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Campbell, J. (2009) *The politics of Esther*. *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 31 (1). pp. 25-35. ISSN 0265-1068

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/24360/>

Deposited on: 11 February 2010

John Campbell, 'The Politics of *Esther*'. *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 31
(2009), 25-35.

Ever since its first performance, in 1689, at Madame de Maintenon's school in Saint-Cyr for the daughters of distressed gentlefolk, it has seemed natural to speak of Racine's *Esther* not so much as a tragedy that happened to be crafted by France's greatest tragic dramatist, than as a cross between a piece of religious poetry, with musical accompaniment, and an innocent entertainment for schoolchildren. It is, however, possible to make the case that this work is authentically dramatic in character, that it has a truly tragic action crowned by an Aristotelian reversal and recognition, and that the *innocence* so often on display has a somewhat ambiguous quality.¹ This article seeks to take this argument one step further. It will argue that the easy assimilation of *Esther* to something between the school play and the oratorio is also complicated by its complex political dimension, one that is difficult to overlook, **at least three centuries on**. This political complication involves both the contemporary context that *Esther* reflects, and the power struggle at the heart of the dramatic action. The article will suggest that this dimension has a dark underside, which, **to a modern eye, to some extent undermines the confident faith in God** that is so often expressed in the work.

At this initial point, a first objection raises its head. Why bring politics into it? After all, Racine had done nothing more than zealously comply with Mme de Maintenon's request that he should 'faire sur quelque sujet de piété et de morale une espèce de Poème, où le chant fût mêlé avec le récit' (Preface).² Does the obvious centrality of *piété* and *morale* not make any other aspect of the work peripheral? The

objection is reinforced by the many references to the Bible, and direct quotations from it, especially in the choral sections often inspired directly by the Old Testament, most notably the Book of Psalms. This evidence would seem to suggest that *Esther*, **whatever rating it is given as a play, is a work of an essentially religious character.** As Richard Scholar observes, ‘the tendency to “sacralize” *Esther* unites hostile critics who dismiss the play as simplistic with those who praise its simplicity’.³ And indeed, Racine himself in his Preface takes pains to emphasize that, having chosen his subject from the Book of Esther, he remained scrupulously faithful to his sacred source, composing his play ‘avec les seules Scènes, que Dieu lui-même, pour ainsi dire, a préparées.’ For these reasons, it is possible to see *Esther* as seeking fundamentally to accomplish what Milton also set out to do in *Paradise Lost*, to ‘assert Eternal Providence, | And justify the ways of God to men’.⁴ This is the message of the final Chorus:

Que son nom soit béni, que son nom soit chanté!

Que l'on célèbre ses ouvrages

Au delà des temps et des âges,

Au delà de l'Eternité! (1285-83)

In addition, it has been easy to marginalize one specific type of “political” interpretation, where *Esther* is seen as a kind of top-drawer, coded commentary on events surrounding the court of France in 1689. This decoding began in the chronicle of that period attributed (rashly) to Mme de Lafayette: ‘La comédie représentait en quelque sorte la chute de madame de Montespan et l’élévation de madame de Maintenon. [...] tout le monde crut toujours que cette comédie était allégorique,

qu'Assuérus était le roi, et que Vasthi, qui était la femme concubine détrônée, paraissait pour madame de Montespan.⁵ Thus, for example, the Neuchâtel Protestants used *Esther* as a text about the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, though they did apologize to Racine for 'une application si éloignée de sa pensée'.⁶ This process was tested to destruction by René Jasinski, for whom *Esther* is a *roman à clef* giving covert information on intricacies of the struggle between Louis XIV and Port-Royal. He builds painstaking parallels, not just between Mme de Maintenon and Esther, but between all the characters of the play and historical figures of that period: the persecuted Jews represented the Jansenists, and the treacherous Aman figured some of their foes, such as le père La Chaise or Louvois.⁷ This approach is historical in focus, and is for historians to assess. The problem here, as Harry Barnwell has pointed out, is that little then remains of *Esther* as a work of the imagination: 'the circumstantial and propagandist thesis tends to trivialize it and so detract from its universal significance.'⁸

Any attempt to see *Esther* in a political dimension thus encounters some obstacles. It is, however, quite possible to accept the work on its own terms, as a dramatic action designed to engage an audience, while at the same time to suggest that an important part of that engagement, **for present-day audiences and readers**, might spring from the play's complexity and ambiguity. For, **at least at this distance from *Esther's* creation, it is difficult to maintain the work** on some artificial island of the purely religious, when the religious faith in question is being expressed in terms of political action, and when the successful attempt to save God's chosen people from extinction is crowned by the physical elimination of its enemies. The "political" is not something a foolhardy critic adds to *Esther*, but something that springs directly from its unravelling dramatic action.

Nor was the play written and produced in a political vacuum. In the years following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, religious fervour was the only show at Court. When Racine was requested by Mme de Maintenon to take up his creative pen once more, this was not just to express a religious sentiment, but, in effect, to defend a religious policy: ‘elle ordonna au poète de faire une comédie, mais de choisir un sujet pieux; car à l’heure qu’il est, hors de la piété point de salut à la cour.’⁹ To this end, once Louis XIV became involved, no expense was thereafter spared, for costumes, scenery, and music. As Racine notes in his Preface, ‘un divertissement d’enfants est devenu le sujet de l’empressement de toute la Cour’. What could still be seen by many as a footnote to Racine’s dramatic career, the work of a true believer that expressed the depth of his own faith, became in reality a lavish spectacle, entry to which became public proof that of favour by the king, the one true god of Versailles: ‘Ce qui devait être regardé comme une comédie de couvent, devint l’affaire la plus sérieuse de la cour: les ministres, pour faire leur cour en allant à cette comédie, quittaient leurs affaires les plus pressées.’¹⁰ Nor was it possible to overlook the link that is established between Esther’s decision to fill the royal palace with innocent young women, ‘Jeunes et tendres fleurs’ (103), and Mme de Maintenon’s establishment of the ‘Colombes timides’ at Saint-Cyr, to which explicit reference is made (Prologue, 11). From the very beginning, in other words, *Esther* was transformed into a piece in the deadly serious game of piety being played on the great and very public chessboard of the Sun King’s court.

Here again, it might be fairly objected that a distinction must be made between the play itself and **either its exploitation by an absolute monarch, or its interpretation in the twenty-first century**. After all, there is no reason to doubt the Racine’s assertion in his Preface that his intention had been to write a religious work, with the

Chorus partly used ‘à chanter les louanges du vrai Dieu’. Thus Georges Forestier reminds his readers that Racine was ‘un homme qui écrit une œuvre de piété parce qu’il est sincèrement pieux’, and continues: ‘les premiers spectateurs d’*Esther* l’ont reçue comme Racine l’avait conçue, c’est à dire comme un pur moment d’émotion religieuse. [...] la messe catholique n’est pas loin, dont le rituel vise aussi à “enlever” vers Dieu.’¹¹ Jean Rohou declares that ‘l’action n’est que l’illustration d’une Providence et l’occasion d’une méditation’, while Pierre Brisson seems to wish to shut the door on any attempt to see the play other than in a solely religious and indeed fervent dimension: ‘C’est ainsi que Racine a conçu la pièce et ainsi qu’il faut l’admettre.’¹² To this objection, one might respond, following the lead of William Empson on *Paradise Lost*, that there is no reasons why present-day readers or audiences should deny themselves a more complex and morally ambiguous experience than an author’s intention, or the opinion of a past age, might seem to permit.¹³

In the particular case of *Esther*, the play itself, and the way in which this could be interpreted in performance, provides enough material to muddy the waters of the “pure religion” thesis. To see an important political dimension in the play it is not necessary to start playing Janinski’s game of matching up its characters with contemporary historical figures. Its Prologue, delivered with due authority by the figure of Piety who has descended from heaven for that purpose, provides what is essentially a political preamble, with the person and politics of Louis XIV very much on display. It glorifies the military exploits of Louis XIV, in what is a lengthy, traditional, and somewhat uncomfortable assimilation of religious proselytism and national aggrandisement by means of war, *et plus catholique que le pape*. Thus while the king ‘De la Religion soutient tout l’édifice’ (Prologue, 40), the Pope is criticized

for supporting the Protestant League of Augsburg against Catholic France (Prologue, 36). The figure of Piety presents this warrior king to God as being his only faithful representative on earth in the battle against wicked heresy: ‘De ta gloire animé, lui seul de tant de Rois | S’arme pour ta querelle, et combat pour tes droits (Prologue, 29-30). And a very positive spin is given to the Dauphin’s visit to Alsace, a familiar story of annexation, retaliation, and devastation: ‘Quand son roi lui dit: «Pars», il s’élance avec joie, | Du tonnerre vengeur s'en va tout embraser’ (Prologue, 56-57). **A modern audience might just find it difficult** to reconcile this generalissimo God, who kills his enemies by the intermediary of Louis XIV, and the God praised by the Chorus some lines later, who ‘fait que tout prospère aux âmes innocentes’ (68). What is less difficult is to see, first, that from the outset *Esther* is not just concerned with the expression of religious feeling, and then, that the very idea of religion is not sweetly circumscribed by the chants of those ‘innocentes beautés’ whose innocent sighs rise up like incense to heaven (122-28). What holds the stage in the Prologue is Louis XIV’s muscular Christianity.

Here it might again be objected that any sense of irony generated by this *sabre et goupillon* Prologue is anachronistic and thus somehow invalid, on the basis that only to a post-Enlightenment eye are killing and divine goodness unlikely bedfellows, whereas Louis XIV’s continual, devastating, self-impoverishing wars were accepted. To state this is in one sense to state the obvious: we cannot be other than what we are. It is impossible, for example, now to read about the projected extermination of the Jews in *Esther* in the same mental disposition as in 1689. At the same time, while this is not the place to open a complex question to be debated by appeal to the historical record, it would seem rash to suggest that Louis XIV’s wars made the population joyous, or even

left them indifferent, or that no one at the time saw any contradiction between the principles of the Gospel and the practice of *le roi très chrétien*. Only a few months after the lavish set for *Esther* was expensively created in Saint-Cyr, food riots began breaking out in Paris.¹⁴ And Fénelon for one, though in good terms with Madame de Maintenon and still awaiting a bishopric, was still able, without fear of the Bastille, to articulate the opposition between the demands of a belief in God and Louis XIV's ruinous military campaigns, while insisting particularly that the King, surrounded only by flatterers, did not see things as they really were: 'Vous craignez d'ouvrir les yeux. Tout le monde le voit et personne n'ose vous le faire voir.'¹⁵

This is not to suggest that Racine was suggesting anything as blasphemous as equating the *Roi soleil* with the Almighty. It is also true that the image of God smiting the powerful echoes the famous 'Why do the nations conspire...?' of Psalm 2:

Que peuvent contre lui tous les Rois de la Terre?

En vain ils s'uniraient pour lui faire la guerre.

Pour dissiper leur ligue il n'a qu'à se montrer.

Il parle, et dans la poudre il les fait tous rentrer. (221-24)¹⁶

That caveat entered, the figure of Piety has already asserted, in the Prologue, that it is God's work that is being done by Louis XIV's gunpowder. In addition, the vocabulary of these lines, from the body of the play, does seem to offer a comparative wink and a nod to the war that the king was then waging against the League of Augsburg. It also seems clear that Racine presents both Assuérus and Louis as battling for truth and true

religion, a cause so noble as to justify any means. The Chorus pointedly emphasizes the importance of a ‘un Roi victorieux’ (989):

Que le peuple est heureux,
Lorsqu'un Roi généreux,
Craint dans tout l'Univers, veut encore qu'on l'aime!

Heureux le Peuple! Heureux le Roi lui-même! (960-63)

It is this glorification of the divinely anointed king that has led commentators who have no time for the Jasinski approach to conclude, nonetheless, that the dramatic action of *Esther* cannot easily be separated from its historical context, the more so in that the play can be read as a study in kingship: ‘Sous-jacente à l’histoire d’Esther, apparaît donc une analyse pertinente, éclairante de la vision du monarque que se fait Louis XIV, et que c’est la mission du poète-historien de révéler.’¹⁷

None of this transforms *Esther* into a simple historical commentary. As Jean Rohou suggests, ‘L’auteur d’*Esther* écrit une œuvre d’art, de foi et de célébration du roi, qui n’a rien d’un plaidoyer politique.’¹⁸ On the other hand, it seems excessive to say, as Rohou does, that it is essentially ‘un poème pieux’, thus following the early lead of the Jansenist Arnauld, for whom ‘on n’a rien fait dans le genre de si édifiant’.¹⁹ Even setting aside the context in which *Esther* was written, and any possible allusion to the contemporary scene, the work still has an undeniable political character. The Book of Esther that Racine follows so faithfully is, after all, the story of a plan to exterminate the Jewish people, hatched by a king’s minister, Haman, and of the action taken to thwart that plan. The Assuérus flattered by Esther as an ‘ami de l’Innocence’ (1080), who may or may not be seen as a representation of Louis XIV, has a more complex role than this description and hypothesis might suggest. For

example, questions might be asked about the king's blindly appeasing attitude to his scheming minister. As Aman himself contends, in a passage Racine does not take from a biblical source, has the king not happily tolerated the criminal acts his minister has committed in his service?

Il sait qu'il me doit tout, et que pour sa grandeur
 J'ai foulé sous les pieds remords, crainte, pudeur;
 Qu'avec un cœur d'airain exerçant sa puissance,
 J'ai fait taire les Lois, et gémir l'Innocence. (866-69)

The credibility of Aman's version is strengthened by the manner in which the king, having heard his minister's view that the Jews are a threat, immediately agrees to their extermination, and even works with him on the details:

Assure, me dit-il, le repos de ton Roi.
 Va, perds ces malheureux; leur dépouille est à toi.
 Toute la Nation fut ainsi condamnée.
 Du carnage avec lui je réglai la journée. (507-10)

To this it might be said that Racine was simply following the Bible story, as Mme de Sévigné had confirmed approvingly.²⁰ And indeed, much evidence can be mined from the text, not least from the words of scripture chanted by the Chorus, to support the thesis that the dramatic action of *Esther* has a providentialist character, with characters as puppets in the hand of 'Ce Dieu jaloux, ce Dieu victorieux' (342), who first looks after his own. This God is a warrior God, stronger than all others:

Le Dieu que nous servons est le Dieu des combats.

Non, non, il ne souffrira pas

Qu'on égorge ainsi l'Innocence. (336-38)

Such a display of divine omnipotence, it could be argued, in such a manifest and deliberate expression of piety, does not leave much room for politics.

This point of view has obvious appeal. It does, however, overlook certain facts. 'Simply following the Bible story', for example, was not a simple option for Racine, since the biblical story comes in two versions, each with its own perspective, a point well developed by Richard Scholar: 'It is to the Book of Esther's two narratives—one sacred in emphasis and the other secular—that Racine's play is faithful. [...] The Hebrew version is a secular story of transgression, reversal, and revenge [...]. In the Greek version, however, the narrator depicts events as the result of God's direct intervention.'²¹ In other words, Racine made choices. Second, **just as in *Athalie*, whatever the power ascribed to an all-controlling God, events in *Esther* take place as the result of preparation, plotting, and very human action.**²² The organiser of Jewish resistance is Mardochée, to whom Racine gives a much greater role than in either of the biblical accounts. These tell how Esther was chosen at random by the king, whereas in Racine's version this choice represents the triumph of Mardochée's grand design to use her to influence the king, in a way certainly less assertive and more decorous but with an outcome not essentially different from that of Agrippine's subjugation of Claudius in *Britannicus*: 'le Persan superbe est aux pieds d'une Juive' (28). The new queen recounts how she became part of Mardochée's secret plans to seduce the king:

Du triste état des Juifs jour et nuit agité,
 Il me tira du sein de mon obscurité;
 Et sur mes faibles mains fondant leur délivrance,
 Il me fit d'un Empire accepter l'espérance.
 A ses desseins secrets tremblante j'obéis. (49-53)

From the hundreds of women procured for royal inspection, Esther comes out the winner, modestly attributing her success not to her beauty but to divine intervention (72-73), an ambiguous *grâce*.²³ Thereafter she functions as a tool in Mardochee's hands, receiving his covert messages (98), and educating the Jewish girls she has secretly assembled in the royal palace (101-6). Racine's Esther, in other words, operates as a resistance fighter. It is on this basis, when the Jewish people are threatened with imminent extermination, that she is urged by Mardochee to declare her real identity to the king, and thus draw on the capital she has built up in this account.²⁴ This is not God intervening miraculously to save Israel from her enemies. Mardochee is no Moses, parting the Red Sea: his plan is a demonstration, not of divine power, but of sexual politics and cold-headed calculation. However necessary his aim, the means by which he achieves it involves a strategy of deception and seduction designed to gain power. This essential political dimension of *Esther* cannot be ignored.

In all of this, is the blushing, modest young heroine a mere passive instrument in the hands of God, or of Mardochee? The very opposite impression comes across from the carefully constructed rhetoric of her long plea to the king (1041-1135). Here every element combines in a strategy of persuasion made more convincing by the *je ne sais*

quelle grâce (669) that Assuérus has admitted finding irresistible. In one sense, Racine invents nothing, since everything has its source in various books of the Old Testament, such as the story of how the Persian king Cyrus was chosen by God to release the Jews from the Assyrian yoke, and allow them to practise their faith openly. In a very important sense, however, everything is created by Racine, since the disposition of these materials is completely new. Esther's address is not the naïve declaration of a young woman innocent of the political arts. Everything she says, the emphasis she gives, the selection and omission of details from history that she makes, is calculated, as by a successful lawyer, to persuade the Persian king that persecution of the Jews, decided by him at the instigation of his chief minister Aman, would be a departure from a noble tradition, and would only play into the hands of his enemies. There is a discreet mention of the Jewish people's monotheism, but only to explain that they were punished when they abandoned God (1058-61). On the other hand, she makes no mention of her previously expressed detestation of Persian gods and habits (273-76). Her aim is persuasion, not martyrdom, and every phrase she utters targets the king's self-interest. Even the declaration of faith in God with which she begins is designed to show that even the mightiest king can be humbled by the Almighty (1054-57), a point reinforced by the reminder that Assuérus's predecessor was doomed from the moment he abandoned Cyrus's policy of tolerance towards the Jews (1075-77). In other words, if Assuérus allowed the Jewish people to be persecuted, he would be the first to suffer, since they pray to God to watch over the king (1111-13), and it is same God who in turn has permitted Assuérus's military exploits.

In developing the argument that the king's natural clemency has been polluted by a barbarian who has sought to work against the king's interests (1083-88), Esther cleverly plays the same race card against Aman that he has himself been using against

the Jews, but she can trump him: he is a Thracian barbarian (1086), a pitiless Scythian (1096), ‘un perfide Etranger’ (1101), and what is more an Amalekite, a race cursed by God (1124-25). This leads to a climax made the more powerful by the effect of surprise: the revelation that the person who saved Assuérus from assassination was a Jew, that she is his adopted daughter, and that it is this very person, Mardochée, whom the hated, scheming foreigner Aman has had condemned to a public hanging. This carefully crafted rhetoric contains crucially important facts that the biblical Esther does not convey. It is everything save an emotional outburst. As with a carefully constructed tragic action, its purpose is to use emotion in order to achieve maximum effect. That effect is immediate, producing in the king a feeling of horror, anger, and shame (1036-37) that leads instantly to the rehabilitation of Mardochée and of the Jewish people, and to the downfall of Aman. It is not divine intervention that brings about this reversal, but the art of persuasion used with skill and cunning, and reinforced by the *charme* (290) that Esther has asked God to give her eloquence. Her rhetoric, together with Mardochée’s very active organizational skills, thus exist side by side with the idea that they both promote, that of God’s providence, ordaining all. This cohabitation engenders a degree of tension and ambiguity that complicates any simple response to the play.

This tension is also alive in the sense of the religious that *Esther* projects. God is, of course, a very present absence in the play. A major, almost liturgical part of the work consists of the words chanted by the Chorus, which have a quasi-liturgical function:

O douce paix!

Ô lumière éternelle!

Beauté toujours nouvelle!

Heureux le cœur épris de tes attraits! (802-5)

This God is sweetness and light, something not always true of the deeds committed in his name. Though Jules Lemaître described the book of Esther as ‘un conte voluptueux et sanglant et un poème de fanatisme juif’, the play is another matter.²⁵ There is general agreement that Racine presented a sanitized version of the biblical source, whether out of Christian charity, as has been suggested, or because the play was being acted by schoolchildren, and this despite saying in his Preface that ‘altérer aucune des circonstances tant soit peu considérables de l’Ecriture sainte [...] serait à mon avis une espèce de sacrilège’²⁶.

What Racine does do, however, is to allow allusion to take the place of illustration. For there is no shortage of allusion. The political background to the dramatic action is the conflict that has continued for generations between the Amalekites and Israel, who once attempted to wipe this whole race from the human map in a supposedly divinely inspired mission given to Saul (1 Samuel 15: 3): the Amalekite Aman thus alludes to the ‘éternelle haine’ and ‘rage’ that provoked an ‘indigne carnage’ where even the cattle were not spared (484-86). Although declaring himself above such blood feuds (490), Aman manages easily to persuade Assuérus that the Jews in their turn should be exterminated, as being a subversive threat to the Persian empire (492-508). This is the blood-soaked context in which the whole tragic action is played out, and against which the sweetness and light of the loving God, chanted by the Chorus, must be set. It is for audiences and readers to adjudicate. The tension created by this cohabitation is not easily resolvable, leading for example Jean Emelina to say at one point, defensively, that ‘une tragédie qui se veut *pieuse* n’est

pas un voyage au bout de la nuit chargé d'interrogations, d'incertitudes et de vertiges', and at another, that 'Aman, esclave parvenu, est un sadique ivre de pouvoir, Hitler avant la lettre, qui rêve déjà, à l'encontre des Juifs, 'insolente race', d'extermination et de solution finale'.²⁷

Whatever these critical hesitations, one reading of *Esther*, **perhaps necessarily that of a post-Enlightenment mind**, is that barbarity does not simply coexist with the expression of religious faith, but may be nourished by it. The opening scenes, for example, are dominated by the fear, conveyed in some quite explicit images, that the whole Jewish people will be slaughtered, men, women, and children: 'Que de corps entassés ! que de membres éparés' (321). The unease is the greater when the anti-semitic discourse of Aman is placed in the context of a very real programme of extermination of the Jewish people to which the twentieth century was witness: 'Je veux qu'on dise un jour aux siècles effrayés, Il fut des Juifs' (475-76). Hearing Aman's threat, it seems inconceivable that any modern audience could simply forget the holocaust.²⁸

This image of extermination, however, is given another disturbing perspective by the bloodbath with which the book of *Esther* ends. For here it is the Jewish people that are allowed by the king to take vengeance on their enemies, whom they massacre, including the ten sons of Haman, and this by special request of sweet queen Esther. Racine chooses to compress this carnage into one allusion, when the king grants permission for the massacre to take place: 'Je leur livre le sang de tous leurs Ennemis' (1183). As though in compensation, however, he gives a description of the death of Aman's *confident* Asaph that looks forward to the 'Mathan est égorgé' of *Athalie* (1768), and recalls the death of Narcisse at the hands of the Roman crowd in *Britannicus* (1771). The difference is that this display of public wrath, which has no

biblical source, is much more graphic in the ‘poème pieux’ of *Esther* than in these other, apparently more sombre works:

Par le peuple en fureur à moitié déchiré.
 On traîne, on va donner en spectacle funeste
 De son corps tout sanglant le misérable reste. (1192-93)

This scene of carnage, and the succeeding wave of racial killings which it foreshadows, chafes with the praise of God’s goodness that is chanted by the Chorus just afterwards, in the final scene of the play: ‘Dieu fait triompher l’Innocence, | Chantons, célébrons sa puissance’ (1200-1). **Present-day audiences and readers cannot but be reminded** that the expression of religious faith may not just involve worship of God, but human beings caught up in bloody power struggles, and in an interminable cycle of atrocity and revenge. These actions may in turn pose questions about the identity of a God that uses Assuérus, or Louis XIV, to kill his enemies. If this God becomes the site and justification for primal human antagonisms continually expressed in suffering and death, it is understandable that **some** should ask if it was God that created humankind in his image, or vice versa.²⁹ For a work written with a clearly pious intent, this would be an ironic outcome.

It goes without saying that these questions remain in the background, and are afforded not even the beginning of an attempt at resolution: a play is a dialectic, not a discourse. But it is only if they are set to one side that *Esther* may be read as a simple hymn to the one true God, or as a victory of right over might, and good over evil. And because of this potential for complexity, the play only gains in density and

suggestiveness. To return to William Empson's verdict on *Paradise Lost*, 'the poem is not good in spite of but especially because of its moral confusions'.³⁰

Abstract

Racine's tragedy *Esther* is often presented as a **religious** poem extolling piety and innocence. This article argues that this reading is complicated by the **political** dimension of the work. This dimension is reflected in the context in which *Esther* was first performed, in allusions to the prevailing socio-political situation, and to the drama that is played out within the work. Despite the author's stated intention to compose a work of piety, his indebtedness to the two **biblical** versions of the Esther story and to other books of the Old Testament, the plot is based on a story of hatred, persecution, plotting, revenge, and extermination that exists in uncomfortable counterpoint to the hymns to **God's** goodness and providence chanted by a Chorus of innocent young maidens. The article concludes by suggesting that this **ambiguity** looks forward to its more explicit statement in *Athalie*, and that, as in that play, *Esther* does not offer any easy reading as a victory of right over might, and good over evil.

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¹ See John Campbell, 'Racine's *Esther*, the metamorphoses of innocence', in *Influences and Transformations. Essays in Honour of Christopher J. Gossip* (Peter Lang, forthcoming).

² Jean Racine, *Théâtre, Poésie*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 946. This is the edition from which references to the play will be taken, with the appropriate line-numbers in parenthesis.

³ 'Je ne sais quelle grâce': Esther before Assuérus', *French Studies*, 56 (2002), 317-27 (p. 318).

⁴ *Paradise Lost*, I, 25-26, in Milton, *The English Poems* (London: OUP, 1946), p. 114.

⁵ Mme de Lafayette, *Mémoires de la cour de France* (Paris: Editions Galic, 1962), p. 68. Note that the attribution of this work to Mme de Lafayette is 'improbable', to use the term of Roger Duchêne, *Mme de Lafayette: la romancière aux cent bras* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p. 458. On the general question of the attribution of historical works to this writer, see also Geneviève Mouligneau, *Mme de Lafayette, historienne?* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1990).

⁶ See Jéchiel Lichtenstein, *Racine, poète biblique* (Paris: Lipschutz, 1933), p. 219, and Jean Dubu, 'Esther: Bible et poésie dramatique', *The French Review*, 64 (1991), 607-20 (p. 619).

⁷ René Jasinski, *Autour de l'Esther racinienne* (Paris: Nizet, 1985), pp. 198-215.

⁸ Review of Jasinski, in *French Studies*, 41 (1987), p. 82.

⁹ Mme de Lafayette, p. 67.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

¹¹ Forestier, pp. 1675-77.

¹² Jean Rohou, edition of Racine, *Théâtre complet*, (Paris: Poche, 1998), p. 1092, and Pierre Brisson, *Les deux visages de Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), p. 212.

¹³ William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965).

¹⁴ See Henri Méchoulan and Joël Cornett, *L'Etat classique (1652-1715)* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), pp. 475-76.

¹⁵ 'Lettre à Louis XIV', in Fénelon, *Œuvres*, ed. By Jacques Le Brun, 2 vols, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1983-97), I, 548.

¹⁶ See Forestier, pp. 1697-98.

¹⁷ Jean Dubu, *Esther: Bible et poésie dramatique*, *The French Review*, 64 (1991), 607-20 (p. 616).

¹⁸ Rohou, p. 1087.

¹⁹ Rohou, p. 1089. Arnauld, Lettre au Landgrave de Hesse, 13 (avril) 1689, in Raymond Picard, *Nouveau Corpus Racinianum* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1976), pp. 240-41.

²⁰ *Correspondance*, ed. by Roger Duchêne, 3 vols, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1972-78), III, 498.

²¹ Scholar, pp. 319-20. For the version by Le Maistre de Sacy and others that Racine consulted, I have used *La sainte Bible traduite en françois, avec des notes litterales tirées des saints pères & des meilleurs interpretes* (Antwerp: Plantin et Moret, 1717).

Note also the comparative analysis of the Hebrew and Greek versions by Lucien-Gilles Benguigui, *Racine et les sources juives d'Esther et d'Athalie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995). For a modern rendering of these different versions, see *The Holy*

Bible. New International Version (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), and *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

²² On this view of *Athalie*, see John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 177 and following.

²³ See Scholar, p. 320.

²⁴ On the role of Mardochée, see Dubu, p. 609: 'La beauté et le charme d'Esther sont des atouts, naturels ou acquis; il a su en jouer et il n'hésite pas à lui rappeler qu'elle doit savoir en jouer à son tour.'

²⁵ Jules Lemaître, *Racine* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1908), p. 279.

²⁶ On Racine's elision of the violence of the Book of Esther, see Rohou, p. 1097, and on its purported motive, see Jean Emelina, 'D'Esther à Athalie, théâtre et religion, profane et sacré', in Gabriel Conesa and Franck Neveu, *L'Agrégation de lettres modernes 2004* (Paris, A. Colin, 2003), pp. 189-229 (p. 211).

²⁷ Emelina, pp. 205 and 234. On Racine's treatment of the violence in the Book of Esther, see R. J. Howells, 'Racine's *Esther*: Reintegration and Ritual', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 20 (1984), 97-105 (pp. 99-100).

²⁸ Indeed, for Benguigui, p. 40, 'l'antisémitisme est bien le sujet du livre d'Esther et de la pièce'.

²⁹ The famous quotation, 'Si Dieu nous a fait à son image, nous le lui avons bien rendu', is often attributed to Voltaire, without a source, perhaps on the basis of statements made elsewhere, as in the article 'Bien' of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, in Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Louis Moland (Paris, 1877-85), XVII, 578: 'Ce n'est pas à nous à donner à Dieu les attributs humains, ce n'est pas à nous à faire Dieu à notre image.'

³⁰ *Milton's God*, p. 13.

