Racine’s Esther and the Biblical/Modern Jew

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The attitude of the French in the seventeenth century toward Jews as a religious and cultural Other was characterized, as it had been for centuries, by ambivalence, repression, and often a limited or displaced return of the repressed. In terms of political history, this cycle repeated itself from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, as Jews were repeatedly expelled, only to be recalled. Louis van Delft indicates the importance of the Other for identity formation:

A l’instar du navigateur, tout individu, pour survivre, a besoin de se repérer: il lui faut avant tout se situer lui-même, situer autrui, se situer par rapport à autrui. [...] Or, l’aventure existentielle se ramène, pour l’essentiel, à des rapports à autrui, à une constellation de rapports psychologiques. (88-89)

By the seventeenth century, although the number of Jews was often undocumented but small, Jews lived in many communities at the margins, a ring around the kingdom, posted at the gates – in the Papal states, in the Southwest around Bordeaux, near Rouen, and in Alsace-Lorraine. Despite this small, precarious presence, the term “Jew” was more often a discursive concept, a trope, rather than a referent to a real, contemporary human being.

Indeed, Jews and Judaism were often written into the religious, intellectual debates of the period.¹ Yet as Myriam Yardeni examines in detail, the various Histoires de France of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she finds that “anti-semitism was never absent from the French mentality.” (40)

¹ In 1643 La Peyrère argued in his Rappel des Juifs that total salvation for Christians depended upon the Jews, who needed to be brought back to France. But the Jews were to be converted to Christianity, and a truly fused Judeo-Christian people would then march to Jerusalem for deliverance. Several of Pascal’s Pensées refer to the Jews, especially their Old Testament role in the preparation for Christianity. And Richard Simon, in the Histoire critique du Vieux Testament (1678) admires Jewish piety but finds Jews (apparently of all times) devoid of reason, obstinate, and prone to deceive Christians.

PFSCl XXXVI, 70 (2009)
In these and other discussions of Jewish history and theology of the time, a split is created between the Jews of the Old Testament – absorbed into Catholicism as proto-Christians and therefore good, historical, parental Others – and their supposedly degenerate, contemporary descendants, a “race abominable” who were a cursed, despised Other.

The literature of the French seventeenth century is almost devoid of Jewish characters or themes, whether in prose, poetry or theatre. This is certainly true in terms of representations of contemporary Jews. Whereas the image of a modern Jew such as Shylock or Jessica is found in Elizabethan drama, set nonetheless in the distant locales of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* (1596) or Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* (1592), French theatre contains no such representations. In France, religious plays predominantly treat Christian martyrdom, with notable examples being Corneille’s *Polyeucte* (1642) and Rotrou’s *Véritable Saint-Genest* (1645). Only a few Old Testament figures, such as Saul, Judith and Esther, provided a suitable caractère, narrative plot and dramatic tension for their stories to be repeated by seventeenth-century playwrights.

This is the situation of Racine’s *Esther* (1689), one of the most successful of the Old Testament plays of the century, which saw earlier versions of the same material by Montchrestien (*Aman*, 1601) and DuRyer (*Esther*, 1642). Racine’s protagonist declares herself in the opening passage to be a descendant of Benjamin, and is undeniably Jewish. But as heroine of both the Jewish megillat (scroll) “Esther” and the Christian “Book of Esther,” she is claimed by both religious traditions of Judeo-Christian history/theology in a most unique story of biblical anti-Jewishness. Esther’s status for a French spectator was double: literally Other but traditionally assimilated to the Same. Esther is seen as a Christian heroine.

The Catholic members of court present during the first representation, as well as the young women of Saint-Cyr themselves who performed the play, could identify with Esther’s struggle to save her people, who from their perspective were to become ultimately the Christian people. An example of Christian virtues of humility and innocence, Esther is nonetheless similar on a few points to a seventeenth-century Jew, since both lived in a Diaspora and suffered anti-semitic attack from a society with a different religion. To further complicate the issue of Otherness, since the Jewish characters are dominant in the play (and hence their perspective as well), the Other is the non-Jew, the Persian society of king Assuérus.

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2 Modern Jewish identity is matrilineal, although biblical references are patrilineal and tribal.
In composing his play, Racine followed closely the narrative development and character portrayal as found in the Old Testament “Book of Esther.” Jasinski succinctly states a common critical view, “Que Racine ait fidèlement suivi les données bibliques ne fait aucun doute” (173). This was indeed Racine’s claimed intent and, as he saw it, his sacred duty, as we find in the “Préface” to the play:

Il me sembla que, sans altérer aucune des circonstances tant soit peu considérables de l’Ecriture sainte, ce qui serait, à mon avis, une espèce de sacrilège, je pourrais remplir toute mon action avec les seules scènes que Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a préparées.

In addition, many critics have found the play to be suffused with a general biblical language, with phrases from “Psalms”, “The Song of Songs,” and “Isaiah.” But although the major scenes, plot, characters, and language are quite faithful to the original Christian text, it is just as clear that his modifications and additions were numerous. And while they may be considered minor in scope, many are highly pertinent and contribute to a version of the play quite unlike any of its predecessors3. For instance, Racine’s truncated plot, which all but eliminates Vashti in the beginning and the slaughter of the Jews’ enemies at the end, may have been necessitated by the need to create a more focused, unified drama from looser, narrative material. But in addition, Jasinski points out that in the Jansenist Bible de Royaumont (1686), which is more of an abridged commentary than a complete Bible, these events are also missing.

Other modifications are more than structural, and are highly significant in the context of an examination of Jews and Jewish life in seventeenth-century France. The marginalized Jew, the repressed Other, returns in certain concepts, techniques, and language in Racine’s Esther, found in passages which were only partially based on, or absent from, biblical texts (either Jewish or Christian).

The fact that Esther hid her Jewish identity from king and court is a basic element of the religious texts, but it is simply stated: “Esther did not reveal her nationality or family, for Mordecai had commanded her not to do so.” (2:10). In Racine’s version, it is somewhat ironic that in the first act, as she is insulated in her own enclosed space within the palace, all she seems to talk about is her Jewish identity, coupled with the fact, repeated incessantly, that it is a secret, kept hidden from those beyond the walls. The

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3 One variation among the three texts concerns the manner of Haman’s death. In the Jewish story, he is impaled on a stake he had prepared for Mordecai, in the Christian story he erects a gallows, and in Racine’s play Aman is torn apart by an angry crowd while being led to his own gallows.
terms “secret” and “cacher” appear throughout, and take on an overly-determined, obsessional quality. This may be due to guilt or fear on her part, or a repeated reminder that she is a hidden Jew, a concept which might resonate in a seventeenth-century nation well aware of Marranos and other crypto-Jews. Yet she was not a “faux croyant,” claiming assimilation to the dominant culture or accepting a different religion. She was simply, silently, Other.

The issue of forced conversion appears in passing as members of the Chœur in Act II, scene 8 lament their fate. Une Autre Israélite asks what the Jews will do if the king forces them to bend their knees before a false idol, and the Jeune Israélite answers the question with an indirect, rhetorical refusal:

Moi! Je pourrais trahir le Dieu que j’aime?
J’adorerais un dieu sans force et sans vertu,
Reste d’un tronc par les vents abattu,
Qui ne peut se sauver lui-même? (ll. 764-67)

The sarcastic response precludes the action of abjuring the true God, and the Chœur continues by claiming that the “démons,” who believe in false gods, must be destroyed, not obeyed. The women would not hide under the cloak of a false conversion.

Members of the Chœur, a Racinian interpretation of Esther’s seven maidens in the biblical texts, do not show direct opposition by word or act. But such is not the case with Mardochée. A courageous, honest and pious man, he is openly recognized as a Jew, and is unwavering in his principles and devotion to his God. He is thus seen as proud and arrogant by Aman, as an example of the “stiff-necked Jew.” But his opposition is displaced, for it is not the king, the Persians or their gods whom he refuses to obey, but the Amélicite prime minister. Mardochée will not publicly enter the palace due to Aman’s presence, although Racine maintains a classical unité de lieu by having him secretly enter at the end of Act I. Aman demands total obedience from every subject, and complains bitterly about Mardochée’s actions:

L’insolent devant moi ne se courba jamais [...]  
Lui, fièrement assis, et la tête immobile  
Traite tous ces honneurs d’impiété servile  
Présente à mes regards un front séditieux  
Et ne daigneraient pas au moins baisser les yeux. (ll. 424, 429-32)

As members of the Chœur had earlier implied that they would not bow before an idol, Mardochée in fact refuses to bow before the false, secular
authority of Aman. This passage may recall the defiance of seventeenth-century Jews to French political or religious orthodoxy.

The politics of forced assimilation and annihilation are examined by Catherine Chalier, and are pertinent to Aman and his plans. Chalier distinguishes between the mystic and the politician:

[...] l’homme politique connaîtrait plutôt une inflation démesurée de son “moi.” Inflation qui voue l’Autre à la mort. L’hégémonie du Même, l’unicité de son chiffre, fournissant la règle et l’alibi de toute domination. Cette tentative conduit aux portes d’un espace ultime et Un, elle déporte et déchire tout ce qui, séparément, existe. Elle rend impensable, invivable, le projet d’un lien entre le Même et l’Autre qui soit lien à l’Infini, qui ne détruisse aucun de ses termes. (102)

In Racine’s play, more obvious examples that denigrate contemporary Jews can be found in his anti-semitic expressions. Lucien Gilles Benguigui states categorically that “après tout, et quitte à se répéter, l’antisémitisme est bien le sujet du livre d’Esther et de la pièce” (40). But he examines primarily the biblical story of Haman’s hatred of the Jews. We read in the Old Testament, for instance, that Haman hates Mordecai and by extension all Jews, and pleads for their destruction before the king:

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus: “Dispersed among the nations throughout the provinces of your kingdom, there is a certain people living apart, with laws differing from those of every other people. They do not obey the laws of the king, and so it is not proper for the king to tolerate them. (3:8)

They are not so much a threat as simply different, Other, and Haman’s only lie may be in portraying them as disobedient to royal law. In Racine, however, Aman gloats before Hydaspe about his lies which inflamed the king against the Jews:

Je prévins donc contre eux l’esprit d’Assuérus:
J’inventais des couleurs; j’armai la calomnie;
J’intéressai sa gloire; il trembla pour sa vie.
Je le peignis puissants, riches, séditieux;
Leur dieu même ennemi de tous les autres dieux.
“Jusqu’à quand souffre-t-on que ce peuple respire,
Et d’un culte profane infecte votre empire?
Etrangers dans la Perse, à nos lois opposés,
Du reste des humains ils semblent divisés,
N’aspirent qu’à troubler le repos où nous sommes,
Et, détestés partout, détestent tous les hommes. [...] “ (ll. 492-502)
The passage is greatly expanded from the Christian version, and contains modern expressions of bigotry. Racine would have found this language in contemporary society, and as a historiographe du roi. However, in DuRyer's play, Haman hates Mordecai and the Jews, but with less anti-Semitic language; for instance, they are “peuples suspects” (l. 308), “sans foy” (l. 312), “factieux” (l. 1432).

In Racine, anti-Semitic references can also be found when Mardochée recognizes that the king (indifferent and removed in the Bible) has been prejudiced by Aman's lies, as he tells Esther “Il nous croit en horreur à toute la nature.” (l. 174) Hydaspe calls Mardochée “ce chef d’une race abominable, impie” (l. 421). And unlike previous references to “race” in Racine, where it refers to family, it means people or nation in Esther. Just as the queen is about to enter, declare her identity, and ask for the deliverance of the Jews, the king comments to himself about how, even though he honored Mardochée for saving his life, he will soon destroy him and all his people: “Je n'en perdrai pas moins ce peuple abominable.” (l. 630) Yet another prejudicial remark against Jews occurs when Aman relates his chagrin at having to lead Mardochée in honor through the streets: “Un exécrable Juif, l'opprobre des humains, / S'est donc vu de la pourpre habillé par mes mains.” (ll. 846-47) Such language comes not from the Bible, but from contemporary characterizations of Jews.

Other references to French views on Jewish life, practices and crimes can be found in displaced, floating signifiers where a term, even taken out of context, is rich in prejudicial connotations. The king cannot believe that Esther is Jewish, that she has a “source impure,” (l. 1039), which is both a comment on the biology of racial purity as well as a suggestion of a “poisoned well.” Esther herself uses a similar term when she calls Aman a “source empoisonnée” (l. 1085) preventing public happiness. She also characterizes the plight of the Jews by stating “Babylone paya nos pleurs avec usure.” (l. 1069) The fact that Jews were relegated in Europe to the role of moneylenders, accused of charging usurious interest rates, is pertinent.

When Jews were able to earn enough money to possess land and property, Europeans often envied what they perceived as ill-gotten gains, exiled the Jews and confiscated their property (especially between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries). Language reflecting this practice is found in Racine’s Esther. In the Old Testament story (3:9), Haman offered 10,000

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4 With the exception of Œnone’s line “quel poison en a tari la source?” (Phèdre, l. 190), these are the only allusions to a poisoned source or well in Racine.

5 The only other use of “avec usure” in Racine occurs in Athalie, where God makes the fields produce fruit “avec usure.” (l. 327)
talents of silver to the king to bring about the destruction of the Jews. The king refused to accept the money, but let Haman do what he wanted with the Jews. In Racine, Aman pleads before the king: “Prévenez, punissez leurs insolents efforts; / De leur dépouille enfin grossissez vos trésors” (ll. 503-504) and then comments to Hydaspe:

> Je dis, et l’on me crut. Le Roi, dès l’heure même,  
> Mit dans ma main le sceau de son pouvoir suprême:  
> “Assure, me dit-il, le repos de ton Roi;  
> Va, perds ces malheureux: leur dépouille est à toi.” (ll. 505-508)

This is the language of a European decree, a license for a pogrom, without an analogue in either Jewish or Christian accounts of Esther.

Finally, we find references in Racine to God and the issue of deicide, one of the most severe accusations brought against the Jews. In the story of Esther, the conflict between Mordecai and Haman plays out before king Ahasuerus, and each man symbolically represents a separate people, and a different theology. Yet the Jewish and Christian texts hardly mention God, to such an extent that the Old Testament book was almost not accepted into the biblical canon. But in Racine’s text, the divine is manifest (both “notre Dieu” and “leurs dieux”), and God is not so hidden, especially in the songs of the Chœur. The human conflict is seen as a clash of the gods. The one God of Israel can defeat, as Esther states, “tous ces dieux qui ne furent jamais.” (l. 272) Typical of Old Testament depictions of God, Esther later describes him as “le Dieu vengeur de l’innocence” (l. 1056) and as a “Dieu redoutable.” (l. 1060) In the Jewish and Christian stories, God may have punished the Jews by exiling them from Jerusalem, but since Esther is successful in saving them, and to the extent that the divine is involved, God is ultimately merciful. The Chœur near the end of Racine’s play alludes to this, in a passage which evokes the “loving” God of Christianity:

> Il s’apaise, il pardonne.  
> Du cœur ingrat qui l’abandonne  
> Il attend le retour;  
> Il excuse notre faiblesse. [...]  
> Une mère a moins de tendresse. (ll. 1272-75; 1278)

But Esther’s God would have been destroyed if Aman and his gods were successful in a total annihilation of the Jews, as stated by Esther in a prayer: “[ils] veulent aujourd’hui qu’un même coup mortel / Abolisse ton nom, ton peuple et ton autel.” (ll. 263-64) She projects this forward from

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6 Malachy indicates this fact that “[...] seul parmi les textes sacrés, [“Esther”] se définit précisément par l’absence de révélation divine.” (145)
“aujourd’hui” to the future, promised Messiah who would therefore not come:

Ainsi donc un perfide, après tant de miracles,
Pourrait anéantir la foi de tes oracles,
Ravirait aux mortels le plus cher de tes dons,
Le saint que tu promets et que nous attendons[.] (ll. 265-68)

Christian exegetes often consider Esther a prefiguration of Mary, the Holy Mother, progenitor and protector of the Messiah. For Racine’s Christian audience, Aman’s actions would have prevented Christ from being born, similar in some ways to the Church’s accusation that the Jews’ actions killed him. Reading backward in time, and with a perspective that appropriates the Jewish story as a proto-Christian allegory, one can find that, irony of ironies, Aman is cast (and cast out) symbolically in terms reserved for a modern Jew. He is a stranger, despised by all, despicable in his actions, and whose violent death is intended as a righteous, fitting end for anybody who would refuse the true God and seek to harm the Chosen people.

At the time of its first performance at Saint-Cyr, Racine’s Esther was not seen as a defense of contemporary Jews, who are mentioned only at the close of his “Préface.” A distant, dismissive “on dit” occurs as Racine comments that the “Juifs d’aujourd’hui” continue to celebrate Esther’s victory as the festival of purim. Who then were the Jews in Esther supposed to represent? As Elaine Marks poses the question:

We may wonder whether or not Jean Racine knew any [Jews ...] or what possible connection might have existed in Racine’s mind, or in the minds of those who saw his play performed, between the Jews of Holy Scriptures and the real Jews of late seventeenth-century France?” (p. 28)

In fact, something else, some Other, has often been sought, as competing interpretations appeared. 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. But to portray Louis as the weak, indecisive Assuérus would have been far from flattering.

Other interpretations identify the Jews in Esther 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

7 Dubu reinforces the openness of Racine’s text indicating that “Racine, à son habitude, poursuit et réussit à concilier des fins multiples.” (619)
may not have been far from Racine’s mind. The revocation of the Edit de
Nantes in 1685 was a major social and political event, causing a massive
exile of Protestants from France. But unlike Esther or Mardochée, whose
words and actions appear rebellious, Racine could not openly oppose Louis
XIV and his repressive policies toward Jansenists or Protestants.

Esther’s courage and actions had assured that a minority religion sur-

vived, and triumphed over its rivals, but it is doubtful if Esther is a play
advocating religious tolerance. The Jews slaughtered their enemies, even
though the lengthy details found in the Judeo-Christian texts are reduced to
the briefest of allusions in Racine; Assuérus allows the Jews their freedom
and vengeance: “Je leur livre le sang de tous leurs ennemis.” (l. 1183) One
branch of the Old Testament Jews ultimately became the dominant, uni-
versal, “Catholic” religion of seventeenth-century France, and following the
unflinching faith of orthodox doctrine which coincided with the lex talionis
oppressed the cultural/religious Other just as it had been oppressed.

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Mauron insists that “dans les sentiments de Racine, l’image de Saint-Cyr et de ses
filles se fondait nécessairement dans celle de Port-Royal et de ses vierges.” (310)

But Esther and Mordecai, along with many other Jews, had chosen not to make the trek back to Judah. They seemed content to stay in Susa, the capital city of Persia, in which the story is set. The book was written no earlier than 470 BC and probably no later than 424 BC, during the reign of Xerxes' son Artaxerxes. Much like the book of Ruth, this book stands as one of the most skillfully written biblical books. Using eight feasts to systematically build and resolve suspense, the author constructed the story chiastically—using a Hebrew literary device in which events mirror each other inversely. Early listeners to the story would have recognized significant events and followed the rising tension with understanding. Modern Jewish identity is matrilineal, although biblical references are patrilineal and tribal. Racine's Esther and the Biblical/Modern Jew.

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Additions B and E are the texts of, respectively, the letter Haman sent out against the Jews, and the letter Esther and Mordecai sent out allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Addition C contains prayers uttered by Mordecai and Esther for the salvation of the Jews, and Addition D tells an expanded version of the story of Esther's approach to the king. The earliest fragment of Greek Esther is 1st/2nd CE. Esther is described in all versions of the Book of Esther as the Jewish queen of a Persian king Ahasuerus. In the narrative, Ahasuerus seeks a new wife after his queen, Vashti, refuses to obey him, and Esther is chosen for her beauty. The king's chief adviser, Haman, is offended by Esther's cousin and guardian, Mordecai, and get permission from the king to have all the Jews in the kingdom killed. Esther foils the plan, and wins permission from the king for the Jews to kill their enemies, and they do.

Of all the biblical heroines Esther has enjoyed greatest popularity among writers, artists, and musicians, representing feminine modesty, courage, and self-sacrifice. For performances of Racine's play at the Comédie Française during this period the choruses were composed by several undistinguished musicians; later contributions include those by Reynaldo Hahn (1905) and Marcel Samuel-Rousseau (1912). The most notable modern work on the subject is Darius Milhaud's opera Esther de Carpentras, which dramatized the staging of an old Provençal Purim play with the threat posed by a conversionist bishop of Carpentras. First, Esther came to symbolize the court Jew who risked everything to defend the nation so often slandered, despised, and threatened.