jewish people. The self-destruction of the spirit of vengeance, as we see it in Aman, is a complementary theme. Aman is curdling with ill will, but we know what a price it will exact from him.

**Transnationalism.** Through Esther's personal power, the Jews and the Persians are eventually led to act as one, instead of as hereditary enemies.

## Characters

**Esther** is depicted as a person of double and very strong loyalties. Her husband, the Imperial Persian Monarch, has no inkling that she is Jewish—for she devotes herself selflessly to his service and attention. By the same token, she never forsakes her fidelity to her uncle Mardochee, or to those Jewish roots, with which she will in the end enable her people to avoid extirpation. While her motives may seem bland, and her personal traits without sharp outline, she remains a figure of surpassing dignity, who knows how to get her way.

**Assuerus** is a dignified monarch, deeply hostile to the Jews, who nonetheless allows himself to be swayed by the behavior and attitudes of his wife, and to see, thanks to her, the dreadful outrages being planned against the post-Captivity Jewish community.

## MAIN CHARACTER

ESTHER (conscientious)

**Character** Like Andromaque and Phèdre, in the Racinian plays associated with those heroines, Esther finds herself in a moral bind, married to the king of the Persians, Assuerus, but privy to a plot, at the Persian court, to kill all the Jews in the kingdom. The genius of Esther lies in her ability to win her husband over to the cause of the Jews—to whom he finally declares lasting amnesty and praise—and in her ferreting out of the evil plotters, within the Persian court, who are determined to overcome their racial enemies. She achieves her ends with unbending integrity, conscientious to all parties.

**Parallels** Woman saviors have been prominent throughout world cultures, often supporting major developments in the course of events. Esther is not alone among Old Testament examples, for her sacrifices, on behalf of her people and her race, were preceded by those of Miriam, sister and protector of Moses, the greatest of the descendants of Abraham, and Jochebed the heroic, protective mother of Moses. Joan of Arc, in the 15th century, will do as an astonishing instance of fearless and effective women power, virtually determining the course of French history; while in the struggle for freedom from slavery, in American culture, no participants have been more 'conscientious' and powerful than Harriet Tubman, of the Underground Railway, or Rose Parks, who knew how to say no.

## Illustrative moments

**Gloomy** Esther makes her first appearance to the Jewish maidens present with her at the Persian court. Her tone is from the start morose, invoking the heavy history of the Jews, and asking her sisters that they should 'de la triste Sion célébrer les malheurs,' 'celebrate the sufferings of sad Zion.' With these words she makes it clear that she is 100 percent Jewish and in sympathy with the Jewish cause. She invokes a chorus of young Jewish women, who are still unaware that trouble is brewing for them in the court.

**Stuck** Esther explains to her uncle Mardochee that she too would be up for destruction, were she not the king's consort. Upon his rejoinder that she must on no account permit such destruction, she reacts with shame and determination. She asks that he should arrange a three day fast, of all the Jews in the Persian kingdom; she declares that she will carry on her own fast within the palace, and that if, at the end

of that time period, the anti-Jewish pogrom has not been lifted, she will take her own life in protest. No less than this commitment will quiet Mardochee.

**Pleas** Esther turns directly to her husband, pleading with him to take a broad view of the crisis she and her people are in. She reminds him of the ancient promise taken, by his ancestors, to respect the Jewish people within his kingdom. Then she turns, in skillful rhetoric, to remind him of his own, and his line's, ancient reputation for magnanimity and long-term thinking. Like all Racine's great tragic females—especially Andromaque and Phèdre—Esther combines the ingenuity of a classically trained rhetorician with the seductive power of her sexuality. It is no surprise that she prevails, and the play turns out salvational for the Jews.

**Peroration** The fate of the Jews having been saved and respected by Assuerus, Esther—instead of simply celebrating this wonderful turn of events—launches into a long peroration on the one god who created us all, though under various guises, of which Judaism is one of the most noble. She rises above the conflict in Persia, and emerges, like Andromaque and Phedre, as a figure around whom suffering can crystallize into nobility. Her enemies are rapidly exposed as power hungry and small minded, and Assuerus is at peace, both in his kingdom and his marriage.

### **Discussion questions**

*Esther* was one of Racine's two last plays. Can you see some evidence, in this play and others, that Racine is here modifying his dramaturgical style, perhaps simplifying the nature of his theater?

Is any character in the play changing dynamically through the course of events? Does Assuerus change? What about Haman?

In some respects—chorus, accompanying orchestra—Racine has in this play created a virtual oratorio. Does he seem anxious to move on from theater to some other form of expression?