Colbert Cairns, Emily. *Esther in Early Modern Iberia and the Sephardic Diaspora: Queen of the Conversas*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 189pp.

In this study Colbert Cairns provides us with an interesting and suggestive portrait of the figure of Queen Esther as a heroine of Iberian and American crypto-Jews in whom the values of crypto-Jewish communities are embodied and whose narrative, manifested in artistic and literary adaptations of the Biblical Book of Esther, serves as an allegory for the experience of Iberian and American crypto-Jews. Her close readings of the texts are original and insightful, and she brings together in this volume a range of sources that have not been studied together before. Colbert Cairns paints us a picture of the Ibero-American crypto-Jewish Esther expressed in sources ranging from the Ladino *Ferrara Bible* to the tapestries in the Cathedral of Zaragoza, the *Seo Real*.

In the introduction (1-20) Colbert Cairns sets the stage for Esther, giving an overview of the emergence of crypto-Judaism against the background of the massive conversions of Iberian Jews to Christianity in the wake of the 1391 pogroms and leading up to the 1492 expulsion from Spain and subsequent expulsion from Portugal in 1497. She calls Esther a “patron-saint for crypto-Jews and *conversos*” (1) and describes her as a figure in which “ideals of nationhood, empire, and self-fashioning were projected, inscribed, and reinscribed” (3).

In chapter two, entitled “Esther in Iberia & Constructing a Catholic Nation upon the Judeo-Christian model” (21-60), Colbert Cairns turns to the evidence from Catholic iconography and Biblical drama, focusing on the tapestries hung in Zaragoza’s Palacio de la Seo (1490) and on two *autos* or dramatizations of the Book of Esther (1501). She argues that these sources demonstrate “how the Esther story is presented and performed for the majority Catholic populace” (21). According to her, the tapestries, traditionally displayed during Holy Week, “use the Esther story primarily to promote obedience to the regime of the Catholic Kings [sic]” (25), and together with the *autos* (*Auto del Rey Asuero quando descompuso a Bashti* and *Auto del Rey Asuero quando ahorco a Aman*), show us “how the Esther story is presented and performed for the majority Catholic populace” (21), establishing a baseline for the normative, orthodox interpretation of the book of Esther against which to read the Jewish and crypto-Jewish sources that follow. These representations “focus on the wrongdoings of non-gender compliant women” (19) in order to “craft a new reality that celebrates obedience, the ideal of a strong empire and ruler, and the use of violence and punishment to maintain order” (47).

In chapter three, “A Jewish Heroine in Early Modern Spain” (61), Colbert Cairns turns her sights on the works of two seventeenth-century authors, the iconic Lope de Vega’s *La Hermosa Ester* (1610), and two works by the *converso* author Felipe Godínez, whose *La Reyna Ester* (1613) drew the attention of the Inquisition, but who ‘corrected’ his unorthodox reading of the Esther story in his censor-approved, compliant updated version, *Amán y Mardoqueo* (1628). Colbert Cairns argues that these plays, read in juxtaposition, demonstrate “one of the major contradictions of early modern Iberia; they simultaneously celebrate a Jewish foundational biblical heroine while telling another story about the creation of loyal subjects of an empire that officially excludes the Jews” (62). Colbert Cairns reads Godínez’s *La Reyna Ester* as a crypto-Jewish drama that ‘passes’ for Christian while presenting the protagonist as crypto-Jewish

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heroine, while his *Amán y Mardoqueo* “uses the biblical story of Esther to legitimize the early modern Spanish Empire and show that it was a fundamental part of the divine order” (115).

Chapter four, “Esther in the Portuguese Nation” (119-46) is a study of João Pinto Delgado’s *Poema de la Reyna Ester* (1627). Pinto was a Portuguese Jew who ‘reverted’ to Judaism in Amsterdam, where he published the play. Focusing on Delgado’s ample use of maritime metaphor, Colbert Cairns reads Delgado’s *Poema* as an allegory of the crypto-Jewish experience in which persecuted conversos find *puerto seguro* (safe port) in Amsterdam.

Chapter five, “Sisters in the Law of Moses” (147-168) moves to the American stage and looks at the Inquisitorial testimony of crypto-Jews Isabel and Leonor Carvajal. Colbert Cairns presents the Carvajal women as examples of converso spirituality who “[model] the Law of Moses in juxtaposition with the Law of Christ” (162). In this chapter Colbert Cairns draws on unedited Inquisitorial documents and expands upon earlier studies by exploring the nature of the crypto-Jewish religious practice of the Carvajal women as described in the Inquisition documents. She argues, following the lead of Janet Liebman Jacobs’ work on contemporary crypto-Judaism, that crypto-Jewish practice is largely defined by women’s practices in the home, in an environment where the patriarchal rabbinate has disappeared.

Colbert Cairns real success with this book is in the conception of the project, her selection of primary sources, and her close readings of the sources. The expansion of Barry Walfish’s investigation into the medieval practice and reception of what I like to call *esterismo* in the Iberian Peninsula (focusing primarily on rabbinic sources) works beautifully. Colbert Cairns does a great job of bringing together the officially Christian, converso, crypto-Jewish, and Jewish readings of Esther in the Hispanic and Sephardic worlds. The sources range from tapestries hung in Cathedrals to Christian and Jewish liturgical drama to Inquisition documents and focuses on the representation of and religious practices of women embodied in the various reimaginings of the Biblical Esther.

The author is at her best in the very insightful close readings of the sources. Her suggestion, for example, that Esther in Felipe Godínez’s *La Reyna Ester* “is a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary” (101), or that the model of obedience Godínez’s Esther demonstrates is not “found in marital bliss nor in gender norms, but instead is presented as the appropriate relationship that subjects in an empire should have with their nation and its ruler” (107) go a long way to expand our understanding of the material and especially to help put it in the context of the Spanish Imperial world. Her readings of the trials of the Carvajal sisters are likewise innovative and make real strides in advancing the field of crypto-Jewish studies.

This being said, I came away from this book with a lot of unanswered questions, especially regarding the historical and intellectual context of the close readings. For example, in Chapter two Colbert Cairns asserts that “Medieval Iberian scholars wrote critical editions of [the Esther] story” (55n22), giving a list of such scholars, but no references to studies or primary texts. In Chapter four her original readings of the maritime imagery in João Pinto Delgado’s *Poema de la Reyna Ester* made me wonder about its relation to the use of such imagery in the writings of Christian Iberian poets. In her discussion of the Purim observances of the Carvajal women I wondered about the connection to the cult of Saint Esther practiced by crypto-Jews in the Southwest (Jacobs 62–63; Kunin 146–91; Melammed 144–45; Maroney 40–45).

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Other issues are more technical and might have been caught by closer peer review and proof reading. For example, there are a number of references to the *Ferrara Siddur*, a 1553 Ladino-language Jewish prayer book originally titled *Libro de oracyones* (Lazar and Dilligan) when it is clear that Colbert Cairns is referring to the *Ferrara Bible* (Lazar), the 1553 Castilian translation of the Old Testament meant for the education of conversos seeking to revert to Judaism in Western Europe. The *Ferrara Bible* became an important literary influence on the works of Western Sepharadim, including some of those that appear in Colbert Cairns' study. This kind of oversight might have been caught in peer review, and I see these shortcomings as an editorial issue for Palgrave to consider.

In sum, Colbert Cairns has given us an originally conceived, timely, and insightful study of a novel combination of sources, painting us a vivid picture of the Iberian and American imaginary of Esther, an important cultural icon around which crystallize issues of gender, sovereignty, and religious authority. Her reading of the sources is innovative and thought provoking. The editorial problems do distract from the author's arguments, but I place them at Palgrave's doorstep, as it is the responsibility of editors to select properly qualified peer reviewers who can help the author polish the manuscript and prepare it for publication.

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