

Melodrama and the ‘art of government’: Jewish emancipation and Elizabeth Polack’s *Esther, the Royal Jewess; or The Death of Haman!*

It took nearly thirty years to get to Lionel de Rothschild taking up his seat in the House of Commons in 1858 from the awakening of Jewish emancipation hopes with the extension of political rights to Roman Catholics and dissenters in 1829. Historians writing on the Jewish emancipation debate overwhelmingly represent the Jewish working-class as disinterested in the battle to remove the few remaining barriers to full Jewish political equality that had most direct impact on elite Jews running for public office. Geoffrey Alderman argues [the emancipation debate was](#) an ‘irrelevance’ for the vast majority of nineteenth-century working- or middle-class Jews [because the campaign](#) ‘did not touch the perceived essential interests of communal existence’.¹ Todd Endelman, for example, cites anecdotal evidence gleaned by Henry Mayhew of Jewish hawkers and old-clothes men as having a ‘perfect indifference to, and nearly as perfect ignorance of, politics’, and Bishop of London C. J. Blomfield’s comment that after enquiries he found ‘very few of the great body of the Jewish people who cared anything at all’.² He is emphatic about working-class indifference in his 2002 study, *the Jews of Britain 1656-2000*: ‘How many pedlars and shopkeepers, after all, considered running for Parliament or sending their sons to Oxford and Cambridge?’³ The insistence on working-class

indifference expressed by many prominent historians of Jewish political history is one challenged by attention to the little-known play produced in 1835, Elizabeth Polack's, *Esther the Royal Jewess, or The Death of Haman!*⁴ Retelling the biblical story of Esther, the play has received a little critical attention for its eponymous female protagonist and was typical of the romping, exotic melodramas popular in working-class areas in the early nineteenth century. Polack is celebrated as the 'first Jewish woman melodramatist in England' and author of five plays, two of which are still extant.⁵ The sophisticated political content of *Esther, the Royal Jewess* suggests there was, in fact, a profound engagement within Jewish working-class culture with issues of emancipation and political freedom. In a wider sense, attention to this play demonstrates the vitality of literature for nuancing our understanding of historical political attitudes.

Polack's work has been given short shrift alongside her better-known contemporary, Joanna Baillie.⁶ Designated a 'potboiler' by the editor of Polack's play, John Franceschina, and deemed of scant artistic value, *Esther, the Royal Jewess* nonetheless expresses sophisticated political content.⁷ It seems that historians and literary critics alike consider the 'low' genre of the melodrama and the working and lower-middle class itself as too lowly for anything beyond facile or narrow engagement with political realities.⁸ Such assumptions are expressed in 1805 in William Wordsworth's judgment that the 'laugh, the grin, grimace' of shows he

enjoyed when in London ‘Passed not beyond the Suburbs of my mind’, the term suburbs here conflating the city’s working-class topography with a working-class lack of profundity.⁹ This article simultaneously challenges assumptions of working-class indifference to the emancipation debate and contests negative generic judgments of melodrama by turning to Walter Benjamin’s apologetic for the German melodramatic genre, the *trauerspiel*, to argue for the suitability of melodrama for ‘the art of government’, a phrase of Benjamin’s that gestures towards the entwining of culture and politics.¹⁰

Esther, the Royal Jewess was staged from 7th March 1835 for a month at the New Royal Pavilion Theatre in the East End of London. The play was popular enough to warrant two editions.¹¹ Although plays on biblical themes were banned at this time, the Pavilion was a minor, unlicensed theatre and beyond the scope of the ban.¹² As its name suggests, the play rewrites the biblical story of Esther, in which the courtier Haman attempts to exterminate the Jews from the ancient Persian Empire. Queen Esther and her uncle, Mordecai, thwart Haman’s plans, save the Jews and order a celebration of their redemption in the festival Purim. The Pavilion Theatre, on Whitechapel Road and later to become the home of Yiddish theatre in London, drew audiences almost entirely from the surrounding ‘low-income working-class neighborhood’ of Shoreditch, an area in which, as a contemporary expressed it, ‘the tribes of Israel have found an abiding place’.¹³ Jim

Davis and Victor Eeljanow note that the Pavilion's repertoire in the 1830s marked it as 'not only a home of melodrama, but of plays that were critical of aspects of British society in those turbulent years leading up to the first Reform Bill of 1832' and that it 'aspired to a respectable audience'.¹⁴

Esther, the Royal Jewess is best read in the light of its Jewish context that also throws light on its wider political import. The play's status as a *purimspiel* would be apparent to its audience because it was staged just after the festival of Purim, which occurred that year on March 3rd.¹⁵ Jews are obliged to hear the Esther story in the Purim synagogue service and the *purimspiel* brought the story into the intimacy of people's communities and homes and enabled an adaptation of the story for contemporary concerns. The retelling of the Esther story at Purim had been a common practice since at least the seventeenth century and emerged in Yiddish-speaking Europe and although often they performed the Esther story, they also often featured other biblical stories celebrating Jewish redemption from threat.¹⁶ By the nineteenth century the *purimspiel* was an established part of Purim festivities. Polack's play situates itself firmly in Purim by ending with the words 'this time in happy Purim!' and the ending tableau is framed, according to stage directions, by a transparency of the word 'Purim!' As the first, and archetypal, story of state-wide anti-Semitism, it is the iconic story of threat to Jewish life. As

Daniel Boyarin, a prominent theorist of Jewish culture, writes of Purim, it is the Jewish festival ‘of Diaspora par excellence’.¹⁷

Reading Polack’s play as a *purimspiel* places it within a political context of Jewish survival and reprieve from oppression.¹⁸ David Conway has noted of *Esther, the Royal Jewess*, within his study of music in Jewish theatre: ‘This relatively lavish production must certainly have pleased its Jewish audience, and must mark the apogee of the *purimspiel* in England’.¹⁹ This context has been overlooked by scholars of British drama, as Conway himself notes.²⁰ This is, then, a play to be understood as a festival drama designed to draw on the story of Jewish redemption to speak to a contemporary context.

With the *purimspiel* context overlooked, critical response to the play has focused to date on what Terry Eagleton has called the ‘contemporary holy trinity’ of gender, class and race. As such, the religious aspect of Jewish identity has been neglected so that Jewishness is conceived primarily in terms of race.²¹ Susan Bennett identifies the play’s concern with marginalization and concludes that the play dramatizes ‘strong and unmistakable representations of what it means to appear according to one’s regulated identity’.²² Critics attempting a feminist reading of the play have scant material with which to engage as it focuses on a male world of political intrigue. Esther may deliver the final speech, but the play’s action focuses overwhelmingly on Mordecai. His role is amplified so that the

biblical subplot of the assassination attempt becomes in the play a major plotline. Haman's part is also extended through greater attention to his psyche and villainous schemes.

Understanding the religious dimension to Jewish identity in the 1830s is vital. At this time, it was the Christian oath that stood as a bar only to religious Jews. British Jews in 1835 had had little political status for centuries. Expelled from Britain in 1290 by King Edward I (motivated by slanders of ritual murders, Jewish attacks on Christian children known as the 'blood libel'), there were failed attempts to legislate for official Jewish return in the seventeenth century. When the 'Jew Bill' was published in 1753 to allow Jewish immigrants to be naturalized as British subjects, the ensuing public outcry meant that the bill was rescinded. In 1828 the requirement that governmental officials take the Christian sacrament was replaced by the need to take an oath, widening inclusion to dissenters who could express the Protestant phrasing of the Oath of Abjuration, 'upon the true faith of a Christian'.²³ Roman Catholics could hold office (except for the highest roles) through the 1829 Emancipation Act, leading to expectations these rights would extend to Jews. The expectation was logical, as M. C. N. Salbstein explains: 'once the problems of dual loyalty to spiritual and temporal authority had been resolved in the case of the one group the claims of the other would be correspondingly enhanced.'²⁴ As already stated, these hopes would not find

fulfilment for nearly another thirty years. At the beginning of 1835, when Polack's play was performed, even Jewish voting rights were precarious because voters could be required to swear a Christian oath – 'I make this Declaration upon the true Faith of a Christian'. Although not always implemented, this constraint was rescinded only later in 1835, and remained vital to taking up public office until it was withdrawn in 1846 with the passing of the Religious Opinions Relief Act.²⁵

Jewish political status could be seen as experiencing a Purim-like reversal in the nineteenth century, the momentum of which could be observed in the early 1830s. From 1830, Jews could become Freemen of the City of London, a title that meant they could trade and work within the city's Square Mile. Later in 1835, albeit six months after Polack's play is staged, one of the two City Sheriffs was for the first time Jewish. Sir David Salomon's inauguration in 1835 is pertinent not just for its timing alongside Polack's play but because it exemplifies the ban against Jewish political activity. His taking up of the office of Sheriff necessitated him to swear the Christian oath, as outlined above, but a new law, the 'Sheriff's Declaration Act' of August 21st 1835, allowed its bypassing precisely to allow Salomon to become Sheriff.²⁶ The bar to government, then, was primarily religious, namely the inability to profess Christian religious belief.²⁷

When Baron Lionel Nathan Rothschild took his seat as the first Jewish MP in 1858, over twenty years after the staging of Polack's play, the London Committee

of Jews presented him with an illuminated address in celebration of the removal of the Christian oath. The address articulates the victory as one that puts to an end Rothschild's "arduous struggles in THE CAUSE OF CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY", so that freedom is qualified in dual political and religious terms.²⁸ Rothschild's election is celebrated as a victory by the London Committee for Jews in the sense that, from now on, "the British Jew, if elected, by the choice of his Fellow Countrymen [...] will be free to fulfill his legislatorial duties". The emphasis extends beyond the freedom for the individual Jew aspiring to office to that of the voter whose wishes should be implemented. The beautifully illuminated address, now framed and housed in the London Jewish Museum, attests to the intertwining of political liberty and religious freedom. It reveals the way in which Jewishness was shaped in the political sphere by the ban against the religiously professing Jew, not against a racial category based on birth, ancestry or biology.

To read Polack's play as a *purimspiel* underlines the centrality of religious identification in the Jewish emancipation debate. Where Christian dramatizations of the Esther story focused on romance, the Jewish *purimspiel* is a redemption story. The most familiar Esther play for a British, Christian audience would be Jean Racine's *Esther*, further popularized in Handel's oratorio. Racine's Catholic dramatization draws heavily on the Catholic, Apocryphal version of *Esther*, which contains additional elements that interpolate God's intervention in the plot to

present a romance between a swooning queen and a besotted king. In contrast, *purimspiel* emphasize a narrative of threat and redemption and express distaste at the nonetheless necessary marriage of Esther to a Persian king.

The *purimspiel* and *Esther* story fit perfectly melodrama's 'Virtue-Victorious-Villainy-Vanquished' form: the virtuous Esther is victorious when she becomes queen, her people are threatened by the villainous Haman who is finally vanquished by Esther and her uncle Mordecai.²⁹ Because of its chiaroscuro morality, melodrama has been deemed unworthy of serious regard. In a classic study, Booth characterizes melodrama as a 'dream world' of 'idealization and simplification of the world of reality'.³⁰ Melodrama is too simple, too sensational, and, as Franceschina outlines, too sentimental to be taken seriously. Reflecting assumptions about the cultural inferiority of this working-class genre and its working-class audience, Franceschina asserts that the tastes of the Shoreditch audience, 'gravitating to the sentimental, patriotic, and moral – seemed much less "sophisticated" than that of audiences patronizing the more fashionable West-end theatres'.

The melodrama's delight in opulent spectacle and its pro-monarchical sentiments may seem conservative and disconnected from the East End's 'non-conformist' reputation. Yet, *Esther, the Royal Jewess*, in placing the sovereign centre stage replicates the German *trauerspiel*, as Benjamin outlines it, which similarly

focuses on the mechanisms and structures of history, politics and sovereignty. The idealization and energy of Polack's *purimspiel* when read in the light of Benjamin's celebration of the equally disparaged German *trauerspiel*, dislocates assumptions about melodrama's political disinterestedness **and by implication that of its audience.**

Benjamin's recovery and celebration of a German melodramatic form, the *trauerspiel*, the 'mourning play' or 'tragic drama' is based precisely on its political credentials. Whilst there is no explicit connection between the two genres Benjamin's analysis of the disparaged *trauerspiel* reveals a form of interpretation that elevates the 'potboiler' to politically engaged drama pertinent for the *purimspiel*. Like the melodrama, the *trauerspiel* was a low genre and its value lies, for Benjamin, in its attention to 'historic life' (p. 62). Not a mythical or ideal fiction, the *trauerspiel* (a term that could be used of both real-life events or genre, like the term 'tragedy', p. 63) provides a critical perspective on everyday political life. The historically-focused *trauerspiel* is interested in 'the confirmation of princely virtues, the depiction of princely vices, the insight into diplomacy, and the manipulation of political schemes' (p. 62). 'The sovereign', he claims, as 'the principal exponent of history, almost serves as its incarnation' (p. 62). Benjamin quotes a definition of tragic drama that defines the *trauerspiel* playwright in terms applicable to (the female) Polack:

[Sh]e must know thoroughly the affairs of the world and the state, in which politics truly consist... must know what is the state of mind of a king or prince, both in time of peace and in time of war, how countries and people are governed, how power is maintained, how harmful counsel is avoided, what skills are needed in order to seize power, to expel others, even to clear them from one's way. In short, [s]he must understand the art of government as thoroughly as his mother-tongue. (p. 63)

What Benjamin finds in the *trauerspiel*, according to James R. Martel, is a form of 'deflated and de-centred' sovereignty that resists a totalizing sovereignty that Benjamin sees as idolatrous in the sense that in its representation of the people it 'interferes with rather than facilitates or expresses popular power'.³¹ For Benjamin, Martel states, political representation, sovereignty, 'works best when it visibly fails to achieve its purpose' (p. 3). In the *trauerspiel*, argues Benjamin, the sovereign's limitations are revealed: 'he is the lord of creatures and he remains a creature' (p. 85). It is, then, a genre that encourages not subversion or rebellion but recognition of sovereignty's inherent limitations.

Esther, the Royal Jewess resembles the *trauerspiel* in its attention to 'historic life' in multiple ways. Although melodrama is in many ways anti-realist, *Esther* demonstrates aspiration to historical veracity. The biblical *Esther* story is notoriously unrealistic, characterized by convolution, its plot marked by what

Betty Rojtman and Jonathan Stavsky call an ‘astonishingly favorable series of circumstances’.³² Polack’s play is more plausible. For example, as already mentioned, the biblical Esther contains a subplot of an assassination attempt on the king’s life, which is thwarted by Esther’s uncle Mordecai. It offers an opportunity for the biblical Mordecai to act virtuously, which is brought to light in a way that amplifies his loyalty to the king at just the right moment. Polack develops the plot by displaying the complex machinations of the evil courtier Haman. The dramatization of Haman as a schemer makes the storyline more rational but it is also more ‘historical’ in the sense of enabling exploration of a would-be tyrant’s rationale. Polack’s adaptation enables a comparison of the good king, Ahasuerus, with the would-be bad ruler, Haman. The play becomes less about Esther’s role in deflecting the lethal threat to the Jews and more about comparing different forms of sovereignty.

The play, in various ways, [encourages in its audience a discerning attitude towards](#) the ‘historic life’ depicted. It does so by creating audience suspicion because Haman at first masquerades as the voice of democracy to gain popular support for his usurpation attempt. He argues against the oppressions of monarchy and for freedom for the ‘people’. He is of course pretending, ventriloquizing persuasively the freedom cry of the oppressed to create his own self-serving dictatorship. Haman’s reasonableness in his speeches provides

veracity so that his followers' belief in him is believable while his obvious villainy sensitizes the audience to the machinations of his skilled rhetoric. The audience is dissuaded from trusting in appearances. An attitude of critique is encouraged, complementing the play's political content, and the audience is encouraged to pay attention to 'historic life', a life of political machination.

As incarnation of the historic, the creaturely sovereign is the focus of the *trauerspiel* and of *Esther*. Polack's play focuses on the inherent vulnerabilities of government in various ways. For example, Haman reveals the ruler's dependence on the consent of the populace:

for without the people, all the bright and deep machinations of political intrigue must fail. It is the common herd must strike the blow – must shake the state of kings and dynasties. Before the people, however humble, if they be but bound in unity, all rank and title must crumble into dust. (I.3)

Haman here, in a way that foreshadows his own attempt on power, recognizes the power of 'might'. Throughout the play the audience is exposed to explicit reflections on the limitations of any system of government.

Esther, the Royal Jewess, like the *trauerspiel*, recognizes the importance of spectacle to sovereign power. Act One, scene one opens on the 'Grand Tent of Ahasuerus', playing to audience desires for theatrical display, but also like the story of *Esther* itself, displaying sovereign power:

See great Ahasuerus stand,
 Monarch of one glorious land,
 He upon whose potent breath,
 Hangs the doors of life or death (I.i)

Despite Polack's unfortunate mixing of metaphors here (how can doors hang on a breath?), she draws the king in terms normally ascribed to God – creative life-giving breath and power over life – this is not mere display but a sign of the sovereign's absolute power. Polack's adjustments to the biblical story are telling because they emphasize that the king is both powerful and flawed. More importantly, he is a complex mixture of creatureliness and goodness. Polack's king announces: 'it is my will to rule my people with mercy', demonstrating a commitment to higher values of clemency that identify him as a good king. That the king immediately then orders his people to obey 'my trusty counselor and friend, Haman', forces the audience to question the king: he is worthy in his mercy, but vulnerable in his trust in the undeserving. The play hereby exposes the limited nature of the 'good': the king is merciful and anchored to superior principles, but he 'remains a creature' and can be deceived by the likes of Haman. Sovereignty may be inherently limited, susceptible to deceit, but there are better and worse ways of leading and the audience can see dramatized, in this play, forms of good and bad sovereignty. The simple Mordecai and the merciful Ahasuerus are

presented as the best ‘creaturely’ possibility for good government while Haman dramatizes the consequences of allowing the bad sovereign to reign. As we will see, Haman is voraciously power hungry and his rule can only harm the nation-State.

If the sovereign is revealed in his creatureliness, healthy critique of his rule is a prerequisite for the nation’s health. As such, *Esther, the Royal Jewess* offers a positive portrayal of honest criticism whilst warning against the duplicitous flatterer. In contrast to the simpering and outwardly loyal Haman, the admirable characters Mordecai and Esther voice an ongoing, detailed yet non-violent critique of the monarchy and the specific regime they live under. Polack identifies Mordecai and Esther as ‘respectable’ Jews through contrast with the character Levi who better fits what Nadia Valman has called the ‘literary stereotype’, embodying ‘internationally recognised stereotypes’ and, here, best understood as what Valman has called a ‘malleable form of rhetoric’ in order to differentiate her respectable Jews from familiar stereotypes.³³ We first see them in their humble home. Simple, honest and highly principled, they are unafraid of uncomfortable or controversial truths. In their first speeches they express displeasure at the king for his unjust laws and for allowing them, as Jews, to be ‘despised’. In Act 2, when they see the approach of the king’s guards (to take Esther to the palace), it prompts Mordecai to call the king ‘proud’ and ‘haughty’ (II.i). Their criticism focuses on the

apparent unhealthiness of the nation through striking metaphors of disease. In Act 3, Mordecai berates the luxuriousness of monarchy arguing that the wealthy suffer by ‘indolence’ in ‘fever-like torpor’, ‘till by degrees the fountain of health becomes dried up, and loathsome imbecility reigns dominant’ (III.iii). Mordecai considers the merriment from the king’s banquet to be draughts that when spent ‘leave the seeds of mortification and decay’ (III.iii).

Yet the audience is aware that Mordecai and Esther’s criticisms are due to Haman’s deviousness: they are complaining about laws made not by the king as they suppose, but by Haman himself. Criticism is endorsed even though the king’s virtue is never in question. In the light of Haman running on the mandate of popular support, anti-monarchical sentiment is avoided (and especially as Haman’s speeches invoke the violence of the dreaded French Revolution). As the play continues, measured criticism is endorsed and revealed to be both crucial to the running of a successful political system and a panacea against the courtier whose outward loyalty masks rebellion. [Esther and Mordecai embody the loyal yet critical friend.](#)

Benjamin’s analysis of the *trauerspiel* focuses precisely on the figures of the good and bad sovereign. The individual sovereign, not the system, dictates the health of the nation according to Benjamin’s analysis because even in a government shaped by law, there is still a single individual responsible for the ultimate

judgment on law. For an English audience well aware of the high status of law in national mythology, the play reveals that law is only a mechanism and always subject to the sovereign decision.

In the first Act, the tricky relationship between sovereignty and law is exposed in the king's response to his first queen's, Vashti's, refusal to appear before him at his banquet. Vashti's refusal is notoriously unexplained in the biblical account meaning that Polack's filling of the gap draws attention. A messenger explains that 'the laws of Persia forbid her to appear before strange guests', defending the queen's disobedience through reference to the empire's laws: 'in reverence of that law she cannot come before you' (I.i). It is Polack's invention to draw on the law in Vashti's defence and it exposes the sovereign's complex relation to law expressed in Ahasuerus's subsequent contradictory negotiation of imperial law. Whilst law is necessary for structuring a kingdom and enabling consistency, as political theorists assert, the sovereign by his very nature must exist both within the law but also above it, to maintain true sovereign power.

[Benjamin was writing in response to the controversial political theorist, Carl Schmitt, who first articulated the argument:](#) 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception'.³⁴ Here, Schmitt indicates that the sovereign is the figure that can legally proclaim the *suspension* of law and it is precisely this power over law that identifies the sovereign. [Where Schmitt concludes that the focus of power on the](#)

individual sovereign is a defence of dictatorship, Benjamin instead argues that the realization of the importance of the individual sovereign leads him to offer a study of the right qualities of a good sovereign, here respect for a system of law that the sovereign nonetheless technically transcends. In Polack's play, the king asserts himself over and above abstract law: 'What care I for the laws of Persia?' and continues: 'My will must be her only law'. Here he claims sovereignty within his very body: as sovereign his word is law. The queen's disobedience, although lawful, has, claims Ahasuerus, 'degraded me to my whole nation' and 'scorned my sovereign power!'. The king is aware that (law-abiding) disobedience puts his sovereignty in question and encourages others to use the excuse of law to disobey him.

Ahasuerus, after this turn from the law, immediately and somewhat ironically turns to the law in calling for the 'expounders of the Persian law' to advise him on Vashti's punishment. The king submits to the Persian law immediately after dismissing it: 'Speak, learned man, what says your law? what punishment has she deserved?' When the law states that he must banish his queen, although unhappy, Ahasuerus submits because this law does not directly challenge his sovereignty: 'The law enjoins her banishment, and if a king conform not to his country's edict, how can he claim allegiance from his subjects?'. As a tool for order, when not contradicting the king's sovereignty, the law must hold sway. Notably,

Haman questions the decision for banishment because, motivated solely by self-interest, he cannot see why a ruler should have to submit to anything disliked. Whilst Ahasuerus's attitude to law seems contradictory, it is entirely coherent in terms of his necessary negotiation of law and his own sovereign supremacy that involves a respect for the law and the stability of the kingdom. The comparison with Haman's self-interest reveals good sovereignty as that which is not whimsical or self-serving but that prioritizes virtuous and stable government. The sovereign is able to suspend law, but does so reluctantly. Ahasuerus represents, then, the good sovereign who may be above the law, but who always acts in the interests of his country.

As Benjamin's king is a 'creature' and not divine, so the law is similarly figured as a creaturely device rather than being transcendent or pure. The law produces good only when it is appropriately handled and this principle can be identified in the play's invocation of transcendent principles. When Mordecai and Esther discuss Esther's removal to the palace, Mordecai entreats Esther, when in the 'pomp and splendour of a throne', not to forget '*Him*, who gave the law' (II.i). Here, Esther is asked to compare the jurisdiction of the earthly king with the divine laws of the Jewish God. Recognizing the creatureliness of the law and the sovereign necessitates the hard work of identifying principles of good government. Here,

Polack invokes divine law not as a conservative force, therefore, but as a power for critiquing earthly laws.

As a play focused on the historic, the divine ideal of law serves to reveal the reality of law's necessary fragility and susceptibility to manipulation. From the first Act of the play the good king's and the tyrant's attitudes to law are compared. The king aligns law with mercy, as we have seen, yet Haman creates a law that restricts access to that mercy through barring access to the throne on pain of death. In a play that focuses on human frailty, the king's mercy is not only an admirable ethical position but mitigates against dooming humans to failure because it loosens law's power of condemnation over a necessarily flawed humanity. Haman's law instead denies access to the king and removes the political status of the individual.

In many ways Haman represents the model of a bad ruler, interested in only his own furtherance. When discussing power and sovereignty, Mordecai asserts the importance of rights, to which Haman responds:

I have observed many fools like thyself who mouth and fume about oppression, and pristine rights. Rights, forsooth! Noble exertions and superior tact are the bulwarks of national independence and grandeur.

These are the rocks of public safety. (3.iii)

Haman here identifies spectacle ('noble exertions') and rhetoric ('superior tact') as the stabilizers of a nation-State: tools or mechanisms of power that are devoid of any inherent value. Haman may be astute but he repeatedly expresses a lack of values. The focus on 'public safety' here seems admirable but is merely a defensiveness untethered from value or principle, and as such becomes a source of violence, as will be discussed shortly. Haman is motivated only by self-interest. Thinking ahead to his law that will order the murder of the Empire's Jews, Haman states that it will bring 'revenge, murder, bloodshed, and happiness to my desire!' (III. i). Shaping his own actions and imperial law according to personal 'desire', Haman expresses self-interest that elides others' suffering.

Haman is dangerous as a potential sovereign, the play reveals, because his all-consuming self-interest leads to the violent privileging of power for its own sake. Although couched in terms of 'this great cause of freedom' (II.ii), his real concern is usurpation, 'that will free us for ever of the tyrant's yoke' (II.ii). For Haman, freedom is equated to violence. He starts with the image of 'vultures' being 'unmasked', identifying here the monarch's supposed exploitative tyranny, and then identifies the rebels as 'the towering eagle' who will 'watch our prey, then boldly spring forward, and with one blow be freed for ever!' Freedom, enacted with a 'blow', is indistinguishable from violence. His plans ooze with violence because he is interested only in seizing power. He focuses on power's mechanisms

and not its purpose. Haman's formula is clear: 'The blow once struck, success is sure to follow' (II.ii). Yet again, the audience is pushed into a position where they must adjudicate between Haman's violent freedom as unfettered power, devoid of content, or Esther and Mordecai's articulation of a positive form of political freedom in the form of political participation.

Mordecai and Esther's concept of freedom is dramatized in arguments for and against Jewish emancipation played out in a scene between Mordecai and Haman after Mordecai refuses to bow to him, [a scene that more obviously engages with the emancipation debate](#). The conversation focuses on Mordecai's challenge to Haman's focus on outward status, not inner worth. A victim of violence, the exilic Jew is for Haman a sign to produce scorn. 'I have no country', Mordecai explains, and 'the settled land of my forefathers has been basely wrested from me and all my race' (III.iii). Haman concludes that having no acknowledged country, makes the Jews 'objects for scorn', whereas Mordecai asks: who should be scorned: 'the humble sufferers, or the tyrant robbers'? Haman here expresses the logic of Christian supersession (the belief that Christians displace Jews as the chosen people), colonization and imperialism, in that he presumes that preeminence justifies control, in short that might is right. Haman presumes 'a right of superiority over a fallen people', and goes on to iterate standard anti-Semitic stereotypes: 'For what are ye? A groveling crew – a money-hoarding herd! too lazy

for bodily exercise, and too weak in intellect to rule the state' (III.iii). The false equating of weakness with moral lack would surely resonate with the anti-Semitism familiar to the London Jewish audience. Mordecai defends his fellow Jews:

Are we not shut out from all exercise of our talents in the state? are not even your common artisanship debarred us? and when deprived of this our honest endeavors are called groveling, and a thirst for gold? Are we not equal to you in manly firmness? (III.iii)

Polack here does not argue for rights based on proven worthiness, but presumes a worthiness that is inhibited from benefitting the nation. Mordecai should be free to contribute to the state's health, the 'exercise of our talents': the Jews free to be political subjects who may act politically.

The play dramatizes what true political action should look like in Mordecai's, Esther's, and the king's explicit adherence to admirable qualities that are articulated as mercy, truth and justice as well as lawfulness. Haman desires only to wrest power as expressed in his despising of the weak and his usurpation; two acts that are entwined for Mordecai because they alike adhere to a logic of self-interested power that seeks to take from those weaker (the 'fallen') or stronger (in becoming a 'traitor'). Mordecai equates Haman's willingness to 'insult a fallen people' with being 'a traitor to his sovereign' (III.iv). Mordecai locates

moral vacuity in ambition for power and is concerned with defining a virtuous content to political power.

Haman's self-interest not only threatens the health of the nation because of his lack of care, but for Benjamin such self-interest must inevitably lead to disaster because of self-interest's incompatibility with sovereignty in its incapacity to make the sovereign decision. Haman's reflection on the act of 'decision' in the play exemplifies Benjamin's argument that the sovereign's limitations as 'creature' is most exposed in the decision-making necessitated by sovereign judgment. As already discussed, law may provide seemingly rigid structures, Benjamin argues, but law must always be interpreted and applied and is therefore always dependent upon the sovereign decision (pp. 70-1). Further, it is the tyrant who is marked by indecision. The self-interested tyrant knows only whim and desire. Such vacillation destabilizes kingdoms and is a sign of a chaotic mind. Danger occurs, notes Benjamin, when 'actions are not determined by thought, but by changing physical impulses' (p. 71) so that activity becomes subject to 'the sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm (p. 71) as seen in Haman's commitment to 'my desire!' (III.i). The 'indecisiveness of the tyrant' reveals the dangerous limits of the creaturely sovereign and aligns chaotic thought with chaotic politics: 'indecision' is the 'complement of bloody terror' (p. 71).

Haman embodies precisely this instability. After his assassination plot fails, Haman captures his fellow-conspirators to mask his own involvement. He then expresses indecision on whether to punish the conspirators (which would only be fair) or release them (which could endanger him). Haman's speech is a consequence of his taking-up of the sovereign power of 'decision': he declares the conspirators 'are under my power, and mine alone'. Haman reflects:

Decision! how godlike are thy attributes – you either make or mar. Decision, when concluded by reason and deep resolve, elevates the actions to a climax, noble or depressed; but when doubt – damning doubt – destrides resolution, all is vapour , darkness, and dismay! The labyrinth of infamy, and, but for an energetic impulse of nature, would have fallen degraded and lost. (III. i)

Infamy is labyrinthine, untethered either to reason or to resolve. Haman is dangerous precisely because has no principles to anchor his decision-making..

Precisely because it is a mechanism, law must be handled appropriately. The full extent of the danger posed by Haman's attitude to law is exposed in his speech when the assassination plot is revealed through Esther at her coronation ceremony. It is here that Haman leaps to arrest his fellow conspirators to avoid accusation. In his expressed desire to punish the conspirators (by which he distances himself from his own crime), he indicates a dangerous attitude towards

law: 'Give this vile herd to my judgment: the terrors of the law shall be stretched to meet their damnable resolve' (III. v). Although hyperbolic, Haman's suggestion that he may 'stretch' the law expresses a desire for, or attitude of, sovereign power over law. Haman's speech violently defends the king's sovereignty – 'My loved sovereign' – but usurps sovereign power through his attitude toward a law that he regards as subject to his own (sovereign) control.

Later in the play, when Esther identifies herself as the object of the law ordering the slaughter of the Jews, the king echoes and invokes the idea of the 'stretching' of laws earlier voiced by Haman: 'But who has stretched my laws so far?', the king asks, further pushing the audience to recognize Haman's flawed attitude to law. As the stretcher of law, Haman is, in Esther's words, the 'secured perverter of thy monarch's law!' (III.v), the loaded term 'perverter' indicating the moral freight of this distortion.

It is in his issuing of laws ordering genocide that Haman demonstrates his willingness to stretch law to a point of fatal abuse through the power of 'ban laws'. The relation between ban laws and tyranny is foreshadowed in Haman's earlier political speeches, in which he promises the 'total reversion of ban laws' (I.3), promising the reinstatement of restrictive laws in the mould of his law that bans approach to the sovereign. He glosses that the ban law is 'a probing of all ulcer and wen-like excrescences on the state', anticipating that they act to exclude the

unwanted. In using the term ‘ban laws’, the play invokes the status of Jews in early nineteenth-century Britain who are excluded from political office. The political theorist Giorgio Agamben has written on the ‘ban’ as a key concept for understanding the state of exception in which the ban binds and abandons the individual.³⁵ The ban is pernicious because it does not protect the people as law should. Instead, it contains people within the political system whilst excluding them from participation or rights. The subject of the ban becomes, for Agamben, bare life, disqualified from normal, qualified political life that for Agamben and Aristotle before him, is the authentic state of human living. An audience excluded from the political sphere, such as Polack’s Jewish audience, would be especially sensitive to Haman’s promise of the ‘reversion of ban laws’. Because the play is staged five years after Jews were first allowed to become Free Men of the city of London, in which freedom is equated with being protected by the city’s charter, the Jewish audience **would be all-too aware** that the law could incapacitate as well as protect. Agamben’s theories articulate what must have been obvious to Polack’s audience: **that the use of law against a selection of the country’s subjects is to denigrate those subjects and position them on the spectrum of ‘bare life’.**

Haman stretches law to its furthest extent through the invocation of a state of emergency when he orders the murder of the Jews, arguing they present a threat to the king and empire. Haman’s desire for power leads him to advocate

destruction and he likens himself to a lion, who ‘in the forest lurks in ambush, waiting for its destined prey, then springs forth to destroy’ and orders his fellow conspirators that they must likewise ‘at the fitting moment, burst on their foes, and shout the name of freedom throughout our land’ (I.iii). In the state of emergency, or state of exception, political rights are removed for the apparent protection of the population.³⁶ Death is legislated in the name of freedom. In reducing the Jews of the Empire to bare life through the law ordering their death, Haman demonstrates the lethal consequences of his sovereign intentions to stand above the law.

Yet murder is downplayed in *Esther* in favour of a focus on the reduced political status of the Jews, so that redemption is achieved through the removal of ban laws and not only when threat to life is removed. As such, the play chimes with the pressing concerns of Jews in 1830s Britain who were not subject to life-threatening laws but ban laws that barred political office to those who could not profess Christian faith. The play echoes Polack’s historical moment in which religious freedom was inextricable from political freedom. In the play’s opening scene, Mordecai privileges religious faithfulness to Esther: when ‘thou art left alone in the land of the infidels, let no persuasion shake thy settled faith’ (II.i) and reiterates that God ‘has chosen us for his people’. When Esther tells of a dream that she will be queen, Mordecai is shocked at the thought of ‘thou my niece – a Jewish

maiden – seated beside an infidel!' (II.i). A romantic narrative is explicitly rejected in favour of adherence to religious community. Where the biblical Esther's heroism is in response to the edict threatening slaughter, in the play Esther's heroic speech (that echoes the biblical Esther's response to the murderous edict, 'If I perish, I perish', Esther 4.16), expresses sacrifice in the name of religious and political freedom. Esther says she is willing to 'hazard all': 'misery – danger – yes, even death – to make my people free!' Esther's reference here is to political freedom and distinguishes, like Aristotle's classic formulation, between political or qualified life (the freedom to act politically) and animal, apolitical, life. Polack in this way presents Jewish experience of discrimination as a form of bare life, devoid of protection. Through this focus on religious and political life, the play reveals that Jewish experience **is precarious when subject to limited political opportunities.**

When Mordecai entreats Esther to 'Remember thy captive nation, and pray for their deliverance.' (II.i), captivity here refers to a state of living within prejudice and lack of political power. Replicating the political status of Jews in 1830s Britain, Polack demonstrates that states of disfranchisement and threat to life are on a continuum, **both are forms of bare life**, dramatizing the urgency of the need for political agency.

It is difficult to narrate working-class engagement with the emancipation debate as indifferent in the light of this play in which the depoliticized individual is

equated to a slave. When Mordecai follows Esther to the palace, his lack of rights as a Jew are underscored through his plan to take the ‘disguise of a mendicant’, because ‘were I known they would turn me from the palace gates, as if the Jew had not the feelings of humanity’ and wishes: ‘Oh that the time were on me when the poor Jew shall be raised from this state of slavery, and rank in common with his fellow men!’ (II.i) When explaining to his fellow Jew, Levi, that all must bow to Haman, Mordecai again reiterates the powerlessness of the Jews: ‘See, my friend, how the ill-fated Jew must bow before the infidel.’ (II.i) He repeats the term ‘slavery’ not in reference to the threat of death (which has not yet occurred) but to being barred from political agency [at the hands of the self-interested Haman](#).

What is dangerous about Haman throughout this play, then, is his lack of principle beyond self-interest. Polack’s virtuous characters, conversely, invoke transcendent values. The only supernatural digression from the biblical story in *Esther* invokes the abstract figure of Time, who enters the king’s Bedchamber to reveal to him ‘The hidden sorrows of thy people’. Time introduces himself with his opening lines: ‘By none controlled, by no one ruled.’ (III. ii). In a play in which law is foregrounded, it is personified Time that is outside of the rule of law, under no law, and therefore autonomous. Time’s transcendent status also accentuates the time-bound historicity of the play’s setting itself. From outside history, Time reveals to the king the future: images of Jews being slaughtered and the queen

petitioning him. Time voices a divine order: 'Prevent all this, or the wrath of Heaven/ Will scorch thy aching soul with madness!', which then becomes summed up in the assertion: 'Let justice be administered!' (III. ii). Again, Polack's use of terms is specific here. Time, unlike most other key characters in the play, does not turn to law – either governmental, juridical or religious. Instead, he turns to justice, a principle that cannot be summed up by rules or upon which rules and law need to be based and which transcends law itself. Justice, a principle that emerges from a transcendent realm can, and should, pertain in the historical world.

Haman is revealed as traitor and the play ends on a commitment to good politics that includes religious freedom as its foundational tenet. Esther's speech, the final words of the play, focus not on **redemption as** reprieve from murder but on **redemption as** newly acquired freedom:

May the sacred tree of liberty never lose a branch in contending for religious superiority; but all be free to worship as he pleases. Let that man be for ever despised who dares interfere between his fellow man and his creed. Oh, people of my own nation, may the *heart* promised home you've sighed for present you golden hours of freedom; and down to posterity may the sons of Judah in every clime celebrate this time in happy Purim!'

Here, good politics is an adherence to transcendent values of justice and universal good, a sign of the deep commitment and engagement with current politics for this Jewish playwright and her Jewish working-class audience.

Running for a month, Polack's play was a popular articulation of an astute and sophisticated engagement with issues of the ban on political office and the pernicious consequences of discriminating against religious affiliation. Polack's play seems to be a rare example of dramatic engagement with the more abstract politics of sovereignty and law and as such it does stand out Anglo-Jewish literature and performances from the early nineteenth century that more often focus on issues of assimilation and intermarriage than political theorizing.

Performed three years after Polack's play, Charles Barnett's *The Dream of Fate; or, Sarah the Jewess* for example, addressed the issue of Jewish intermarriage through the trope of a dream in which marriage to Christian is averted by the supernatural revelation of a miserable future.³⁷ While many of the *purimspiel* written and performed in England travelled across the Atlantic, Polack's did not. Heather S. Nathans suggests, in distinction to critics who downplay its political content, that Polack's 'vision of Esther may have been too specifically entwined with contemporary British political debates to resonate with American audiences'.³⁸

Polack's play enriches our sense of non-elite engagement with issues of Jewish emancipation that cannot be gleaned from demographic statistics or from

records of Jewish public politics. It is telling that historians who look to understand the Jewish political landscape of the nineteenth century underestimate the cultural sphere. For example, in Alderman's study of Jewish infrastructure, he focuses on Jewish community as shaped by synagogues, almshouses and hospitals in London in order to understand Jewish life, with no attention paid to theatres.³⁹ Yet the concern with emancipation and religious freedom expressed in Polack's play echoes those articulated in Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid's petition to Sir Robert Peel in 1845, that Jewish concerns are 'not so much on account of the hardship of being excluded from particular stations of trust or honour, as on account of the far greater hardship of having a degrading stigma fastened upon us by the Laws of our country.'⁴⁰ Goldsmid elsewhere wrote: 'the law shall [...] continue to mark them with a brand and make them, so far as the law can have that effect, a dishonoured and degraded caste.'⁴¹ For Goldsmid, as for Polack, law and discrimination are intimately linked.

Although a neglected 'potboiler', Polack's play demonstrates, as the above analysis has attempted to establish, not only that the melodramatic form is not a hindrance to the inclusion of complex political discussion but it **provided its working-class audiences with a form ideal for the exploration of complex political debates about law, sovereignty and political life.** Focusing on the most theatrical of historical settings, palace and court life, melodrama fulfills what Benjamin first

saw in the German *trauerspiel*: a committed historical focus. The extremes and moral clarity of the play, like the story of Esther itself, does not preclude an involved and complicated interest in politics but perhaps demands it.

¹ Geoffrey, Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, repr. 1998), p. 52. Israel Finestein asserts the case even more strongly in arguing for 'Jewish indifference' over emancipation, Israel Finestein, *Jewish Society in Victorian England: Collected Essays* (London and Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 1993), p. 2.

² Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England 1714-1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 278.

³ Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 104.

⁴ Elizabeth Polack, *Esther, the Royal Jewess: or, The Death of Haman! An Historical Drama in Three Acts* (London: J. Duncombe and Co., 1835).

⁵ John Franceschina, 'Introduction to Elizabeth Polack's *Esther*', *British Women Playwrights around 1800*, Gen. Ed Thomas C. Crochunis and Michael Eberle-Sinatra, 15 October 2008. 11 pars.

<http://www.etang.umontreal.ca/bwp1800/essays/franceschina_esther_intro.html>. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Paragraph numbers will follow in brackets. For background on Polack see Franceschina, *Sisters of Gore: Seven Dramatic Melodramas by British Women, 1790-1843* (New York and Routledge, 2000), pp. 227-230. In this edition, Franceschina reproduces Polack's other extant play, *St. Clair of the Isles, not Esther*.

⁶ See Susan Bennett, 'Genre Trouble: Joanna Baillie, Elizabeth Polack – tragic subjects, melodramatic subjects', in Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin, *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 215-232 (p. 222), who spends less than a page of her article on Polack's *Esther*.

⁷ See John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* (CUP, 1980).

⁸ I use the term ‘working class’ throughout the article to depict what may better be thought of as a slippery identification of non-elite, working and lower-middle classes.

⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book VII, 1805, ?l. 7429, 476.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* ([1963] London: Verso, 1998, repr. 2009), p. 63. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

¹¹ It also produced ‘Lloyd’s Miniature Portraits’ of characters and was published in *Lacy’s Acting Edition of Plays* of 1884. See Franceschina, §8.

¹² A later Esther play, *The King of Persia; or, the Triumph of the Jewish Queen* (1855) only achieved a license when the protagonists’ names were changed to distance it from its biblical origins, see John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹³ Jim Davis, ‘The East End’, in *The Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Michael Richard Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 202-219 (p. 202); Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Ohio State University Press, xxxx), p. 56. See also Anthony L. Ellis, ‘The East-end Jew at his playhouse’, *Pall Mall Magazine* 41 (1908): 173-179, (p. 173).

¹⁴ Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, pp. 55-6, 56.

¹⁵ The Yiddish term for the Purim play is usually transcribed as either *purimspiel* or *purimshpil* in criticism on the subject. I have chosen the former version in order to highlight the consonance between the two key terms *purimspiel* and *trauerspiel*.

¹⁶ Purimspiel are believed to have emerged from travelling ‘Purim players’, who cashed in on the religious obligation at Purim to give charitably. These musicians would travel around houses giving songs and skits for food and payment. The purimspiel is celebrated as ‘folk’ culture and, like the melodrama, dismissed as ‘low culture’, see Ahuva Belkin, ‘The “low” culture of the Purimshpil’, *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), pp. 29-43.

¹⁷ Daniel Boyarin, ‘Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism-Theorizing Diaspora’, in *Poetics Today*, 15:1 (1994), 1-8 (p. 5).

¹⁸ The nearby Garrick Theatre was also playing to the festive season by putting on a play called ‘Ahasuerus’. The purimspiel was a genre concerned with Jewish difference from its host nation rather than a carnivalesque dissolution of boundaries. For criticism arguing against Purim as carnivalesque, see Harold Fisch

in 'Reading and Carnival: On the Semiotics of Purim', *Poetics Today* 15.1 (1994), pp. 55-74.

¹⁹ David Conway, *Jewry in Music: Jewish Entry to the Music Professions, 1780--1850*, unpublished PhD thesis (Dept. of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL, 2007), p. 139.

²⁰ Conway notes Franceschina's oversight, *Jewry in Music*, p. 138, fn. 373.

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays, 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 82.

²² Bennett, 'Genre Trouble', pp. 222, 226.

²³ See M. C. N. Salbstein, *The Emancipation of the Jews in Britain: The Question of the Admission of the Jews to Parliament, 1828-1860* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982), p. 50.

²⁴ Salbstein, p. 40.

²⁵ See Alderman and Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* for overviews of the political landmarks mentioned here.

²⁶ David B. Green, 'This Day in Jewish History: Sun Sets on London's First Jewish Sheriff' (July 18, 2013), *Ha'Aretz*. See also Conway, pp. 138-9.

²⁷ Salomen was in the same year also elected to become an alderman, a member of the governing body of the City, although in this instance his inability to take the Christian oath meant he didn't take up the office until 10 years later in 1845.

²⁸ Illuminated address, 1858. JM 633. Jewish Museum, of London.

²⁹ Franceschina § 4, citing Ellis, p. 173.

³⁰ R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1965), p. 14.

³¹ James R. Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 9, 2.

³² Betty Rojtman and Jonathan Stavsky, 'Towards a Hermeneutics of Ambiguity: The Book of Esther and the Silence of Signs', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 10:1 (2012), 1-10.

³³ Nadia Valman, 'British Jewish Literature and Culture: An Introduction', *Jewish Culture and History*, 12.1-2, 204-212.

³⁴ *Political Theology*, p. 5.

³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 28ff.

³⁶ See Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁷ Charles Zachary Barnett, *The Dream of Fate; or, Sarah, the Jewess* (London: T. H. Lacy [1838]).

³⁸ Heather S. Nathans, *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans: Performing Jewish Identity on the Antebellum American Stage* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2017), p. 167.

³⁹ Alderman, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁰ Peel papers, British Library Add. MSSS 40612, fo. 164v: petition to Sir Robert Peel from I. L. Goldsmid and 30 others, Feb 1845; cited in Alderman, 60.

⁴¹ In *The Arguments Advanced against the Enfranchisement of the Jews Considered in a Series of Letters* (Letter V), cited in Finestein, p. 3.