

# Cinderella and Esther

Dr. Shaina Trapedo will analyze beauty, truth, and happy endings

By [JOANNE PALMER](#)

February 10, 2021, 5:56 pm



Dr. Shaina Trapedo

Think about the story of Cinderella.

That’s how Dr. Shaina Trapedo started her discussion of Esther with her literature class at Stern College — a discussion that eventually became “Esther Ever After — A Life and Legacy in Full Color,” which she’ll offer on Zoom on Sunday evening. (See below.)

“I like to start with something that’s familiar to my students,” she said. “Most of the versions of the Cinderella narrative they’re familiar with is the Disney version. Or maybe they’ve seen the live-action version, or the Selena Gomez one, which is a little more feminist.

“But they don’t know anything about the earlier stories. They’re much darker; you wouldn’t even recognize them. There’s the Grimm Brothers; there’s a 17th-century version by Madame d’Aulnoy, there are versions with the stepsisters chopping off their toes and with birds pecking out their eyes.”

No matter how these stories diverge from each other in mood or tone, they provide similar messages to girls. “They are terrible messages,” Dr. Trapedo said. “If you want to change your circumstances, if you want to improve your life, you can be good, you can be kind, but without the right dress and a makeover you can’t achieve success.



Esther swoons before Ahasuerus, as envisioned by Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi in the 17th century.

“These are widely circulated stories” — the later, lighter versions, that is. “America loves Cinderella stories and the idea of rags to riches.

“So one of my students said, ‘Isn’t Esther a Cinderella story?’” Dr. Trapedo said. “‘You have the right elements. She wears the right dress, she goes into society, she becomes a queen.’ And the other students say yes, but we don’t want to accept that idea. So they break it down.”

What the students figured out, Dr. Trapedo said, is that “really Esther’s story is the anti-Cinderella story.

“It’s a dilemma for her, in that she’s caught in two different systems of obligation and divided loyalty. It’s complex, but ultimately the positive elements in the Cinderella story don’t line up with the positive elements in the Esther story.

“In the Esther story, there is a young woman who is beautiful, but the goal of beauty is not for selfish personal advancement. In the Jewish tradition, which this narrative models, every privilege that you have, including beauty — which I argue is a privilege — or intelligence has to be used in the service of others.



Queen Elizabeth is carried on a litter on a royal progression. The immensely powerful, childless queen, who lived from 1533 to 1603, often was compared to Esther.

“In the Cinderella narrative, the only one who benefits from her beauty is Cinderella herself. Not even her own family benefits from it.

“What I am trying to look at specifically is what kind of model does the Esther story provide in the literary tradition.”

This matters, Dr. Trapedo said, because “human beings love stories.” That’s an intuitive truth that just about all of us

— both the storytellers and the readers and the listeners among us, which is just about every single one of us — know. It’s also a truth that science has begun to prove. “Neuroscientists have found that oxytocin is produced in the brain when we hear stories,” she continued. “They took blood levels before and after people have heard character-driven stories.” It’s a hormone that’s associated with birth, with breastfeeding, with trust, with feelings of safety, and with the desire and ability to work compatibly with others.

“That proves what English professors and others have been saying all along,” Dr. Trapedo said. “That the most powerful way to move people, and to bring them to social activism and to make positive social change possible, is through stories. The Chazal knew that, and so did Martin Luther King. When we read the stories of our fathers, we are given paths to action. As a writer, researcher, and scholar, I am fascinated by what happens when reading or hearing a story and how that is translated into action and social engagement — it is a big step from seeing a movie to volunteering in a soup kitchen or launching a nonprofit.”

Getting back to stories, Dr. Trapedo plans to talk about some of the versions of the Esther story and what they say about the time and place that produced them.



Stories about Queen Esther contests.

During the Renaissance, Esther is a character in biblical satire, which was a popular genre at a time when everyone knew biblical stories; then, as now, there was much to satirize. “The Esther story mapped perfectly onto the story of Henry VIII, depending on the writer’s objective,” she said. Vashti could be Catherine of Aragon, Henry’s first wife, the loyal Catholic, replaced by Esther as Anne Boleyn. (That one’s less intuitive, all these centuries later.) “The way people read their contemporary politics, they didn’t see any gap, any difference, in what happened in the Bible and what was happening in the world right now,” Dr. Trapedo said.

The few named women in the Bible have become symbols for a range of beliefs and behaviors, attacked or defended or wielded as weapons. In response to the extraordinarily named 1615 pamphlet “The arraignment of lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women” by Joseph Swetnam — according to everyone’s best friend, Wikipedia, Swetnam is “best known for a misogynistic pamphlet and an early English fencing treatise” — the pseudonymous Esther Sovernam (“Sower” — think “sour” — was the opposite of “Swet” — think “sweet”), wrote “Ester Hath Hang’d Haman.” In that pamphlet — the social media of its day — Esther Sovernam — a woman — defended women through the voice of Queen Esther.

Queen Elizabeth often was compared to Judith, Deborah, and Esther; she was warlike (remember that the parts of the Book of Esther that most of us read through quickly involve a great deal of bloodshed) and dispensed justice, and like them she was childless, or at least never mentioned as a mother.

After talking about other appearances Esther made through the centuries in European literature and Israeli art, Dr. Trapedo will arrive at the early 20th century, where the Shushanite queen gave her name to beauty pageants.

“In the 1920s, at the same time as the rise of the Miss America contests, there were parallel contests within immigrant Jewish communities, marketed as Queen Esther contests,” she said. “In 1933, a contest was held at Madison Square Garden, with 10,000 people in attendance, as a girl was crowned the prettiest Jewess in American.

“It wasn’t just in New York. It was a charged time for Jewish women in America.”

The contest, Dr. Trapedo said, “was an adaptation, a cultural appropriation. It reminds me of kosher sushi. We see something that has value, and we take it and make it our own. Sushi, but no crab and no shellfish.” American, with a twist; and sushi only became American when Americans took it from the Japanese, with a twist.





**Modern "Queen Esthers"**—What is a Purim celebration conducted along pretentious lines without the "crowning of a modern Queen Esther"? This distinction, properly coveted by a host of pretty aspirants, was awarded this year in Chicago and New York to unusually attractive representatives of American Jewish young womanhood. Leona Richter (right) was selected by the judges as the fairest among 500 contestants at the All-Youth Purim Carnival (Adloyada) held at the Aragon Ball Room, Wednesday night, March 15, and was acclaimed by 3,500 who were present. She is 18 years old and lives at 2701 W. 23rd place. Miss Katherine Spector (above) was picked as "the prettiest Jewish girl in America" among 300 contestants at the annual Purim Festival of the Jewish National Workers' Alliance, held at Madison Square Garden, New York. D. W. Griffith, noted veteran movie director, was one of the judges.

One of the judges in this contest, according to the caption, was D. W. Griffith, the director of the early — and virulently racist — film "The Birth of a Nation."

Beauty contests were double-edged, Dr. Trapedo said; they valued women for the wrong reasons, but they valued them nonetheless. "And if it was being done in American, then why not do it in the Jewish community? It also was producing young, vibrant, beautiful women, who were representative of what the Jewish community had to offer."

Was Esther beautiful? "Some rabbinic commentaries say that she was," Dr. Trapedo said. "Other say that she had a green complexion — her Hebrew name was Hadassah, which means myrtle. And she was on the shorter side. The way that she is painted for us changes. The story changes. The one thing that does not change is that no matter how you paint her, she was heroic.

"She was in a position of power, and she uses it for the sake of others, not for herself. That is Esther's aesthetic. You use whatever aspects of yourself that you have — aspects that you did not determine, circumstances that you did not choose, your affiliation or your time or your place or your physical appearance. You use whatever you have — beauty, intelligence, writing skills."

Writing skills? Yes, because it's all about stories.

At the end of the Book of Esther, the queen writes the story. "I think it's really about a young woman learning how to write," Dr. Trapedo said. "She recognizes the imperative of writing a story about a woman. She was not egocentric, but she was a role model who put forward the idea of using your abilities in the service of others." And if that service is telling the world the story of your people, then you should tell that story.

---

**Who:** Dr. Shaina Trapedo

**What:** Will give the Sara Lamm Dratch Memorial Lecture, "Esther Ever After: A Life and Legacy in Full Color"

**When:** On Sunday, February 14, at 8 p.m.

**For whom:** The Jewish Center of Teaneck