

Vashti and the *Golden legend*: A pagan queen turns saint?

Lisa Shugert Bevevino

The University of Minnesota Morris

lbevevin@morris.umn.edu
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4597-009X>

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ABSTRACT

Hagiographic texts establish a narrative template for shame, avoidance of shame, what looks like death wish in courtly literature. Scenes of shame and its avoidance through death are adapted and folded into romance and other genres and affect how characters behave and are described and gendered. This article treats saints' lives as literary texts and identifies the language used for female saints in the Old French and Old Occitan versions of the *Legenda aurea* and uses that codified language to compare the hagiographic text with a vernacular Jewish narrative: the Occitan *Romans de la reina Ester*, written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets by Crescas Caslari in 1327.

This codification gives insight into how widespread such language and description became by the fourteenth century across language and culture barriers.

Both the hagiographic texts and the romance are read as narrative, regardless of their intent for the original audiences. Acknowledging the deep-seated literary tradition of shame in a woman's bodied existence and attempts to avoid that shame through dying, it is argued that both narratives have such substance and language in common that there may be crossover between the readers or writers of Jewish and Christian contemporary texts.

This article first establishes the critical approaches to the lives of the saints and the death wish more generally. Secondly, it shows one pattern of the death wish in the French and Occitan *Golden legend*, that of a desire for death to avoid shame. Thirdly, it presents the language of the death wish for a female character folded into a Jewish text and how the similarities between Christian and Jewish description of such a character could imply an even more widespread sharing of saints' lives than just among a Christian community.

KEYWORDS

Hagiography, medieval culture, narrative, death wish, courtly literature, female, saints, Old French, Occitan, *Legenda aurea*, *Golden legend*, Voragine, medieval Jewish literature, romance, Esther, Bible, Crescas du Caylar, Crescas Caslari, Cresques Caslari, Judeo-Provençal, Vashti, fourteenth century, martyr, death, shame, Christianity, saints' lives, Occitan narrative, French narrative, women in medieval literature.



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Vashti i la *Legenda aurea*: una reina pagana, transformada en santa?

RESUM

Els textos hagiogràfics mostren un patró narratiu ben establert per a les idees de vergonya, d'evitació de vergonya i del que sembla desig de mort, en la literatura cortesana. Escenes de vergonya i la seua evitació via la mort s'adapten i apliquen al romanç i a d'altres gèneres, i afecten com es comporten els personatges, i com aquests són descrits i marcats quant al sexe. Aquest article tracta les vides de sants com a textos literaris; identifica el llenguatge emprat per a les santes en les versions antigues occitana i francesa de la *Legenda aurea*, i empra aquell llenguatge codificat per comparar el text hagiogràfic amb una narració jueua: l'occità *Romans de la reina Ester*, escrit per Crescas Caslari en noves rimades octosil·làbiques, amb alfabet hebreu, en 1327.

Aquesta codificació dóna idea de com d'estesos havien esdevingut aquest llenguatge i aquesta descripció al segle XIV, travessant barreres de llengua i cultura.

Els textos hagiogràfics i la història d'Ester són ací llegits per igual com a narracions, al marge de la intenció d'audiència original. Partint del reconeixement d'una arrelada tradició de vergonya associada a l'existència corporal de la dona, i del tema d'evitar la vergonya gràcies a la mort, s'argumenta a continuació que els dos tipus de narracions tenen tanta substància i tant de llenguatge en comú que pogué haver-hi una hibridació entre lectors o escriptors de textos coetanis jueus i cristians.

Aquest article estableix en primer lloc l'aproximació crítica a les vides de sants i, més generalment, a l'aparició del que sembla desig de mort. Després es mostra un patró d'aquest desig de mort en les versions antigues francesa i occitana de la *Legenda aurea*: el desig de morir per evitar la vergonya. En tercer lloc, veiem el llenguatge d'aquest tòpic en un personatge femení, aplicat a un text jueu, i com la similitud de les descripcions tant jueua com cristiana d'un personatge així podria suposar la difusió de les vides de sants encara més enllà de la comunitat cristiana.

PARAULES CLAU

Hagiografia, cultura medieval, narrativa, desig de mort, literatura cortesana, santes, francès, occità, *Legenda aurea*, Voragine, literatura jueua medieval, noves rimades, Ester, Bíblia, Cresques Caslari, Crescas Caslari, judeoprovençal, Vastí, segle XIV, màrtirs, mort, vergonya, cristianisme, vides de sants, narrativa occitana, narrativa provençal, narrativa francesa, dones en literatura medieval.

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1 Introduction

Hagiographic texts establish a narrative template for the emotional experience of shame and avoidance of shame in courtly literature. These texts might have begun as examples for religious people to follow holy lives, but they are also literary tales that are affected by and affect the culture around them. Themes from hagiographic scenes are adapted and folded into romance and other genres and affect how characters behave and are described and gendered. This article establishes the language used for female saints, read as literary characters, in the *Legenda aurea* and uses that language to provide a comparison with a vernacular Jewish romance, the Occitan *Romans de la reina Ester*, giving insight into how widespread such language and description became by the fourteenth century across language and culture barriers.

The *Legenda aurea*, or *Golden legend*, was a collection of saints’ lives and feast days of the liturgical year, and was intended as a preaching manual (Boureau 1984, 32-41). The *Golden legend* and hagiography in general has had a long tradition of being read by those outside the Church—the Christian laity and non-Christians alike. The text for some was what we would think of as a coffee table book, a sign of luxury; others owned it as a collection of what today we might call short stories (Fleith 1986, 19-20). Thus, the characters appearing in the text should be understood not only as saints revered by the faithful but also as characters seen by contemporary readers. In the Latin text Jacobus de Voragine chose to include only snippets about each saint.¹ The Old French versions contain only the stories that Jean de Vignay had in the Latin text from which he was working (with some of his own additions, such as short prayers at the end of the lives). The Occitan text is pared down even further. The *Golden legend* provides many examples of a female saint experiencing some sort of despair in earthly life because there is no hope to avoid shame or dishonor related to the body in their current circumstances.²

Similarly, a woman features as the primary character facing voluntary death in the *Romans de la reina Ester*, in which the story of Esther in the Hebrew Bible is embellished into a romance, giving Queen Vashti, a minor character in the original story, a voice and a death (Méjean-Thiolier-Notz-Grob ed. 1997, 33). Its author, a Crescas Caslari, adapted the biblical book into Judeo-Provençal³ verse form in 1327 (Silberstein-Miller ed. 1973), enlarging what was originally a twenty-two-verse chapter into two hundred octosyllabic rhyming couplets. The author’s identification is not completely clear.⁴ Only one, incomplete, Judeo-Provençal manuscript exists of *Ester*, though there

1. A further study of this will include a comparison with vernacular, Christian amplifications of the saints’ lives.

2. The amplification of description of female characters is also due to the fact that beauty was such a focal point in the texts, though this is also related to the intended audience (Faral 1962, 77).

3. Judeo-Provençal is Provençal/Occitan language written phonetically in Hebrew characters.

4. “Crescas du Caylar” is the version given by the French editors of this Crescas Caslari. He would be Israel ben Joseph ha-Levi Caslari, according to Leopold Zunz (1865, 504) and the *Jewish encyclopedia* (1901-06, s.v. Caslari). He has also been identified by the *Gran enciclopèdia catalana* (GEC 1969-80, s.v. Cresques de Caslar) with Cresques des Caslar or Cresques de Caslar, a physician apparently working in Avignon but of Catalan origin (Cifuentes 2006, 99), translator of at least a *regimen sanitatis* attributed to Arnau de Vilanova, from its original Catalan version into Hebrew,

is other ample Sephardic literature treating the Book of Esther from the time.⁵ Crescas asserts that his audience was composed mainly of women and children, which perhaps explains his neglect of the male characters (Neubauer - Meyer 1892, 195-197). Vashti is not merely banished in his version of the story, she is burned alive for her disobedience of a man. Much like a martyr, she holds to her ideals even in the face of death. Despite the striking decision taken by Vashti, a saint-like woman in this Occitan text, very little attention has been given to it from the academic community. This story shows one of the main differences between the depiction of men and women in facing shameful situations. A woman could face or even desire death as an avoidance of shame, but a man could not.

This article will first establish the critical approaches to the lives of the saints and shame more generally. Secondly, it will show one pattern of the death wish in the French and Occitan Golden legend as a means of avoiding dishonor which would result in shame. Thirdly, we will see the language of shame for a female character folded into a Jewish text and how the similarities between Christian and Jewish description of such a character could imply an even more widespread sharing of saints' lives than just among a Christian community.

2 Approaches to the *Golden legend*

To begin my study of Vashti and the saints, I establish my parameters here in terms of the manuscripts and editions used, my approach to the texts, cultural context insofar as it is relevant to the texts, and theoretical background.

2.1 *Manuscripts and editions*

The texts that I use include editions of the Latin, Old French and Old Occitan versions of the *Legenda aurea*, but each version has its own problems. The medieval authors omit certain stories and add or change details within a story, and often we can only guess as to whether there were missing pieces from the branch of the manuscript they were using or if it was their own choice to do so. Each text contains a different number of the lives of the saints, and some are missing altogether from the Old French and Old Occitan.

Jacobus de Voragine, a thirteenth-century Dominican (1230-98), compiled the Latin text between 1260 and 1267. His *Legenda aurea* is a collection of saints' lives that he copied from a variety of sources with minimal commentary of his own throughout each life. The text is also known by the title *The history of the Lombards* because that history makes up the contents of the last chapter. Roughly one thousand Latin manuscripts are extant along with hundreds of vernacular incunabula left from the origin of the printing press (Boureau 1984, 19-27 and Fleith 1986, 9). When consulting the Latin *Legenda aurea*, I use the SISMELE edition completed in 2007 (Maggioni ed. 2007). Barbara Fleith explains the content of the text as a collection of lives of the saints, organized according to the dates of the liturgical calendar, interspersed with prayers and other documents relating to other liturgical feasts. She clarifies that Jacobus de Voragine had decided to suppress the longer and more traditional accounts of the *Lives* in favor of *abbreviations*, so as to facilitate the grouping of

in 1327-28 (Cifuentes *ibid.*, García-Ballester ed. 1996, 412-14). Susan Einbinder has also suggested this identification of the author of *Esther* with the said physician-translator, because of the use in *Esther* of medical terms (Einbinder 2005). But given that this name is so very common amongst the Occitan and Catalan fourteenth-century Jewish community, more proof would be welcome for an incontrovertible identification between the narrator and the physician-translator.

5. A complete version of this text exists in Hebrew and will be treated in a future study.

all the lives in one manual for the preaching clergy who had only limited access to hagiographical collections in their parishes (Fleith 1986, 9).

Many of the collections of sermons from the Middle Ages serve as evidence for the use of these lives in sermons and homilies. Laura Gaffuri (2001, 139-45) specifically looks at a variety of collections of sermons to find examples of the saints’ lives as taken from the *Legenda aurea* and demonstrates how much of an authority Jacobus de Voragine became throughout her close textual study. Boureau corroborates this when he quotes Jean de Mailly (1984, 21).⁶ I have also taken into consideration Dunn-Lardeau’s 1997 Old French edition of the text, which follows Batallier’s revision from 1476 from the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal (Fol. H 3718 R’ s.) and La Brit. Libr. (IC 41504). She gives the lexical variants between the editions of Vignay and Batallier. The Vignay manuscript from which she made her edition was B.N. fr. 241, from 1348, the oldest manuscript known, at the base of the stemma of the extant manuscripts (Fleith 1986, 11-12).

The Occitan text is more problematic than the Old French. As with most Occitan texts, there are no complete extant manuscripts of the text, nor do we know many specific details about any of the translators, including when they may have been working. It may be inferred that the purpose of the text was both to educate local preachers and also to serve as a devotional text for individuals—and perhaps also as a symbol of prestige—as the Old French translations were. Of the extant manuscripts, there are four Catalan, three Occitan, and one Occitan fragment (Tausend 1995, 8). These texts date from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries (Tausend 1995, 13-26). Monika Tausend (*ibid.*, 17) uses manuscript B (Kodex Paris, Bibl. Nat., n. acq. Fr 6504) for her edition, along with notes from the other six manuscripts and the fragment, and thus my work here will be based on this manuscript. Georges Brunel offered in 1976 the most detailed suggestion for who might have translated the work: a Languedocian copyist originally from Albi (commented by Tausend 1995, 15).

2.2 *Approaching the texts as literature*

In the earliest extant poetic text in Old French, the *Cantilène de Sainte Eulalie*, Eulalie expresses a preference for death over a loss of honor. Although it is somewhat by chance that this is one of the first texts surviving in Old French, and that this French text is about a Hispanic saint (Quentin 1908, 162-164), it is not out of the ordinary to see a contemplation of death as a preference to pain or shame in life in a French text, especially in a saint’s life. The text reads:

Ell’ent adunet lo suon element
 melz sostendriet les empedementz,
 qu’elle perdesse sa virginitet:
 poros furet morte a grand honestet.

(So she gathered her strength / she would rather suffer chains, / than lose her virginity: / for this she died with great honesty/honor.) (Berger - Brasseur ed. 2004, 63, ll. 8-9).⁷

Because of the great number of saints’ lives and the rich tradition that they have had for nearly two thousand years, it comes as no surprise to the modern reader that a saint would be approaching death in the name of maintaining her faith. However, I look at each text as an individual example

6. For more information about the background of the *Legenda aurea* and its reception as a source for sermons and other exempla, see the work of Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu (2001).

7. Translation here and all others are my own unless otherwise noted.

of a literary character. This approach does not claim that any individual saint's historical existence followed a certain narrative, but rather that the narrative itself is an important key to understanding both the reception of the text as well as the experience of—what we will view in this study—the character. Thus, each individual saint's emotions and desires are as important as that of any other character in an overtly fictional written work even if those emotions and desires are very similar across many examples from the genre.

The contemplations of death are surrounded by shame and honor in the *Golden legend*. As Barbara Fleith points out, compiler Jacobus de Voragine follows the tradition and sources of Dominican hagiographers very closely; however, with the themes, images, and repetition of narrative structure, his *Golden legend* began to be perceived as a unitary work (Fleith-Morenzoni 2001, 42). Alain Boureau (2001, 283) claims that Jacobus de Voragine—and his text—were viewed as having the "strange status of a minor monument" until the 1970s, and thus scholars have only been seriously studying this text and the questions surrounding it for the past thirty or so years. Gathering emotions and desires across the theme of a specific longing for or an openness to death in the *Golden legend* will help us understand Vashti and the saints together.

My study here maintains that the stories of the female saints throughout the *Golden legend* are linked philologically by the theme of a willingness or desire to die and discussions of shame and honor surrounding that willingness. This close study of the saints expressing some sort of desire to die has not yet been done, in part because it is simply assumed that martyrs must die and must be willing to do so.⁸ In order to work with this assumption for both the *Golden legend* and for Vashti's tale, we need to have an understanding of the vocabulary and verbal patterns behind the expressions of this shame and desire.

The saints were not simply suicidal people who found martyrdom a socially and religiously acceptable way to die, nor were the translations of the *Golden legend* meant to be the newest pieces of literature with a large focus on suicide and longing for death.⁹ Rather, the texts present this longing for death as one theme, and a major one at that, which arises from many of the lives of the female saints, and as a theme that needs to be subtly articulated to bring the different manifestations of that longing to light.¹⁰

Throughout the *Golden legend*, dying by martyrdom is shown as one of the most—if not the most—viable way of gaining a high religious status, or honor (Boureau 1984, 38). Women may also remain virgins, and in some rare cases, married women may gain respectable status by leading holy lives. Many of the women express a willingness to die when they learn they will have to be married and lose their virginity to someone who does not share their faith.¹¹ They do not want to be ashamed of their bodies because of giving them to a non-Christian or because of defiling them in any sexual way.

8. Boureau (1984, 207-212) studies the narrative system within the Latin *Legenda aurea*, but I am viewing the reception and not intentionality of the narrative system.

9. Boureau cites Saint Thomas, saying: "Thomas procède à de nombreuses exclusions: les femmes qui ont préféré le suicide au déshonneur ne méritent pas la couronne" ("Thomas defines a number of exclusions: women who preferred suicide to dishonor do not earn the crown") (Boureau 1984, 114).

10. I have chosen to focus only on the lives of the female saints because such a high percentage of the women are presented as having a longing for death, and many of these with discussion of shame and honor. The theme arises among the male saints as well, but the proportion of female saints with an expressed wish for death is almost half—48.5% in the Latin, 45% in the Old French, and 42% in the Old Occitan. In a later study, I plan to examine the language behind the scenes of men expressing a death wish.

11. This follows Augustine's view of rape and suicide in the *City of God*, which rests on the example of Lucretia, who was raped and committed suicide so as not to serve as a bad example to other wives (Augustine 2008, I.19).

2.3 *Historical and cultural background*

The historical and cultural background of these saints informs how these characters were written, and to a certain extent, how they may have been received by contemporary readers even though we are not viewing the narratives as directly reflecting historical society. Saints such as Eulalie whom we met above follow Paul's discussion of life and death in his second letter to the Corinthians in the Greek testament, "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:9-11).¹² Ambrosiaster, a name given to the unknown author or authors of several early Church texts, interprets this passage for the medieval believer in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, defending the tribulations that human beings must suffer as part of their mortal condition by citing passages from both the Jewish and Christian testaments.¹³ Paul encourages his people to be willing to suffer and even to die because, with the promise of resurrection, a Christian should not fear death as the end of his or her existence. Paul himself risked his life by preaching what he did, so the saints are simply emulating the actions of those closest to Christ.¹⁴

The language and social and cultural problems surrounding each death wish accompanied by the feeling of shame or honor in the *Golden legend* in Old French and Old Occitan is nearly codified in its regularity. The saints' view of eternity compelled them to use their lives as a service and example to others. Because their goal was life after death, they did not need to dwell on the hatred of their existence here on earth. The female saints in particular are attributed the most discussion of shame and honor; society controlled so much of their lives, but in their faith, they could claim a sense of honor by asserting their rights over their bodies. The language chosen by the French and Occitan translators emphasizes what death as a goal implies in life and how that goal is portrayed to the medieval reader.

Part of the trope of the martyr's death willingness focuses on the presence of shame and honor within the saint's culture and how that person must act in order to maintain faith and attain sainthood. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that shame and honor with regards to the bodied existence has been problematic for women since the beginning of the Hebrew tradition, in which Eve brings sin onto humanity by eating the forbidden fruit (Bynum 1985, 1-25). From the first written book of the Judeo-Christian tradition, man is shown as avoiding shame by action, and woman is shown as living with it under another's control. This book continues its echoes in the saints' lives as well as in the Romance of Esther.¹⁵

12. Translations of biblical quotations throughout this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

13. Ambrosiaster is the name given to the author of certain commentaries because they had previously been attributed to Ambrose of Milan (fourth century). These commentaries are classified by the Patristics to explain the meanings of biblical texts (Lunn-Rockliffe 2007, 11-32).

14. His comments on this passage are: "What Paul is saying is clear. We have the power to go on living, but we do not object to being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life by which Christ rose from the dead may be granted to this mortal flesh of ours. We are not afraid to die because we have the promise of resurrection. Paul is saying this because he and Timothy were being subjected to death for their sakes. By preaching to the Gentiles, they were stirring up hatred against themselves both from Jews and Gentiles, risking even death" (Bray ed. 2009, 221-222).

15. One of the first statements about woman in the Bible is in Genesis: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25) acknowledging the relationship between the physical state of people and their emotional reaction to themselves. It is, obviously, a negative statement and does not claim that honor exists for Adam and Eve as a contrast to shame, but simply that shame is absent, foreshadowing its imminent arrival in their lives.

Eve's temptation by the serpent immediately follows this statement, in which the serpent claims that the bodily effect of the forbidden fruit will not be death but rather will be a mental enlightenment. The serpent said, "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and

Bynum takes the narrative in Genesis as the origin of the theology of shame and the body for the experience of the Christian woman in the Middle Ages. I view this narrative as foundational for characters in other literature and a necessary piece to acknowledge in the reading of hagiographic and literary texts. The honor in a woman's life centered on food, over which she exerted the most control within the household, and her body, which though under submission to men, was her own to control in terms of immediate needs, such as eating. By combining these two sources of power, she was able to live with honor or die with it (Bynum 1985, 8-9). We will see this in an analysis of saints' lives in which the women refuse to eat or refuse to give their body in marriage to someone they do not desire, preferring death over giving into the control of a man. This acknowledges the unavoidable presence of shame within the body, and thus within life.

Marcia Mount Shoop, a twenty-first century theologian, subscribes to a similar interpretation of the problem of the female body in Christianity. She writes, "Woman as temptress, as unclean, as lacking in moral capacity, as irrational... are just some of the symptoms of how hatred, distrust, and negativity about the body have been particularly heaped onto female bodies" (Mount Shoop 2010, 6-7). She maintains, like Bynum, that this hatred and distrust became a foundation of the Judeo-Christian tradition starting with the first Biblical text and continuing throughout the religion's history.

Mount Shoop also discusses the body without regard to its sex. Both her viewpoints about women being objectified and hated and the body of either a man or woman pertain to the feelings and experiences any person might have. "Feeling is how we intersect with everything else—our mode of encountering all that is, our means of negotiating ourselves through life, and the way we incorporate all that we encounter into our 'selves'" (Mount Shoop 2010, 17). This feeling is expressed by characters in romance and hagiography, especially when they contemplate death, which, though extremely individual, indicates how a character intersected with everything and everyone else in his or her life. This contemplation brings forth what makes a character most joyous and most grieved.

Mount Shoop's work discusses the experience of feelings of grief and suffering and how those have related to life throughout the Christian era:

All embodied existence entails suffering and so shares in the tragic layers of having a human body. Human bodies are not only steeped in the distortions and deformities of sin. ..Human bodies are also ravaged by the wounds of tragedy. Suffering is, indeed, entangled with the wages of sin, but suffering is also a fact of human life that is sometimes addressed best outside the framework of sin, guilt, and forgiveness. Sin carries with it moral judgment for suffering; tragedy focuses less on judgment and more on acknowledgment, grief, and compassion (Mount Shoop 2010, 37).

The examples of the contemplation of death in hagiography and romance generally are found

evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Both Adam and Eve ate the fruit, resulting in new knowledge and awareness of their bodies: "they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings" (Gen. 3:7). God confronts his two human creations about their new actions and proceeds to curse them and the serpent after the woman blames the serpent and the man blames the woman. The woman's curse is focused entirely on her body and its relation to her husband: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). According to the myth, the woman's penance is one of physical pain and also of submission, a loss of control over her self.

The man also receives a curse from God because he chose to listen to the temptation of his wife (Gen. 3:17). However, his curse is external to his body: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread" (Gen. 3:17-19). The man's penance for shame is action that he must perform, and the difficulty of it, in order to survive and to provide for his fellow human beings.

outside of the realm of sin. According to Mount Shoop's definition of tragedy, these characters are focusing on just that: they acknowledge their pain and share it with a public audience in the case of the saints or, generally, a more private one in romance, and the authors display the characters' grief. These saints and characters are seeking compassion; the saints desire it from God, the heroes or lovers from other people in their lives. The suffering that a person feels as a result of internal shame or shame encouraged by a society provokes many of the contemplations of death in literature, both in hagiography and romance.

2.4 *Theoretical Background*

Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, in their recent works on courtly literature, love, and death, view death and love as integral to medieval courtly literature and view both of these as part of the narrative function of a text. Gaunt asserts that, throughout the corpus of courtly literature,¹⁶ there is "one central motif, the association of love and death" and that the characters associating love and death are in fact welcoming it: "A lover welcoming death—like a religious martyr—is a common motif in courtly love literature even when the word *martire* is not used" (Gaunt 2006, 7-8). I take a similar approach to the saints represented in the French and Occitan *Golden legend* where the association of love and death tends to be—but is not always—expressed as love for the deity instead of love for another living human being. Thus, I am not defining the legends as courtly *love* literature, but I am viewing them as courtly literature—literature read not just for religious purposes by people in the Church since, as stated above, that was not their sole purpose. I am viewing the episodes from a literary standpoint, much as Gaunt does in his text.¹⁷ This study does not treat any of the other representations or amplifications of the saints' lives and deaths or other historical versions of anyone's life or death, saints or otherwise.

In Kay's study of the literary representation of the death wish, she argues "that belief is intimately interwoven with death (or rather, Lacan's idea of the 'zone between two deaths') and enjoyment in all of them, but with different effects, the development of which can be traced chronologically and across genres" (Kay 2001, 216). This suggested enjoyment on the part of the saints invites further study in the greater theme of longing for death. The saints *ask* for their torture and death; they seek this in order to avoid betraying their God, because of their desire to express faith in a certain way, or perhaps for other unknown reasons.

Kay continues her argument about the saints' enjoyment and desire for death: "Martyrs have from the outset, then, mentally and spiritually given up the world. Death is both acceptable and welcomed; and they all quickly meet with what should, under 'natural' conditions, put an end to their bodily existence". Thus, death is socially, culturally, and religiously acceptable for the martyrs (Kay 2001, 216).¹⁸ They accept death in order to leave the world they seem to feel they cannot live in, and they can achieve this death in a non-sinful way if someone else puts them to death. For Kay,

16. Jean Frappier (1943, 5) defines courtly literature as literature meant for the aristocracy at court, as opposed to peasants and clergy.

17. "I should also stress that my concern is not with the experience or representation of death in the real world, but rather with the evocation of death as a consequence of being in love in fictional and imaginary accounts of love, thus with the meaning and symbolic value of representations of death in texts about love" (Gaunt 2006, 10).

18. "L'Église attire l'attention du fidèle sur les conditions strictes que doit respecter tout candidat à la palme du martyr: ne pas provoquer le persécuteur, mourir pour la foi, témoigner publiquement". ("The Church draws the attention of the faithful under strict conditions that each candidate of the palm of martyrdom should respect: do not provoke the persecutor, die for faith, witness publicly") (Boureau 1984, 113). As we will see, the first category is not observed by many of the martyrs in the *Legenda aurea*; many of them provoke their persecutor to hasten their death.

the primary question is defining the "zone between two deaths" and not a desire for death itself. For Simon Gaunt (2006, 10), the primary question is: "what is at stake in the ubiquitous association of love with death in medieval courtly literature". In exploring this question he wants to separate the secular and the spiritual by more defined lines than has previously been done.¹⁹ My study and argument are about the language at the moment before death and at the moment of an expressed desire for death and how this is echoed in courtly literature, both Christian and non-Christian.

I categorize the deaths of the women and the acts leading up to their deaths thematically in three ways: 1) wanting to leave society and join God; 2) wanting to die for Christ, and 3) having a desire for an immediate end—possibly due to the fear of losing their virginity or other purity connected to conceptions of shame and honor. Other themes and repetitive structures, such as the cries of martyrs or their last words, are equally worthy of codification, but it is only the third category that will be used as relevant to the Vashti text in this study.²⁰

3 A Desire for an Immediate End to Life to Maintain Honor in the *Golden legend*

Setting aside the historical and religious background as small pieces of context for saints we are viewing as literary characters, we can now turn to the *Golden legend* as our narrative example of literary despair in the possibility for chastity in earthly life. There are many instances throughout the *Golden legend* of a saint demanding immediate termination of her life from her executioner, and one obvious way to interpret the request is—as above—a way to end one's misery or fear. However, Karen Winstead argues that Jacobus did not want his readers to interpret his saints as fearful (Winstead 2005, 204). She also follows Hahn's argument about the saints' relationship to pain:

One of the principal characteristics of saints ... is that they do not feel pain; viewers, on the contrary, confronted with the sight of whips, claws, torches, and the display of wounds and blood cannot help but conceptualize and experience the unfelt, unexperienceable pain of others. The presence of weapons and wounds cues a response of pity and empathy in the viewer (Hahn 2001, 88).

Thus, if the torture these saints endure is painless, then I hesitate to read these requests for a quick execution as moments that let the characters end their physical suffering. I see another motivation behind these deaths: an avoidance of sin, which would lead to shame.

Some examples of characters wanting to die to avoid falling back into sin or falling into sin anew are the wives of the kings persecuting Catherine and Marguerite. Shortly after the queens' conversions to Christianity through the help of Marguerite and Catherine, these queens seek hasty deaths. When the queen in the Marguerite account is being led to her death, she first prays and then commands her executioners to carry out their orders. In the Old French Marguerite tale, the scene is as follows:

19. "Of course, spiritual love is also grounded in the body—Christ was after all made flesh—but courtly literature appropriates and incorporates models of sacrifice and desire associated with religious discourse and practices to produce an alternative ethical space in which salvation and redemption may be sought (albeit hopelessly erroneously, or sinfully) through a passionate attachment to another human being, rather than to God. My hypothesis is that this move may be far-reaching indeed, in that through the ethics of desire, the 'fuzzy edges' between the 'secular' and the spiritual may eventually start to become more defined" (Gaunt 2006, 10).

20. Boureau (1984) has done an extensive study on the tropes and themes throughout the saints' lives in the *Golden legend*.

Et donc se leva d'oroison et dist au decoleur: 'Frere, prens ton glaive et fiers'. Et donc ferit et lui osta le chief a ung coup: et ainsi receut coronne de martyre.

(And then she raised herself from prayer and said to the executioner: 'Brother, strike your sword and fiercely!' And he did so and removed her head with a single stroke, and thus she received the crown of martyr.) (Dunn-Lardeau ed. 1997, 608.)

The Occitan version is almost identical:

E quant ela ausi aquesta vos, levet se de oratio e di al carnacier que-l trenques la testa, ayssi coma avia comandamen. Et adonc lo carnacier levet lo glasi es al primier cop ostet li lo ca. Et en ayssi la gloriosa sancta redet l'arma a Nostre Senhor.

(And when she heard this voice, she raised herself from prayer and told the executioner to chop off her head, just as the voice had commanded. And then the executioner raised his sword and removed her head on the first strike. And in this way, the glorious saint gave back her soul to our Lord.) (Tausend ed. 1995, 210.)

Both representations of the queen tell her executioner to kill her quickly, and both executioners follow the order. There is no explanation given for why the queens want to die in haste, but one possible avenue leading to an answer is the question whether suicide could be a way to avoid sin.²¹ Above, we see avoidance of sin as a reason for a hasty death. I am not suggesting that the historical martyrs should be characterized as suicidal because most of them do nothing by their own physical power to kill themselves. However, as literary characters in the *Golden legend*, these martyrs seem to display a death wish. Perhaps this is why the queens in the Marguerite stories wish to exit life so abruptly.

In the Catherine stories, the queens act similarly. In the Old French, the queen hastens her death:

Et fut celle ferme et admonnestoit les martireurs de faire ce qui leur avoit esté commandee. Et donc l'amenerent les serjans hors de la cité et lui esracherent les mamelles a tenailles de fer et puis, le couperent le chief.

(And she was strong and admonished the martyr-makers to do what had been commanded to them. And thus the men took her out of the city and cut off her breasts with iron clamps, and then they cut off her head.) (Dunn-Lardeau ed. 1997, 1112.)

The Old Occitan version says the same, though her torture is not so harsh in the end:

Et adonc la regina preguet aquels que la devian desca/pitar que tantost ho feesso. Et adonc els li van toltre la testa foras de la cieutat.

(And thus the queen asked them that they cut off her head quickly and they did so. And then they took her head outside of the city.) (Tausend ed. 1995, 393.)

21. For theological background, see Saint Augustine, who discusses the question of suicide in order to avoid sin (*De civitate Dei* I.27). Augustine follows a very rational argument in this chapter about the value of killing oneself just as one has been baptized or forgiven all of one's sins, but then he negates this, saying: "Hoc quia nefas est dicere, nefas est profecto se occidere. Nam si hoc sponte faciendi ulla causa iusta esse posset, procul dubio iustior quam ista non esset. Quia uero nec ista est, ergo nulla est". ("To say this is criminal, it is logical that to kill oneself is unlawful. But if somehow it were possible to make this just, I doubt that one could find one more just than this. But since this is not true, this is not just.") (Walsh ed. 2005, I.28.)

The main difference between these two representations is that the Old French queen is "ferme" (firm, rigid) in her orders while the Occitan queen has no adjective. The adjective "ferme" indicates a strong will on the part of the queen; she asks for her death voluntarily.

An even more overt seeker of death is the Virgin of Antioch in life LX who fights a knight for her right to die as a martyr even though he stepped in to save her from losing her virginity and her life. This life is absent from the Occitan, and, as before, we do not know if this was a scribal choice or whether it was absent from what the scribe had as French or Latin texts from which to work. The opening of the Virgin of Antioch story is similar to the Old French Marguerite: "[Elle] fut tant religieuse que elle ne doubtoit la mort" ("She was so religious that she did not fear death") (Dunn-Lardeau ed. 1997, 443). We are introduced to her as one who does not fear death. However, as the story progresses, she is presented as actively seeking for death.

The Virgin is put into a brothel, and a knight comes to save her; the Virgin thinks he is only coming to save her chastity, but he comes to save her life as well. Her outcry against his attempt to preserve her life depicts her proclivity for death:

Je ne t'ay pas esleu a estre gaige de ma mort, mais je te desiray estre deffendeur de ma chastee... Et se l'on veult avoir le sang, je ne desire nul plege, j'ay bien de quoy paier et contre moy est donnee ceste sentence la quelle est donne pour moy... je morrai hui coupable de ton san ou martire du mien.... Et tu me ostes la mort... Garde, je t'en pri, que tu ne me condennes et ne me oste pas le benefice que tu me as donné.

(I did not choose you to be the wage for my death; I only wanted you to be the defender of my chastity...And if they want to have blood, I desire no pledge, I have enough to pay for it and against me is given this sentence which is given for me...I will either die today guilty of your blood or martyred myself...And you take death from me...Be careful, I beg you, that you do not condemn me and do not take from me the blessing that you gave me.) (Dunn-Lardeau ed. 1997, 446.)

The woman is determined to die to avoid shame. She says in the indicative future, "je morrai hui". She will die on that day, and while she prefers to die a martyr and not as one guilty of his blood, too, she will die regardless. She also asks him not to take away from her the blessing or "benefice" he has given her. "Benefice" was also an income source, sometimes land, for the regular clergy, elevating them to a higher social status. The blessing is left unspecified; Jacobus de Voragine and Jean de Vignay leave the possibilities for multi-layered interpretations open. Thus, it means a variety of possible blessings: first and most obviously, martyrdom (death); secondly, saving her chastity; thirdly, freedom from any sin she could possibly commit. If she dies a martyr with her virginity intact, she will not sin nor be tempted to sin, and thus will go to her God. The language of the death wish here comes in the verb "morir", the more important feature is its tense and affirmative, emphatic nature.

We see how the Virgin of Antioch evades shame by escaping life while she is chaste and guiltless in all respects. She seeks death to retain this purity for eternity. The Virgin of Antioch argues strongly against a man who thought he was saving her so that she could have the right to die.

Petronelle, account LXXVIII in the Old French, is another woman who wanted to preserve her chastity. The story reads:

Le conte Falcus vint a elle et la voulut avoir a femme pour sa beaulté. Au quel elle dist : "Se tu me veux avoir a femme, commande que les vierges viennent a moy qui me tiendront compaignee jusques a ta maison".

(The count Flaccus came to her and wanted to have her as his wife because of her beauty. To which she said: “If you want to have me for a wife, command that the virgins come to me who will keep me company until your house”.) (Dunn-Lardeau ed. 1997, 529.)

Petronelle devised the distraction of the virgins so that she might escape the marriage. During the distraction:

Perronelle se mist en jeunes et en oraisons, et repceut le corps Nostre Seigneur, et se coucha en son lit et trespasa en dieu au tiers jour.

(Petronelle began to fast and pray, and received the body of Our Lord, and lay down in her bed and passed over to God on the third day) (Dunn-Lardeau ed. 1997, 529).

The narrator does not say for certain how she died, but one can speculate that by fasting, she could have caused the end of her own life.

The Occitan version of the same story is very similar:

Et edevenc se que hun comte venc a luy, e per la sua gran beutat demandet la per molher. Et ela respos li : ‘Se tu me voles aver per molher, fay me venir de las virgis que-m meno a ton ostal’... ela mes se en oratio e cumerguet. Et en apres mes se el liech. Et en apres .iij. dias, ela va morir.

(One day a count came to her and asked her to be his wife because of her great beauty. And she answered him: “If you want to have me for a wife, command that the virgins come to me who will keep me company until your house”...She began to pray and fast, and received the body of Our Lord, and lied down in her bed and after three days, she died) (Tausend ed. 1995, 157).

The count is nameless, and the woman does not just have beauty; she has “gran beutat”. The order of actions, too, is different; the prayer comes before the fasting. As in the Old French, the writer does not exclude the possibility of her dying because she refrained from food and drink. The vocabulary in this tale that leads us to view it as a death sought intentionally to avoid shame again centers on the verbs, the verbs representing the actions that could possibly have led to Petronelle’s death—“se mist en jeunes” and “cumerguet”.

We have a rejection of fear in this story in addition to active verbs reflecting the desires of the women in the stories. It is worth noting that the queens in the stories do not receive the same prestige as the primary saints even though they die through martyrdom. Perhaps their deaths are too much about avoiding cowardice and sin. Alternatively, perhaps the reader perceived their method of death (these women with a powerful social title) as being similar to the death of the saints featured in the stories, which would have served to elevate the standing of the saints for the reader.

Both vernacular languages express an equal recognition of the desire for death to avoid shame among the characters. To view these figures set forth by the Church as people to be revered but also to see them as desiring death adds a new level to their characters. As Winstead notes:

Martyrs occupied an ambiguous position in medieval culture...The significance of the martyr, like that of any cultural symbol, was constantly being contested and renegotiated, and in that process different facets of the legends—defiance, suffering, fear—were given emphasis as writers at various times and for various audiences sought to reconcile the exemplary and the potentially subversive elements (Winstead 2005, 220).

Jacobus de Voragine or Jean de Vignay or the Occitan translator were not necessarily highlighting

the death wish as the theme they wanted to emphasize, but this theme remained significant in every story and every assumption made about the martyrs who sought to avoid shame. To read the stories without identifying the assumptions made and what those assumptions imply—that the saints' journeys toward death were more complicated than a simple faith in God—strips them of a very important theme. Indeed, the saints' stories cannot be read as separate from the stories by Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and other writers of courtly literature. The saints, as well as intentionally fictional characters, display a proclivity for death when faced with unacceptable earthly situations.

Within the texts, two primary explanations emerge as to why the women want to die. The first is that martyrdom is a way for them to gain cultural and religious collateral. Men within the text are given a variety of positions to hold in society: bishop, martyr, doctor, evangelist, hermit, abbot, sinner, confessor, and even pope.²² Women in the text (because they would have been limited in society) are primarily limited to being virgins, martyrs, and (repenting) sinners, with some flexibility for becoming a hermit or an abbess, an alternative to death. The martyrdom the women seek elevates them to the highest status they know—union with God—and thus they have cause to strive for that within their cultural and societal framework. The women wanting to die for Christ and leave the societal structure in which they live, even if they are noble, both fit this theory. The second theory is that the women desire death in order to avoid sin and shame, or the destruction of purity through an unwanted marriage. These categories and situations will be similarly displayed in the Vashti romance, as Vashti herself desires death.

This study with respect to desiring death on the part of the female saints opens up a new venue for the study of the saints and their relation to other figures in courtly literature. These saints consistently desired something actively; their characteristic action began because of a named desire, and by successfully acting on it, they proved their sincerity. Keeping the faith of the portrayed characters in mind but not limiting ourselves to the assumptions that too often come with seeing them as faithful will allow us to approach the texts in a fresh way so that we can apply the theory that the saints and martyrs not only faced death but are presented as desiring it. Jacobus de Voragine, Jean de Vignay, and the Occitan translator all maintain this narrative background in their versions of the *Golden legend*. The pattern of the avoidance of shame by death that we have seen provides us with the details needed to apply this pattern as a label to the avoidance of shame by death in the Vashti text.

4 Vashti's Death

Knowing the narrative pattern for women who desire to avoid sin, shame, or dishonor even by death in the *Golden legend*, we can compare them to Vashti as the prominent female character who desires death to avoid shame in the *Romans de la reina Ester* (Méjean-Thiolier - Notz-Grob ed. 1997, 124-157). Written for an audience of women and children, the romance places its focus on Vashti's actions toward shame and honor, which result in her being punished by death, much like a martyr. Little evidence has been found as to the sources of Crescas' amplifications. Neubauer and Meyer found only some evidence of inspiration from the Midrasch or other Hebrew texts, which invites the question of what else could have inspired it if not other secular literature of the time (Neubauer -

22. Boureau (1984, 36-38) offers a succinct breakdown of the social and religious status held by the saints throughout the collection, dividing them into evangelists, sinners, virgins, martyrs, popes, bishops, hermits, abbots, confessors, and doctors, showing the majority of opportunities for social status to be solely for men.

Meyer 1908, 195). However, viewing the treatment of a character within an invented scene enduring shame indicates that the culture, if not the texts extant at the time of composition of the romance, influenced the way in which a woman's experience of shame was written within romance, even when not using the Roman alphabet. Reading a text inspired from the Hebrew Bible for a Jewish audience reinforces the way that silence surrounds the issue of despair in earthly life, emphasizing the lack of the Church's influence on secular literature about the problem. For a man with access to at least two languages, it is possible that the author also had access to literature from the north. Without question, however, this tale remains silent in any judgment on the character's acceptance of death as a means of avoiding shame.

The romance follows Queen Vashti, the wife of King Xerxes (also known as King Assuerus in the *Book of Esther* in the Hebrew Bible). She was queen until she refused to parade in front of her husband and his friends when he drunkenly and lustfully demanded that she do so. Because of her disobedience, Assuerus banished her from his sight forever and found a new queen, Esther. The Biblical narrative does not provide much more detail than that; it only provides that Assuerus asked Vashti to appear before him and his friends with her crown, which some read as "nothing but her crown" (Brown et al. 1990, 628). This reading obviously makes the request much more difficult for a woman who must at once honor and obey her husband. It would be a dishonor to him to share her beauty with other men, but it would be disobedience, and thus also dishonor, to deny him his request.

As seen above in the examples from the *Golden legend*, Christian martyrs could die or choose death in order to avoid dishonor, thus retaining honor. Vashti was not a Christian, so dying by martyrdom as a result of disobeying a man in power was not a way of retaining her own honor, but her status as queen makes this read very similarly to the deaths of the literary saints. Vashti's prestige and manner of adhering to her own moral convictions follows hagiographic narrative conventions. The saints in the fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Old Occitan translations of the *Golden legend* share much in common with the pre-Christian Queen Vashti.²³ When juxtaposing these texts, the question emerges of how does the woman as saint differ from the woman as non-Christian sufferer, if in fact they do. We saw the female saints prefer death to losing their virginity and honor to undesired, often non-Christian, husbands.

This sacrifice of life is one of many themes in the saints' lives, but it is the most important in terms of the comparison with Queen Vashti because it highlights the way in which women could exercise independence or power and honor in a male-dominated society. The Occitan *Romance of Esther* begins with a discussion of self-sacrifice and mortality. King Nebuchadnezzar was in the process of having a statue of himself constructed in order to force everyone, especially the Jewish people, in the kingdom to worship his idol. Crescas provides a bit of fascinating commentary on that:

Aquel peccat fon gran e fort,
car Dieu vol c'on se liur' a mort,
per que n'estem toz en balansa;
mes Dieu nos donet perdonansa.

(This was a grave and strong sin / because God would prefer that people deliver themselves to death.

23. Vashti's story and actions also share much in common with the romance genre, especially in terms of *Partonopeus de Blois* and *Le chevalier au lion*. Yvain's lion's readiness to show his valor and honor also echoes with her actions. The woman, Partonopeus's non-Christian servant, and the lion do not differ greatly. As a devoted servant to a powerful man, whether as a man (in terms of Partonopeus's situation), an animal (in terms of Yvain's) or a woman (in terms of Vashti's situation or that of the saints), the behavior is very similar.

/ This is why we are always unsure of what to do, / but God pardon us.) (ll. 27-30.)²⁴

Crescas highlights the fact that making a statue of oneself and forcing others to worship it creates a certain sort of immortality, which, as a sin, goes against God. Delivering oneself to death is an acceptance of mortality and movement towards God and faith. Crescas adopts the Christian rhetoric of self-sacrifice for one's faith and ideals, much like the female martyr characters, directly addressing the reader and saying that he has added to the biblical story to provide a gloss on the holy story to a reasonable extent:

E non vos o tengas a carc
se mon roman sera plus larc:
ganren mais otra lo test,
conta las glozas des procest
e car es tot cert et verai,
Per qe ieu ren non laisserai.

(Don't think there is too much / even if my romance is longer [than the original] / because in addition to the original / it tells a holy story / and because everything is true and verified, / I will leave no part covered.) (ll. 37-42.)

The Bible does not instruct anyone to give him or herself to death,²⁵ in either the Hebrew or Greek Testaments, but Crescas uncovers that hidden morsel of "truth" for his audience. Vashti, a woman, gives herself to death in the manner of the female martyrs, who try to imitate Christ's self-sacrifice instead of accepting that He died on their behalf. Vashti belongs to a literary culture where following such guidelines is tantamount to following the perceived truth of God's word.

Vashti, like the saints, desires death as an end to an unbearable situation in her mortal existence.²⁶ These female martyrs desire death in order to leave the world they feel they cannot live in, or to avoid performing actions that would be sinful to them. They can achieve this death in a non-sinful way if someone else puts them to death. It is important to recall that shame and honor with regards to corporeal existence has been problematic for women since the beginning of the Judaic tradition, in which Eve brings sin onto humanity by eating the forbidden apple (Bynum 1985, 1-2). The woman's penance for eating this and encouraging Adam to share it is one of physical pain and also of submission, a loss of control over her self. A woman's honor centered on her body, which was arguably the only aspect of her life she could control (Bynum 1985, 8-9). As we saw above, this played out in many of the saints' lives in scenes where the women refuse to eat or refuse to give their body in marriage to someone they do not desire, preferring death in place of giving themselves into the control of a man.

To recap how these characters function, let us briefly revisit what we learned about the texts.

24. All quotes from the Méjean-Thiolier - Notz-Grob edition (1997).

25. The Church also did not explicitly encourage its members to seek death, and even gave "strict conditions that each candidate of the palm of martyrdom should respect: do not provoke the persecutor, do die for faith, do witness publicly". The first category is not observed by many of the martyrs in the *Golden legend*; many of them provoke their persecutor or act transgressively to hasten their death. ("L'Église attire l'attention du fidèle sur les conditions strictes que doit respecter tout candidat à la palme du martyre: ne pas provoquer le persécuteur, mourir pour la foi, témoigner publiquement".) (Boureau 1984, 113.)

26. Kay (2001, 222) describes this mental and emotional outlook that the saints had, saying that: "Martyrs have ... mentally and spiritually given up the world. Death is both acceptable and welcomed; and they all quickly meet with what should, under 'natural' conditions, put an end to their bodily existence".

Saints Catherine and Marguerite present examples of characters wanting to die to avoid falling back into sin or falling into sin anew. Moreover, like Vashti they are the wives of kings who attack those of a persecuted faith. Recall from above that when the queen Marguerite is led to her death, she prays and asks her executioners to carry out their orders.²⁷ The persecuted queens behave similarly in the Catherine story in order to end their existence before greater shame comes upon them.²⁸ Petronelle, another woman from the *Golden legend* who sought to preserve her chastity, specifically spoke of this desire when devising a distraction to escape marriage. The narrator implies that this woman of great beauty died by fasting, thus causing the end of her own life.²⁹

Surpassing female beauty is a key narrative element in these three saints’ lives (among others), as it is similarly in the Vashti poem. The biblical source material regarding Vashti indicates that King Assuerus has been giving a long party to celebrate his reign, and when he became inebriated, he asked his wife to show to his friends that she was the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. In the embellished Occitan version, Vashti, like the saints, is described further and is specifically ascribed great beauty. The king says:

Per caritat,
al mont non a tant bela dona
bon la regina, ni tant bona.

(By the love of God, / in the world there is no woman so beautiful / as the queen, nor one so good)
(ll. 176-8).

He then commands:

Anas de cors
e menans me ses vestidura
Vasti la bela creature.

(Go quickly / and bring to me Vashti, without her clothes, / the beautiful creature) (ll. 184-6).

The Occitan writer makes explicit the lack of clothing instead of letting it be inferred by saying that Vashti should be wearing only her crown.

Vashti, like the characters of the saints in the *Golden legend*, lives in a society where she is obliged to obey a man, but she chooses not to. Despite her stature of submissive wife, she has the personal freedom just as the saints do to obey or not to obey as well as to live or die when faced with a certain

27. “E quant ela ausi aquesta vos, levet se de oratio e di al carnacier que-l trenques la testa, ayssi coma avia comandamen. Et adonc lo carnacier levet lo glasi es al premier cop ostet li lo ca. Et en ayssi la gloriosa sancta redet l’arma a Nostre Senhor”. (‘And when she heard this voice, she raised herself in prayer and told the executioner to chop off her head, just as she had commanded. And then the executioner raised his sword and removed her head on the first strike. And in this way, the glorious saint gave back her soul to our Lord’.) (Tausend ed. 1995, 210.)

28. “Et adonc la regina preguet aquels que la devian desca/pitar que tantost ho feesso. Et adonc els li van tolre la testa foras de la ciutat”. (‘And thus the queen asked them that they cut off her head quickly and they did so. And then they took her head outside of the city’.) (Tausend ed. 1995, 393.)

29. “Et edevenc se que hun comte venc a luy, e per la sua gran beutat demandet la per molher. Et ela respos li: ‘Se tu me voles aver per molher, fay me venir de las virgis que-m meno a ton ostal’ ela mes se en oratio e cumerguet. Et en apres mes se el liech. Et en apres .iij. dias, ela va morir”. (‘One day a count came to her and asked her to be his wife because of her great beauty. And she answered him: “If you want to have me for a wife, command that the virgins come to me who will keep me company until I come to your house” ... She began to pray and fast, and received the body of Our Lord, and lied down in her bed and after three days, she died’.) (Tausend ed. 1995, 157.)

reality or loss of honor. Her response is:

Per que li digas tot cort
que en aiso non meta ponha;
trop me seria gran vergonha

(You go tell him right now / that he should not ask for that. / It would be too great a shame for me)
(ll. 212-4).³⁰

She adds further: "Ieu en cort non venrai nuza" ('I will not enter court naked') (l. 228). These are Vashti's words in her own voice, much as the saints speak to their persecutors in their own voices. Unlike Eve, who added to Adam's shame by performing a sinful act, Vashti wanted to protect both her honor and her husband's, knowing that the effect would be shameful for him as well:

Ben par qe trop aja begut,
qe en aiso en sia vengut.
mal sembla mon senher avi
qe era tant bon e tant savi,
que begra de vin per un bou
e el non balanzera un ou.

(It seems that he has drunk too much / in order to have arrived at such an idea. / He barely resembles my grandfather [Nebuchadnezzar], / who was so good and wise, / who could drink as much wine as a steer / without wavering a bit) (ll. 215-20).

In the Bible, Vashti is merely described, not personified. She is not shown to attempt to save herself or her husband from shame, though she does lose her life for her disobedience. This woman is not only responsible for her own honor but also that of her husband, infusing her character with wisdom. That she was not able to protect either of them from shame speaks to a lack of power, again unlike Eve. Her wise actions, obedient not to her husband's demands but to greater values of honor, build her as a strong, noble character for the reader, holding onto her clothes but throwing off the cloak of shame surrounding the tradition of the female experience in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The king, of course, cannot accept such disobedience and consults with his advisers as to the proper action, which is to put her in a swamp and leave her there until she drowns. The king's advisers suggested that perhaps the king should wait a bit to make such a decision and that he should consult with others (ll. 264-75). The new set of advisers decides that in order to assert the power of husbands over wives, Vashti should indeed be killed, and that she should be killed by fire, much like the punishment of the suicide's corpses. Often in the saints' lives, we see attempts on a person's life in a variety of forms until that person dies. Famous examples include Catherine, who was first put on the wheel, but after its inefficacy, she was beheaded (Maggioni ed. 2007, CLXXII). Barbara was another example of this; when she did not die after torture, the men who tried to burn her found their torches extinguished, and eventually they beheaded her to be certain of success (Williams 1975, 162). Here, the persecutors only try fire, but the discussion and deliberation of traditional methods of killing saints is present.

In this story, there is no "hidden message" that the issues between saint and persecutor are of

30. In the Apocryphal commentary, there is suggestion that she has leprosy and is hiding that, not hiding her body. However, this is still shame for her, and nudity would expose that shame. (Méjean-Thiolier - Notz-Grob ed. 1997, 139).

power between a man and a woman. As in the biblical narrative, the problem is *overtly* one of male control over a woman, and Crescas gives voice to the king and his advisors who worry that Vashti’s disobedience would teach other women that they could be independent if she were not executed as an example to them. He even uses the phrase “portar las braias” (‘to wear the pants’) (l. 310) when talking about what this would teach women because the women would feel that they could be powerful within their households. Thus, they burn her. The next day, the king does not understand what happened to her because he had forgotten what he had done in his drunkenness. He recovers quickly, comparing the loss of a woman to the feeling when one hits one’s funny bone:

mes qe aital es dol de molher
cant cel de copde c’om se fier
qe la dolor passa tantost.

(But such is the pain of [losing] a woman / when one hits one’s elbow / the pain passes just as quickly) (ll. 359-361).

All of this is added to the Occitan version by Crescas. Crescas, a Jewish man, thus created a new story from an old one, retold using Christian literary trends from hagiography. Both Vashti and the female saints must follow their inner morals in order to maintain any semblance of power and honor against the men in their lives and that in a culture where there is an abundance of tales of female saints, Vashti’s author necessarily rewrites her like a literary saint and does not judge her with an authorial stance for preferring death to life.³¹ Vashti is under the authority of a man, the king, and is asked to do something with her body that would bring her shame. She refuses to obey in order to maintain honor and independence, and this choice brings an end to her life at someone else’s hands. This does not go quite far enough to actually classify her as a literary saint (she is a pagan character from a Jewish story, after all), but it certainly follows a similar narrative pattern established by the hagiographic tradition. Crescas takes Vashti’s story and rewrites it according to the same models and patterns established in the popular saints’ lives, reflecting the influence of the hagiographic tradition on medieval literature.

5 Conclusions

This later medieval piece of Occitan literature, the *Romans de la reina Ester*, provides a rendition of a Christian martyr approaching her death. The romance offers insight to the portrayal of gender roles, personal agency, and the role of shame and honor. To welcome death as a way to avoid dishonor became established as a way for a devout female Christian character in hagiographic literature to act under early persecution, and here it is established as a way to act in order to salvage one’s own honor or protect another’s. Like the saints, Vashti, a female character, may access steps toward death much more easily than the male characters who lead her to her death. She may lose hope that she could avoid shame in earthly life. Vashti goes to her death in defiance and disobedience of her husband but maintaining her honor and obedience to her values. The author does not judge her loss of hope for an alternative action but rather judges her husband’s absurdly rash behavior. By choosing a woman to defy orders even unto death, Crescas du Caylar reflects the tradition of holy women in the past and shows such action as acceptable. This hints at intertextuality

31. This is true in the fragment of the Judeo-Provençal version, but a further study of a comparison with the complete text, which survives in Hebrew could prove to add further commentary from the author.

between Jewish and Christian texts and further emphasizes the availability of death as an escape from pain without external judgment for literary characters.

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