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

Jo Carruthers
Lancaster University, UK

Abstract
This article challenges historians’ representations of working-class Jewish attitudes to emancipation in the early nineteenth century through a reading of Elizabeth Polack’s 1835 melodrama, Esther, the Royal Jewess, or the Death of Haman! Low expectations of working-class political engagement and the working-class genre of the melodrama are challenged by the astute political content of Polack’s play. Its historical and political value is revealed by placing the play within the tradition of the purimspiel, the Jewish genre that traditionally explores Jewish life under hostile government. Reading the play alongside Walter Benjamin’s writings on the disparaged German melodramatic genre of the trauerspiel enables a finely articulated reading of its complex exploration of issues of sovereignty, law, and religious and political freedom.

Keywords
Jewish emancipation, melodrama, Benjamin, Elizabeth Polack, Esther (Bible), Purimspiel, politics, sovereignty, law

Corresponding author:
Jo Carruthers, English & Creative Writing, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.
Email: j.carruthers@lancaster.ac.uk
It took thirty years from the extension of political rights to Roman Catholics and dissenters in 1829 to the moment when Lionel de Rothschild entered the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament in 1858. Historians writing on the Jewish emancipation debates that took place over this period overwhelmingly represent the Jewish working class as disinterested in the battle to remove the few remaining barriers to full Jewish political equality that admittedly 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 cites anecdotal evidence gleaned by the nineteenth-century social commentator, Henry Mayhew, of Jewish hawkers and old-clothes men as having a ‘perfect indifference to, and nearly as perfect ignorance of, politics’, and by Bishop of London C. J. Blomfield, who, after enquiries found ‘very few of the great body of the Jewish people who cared anything at all’.2 Endelman 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 Assumptions of working class political apathy are challenged by attention to a little-known play produced in 1835, Elizabeth Polack’s *Esther, the Royal Jewess, or The Death of Haman!*4 Typical of the romping, exotic melodramas popular in working-class areas in the early nineteenth century, its sophisticated political content suggests there was a profound engagement within Jewish working class culture with issues of emancipation and political freedom. In a wider sense, attention to the play demonstrates the importance and vitality of literature for nuancing our understanding of historical political attitudes.

Polack is celebrated as the ‘first Jewish woman melodramatist in England’, and was author of five plays, two of which are still extant.5 Polack’s work has been given short shrift alongside her better-known contemporary, Joanna Baillie, and *Esther, the Royal Jewess* deemed of scant artistic value, designated a ‘potboiler’ even by the editor of Polack’s play, John Franceschina.6 It seems that historians and literary critics alike consider the ‘low’ genre of the melodrama and the working and lower-middle classes as too mean for anything beyond facile or narrow engagement with ‘serious’ political realities.7 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 non-elite topography with lack of profundity.8 This article simultaneously challenges assumptions of working-class indifference to emancipation debates and contests negative generic judgments of melodrama by turning to Walter Benjamin’s apologia for the German melodramatic genre, the *trauerspiel*, to argue for the suitability of melodrama for ‘the art of government’, a phrase that Benjamin utilises that expresses this entwinning of culture and politics.9
Esther, the Royal Jewess was staged from 7 March 1835 for a month at the New Royal Pavilion Theatre on Whitechapel Road in the East End of London and was popular enough to warrant two editions. 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. Although plays on biblical themes were banned during Esther’s production, the Pavilion was a minor, unlicensed theatre and beyond the scope of the ban. The Pavilion Theatre was later to become the home of Yiddish theatre in London. It 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’. Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow 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’.

The status of Esther, the Royal Jewess as a purimspiel would be obvious to its audience because it was staged just after the festival of Purim, which occurred that year on 3 March. Daniel Boyarin, a prominent theorist of Jewish culture, identifies Purim as the Jewish festival ‘of Diaspora par excellence’. Although Purim plays often featured the Esther story, their purpose in celebrating reprieve from threat meant they often drew on similarly redemptive biblical stories. Reading aloud the Esther story is an obligatory part of the synagogue Purim service, but the more informal retelling through drama had been a common practice since at least the seventeenth century and emerged in Yiddish-speaking Europe. By the nineteenth century the purimspiel was an established part of Purim festivities, depicting biblical stories of redemption, with the Esther story as the archetypal tale of reprieve from threat to Jewish life. Polack’s play situates itself firmly in Purim by ending with the words ‘this time in happy Purim!’ and stage directions frame the ending tableau with a transparency of the word ‘Purim!’. Understanding Polack’s play as a purimspiel therefore places it within a political context of Jewish survival and reprieve from oppression. Christian dramatisations of the Esther story – like Jean Racine’s Esther and Handel’s oratorio – focus on romance and drew on the Apocryphal additions that present a swooning queen and besotted king. David Conway notes 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.’ This festival context has been overlooked by scholars of British drama, as Conway himself notes.

The play’s concern with marginalisation more generally has been noted by Susan Bennett who concludes that it dramatises ‘strong and unmistakable representations of what it means to appear according to one’s regulated identity’. Yet, those 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. While Esther
may deliver the final speech, Mordecai’s and Haman’s roles are amplified so that
the biblical subplot of attempted assassination expands to a major plotline and
Haman becomes the instigator. With the *purimspiel* context overlooked, critical
response to the play has focused on what Terry Eagleton has called the ‘contem-
porary holy trinity’ of gender, class and race, leaving the religious aspect of Jewish
identity neglected.21

Understanding the religious dimension to Jewish identity in the 1830s is vital. At
this time, the bar to political participation was the Christian oath that applied 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 cen-
tury. When the ‘Jew Bill’ was published in 1753, allowing Jewish immigrants to be
naturalised as British subjects, the ensuing public outcry led to the bill’s repeal. 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’.22 When Roman Catholics could hold office (except for the highest
roles) through the 1829 Emancipation Act, there were logical expectations these
rights would extend to Jews, 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.’23 Yet
these hopes would not be fulfilled for nearly 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 the Christian Oath. 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.24

Jewish political status may have experienced a Purim-like reversal only later in
the nineteenth century, but its momentum 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 was staged, one of the two City Sheriffs was for the first
time Jewish. Sir David Salomen’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
21 August 1835, allowed its bypassing precisely to allow Salomen to become
Sheriff.25 The bar to government, then, was primarily religious, namely the inabil-
ity to profess Christian religious belief.26

The importance of religious identity was apparent 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, which
articulates the victory as putting an end to Rothschild’s ‘arduous struggles in THE CAUSE OF CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY’, so that freedom is qualified in dual political and religious terms.27 Rothschild’s election was celebrated as a victory by the London Committee for Jews because ‘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.

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.28 Because of its chiaroscuro morality, melodrama has been deemed unworthy of serious regard. In a classic study, Michael Booth characterises melodrama as a ‘dream world’ of ‘idealization and simplification of the world of reality’.29 Melodrama is too simple, too sensational and 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-monarchal sentiments may seem conservative and disconnected from the East End’s ‘non-conformist’ reputation. Yet, Esther, the Royal Jewess’s depiction of the sovereign replicates the German trauerspiel, as Benjamin outlines it, which similarly focuses on the mechanisms and structures of history, politics and sovereignty. Benjamin’s recovery and celebration of the German melodramatic trauerspiel (the ‘mourning play’ or ‘tragic drama’) asserts the genre’s political and historical credentials. As Bainard Cowan notes, for Benjamin, history ‘was his constant and final concern’.30 Benjamin states of the trauerspiel that, ‘Historic life [...] is its content, its true object’ (p. 62). Benjamin’s book on the trauerspiel, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, was originally a doctoral thesis written for a Christian university in a Europe in which anti-Semitism was rife, and so it is not surprising that it mentions neither Jews nor the purimspiel. Yet the connections to this Jewish genre are numerous and focus on the sovereign, court intrigue and secular politics. Both genres share a court setting in a ‘world of intrigue’ (p. 97), the presence of ‘an intriguer’ who is ‘all intellect and willpower’ (p. 95), a setting in the Orient with its ‘absolute Imperial power’ (p. 68), the depiction of the extremes of the very good (gar guten) or very bad (gar bösen) ruler (p. 69), and a world of the ‘merely creaturely’ in which even objects have power over rulers (p. 132). Above all, both
genres can be read as essentially ‘worldly’ (p. 66) – all threads that I will draw out more fully in the following discussion.

Benjamin’s analysis of the disparaged *trauerspiel* elevates the ‘potboiler’ to politically engaged drama pertinent for the *purimspiel*. A key argument of Benjamin’s book is to recognise the *trauerspiel* as allegory, a form he champions despite the reverence for the symbol expressed by both the Romantics and twentieth-century critics. His distinction between symbol and allegory relates to relative levels of transparency. The symbol stands in for the thing represented through conventional association (for example, monetary symbols – £ or $– bear no resemblance to the money they stand in for). Allegory instead draws its meaning from constant referral: this person here is understood by reference to another person or story. To allegorise means to ‘speak otherwise’, a retelling that refers back to an original narrative but infuses it with new, subjective significances. As Benjamin notes, through allegory, ‘Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything’ (p. 175).

Allegory would have been a familiar interpretive mode in the early nineteenth century. The Jewish community in London would be all-too-aware of the English Protestant penchant to call themselves the ‘new Israel’, a supersessionist move in which Protestants overtook the narrative of Israel to tell the story of England as chosen nation. Jews were rendered archaic and irrelevant by this form of appropriative allegory that overwrote Jewish self-identification. Christian tradition excelled in allegory, but so too did Jewish forms of biblical interpretation. Key narratives from the Hebrew Bible are themselves allegorical: in Ezekiel 37’s valley of dry bones, a divinely animated field of previously parched bones represent an arid and then revived Israel. Many Jews would also be familiar with kaballah, a tradition within Jewish orthodoxy from at least the early middle ages, that revels in allegorical interpretation. Revealing mysterious profundities, kaballah assumed layers of meaning and hermeneutic depth. In the simplest of terms, allegory (*mashal*, or midrash in Jewish tradition) was and is a familiar mode of reading Scripture that enquires of the narrative for present-day relevance.31

Retellings of Esther in the *purimspiel* were allegorical in the sense that they often applied the narrative to a contemporary concern. As tales of reprieved threat, *purimspiel* – explicitly and implicitly – would identify the current enemy of the Jews in the Haman figure and celebrate heroes as Esthers and Mordecais. Polack’s *purimspiel* is no exception to this allegorical mode, but is unusual in terms of applying the narrative events of Esther to the political sphere more generally. It is in this move towards applying the Esther narrative to politics itself that Polack’s play is exceptional.

The form of allegory is all-important to Benjamin’s theories about history. In its action of pointing away from itself, allegory acknowledges an ideal of truth at the same time as identifying that truth as located elsewhere. Allegory is therefore profane in its grounding in the present-day, but also signals to a
distant and inaccessible transcendence via its function as a sign. As Cowan explains:

The affirmation of the existence of truth, then, is the first precondition for allegory; the second is a recognition of its absence. Allegory could not exist if truth were accessible; as a mode of expression it arises in perpetual response to the human condition of being exiled from the truth that it would embrace. Allegory simultaneously devalues and elevates the ‘origin’ narrative: allegory designates the Esther story as vital and incomplete. It is fulfilled only in pointing elsewhere to invoke a transcendent truth about sovereignty and politics more generally. In this sense, allegory and the story of Esther agree on a profane world in which transcendence is not immediately apparent: flawed or fallen, individuals are subject to the political actions of other less-than-perfect humans.

The *trauerspiel* emerges from a secular view of human effort – and history itself – as lacking, Benjamin argues. In focusing on subjection to flawed authorities, the genre expresses the perspective of the ‘outsider’ (p. 91), or those who believe ‘human actions were deprived of all value’ (p. 138). The Baroque (and the plays that emerge in the *trauerspiel*) ‘had such a clear vision of the misery of mankind in its creaturely estate’ (p. 146). Such misery is found in the fact that ‘it is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history’ (p. 180). Although Benjamin explicitly couches his discussion in the context of a Protestant theology of the inefficacy of human works, the principles fit very well a Jewish understanding of the profane world as often applied to Esther.

Polack’s audience would have been primed to think about this melodramatic *purimspiel* as allegory and Benjamin’s writing helps us to recognise its essentially historical mode. Benjamin reveals what George Steiner aptly calls the ‘metaphysical presumptions of allegory’: what it is that allegory presumes about wider, cosmic meanings. For the audience at Polack’s *purimspiel*, the Esther story was not only about events that happened thousands of years ago, but about events unravelling in their present time and principles that could guide human action. The form of the allegory as seen in the *trauerspiel* and *purimspiel* is, as Steiner asserts, ‘counter-transcendental’. Like allegory, divine activity is acknowledged, but only, like allegory, as the result of a ‘reading between the lines’. As such, Polack’s *Esther, the Royal Jewess* retells the Esther story with a surprisingly sophisticated engagement with the political situation of Jews in 1835 England.

The *trauerspiel* was valued by Benjamin precisely, then, for its attention to ‘historic life’ (p. 62) and especially the sovereign as the ‘principal exponent of history’ (p. 62). The historically focused *trauerspiel*, reveals Benjamin, 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). 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 h[er] mother-tongue. (p. 63)

The *trauerspiel* offered Benjamin, as James R. Martel explains, the representation of a form of ‘deflated and de-centred’ sovereignty that resists idolatrous forms of idealisation. Such totalised sovereignty is dangerous because, as Martel clarifies, it ‘interferes with rather than facilitates or expresses popular power’. Any representation of sovereignty ‘works best when it visibly fails to achieve its purpose’.³⁵ The *trauerspiel* is valuable because it exposes the sovereign’s essential limitations as Benjamin asserts: ‘he is the lord of creatures and he remains a creature’ (p. 85). The *trauerspiel* – and Polack’s play – displays a vital principle of the paradoxical contingency of ‘human-earthly perplexity’ and ‘princely hierarchical power’ (p. 84): that although creaturely humans are flawed, some are given inordinate power over others. Benjamin elsewhere emphasises the disparity between the ‘capacity to rule’ and the ‘power of the ruler’ (p. 70). In other words, there is a discrepancy between the facts of absolute power and human frailty that defies an idealisation of sovereign rule.

*Esther, the Royal Jewess* resembles the *trauerspiel* in its attention to ‘historic life’. Its plot is more plausible than the biblical *Esther* story, which is characterised by convolution and what Betty Rojtman and Jonathan Stavsky call an ‘astonishingly favorable series of circumstances’.³⁶ The string of unlikely coincidences – so implausible as to warrant divine explanation for many – take on supernatural form in Polack’s play so that the king’s sleeplessness is figured as the visitation of Time itself to the king’s bedside. For Benjamin, such supernatural elements confirm, not undermine, historicity because ‘prophetic dreams’, ‘an almost obligatory ingredient of the drama’, ‘belonged to the domain of fate’ (p. 134), or subjection to forces beyond human control. Attention to the complex machinations of the evil courtier Haman makes the storyline more ‘historical’ in Benjamin’s terms in the sense of enabling exploration of a would-be tyrant. In *Esther, the Royal Jewess* Haman’s role is amplified by details of his motivations and plottings. As such, Polack’s adaptation urges political reflection through the 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 depiction of Haman’s self-serving manipulations encourages a discerning attitude from the audience. Haman’s surface reasonableness in his speeches may convince his followers, but by dramatising his villainy Polack sensitises her
audience to deceptive rhetoric. The attitude of critique complements the play’s political content and the audience is encouraged to pay attention to ‘historic life’, a life of human activity and political manoeuvring. As such, the play foregrounds the inherent vulnerabilities of government. Haman himself admits sovereignty’s dependence on popular support in his recognition, within a longer speech, that ‘Before the people, however humble, if they be but bound in unity, all rank and title must crumble into dust’ (p. 10). Haman foreshadows his own attempt on power in recognising the power of ‘might’ of what he disparagingly calls the ‘common herd’.

_Esther, the Royal Jewess_, like the _trauerspiel_, recognises the importance of spectacle to sovereign power. Act One, scene one opens on the ‘Grand Tent of Ahasuerus’ (p. 5) and, like the _Esther_ story itself, plays to audience desires for the theatrical display of sovereign power. Polack’s king is depicted as both powerful and weak, in line with Benjamin’s recognition of the concurrence of authoritarian system and creature. The king desires to rule ‘with mercy’, invoking clement values, yet is duped by the man he announces as ‘my trusty counselor and friend, Haman’ (p. 5). His status as creature sits uncomfortably alongside his absolute power.

Sovereignty is inherently limited, but Polack’s play suggests there is a spectrum from what Benjamin identifies as the very good (gar guten) to the very bad (gar bösen) ruler (p. 69). The simple Mordecai and the merciful Ahasuerus are presented as the best ‘createlyre’ possibility for good government while Haman dramatises the tyrant. In the king and Mordecai the play dramatises facets of good rule: the king is not only wishing to be merciful, but is at his best when listening to a trusty advisor, as identified in Mordecai’s proven loyalty and honest critique. While Haman is simpering and outwardly loyal, Mordecai and Esther voice a detailed yet non-violent critique of the regime they live under. Mordecai and Esther’s status as ‘respectable’ Jews – worthy of inclusion in government – is effected through contrast with the character Levi who better fits what Nadia Valman has called the ‘literary stereotype’ and who embodies ‘internationally recognised stereotypes’ of ‘the Jew’. Levi is best understood to function as what Valman has called a ‘malleable form of rhetoric’ for Polack to enable her to differentiate respectable Jews from familiar stereotypes.37 In their first speeches Mordecai and Esther express displeasure towards the king about unjust laws and for allowing them, as Jews, to be ‘despised’. Mordecai calls the king ‘proud’ and ‘haughty’ (p. 15) and expresses concern for the empire’s health through striking metaphors of disease and berates the luxuriousness of the palace: ‘till by degrees the fountain of health becomes dried up, and loathsome imbecility reigns predominant’ (p. 19). Yet the audience is aware that Mordecai and Esther’s complaints pertain to the actions and laws instituted by Haman, not the king. Anti-monarchal sentiment _per se_ is avoided and revolutionary violence rejected. Measured criticism is revealed to be a panacea against the courtier whose outward loyalty masks rebellion.
On a more profound level, Polack’s play exposes the sovereign’s difficult relationship to law. For an English audience well aware of the high status of law in national mythology, the play reveals law’s reliance on the sovereign decision that is dependent on acts of individual judgment. In this way the play pre-empts Benjamin’s analysis of the individual sovereign who dictates the health of the nation because he holds ultimate judgment over law as exemplified in the ability to suspend law. The first scene of *Esther, the Royal Jewess* presents the tricky relationship between sovereignty and law. The reason for Queen Vashti’s refusal to appear at the king’s request is unexplained in the Bible. In the play the queen defends herself by recourse to law and in practice places the law above her sovereign. A messenger explains to the king that ‘the laws of Persia forbid her to appear before strange guests’ (p. 6). She refuses out of ‘reverence of that law’ (p. 6), implying lack of reverence towards the king.

In response, the king takes offence at the queen’s prioritising of law over his dictate in a way that appears dismissive: ‘What care I for the laws of Persia?’. The king continues: ‘My will must be her only law’ (p. 6). The king asserts his precedence over law claiming that such disobedience, although lawful, has ‘degraded me to my whole nation’ and ‘scorned my sovereign power!’ (p. 6). Although Ahasuerus rejects law’s jurisdiction he subsequently demurs to the ‘expounders of the Persian laws’ (p. 6) to advise him on Vashti’s punishment. Even though he loves Vashti he recognises the people’s consent depends upon a sovereign’s right attitude to law: ‘The law enjoins her banishment, and if a king conform not to his country’s edict, how can he claim allegiance from his subjects?’ (p. 7).

While law is necessary for structuring a kingdom and enabling consistency, as political theorists like Benjamin assert, the sovereign by his very nature must exist both within the law and above it to maintain true sovereign power. Benjamin’s attention to the relation between sovereign individual and law emerged from his opposition to the controversial political theorist, Carl Schmitt, who first articulated the argument: ‘sovereign is he who decides on the exception’. Here, Schmitt indicates that the sovereign is the figure that can legally proclaim the suspension of law, meaning that power over law identifies the sovereign. While Schmitt and Benjamin agree that power is located in an individual sovereign, Schmitt argues for a defence of dictatorship (presuming that a strong decision-maker produces a strong nation-state), while Benjamin instead argues for recognition of the limitations of sovereignty. To identify the sovereign as ‘creature’ necessitates identification of the qualities of a good sovereign, including respect for a system of law that the sovereign nonetheless technically transcends.

The play dramatises the principle that law is valuable as a tool for order, even in an autocracy like Ahasuerus’s. Notably, Haman questions the decision to banish Vashti because, motivated solely by self-interest, he cannot see why a ruler should have to submit to anything disliked. While Ahasuerus’s attitude to law seems contradictory, it is coherent in terms of the necessary negotiation of law and sovereign supremacy that involves a respect for the law and the stability of the kingdom. The sovereign is able to suspend law, the play suggests, but does so
reluctantly. The good sovereign may be above law but is not whimsical or self-serving, instead prioritising virtuous and stable government.

*Esther, The Royal Jewess* anticipates Benjamin’s depiction of the king as a ‘creature’ in its exposure of the law as a creaturely device. The law produces good only when it is appropriately handled and this principle can be identified in the play’s invocation of transcendent principles: it expresses what Benjamin calls an ‘allegorical way of looking at things’ (p. 181) by pointing to a transcendent moral realm. Such values are invoked by Mordecai who entreats that Esther, when in the ‘pomp and splendour of a throne’, should not forget ‘Him, who gave the law’ (p. 16). Esther is asked to compare the jurisdiction of the earthly king with the divine laws of the Jewish God. As Cowan argues – and specifically in relation to Ezekiel’s allegory of the dry bones – such references to the divine are ‘allegories of power though only by signifying human and natural impotence’, or as he puts it more straightforwardly, they reveal that ‘the play’s agents cannot bring about their own rescue’. There is a sense, then, that for Benjamin and Polack alike, attention to human frailty is augmented by divine order. Divine law in *Esther, the Royal Jewess* is not a conservative force but enables the critique of earthly laws.

While the king aspires to law aligned with mercy, Haman works to create a law that restricts access to that clemency through barring access to the throne on pain of death. In a play that focuses on human frailty, the king’s mercy recognises the inevitability of human failings and the necessity for softening condemnation. By denying access to the king, Haman’s law removes the political status of the individual. In many ways Haman represents the model of the bad ruler or tyrant, interested only in his own furtherance. Haman is voraciously power hungry and his rule can only harm the people of the empire.

Haman is dangerous as a potential sovereign, the play reveals, because his all-consuming self-interest leads to the violent privileging of his own desires and for power for its own sake. Haman may be astute but he repeatedly expresses a lack of moral values. Even when appealing to ‘public safety’ (p. 21), it is merely a defensiveness un tethered from value or principle and an excuse for violence. 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 desires!’ (p. 24). Shaping his own actions and imperial law according to personal ‘desires’, Haman expresses self-interest that elides others’ suffering. Haman’s desire for power is expressed in both his contempt for 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’ (p. 21) because both expose Haman’s moral vacuity in his ambition. Haman’s real concern is usurpation, ‘that will free us for ever of the tyrant’s yoke’ (p. 18). Haman presents Ahasuerus’s as an exploitative tyranny only in order to seize power. The play dramatises 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’s self-interest not only threatens the health of the nation because of his lack of care but, as Benjamin argues, such self-interest must inevitably lead to disaster because of self-interest’s incapacity to make the sovereign decision. Haman’s reflection on the act of ‘decision’ in the play indeed exemplifies Benjamin’s argument that the sovereign’s limitation as ‘creature’ is most exposed in the fact that necessary decision-making may be subject to unstable passions. As already discussed, the sovereign is identified by his position over law because he must interpret and apply it. Good rule is therefore always dependent upon the sovereign decision (pp. 70–1). The tyrant is marked by indecision because he is motivated only by whim and desire. Such vacillation destabilises 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 desires!’ (Esther, p. 24). The ‘indecisiveness of the tyrant’ reveals the dangerous limits of the creaturely sovereign and aligns chaotic thought with chaotic politics: ‘indecision’, warns Benjamin, is the ‘complement of bloody terror’ (p. 71). Such chaotic emotions are identified in excessive eloquence for Benjamin and are embodied in the loquacious Haman. The verbose for Benjamin represents ‘exposure, rashness, powerlessness before God’, whereas writing, or reserved speech represents ‘dignity, superiority, omnipotence over the objects of the world’ (p. 201). In Polack’s play Haman’s dominance in speech signals not importance but volatility, while the king’s quietness can be read as self-possession.

Haman’s instability extends beyond his verbosity. 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 upon himself the sovereign power of ‘decision’ because, 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 – bestrides resolution, all is vapour, darkness, and dismay! So I […] was nearly hurled into the labyrinth of infamy, and, but for an energetic impulse of nature, would have fallen degraded and lost. (p. 24)

Haman not only cannot make a decision but fears the unpredictability of any outcome. His infamy is labyrinthine, untethered either to reason or to resolve, and as a result Haman has no principles to anchor his decision-making.

As a tool, law’s effectiveness depends on who wields it. 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’ (p. 23). Although hyperbolic, Haman’s suggestion that he may ‘stretch’ the law expresses a desire for, and attitude of, sovereign power over law. Haman’s speech violently defends the king’s sovereignty – ‘My loved sovereign’ (p. 23) – but usurps sovereign power through assumption of sovereign control. Later in the play, when Esther exposes herself simultaneously as a Jew and the object of Haman’s murderous law, the king repeats the metaphor – ‘But who has stretched my laws so far?’ (p. 28) – further pushing the audience to recognise Haman’s flawed attitude to law. Esther glosses this metaphor of distortion to name Haman the ‘secured perverter of thy monarch’s law!’ (p. 29).

Haman demonstrates his willingness to stretch law to a point of fatal abuse through the law that orders the killing of Jews through which he intends to wreak vengeance on Mordecai. Both this and the law denying approach to the king enact a ban of sorts: the first bans access to the king, the second enacts a more profound ban that reduces the Jews to outlaws, beyond the empire’s normal protection. 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.41 In his Homo Sacer series of books, Agamben carries on the arguments of Benjamin and in doing so exposes the relationship between law and sovereignty. The ban is pernicious, argues Agamben, because it does not protect the people as law should. Instead, it contains people within the political system while excluding them from participation or rights. The subject of the ban becomes, for Agamben, bare life, disqualified from normal, qualified political life that 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 bad law-making. Because the play is staged five years after Jews were first allowed to become Free Men of the city of London, in which freedom was 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 ‘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’ (p. 11). In the state of emergency, or state of exception, political rights are removed for the apparent protection of the population.42 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 the threat of murder is downplayed in Esther, The Royal Jewess in favour of a focus on the reduced political status of the Jews, so that redemption is achieved through the removal of bad laws and not only when threat to life is removed. As such, the play chimes with the pressing concerns of Jews in 1830’s Britain who were not subject to life-threatening laws but ones that barred political office to those who could not profess Christian faith. The play speaks to 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 this land of infidels, let no persuasion shake thy settled faith’ and reiterates that God ‘has chosen us for his people’ (p. 14). 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 the infidel!’ (p. 14). 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 – yea, even death – to make my people free!’ (p. 15).

Esther’s reference to political freedom distinguishes between political or qualified life (the freedom to act politically) and apolitical life. Polack in this way presents Jewish experience of discrimination as a form of bare life, devoid of protection. The audience is urged to adjudicate between Haman’s ‘great cause of freedom’ (p. 18), as unfettered power, devoid of content, and Esther and Mordecai’s articulation of a positive type of political freedom. These freedoms are dramatised in arguments for and against Jewish emancipation – resonating with England’s own emancipation debate – played out in a scene between Mordecai and Haman. In the quarrel that ensues after Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, Mordecai challenges Haman’s focus on outward status, not inner worth. When Mordecai explains ‘I have no country’, and ‘the settled land of my forefathers has been basely wrested from me and all my race’, Haman concludes that such weakness merely makes the Jews ‘objects for scorn’ (p. 20). Mordecai instead 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), colonisation and imperialism, in that he presumes that preeminence justifies control: in short that might is right. Haman argues for ‘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’ (p. 20). 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 artisancships 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? (p. 20)

Polack here does not have to prove worthiness to her Jewish audience, so that Mordecai instead articulates an argument based on benefit to 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. Replicating the political status of Jews in 1830’s Britain, Polack demonstrates that disfranchisement and threat to life are on a continuum: both are forms of bare life, dramatising the urgency of the need for political agency.

It is difficult to perceive working-class engagement with the emancipation debate as indifferent in the light of this play in which the depoliticised individual is equated to a slave. When Mordecai follows Esther to the palace – before the lethal edicts are issued – 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 come when the poor Jew shall be raised from this state of slavery, and rank in common with his fellow men!’ (p. 16). 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’ (p. 17). 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, The Royal Jewess* 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 controuled, by no one ruled’ (p. 24). In a play in which law is foregrounded, it is personified Time that is outside of the rule of law and therefore autonomous. Time functions like allegory itself: it is thoroughly secular (a moment in time), accentuating the time-bound historicity of the play’s setting itself, but also outside history. A quasi-divine figure, 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!’ (p. 25). Time, unlike most other key characters in the play, does not turn to law – either governmental, juridical or religious. Instead, Time turns to justice, a principle that cannot be summed up by rules and upon which rules and law need to be based. Justice emerges from a transcendent realm that can, and should, pertain in the historical world.

Haman is revealed as a 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! (p. 30)

Good politics involves adhering to transcendent values of justice and universal good expressed specifically in religious freedom, 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 within Anglo-Jewish literature and performances from the early nineteenth century that more often focus on issues of assimilation and intermarriage than political theorising. 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 a Christian is averted by the supernatural revelation of a miserable future. And while many of the purimspielen 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’.  

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 institutions such as synagogues, almshouses and hospitals in London, with no attention paid to theatres. 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.

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.’ For Goldsmid, as for Polack, law and discrimination are intimately linked.

Although a neglected ‘potboiler’, Polack’s play demonstrates 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 fulfils 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, do not preclude an involved and profound interest in politics but perhaps demand it.

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**ORCID iD**

Jo Carruthers https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9125-4297

**Notes**

1. Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford, 1992, repr. 1998), p. 52. Israel Finestein likewise asserts ‘Jewish indifference’ over emancipation in *Jewish Society in Victorian England: Collected Essays* (London and Portland, OR, 1993), p. 2.

2. Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England 1714–1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 278.
3. Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656–2000* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), p. 104.

4. Elizabeth Polack, *Esther, the Royal Jewess: or, The Death of Haman! An Historical Drama in Three Acts* (London, 1835): All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and given in the text.

5. John Franceschina, ‘Introduction to Elizabeth Polack’s *Esther*’, *British Women Playwrights Around 1800*, Gen. eds 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, 2000), pp. 227–30. This edition 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 (eds), *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 215–32 (p. 222), which contains brief mention of *Esther*.

7. The term ‘working class’ identifies in shorthand what may better be thought of as a slippery identification of non-elite, working and lower-middle classes.

8. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York and London: 1979), Book VII, 1805, l. 463, 507.

9. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* ([1963] London, 1998, repr. 2009), p. 63. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and given in the text.

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

11. 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, see John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901* (Cambridge, 1980).

12. Jim Davis, ‘The East End’, in Michael Richard Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (eds), *The Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 202–19 (p. 202); Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Columbus, OH, 2003), p. 56. See also Anthony L. Ellis, ‘The East-end Jew at his Playhouse’, *Pall Mall Magazine* 41 (1908): 173–79 (p. 173).

13. Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, pp. 55–6, 56.

14. The Yiddish term for the Purim play is transcribed as either *purimspiel* or *purimshpil*. I have chosen the former version in order to highlight the consonance between the two key terms *purimspiel* and *trauerspiel*. While this article was in press an important article was published analysing the significance of Polack’s play as both melodrama and *purimspiel*, and offers a useful and complementary analysis. See Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, ‘Melodrama, *Purimspiel* and Jewish Emancipation’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47:2 (2019), 305–45.

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

16. *Purimspielen* are believed to have emerged from travelling ‘Purim players’, who would travel around houses giving songs and skits for food and payment. The *purimspiel* is celebrated as ‘folk’ culture and, like the melodrama, often dismissed as ‘low culture’, see Ahuva Belkin, ‘The “low” culture of the Purimshpil’, in Joel Berkowitz (ed.), *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 29–43.
17. The nearby Garrick Theatre was simultaneously showing 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), 55–74 and Jo Carruthers, The Politics of Purim: Law, Sovereignty and Hospitality in the Aesthetic Afterlives of Esther (London, 2020).

18. David Conway, Jewry in Music: Jewish Entry to the Music Professions, 1780–1850, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Dept. of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL, 2007, p. 139.

19. Conway notes Franceschina’s oversight, Jewry in Music, p. 138, fn. 373.

20. Bennett, ‘Genre Trouble’, pp. 222, 226.

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

22. 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, 1982), p. 50.

23. Ibid., p. 40.

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

25. David B. Green, ‘This Day in Jewish History: Sun Sets on London’s First Jewish Sheriff’ (18 July 2013), Ha’Aretz. See also Conway, Jewry in Music, pp. 138–9.

26. Salomen was in the same year also elected to become an alderman, a member of the governing body of the City, although because of not taking the Christian oath he didn’t take up the office until 1845.

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

28. Franceschina, ‘Introduction to Elizabeth Polack’s Esther’, § 4.

29. Michael R. Booth, English Melodrama (London, 1965), p. 14.

30. Bainard Cowan, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory’, New German Critique, 22 (1981), 109–22 (p. 116).

31. See Ronald L. Eisenberg, Jewish Traditions: A JPS Guide (Philadelphia, 2004). See also the book by Benjamin’s friend, Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York, 1946).

32. Cowan, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory’, p. 114.

33. George Steiner, ‘Introduction’, The Origin, 15.

34. Ibid., p. 16.

35. James R. Martel, Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty (London, 2002), pp. 9, 2, 3.

36. 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.

37. Nadia Valman, ‘British Jewish Literature and Culture: An Introduction’, Jewish Culture and History, 12:1–2 (2010), 204–12.

38. See also Agamben’s work on the exception and the sovereign’s relation to law in Giorgio Agamben, The State of Exception, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago, 2003).

39. Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty (Chicago, 2005), p. 5.

40. Cowan, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory’, pp. 117, 118.

41. Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford, CA, 1998), pp. 28–28.
See Agamben, *The State of Exception*.

43. Charles Zachary Barnett, *The Dream of Fate; or, Sarah, the Jewess* (London, 1838).

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

45. Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, pp. 14–15.

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

47. In *The Arguments Advanced Against the Enfranchisement of the Jews Considered in a Series of Letters* (Letter V), cited in Finestein, *Jewish Society in Victorian England*, p. 3.