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The Meek And Mighty Bride: Representations of Esther, Old Testament Queen of Persia, on Fifteenth-Century Italian Marriage Furniture

Abstract

Cassone and spalliere panels depicting the Old Testament Book of Esther were produced by a number of Florentine artists during the fifteenth century. The workshops of Jacopo Sellaio; Filippino Lippi and Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso present Esther as a humble and virtuous queen. Their choice of scenes from the text and distinctive characterisation of the heroine can be interpreted in light of the purpose and function of cassone and spalliere in fifteenth-century Florence, in particular the association of such items with marriage. Representations of Esther can also be interpreted in light of contemporary sources on female education. These recommended depictions of righteous heroines as useful in promoting virtuous behaviour in women, and discussed Esther as an example of obedience and good conduct. In this context, representations of Esther on such marriage furniture can be interpreted as presenting didactic lessons for Renaissance brides.

The Old Testament Book of Esther (Esth. i–x) is a remarkable account of extravagant feasts, plots and poisons, hangings and harems. It is the story of an eponymous Queen of Persia and is replete with extraordinary luxury, scheming advisers and palace intrigue. In fifteenth-century Florence the workshops of Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso; Jacopo Sellaio and Filippino Lippi represented the story of Esther on *cassone* and *spalliere* panels. Their meek and demure Esther contrasts the assertively heroic monarch apparent in contemporary works in other media, such as the Andrea del Castagno's frescoes in the Villa Carducci.[1] An analysis of the context and function of *cassone* and *spalliere* can be used to interpret this distinctive presentation of Esther.

The Book of Esther is set in Persia, during the reign of King Ahasuerus.[2] During an extravagant banquet, the monarch sends for his consort, Queen Vashti, to display

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[1] Castagno includes a portrait of a strong and valiant Queen Esther amongst the hero cycle he produced between 1449 and 1451 for Florence's Villa Carducci (the panels are now in the Galleria degli Uffizi).

[2] The text is ahistorical, and may have been composed to provide historical justification for a pre-existing pagan celebration, or to absorb Babylonian or Elamite narratives into Jewish tradition. On the dating, historicity and composition of the Book of Esther, see Paton, 1908; Moore, 1971; Berg, 1979.

her beauty to the assembled guests. The queen refuses to obey the order. Ahasuerus is incensed, and deposes his queen lest her disobedience set a rebellious example to the women of Persia. From a gallery of assembled virgins Ahasuerus chooses Esther as Vashti's replacement. Orphaned as a child, Esther has been raised by her cousin Mordecai. She is Jewish, but keeps her religion a secret.

Visiting the new queen, Mordecai foils an assassination attempt against the king, but incurs the wrath of Haman, a favoured royal adviser. Haman retaliates by ordering a pogrom against Persia's Jews. Esther petitions Ahasuerus to save her people, risking her life by appearing before the king uninvited. He agrees and Persia's Jews are saved from destruction. They establish the festival of Purim to celebrate their victory.

The function and purpose of Renaissance marriage furniture is significant to a reading of representations of Esther in this context. *Cassoni* and *spalliere* were generally commissioned on the occasion of wealthy patrician marriages, and were intended to decorate the new couple's home. *Cassoni* originated as chests to contain the bride's trousseau and *spalliere* panels adorned walls.[3] Both were often elaborately painted and gilded to display the largesse and importance of the couple's families.[4] *Cassoni* in particular were explicitly associated with marriage and its critical social function during this period. In an era when public and private, commerce and family, social and business intertwined, marriages created important kinship alliances and commercial loyalties between noble families. Treatises such as Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Famiglia* (1433–1441) stressed the importance of familial loyalty and strongly recommended doing business within the family as much as possible.[5] Marriage also established new families and homes, which Alberti and his contemporaries describe as the locus of civic morality, a curb to wanton bachelors and a remedy for women's inherent failings.[6] Alberti sees women as innately suited to domesticity, being 'almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and therefore more useful when they sit still and keep watch over things.' He goes on: 'It is as though nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them…' The critical importance of marital alliances to patrician society and the social role of the

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[3] The examples discussed here have since been dismantled into individual panels.

[4] Painted decoration replaced the jewels and precious metals often prohibited by sumptuary laws. Witthoff, 1982, p. 51; Pope-Hennessy and Christiansen, 1980, p. 12. See also Olsen, 1992, p. 150; Tinagli, 2000, p. 266.

[5] Alberti repeatedly extols the value of doing business with kinsmen over strangers, asking 'What relative of yours would not rather deal with you than with a stranger? A stranger, indeed, only joins you to gain what he can for himself.' Dealing with family is beneficial in the long term: 'The little or much that the stranger takes away with him will never come back into the possession of your family, nor will it be useful in any way to your grandchildren…' The author also cites ethical reasons: 'A crowd of further reasons rushes to mind by which I might clearly show you that it is better form, more honourable, more practical, more noble, and safer to draw your help from your family, not from outside.' Alberti, 1969, pp. 200–201.

[6] Alberti, 1969, p. 207.

family and home suggest the iconography of imagery commissioned for such occasions might reflect such values.

Esther's iconography on Renaissance marriage furniture is defined by an association with the Virgin that characterises the heroine's entire iconographic history. This relationship was introduced to visual art by two medieval pictorial bibles whose immense popularity ensured their iconographic innovations were of enduring importance. The *Biblia Pauperum* (*Bible of the Poor*) and *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (*Mirror of Human Salvation*) were abridged illustrated Bibles that focussed on the New Testament.[7] Both texts employ typology, a doctrine that interprets episodes from the Old Testament as predictions of events from the life of Christ and his salvation of mankind. Each page of the texts illustrates an event from this history of salvation, accompanied by several specific and pre-determined Old Testament scenes that anticipate it.[8]

In the *Biblia Pauperum*, Esther's plea to Ahasuerus on behalf of her people appears as a prediction of the Virgin's mediation between God and mankind. Esther's coronation and her rank above all the women of Persia is paralleled with Mary's elevation above all others as bride of Christ. [9] In the *Speculum*, Esther's intercession to Ahasuerus on behalf of her people is used as a demonstration of loyalty and a prediction of the unusual *Christ Showing His Wounds to God*.[10] Ahasuerus' extravagant feast also appears, as a forecast of the delights of the afterlife. Here the monarch's authority over the meal prefigures Christ's jurisdiction over heaven.

The typological juxtapositions supplied by the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* and *Biblia Pauperum* were a direct source of iconographic, symbolic and even compositional schemes for medieval mural paintings, stained glass, sculpture and even religious drama.[11] The iconographic precedents established by such texts and followed by medieval artists created enduring trends in Esther's iconography. Particularly evident on Renaissance marriage furniture is the association between the heroine and the Virgin.

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[7] Contrary to its title (used exclusively only from the eighteenth century) the *Biblia Pauperum* was not necessarily designed for the poor. Its Latin text and complex theology suggests it was designed for a learned audience. Clerics may have used it for meditative or educational purposes. See Henry, 1987a, pp. 3,16; Mâle, 1987, pp.180–1.

[8] The *Speculum* uses events from classical mythology and secular history as well as those from the Old Testament.

[9] One block-book *Biblia Pauperum* edition emphasises Esther's purity with subsidiary scenes highlighting Haman's lechery and destruction. See Soltész, 1967.

[10] These scenes are accompanied by *Antipater Shows his Wounds to Caesar* (a display of loyalty described by Josephus) and *The Virgin Shows her Breasts to Christ*.

[11] Works featuring Esther with imagery derived from these texts include stained glass at Chartres (see Mâle, 1983) and tapestries (see Rorimer and Freeman, 1948–49). A fourteenth century tapestry from the Cathedral of Sens (Yonne) treasury Coronation of the Virgin tapestry is a direct copy of a *Biblia Pauperum* page. Mâle, 1983 pp. 224–6.

Esther is deliberately and repeatedly linked to the Virgin on Florentine *cassoni*. Artists use poses and compositions reminiscent of Mary and include local landmarks that make similar associations. An Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso and Marco del Buono Giamberti workshop *Story of Esther* panel depicts three scenes from the story of Esther, including the heroine's marriage to Ahasuerus. The monarchs' nuptials are used as a prefiguration for the union of Christ and the Virgin in the *Biblia Pauperum* and *Ahasuerus Giving Esther a Ring* was occasionally used as a prediction of the *Death of the Virgin*.[12] In the background of this image is the Florentine church of SS Annunziata. Dedicated to the Annunciation, the building was a pre-eminent Florentine symbol of the Virgin that was famous for its miraculous Madonna image. A Jacopo del Sellaio *cassone* panel now in the Louvre draws even more on Marian images to associate the two women, depicting Esther kneeling, with her arms crossed in a pose reminiscent of the Virgin Annunciate. The artist also repeatedly depicts Ahasuerus raising Esther to the rank of queen, a standard forecast of the honour done to the Virgin. Such repeated and specific associations with the Virgin deliberately link Esther to Mary, suggesting that artists intended the Old Testament queen to suggest the Virgin's purity and perfection.[13]

Cristelle Baskins however proposes an alternate reading of Florentine Esther *cassoni* that problematises the association between Esther and the Virgin in this context. For Baskins Esther's Jewish faith and her overt sexuality obstruct any thematic link between the heroine and the Mother of Christ.[14] Elements of the text support such a reading, and the Book's highly secular themes and absence of obvious divine intervention at times incurred the disapproval of Christian commentators.[15] The king selected his new bride from an assembly of virgins who each spent a night with him after a year's beautification in the palace harem. The new queen was the 'young woman which pleaseth the king' (ii,4), and Esther 'was shapely and had a beautiful face' (ii,6). Similarly, Esther's specifically Jewish victory obstructs her alliance with the Virgin as symbol of the church. Her achievement was to save Persia's Jews from slaughter by enemies of other faiths, and the anniversary of her victory became an annual Jewish festival. In this reading both Esther's religious identity and her sexual appeal problematise parallels between her and the Virgin's impeachable purity.

The difficulties with Baskins' analysis stem from her reading of the text and her analysis of two symbols she finds in Esther's iconography: the crown and rag. In an apocryphal Greek addition to the Book of Esther, the humble heroine rails against the

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[12] For example the manuscript in Vienna, Staatsbibliothek cod.1198, Fol 9v. For a reproduction of this folio, see Cornell, 1925.

[13] Baskins, 1993, p. 44.

[14] Baskins, 1993, pp. 38–42.

[15] The Church Fathers paid scant, if generally approving, attention the Book of Esther, which was often rejected by early eastern Christian communities. The text was not uniformly accepted as canonical until the fourth century, and not officially incorporated into the Bible until the Council of Trent in 1546.

extravagance of her new royal attire, declaring that her regal finery is as abhorrent to her as a menstrual cloth. In Andrea del Castagno's contemporary frescoes at the Villa Carducci, Florence, Esther holds a portion of her cloak in her left hand. Baskins reads this cloth not as a garment but as a 'binary sign crown-rag', and suggests this symbol is crucial to power relations, sexuality and fertility within readings of Esther.[16] While the association between the queen's cloak and a menstrual rag is evidently a metaphoric rather than literal one, its distance from the artist's likely intended reading of the garment is symptomatic of this approach to Esther. Baskins' analysis of Esther's sexuality as irreconcilably distancing the heroine from identification with the Virgin is inconsistent with both the text and Renaissance perspectives on it.

In suggesting that Esther's success in influencing the king entirely to her irresistible sexual appeal, Baskins misinterprets the text. Her analysis is based on Esther Chapter vii, verse 7, when Ahasuerus interprets Haman's pleas to the queen's clemency as an attempted seduction:

> As the king came back from the garden of the pavilion to the banquet hall, Haman was prostrate on the couch where Esther was; so the king exclaimed, 'Would he actually violate the queen while I'm in the building?' (vii, 7–8).

While Baskins reads this passage as evidence of the overwhelming sexual appeal that divides Esther and the Virgin, the text makes it clear that the king's response is an error, and one that in no way jeopardises Esther's purity. The previous passage explains that Haman's actions were a desperate plea for aid, as the king had already resolved to destroy the villain:

> [B]ut when the king arose in anger from his wine and went out into the garden of the pavilion, Haman remained behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. For he saw that the king had decided to punish him. (vii,7)

While the Book emphasises Esther's attractiveness and her appeal to the king, it notes her impeccable repute and moral attributes. Vashti is replaced with 'a woman who is better [*tob*] than she' (I,19), *tob* meaning both physical beauty, moral goodness and obedience.[17] Esther 'charmed all who saw her' (ii,15) and 'still obeyed Mordecai just as she had when she was being raised by him' (II,20). The text also emphasises the heroine's humility: when first presented to Ahasuerus as a potential new queen, she refuses all adornment and 'asked for nothing beyond that which Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the women, had advised' (ii,15).

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[16] Baskins, 1993, p. 38.

[17] Moore, 1971, p. 11.

While reading of Esther as overtly sexual may well problematise the queen's typological parallels for the modern reader, its relevance to a fifteenth century audience is neither argued nor proved by Baskins analysis. Moreover, Baskins acknowledges that given the numerous Marian references on *cassoni* and *spalliere,* painters appeared to view Esther more as virtuous Mary than sexualised temptress.[18]

While this deconstruction of Esther typology certainly generates meaning for the modern reader, Baskins make insufficient distinction between contemporary readings and those reasonably attributable to Renaissance viewers. She suggests only that a purely iconographic reading of typological images and texts omits the *reasons* Renaissance writers and artists chose to depict Old Testament scenes.[19] Conclusions such as 'read together, the crown and the 'rag' of Esther's semiotic system allow for conflicts between power and the body within interpretation' bear no relation to Renaissance understandings of Esther. Divorced from sufficient consideration of these works' historical context, Baskins' conclusions on Esther typology shed little light on the analytic vocabulary of the Renaissance artist, viewer or patron.[20] As their view of Esther is critical to our understanding of her representation in fifteenth century art, Baskins' analysis can do little more than add an interesting complexity to the modern viewer's reaction to the Renaissance Esther.

An examination of fifteenth-century ideology regarding female beauty and virtue enables a more accurate reading of Esther's significance to fifteenth-century artists, patrons and viewers. In this context repeated biblical references to her attractiveness would have implied moral qualities rather than sexual appeal. A range of sources reflect the common Renaissance view that physical beauty was a sign of inner virtue, which in women was largely equated with chastity. Poet Lodovico Domenichi suggested that exterior attractiveness was in fact proportionate to moral worth.[21] Physical loveliness was thought to capture the scent of divinity, and in Castiglione's *Courtier* Pietro Bembo went so far as to describe women's beauty as assisting men to understand God.[22] In this context Esther's attractiveness, as described by the text and represented by artists, would have been read by audiences as encoding the heroine's goodness.

An examination of fifteenth-century literature composed for female audiences also suggests representations of a beautiful Esther were intended as positive role models. Fifteenth-century writers on feminine education noted that descriptions and

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[18] Baskins, 1993, pp. 44–45.

[19] Baskins, 1993, p. 51.

[20] Baskins, 1993, p. 51 Baskins has elsewhere examined the ongoing issues surrounding the application of critical theory to historical art, and suggested that both critical theory and historical context advocates acknowledge criticisms and aim for a middle ground Baskins, 1998, pp 20–24 This balance of theory and context does not however appear in her analysis of Esther typology.

[21] Kelso, 1956, pp. 202.

[22] Kelso, 1956, pp. 203.

illustrations of female role models were useful for inspiring good behaviour in girls. Collections of biographies of worthy women were compiled for this purpose, and were considered useful tools for cementing traditional values, protecting virtue and helping their female audience fulfil their conventional place. Dominican cardinal Giovanni Dominici suggested that illustrations of these women were also helpful, advising cheerfully that families:

> [h]ave pictures of saintly children or young virgins in the home…[I]t is desirable to bring up little girls in the contemplation of the eleven thousand Virgins as they discourse, pray and suffer.[23]

Giovanni Michele Bruto's later *Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente* (1555) also recommends visual representations of female role models, describing the marked benefits of such images for the female viewer:

> …[S]he will increase her natural virtues of ornament and grace as well as her generosity and magnanimity, with which nature generously endowed her, thanks to such useful and beautiful lessons, learned from the sight of such illustrious deeds and glorious enterprises of great women famous for their rare virtues, and not from words, which teach very little to people of her age, if they lack examples to imitate.[24]

Esther is universally approved by such authors as a model for a range of virtues, and appears to successfully navigate the divide between bold heroism and the ideal Renaissance woman's humility, submissiveness and chaste domesticity.[25] While Boccaccio excluded prominent biblical heroines including Esther from *De mulieribus claris*, she did feature in a compilation he made of his followers' work. Here Esther embodies many of the feminine virtues championed by *De mulieribus claris*, particularly beauty and propriety of dress. Boccaccio describes a bold but pious heroine whose great and noble deed inspired Persia to respect the Jews.[26] Giovanni Michele Bruto describes 'glorious' Judith and Esther as exemplifying feminine patriotism. Dominican monk Antoninus recommended Esther as an appropriate role

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[23] Dominici, 1927, p. 34.

[24] Ajmar, 2000, pp. 247–8. Whilst somewhat later than the works under discussion, this text demonstrates the enduring popularity of instructional literature and advises governesses to read Petrarch, Boccaccio and others. Bruto intends such authors as inspiration as much as instruction for pupils, and suggests that depictions of heroines are more helpful than texts.

[25] The contradiction between the ideal and historic fact led artists and biographers to twist many women's stories into misogynistic lessons about the dangers of inappropriate conduct. Lucretia and Dido for example suffered this fate. On this issue see Russell and Barnes, 1990; Ajmar, 2000.

[26] Dunn, 1995, p. 371.

model for the daughters of wealthy Florentines.[27] While Petrarch was primarily interested in Ahasuerus' enraptured devotion to Esther's beauty, he commends her passivity and concurs with general literary approval of her moral qualities.[28]

A more extensive biography of Esther that is contemporary to the Florentine panels confirms the heroine's high standing. Vespasiano da Bisticci's *Libro delle lodi e commendazione delle donne* (1480) describes the heroine as 'the very holy Queen Esther' and notes that she 'was chosen to be the wife of the king Ahasuerus for her extraordinary virtue'.[29] He emphasises that despite Ahasuerus' riches, Esther relied only on divine assistance to achieve her aims:

> The riches of her husband were so great that all the pots in his house that he used were of pure gold and abundant of all his riches that could be valued in this life; nonetheless, as has been said, all her hopes were in God. In all her needs she turned to him with fasting, prayers and a tear, knowing there was not any other remedy than this…[30]

Da Bisticci even describes Esther as intentionally setting an example of piety and devotion:

> Many times she threw off her royal clothes and dressed herself in penitential garments and set herself to tears, fasting and prayers, to give example to those [women] of her own times and those in times to come.[31]

Beautiful, meek, known for her humility and yet the saviour of her people, Renaissance commentators describe Esther as a singularly virtuous role model.

Contemporary authors viewed Esther as an appropriate role model for women, and described visual representations of such heroines as useful tools for regulating

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[27] Giovanni M. Bruto (1555), *Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente,* Antwerp, in Ajmar, 2000, p. 371.

[28] Baskins, 1993, p. 41; Dunn, 1995, p. 370.

[29] Bisticci, 1999, p. 22. Translation: the author.

[30] Et era tanta la richeza del marito, che tutti I vasi di casa sua I quali usava erano d'oro purissimo et abodante di tutte le richeze che si possono istimare in quest vita; niente di meno, come è detto, tutta la sua isperanza fu in Dio. In ogni suo | bisogno ricoreva a llui co' diguini, orationi, lagrime, conoscendo non c'essere altro rimedio di questo… Bisticci, 1999, p. 22. Translation: the author. His emphasis on religious devotion is particularly interesting given that the Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible not to mention God and was often criticised in exegetical literature for being overly secular.

[31] Ella si cavò più volte di dosso le veste reali et vestissi d'abito di penitentia et volsesi alle lagrime, digiuni et orationi, ad exemplo di quelle che furono al temp suo et di queglie che saranno pe' tempi a venire. Bisticci, 1999, p. 23.

female behaviour. Representations of Esther intended for a domestic context can therefore be read as containing didactic lessons for women, an assertion supported by analysis of the imagery of Esther panels. Filippino Lippi's Esther displays the type of ideal wifely behaviour described by Francesco Barbaro's *The Earthly Republic* (c.1415). While not necessarily a direct source for Lippi's imagery, the immense popularity of Barbaro's text in fifteenth-century Florence suggests it was an accurate record of contemporary values.[32] First and foremostly Barbaro's model wife is submissive, obedience being 'her master and companion, because nothing [is] more important, nothing greater can be demanded of a wife than this'.[33] He gives a range of examples of submissive women, including a Spartan woman whom exclaims dutifully 'When I was still a girl, I learned to obey the dictates of my parents, and now I realise that it is best to follow the wishes of my husband if I want to be what I ought to be.'[34] Barbaro concludes: 'Therefore let the husband give the orders, and let the wife carry them out with an even temper.'[35] The Book of Esther presents almost identical lessons about female obedience. Ahasuerus deposes Vashti because her disobedience might otherwise set a dangerous example to women.[36] To ensure this message is clear, he then issues a decree that 'all women, regardless of their status, shall show proper respect to their husbands' (i,20) and 'that every man should be master of his own home and say whatever suited him' (i,20).

Lippi's works emphasise the fate of disobedient wives by focussing on the punishment of insubordinate Vashti and her replacement with Esther. His *Swooning of Esther* presents Vashti hastily departing the king's chambers, and a further panel, *Vashti Leaving Susa*, depicts her leaving the city. The only panel in the set without multiple groups of figures, *Vashti Leaving Susa* emphasises the bleak solitude incurred by the disgraced queen. Head downcast, her back to the source of light and implicitly to all hope and cheer, Vashti stands poised to step out of the light and colour of the palace into a deserted and desolate landscape. A scene without obvious iconographic precedent, *Vashti Leaving Susa* serves to emphasise the fate of the insurgent wife.

Esther's modest attire on the Lippi panels likewise echoes Barbaro's direction that 'wives ought to care more to avoid censure than to win applause in their splendid style of dress' as '[e]xcessive indulgence in clothes is a good sign of great vanity.

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[32] Barbaro, 1978, p. 184. cites a number of contemporary letters that praise Barbaro's text and note its circulation through patrician families in leading cities including Florence.

[33] Barbaro, 1978, p. 196.

[34] Barbaro, 1978, p. 196.

[35] Barbaro, 1978, p.193.

[36] The king's advisor Memukan reasons: When all the women hear the rumour about the queen, they will look down on their husbands…So, this same day those ladies of the Persians and Medes who have heard about the queen's conduct shall show themselves obstinate to all the king's officials; and there will be contempt and anger to spare! (i,16–18).

Moreover, experience and authorities have shown that such wives are apt to turn from their own husbands to other lovers.'[37] *Esther at the Palace Gate* portrays the heroine in simple, modest garments without jewellery or decoration, and Lippi's Esther is the only potential new bride for Ahasuerus who parades before him with modestly downcast eyes.[38] It seems clear that the set of six Lippi *cassone* panels were intended as a nuptial lesson, and may even have been originally been part of a pair of chests with imagery aimed at bride and groom respectively. Two of the long panels contain iconographic and compositional parallels which suggest they were designed as a pair bearing complementary lessons for bride and groom about the sanctity of marriage. Each panel depicts three scenes from the story that reference Ahasuerus' symbolic relationship with Christ and Esther's with Mary. They therefore note marriage's recapitulation of the spiritual union between Christ and the Church. The panels also collectively emphasise humility, noting the honour done to Mordecai and the elevation of meek, dutiful Esther above all others.[39]

Fifteenth-century Florentine marriage furniture imagery links Esther inextricably to the Virgin, associating the Persian queen with Mary's purity and virtue. Considered in light of the contemporary esteem for representations of worthy women as a tool to regulate female behaviour, *cassone* and *spalliere* depictions of Esther can be read as didactic lessons for feminine viewers. Dutiful, humble and beautiful, this Esther is a model of wifely submission and virtue.

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[37] Barbaro, 1978, pp. 206–7.

[38] Gitay, 1995, p. 138.

[39] Wind, 1983, p. 41.

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