

## Jo Carruthers, *The Politics of Purim: Law, Sovereignty and Hospitality in the Aesthetic Afterlives of Esther*.

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In *The Politics of Purim*, Jo Carruthers brings post-modern political thought to bear on “a literary reading of the story of Esther, informed and entwined with the festival activities of Purim” (34). Set in the Persian Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE), the fictional story revolves around the Jewish community, who are not only tolerated as a minority but thriving until Haman bribes the king to have them all annihilated. The decree of genocide serves as the focal point for Carruthers’ use of political thinkers on “sovereignty, law, and hospitality” such as Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Rancière—as relevant to a post-Holocaust Europe and post-Trump America as they are to the world of *Megillat Esther*. The contemporary resonances of Carruthers’ analysis resound throughout the book. In the introduction, the author lays out her theoretical lens and its application to synagogue practices and *Purimsphiln* (pl.)—comic adaptations of the story—as well as artworks on the Esther story and illuminations of the scrolls themselves. Carruthers understands the biblical text to be inherently “profane” rather than “sacred,” with its emphasis on an absent God and human agency, and thus, of all the biblical books, uniquely appropriate for post-modern political thought. Politics is defined not in the narrow sense of factions, parties, and nation states, but in Foucault’s broad sense of agency—the power of an individual, minority group or people to operate as subjects in the world. Carruthers writes, “What is under threat at Purim is not only Jewish life, but Jewish sovereignty in terms of the community’s rights as a group to protect what is distinct and unique to it and to protect the cultural, social, and traditional life of its community’s members” (17). Yet, according to Carruthers, “sovereignty and hospitality represent two opposing attitudes to the group’s boundary and reflect two different sets of aspirations: the first towards self-preservation and the other towards relationship (for both guest and host)” (12). That is, sovereignty may become ‘bloated,’ denying hospitality to others in the name of policing boundaries and borders. Hospitality, then, provides a kind of antidote. The story of Esther raises the question: “How can a group be hospitable, through making their borders porous, whilst not disintegrating?” (12).

In chapter 1, “Lawlessness, Sovereignty and In-hospitality,” Carruthers outlines how “Law” is central to the identity of the group as law-abiding, law-defying, or law-making agents. The motif of “Law” [Aramaic *dat*, referring to the empire’s custom, rule, or decree] runs rife throughout the Megillah, where the king issues rules despotically (and ironically), overriding even his own sovereignty; he is powerless to rescind the edict to annihilate the Jews (Est. 8:8). Various figures (Vashti, Mordecai, Esther), and putatively the Jews themselves, all defy “the Law” (at peril to their lives), and the festival of Purim revels in lawlessness, with

drunkenness, bawdiness, and cross-dressing. Yet Carruthers critiques the use of Bakhtin’s “carnavalesque” by modern scholars in their analysis of Esther, pointing to the lack of political perspective. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque “is not a true overturning of hierarchies but rather affords a dissolution only on a conceptual level.... As an aesthetic of narrative or festival activities...it does not map onto the boundary-marking activities of Purim” (38). Instead, she draws on Agamben’s theories on anomie (lawlessness in its proximity to Law). In “the State of Exception” (discussed in chapters 2 and 5)—when the king (or sovereign) overrides the Law that should protect its subjects—he is “legalizing lawlessness in the law authorizing the murder of the empire’s Jews” (28-29). The right to kill, with impunity, all Jews (Est. 3:12) renders their status to that of the Homo Sacer (Agamben’s term) or “bare life”—a life deprived of political rights, living under the sign of death (30). When the decree is ‘countermanded’ by allowing the Jews to rise up in self-defense against their enemies, a time-bound civil war ensues. Carruthers suggests that this “suspension of legality” exposes how sovereign power is dangerously mobile (100-101). Symbolically, through the ‘grogger’ or ‘gragger’ (Yiddish for the noise-makers that ‘wipe out’ the name Haman during the ritual reading of the Megillah, discussed in chapter 5) and the image of the hanging of Haman and his ten sons in the illuminated manuscripts (discussed in chapter 4), the Jews enact ‘sovereignty’, the power of life and death over their fellow subjects. While Walter Benjamin originally deployed the concept of ‘sovereignty’ in a neutral (or even positive) sense, the term takes on a sinister hue here. On the one hand, Benjamin points to the “dangers of idolizing the sovereign” and “the overreach of sovereign power in what he calls ‘divine violence’” (32). On the other hand, a line should be drawn between “sovereignty” as it applies to a minority—here, the Jews under the protection of the Persian Empire—and the “sovereign” himself—King Ahasuerus and the Persian Empire that he so ineptly rules.

Along these same lines, Carruthers makes a flawed equivalence between the edict of genocide (3:12) and the Jews’ right to defend themselves (Est. 8:12, 9:1-16). She writes, “Where under the first law the Persians held power over the life and death of the Jews, the second law extends the power to kill, endowing the Jews too with power over life and death, a dangerous diffusion of sovereignty through the population” (103). The analysis also fails to address the issue of plunder, the inverse of hospitality; where the decree allowed the enemies of the Jews to take plunder (Est. 3:13, 8:11), the Jews refrained from doing so upon slaying their enemies in self-defense (9:10, 15-16). Furthermore, given this is “a text about political threat and precarity” (38), Carruthers’ analysis lacks a cogent discussion of Jews as a Diaspora. By contrast, Ed Greenstein (whom the author does not reference) reads the Megillah as a comic *fantasy* of Jewish self-determination—Jews constitutive of a community in exile, who were historically rarely privy to sovereignty under the Law, and whose existence, in reality, was often fraught with anxiety.

On the other hand, Carruthers discusses the inhospitality of Amalek (chapters 2-3), in the paradoxical “remembering to forget” reading of Shabbat Zakhor (Deut. 25:17-19), and the hospitality of the Jews, in relationship to their sovereignty (chapters 8-11). In contrast to Amalek, who attacked the Israelites as they were leaving Egypt, the Jews model hospitality—the sine qua non of ethics according to Derrida (12). The practice of “*mishlo’ah manot*” (Yiddish “*shalokh manes*”) and *matanot la’evyonim*—sending gifts of food and drink, as well as charity to the poor (Est. 9:19, 22)—“epitomizes a concept of a hospitable sovereignty

detached from territory” (32). Carruthers could have noted that these laws enacted to enhance boundary cohesion for the Jews are significantly not called “*dat*” in the biblical text, and, in contrast to the arbitrary, externally imposed Persian edicts, the Jews assumed this obligation on themselves from that generation onward (Est. 9:23). Like these practices, Esther herself models “dispossessed hospitality and sovereignty” (12), discussed at length in chapter 8 in a brilliant analysis of two paintings: John Everett Millais’ “Esther” (1965) and Jan Steen’s “The Wrath of Ahaseurus” (c. 1668-70). In refusing adornment (Est. 2:15), and by emphasizing that she operates in the king’s best interest at the feast where she exposes Haman’s nefarious plot (7:5-6), Esther epitomizes good hospitality while Haman epitomizes only “the failure of hospitality” and “corrosive self-interest” (154).

In the penultimate chapter (9), the author engages with Filipino Lippi’s painting, “Mordecai Weeping” (1465) which adorns the book’s cover, as a lens into the motif of mourning throughout the Megillah. With deeply nuanced insight, she reads Mordecai’s wailing, donning sackcloth and ash, and Esther’s agitated response as indicative of political protest, drawing on Judith Butler’s *Precarious Lives*. His very public displays of mourning—the great loud and bitter cry, tearing his clothing, dressing in sackcloth and ash, and sitting at the gates of the palace—all point to an asserted “undoing of the self,” “and as such becomes an act of resistance” (163). The final chapter discusses the Aftselakhis Collective’s *purimshpil*, performed in Brookline in 2018, which “offers a riotous ridiculing of white supremacist rhetoric, norms of domination, capitalist inequalities, modern slavery and ablest identities and assumptions” (34). The conclusion points to the ways the reception of Megillat Esther and Purim, read through the lens of political theory, might prompt us to think deeply about the ethics of hospitality and sovereignty well beyond the borders of the scroll.

This is a brilliant and refreshing look at an ancient, well-worn text and its reception. The writing is lucid, the arguments subtle and complex without being cluttered with literary jargon. The indices are thorough—including an index of primary references, of authors, and of subjects. While I delighted in reading the book, I suspect the readership may be narrow, drawing from sophisticated literary theory and post-modern thought as windows into the Bible and its reception.



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