

ESTHER

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Esther (in Racine's *Esther*) **conscientious**

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.

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?