Religious conversion in early modern English drama
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Introduction

> Beloved, you are *Actors* upon the same Stage too: the uttermost parts
> of the Earth are your *Scene*: act over the *Acts* of the *Apostles*: bee you a
> light to the *Gentiles*, that sit in darknesse.[1]

In this excerpt from his 1622 sermon on the Acts of the Apostles 1:8, John Donne likens the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantations, his audience, to the proselytizing apostles of Christ. The term "acts" refers to the deeds performed by the apostles that incited people to embrace Christianity, including the delivery of sermons in native languages, miraculous healings and exorcisms. At the same time, Donne uses the verb "to act" and its derivates in their theatrical meaning of pretending or play-acting. Although to a modern audience the missionary acts of apostles and the performances of actors seem unrelated and could even be taken as contradictory, the Latin root of the verb "to act," *agere,* meaning, among other things, to "incite," "accomplish," "stage" and "perform," indicates their sustained common ground. This correspondence is further illuminated when we realize that fourteenth and fifteenth- century religious drama often featured biblical conversions and scenes serving as a moral example for audiences, who were invited to follow in the footsteps of stage converts. However, these late medieval stage conversions entailed a spiritual reformation, a rejection of sin, rather than the conversion from one religion to another which Donne must have had in mind when he preached to his countrymen who, like the apostles, were about to proselytize among the infidels in the far corners of the world. In other words, Donne's use of stage imagery suggests a late medieval understanding of the relation between conversion and the theatre. By the time Donne delivered his sermon, this relation had altered considerably. Although the theme of conversion as a change of religious identity had become popular on the stage, the aim of playwrights was by no means to encourage spectators to convert. Indeed, in contrast with Donne's desire that the colonists should rehearse and act out the apostles' acts of evangelism on the stage of the world, dramatists took pains to avoid depicting the full transformation of religious identity that is part of conversion. This was first and foremost because conversion constituted a problem.

      This thesis explores the topic of religious conversion as represented on the early modern English stage. Its main contention is that despite the great and

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[1] John Donne, *A sermon vpon the viii. verse of the I. chapter of the Acts of the Apostles Preach'd to the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation, 130* (1622) A4v.

abiding interest of playwrights in conversion, and despite the importance of religious change and transformation on the stage (implicit, for instance, in play-acting itself and the performing of spiritual regeneration and moral degeneration), early modern playwrights did not conceive of conversion as a genuine, fundamental, or radical transformation of religious identity, that is to say, as an utter erasure of one's former Christian, Jewish, Muslim or pagan identity and a full adoption of a new faith.[2] To acknowledge that this was a genuine possibility would be to recognize that one's religious identity, far from being an inalienable part of the self, was in fact exchangeable. Dramatists appear to have been unwilling to embrace this possibility. Instead, they portrayed religious conversion in such ways as to confirm that religious identity is fixed, impermeable and encoded in one's very being.

This study is informed by early modern perceptions of conversion and the relation between conversion and the early modern theatre. It shows how and why conversion enjoyed sustained popularity with theatre audiences throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; how the meaning of conversion changed from an unambiguously positive and inspiring event to an act that was looked upon with suspicion; it explains the fundamental differences between these understandings of conversion and what they tell us about early modern thinking about religion; it describes in what respects the idea of genuine and radical transformation of religious identity was considered so disturbing and reveals how this collective anxiety took shape on the stage; how dramatists dealt with their need to celebrate embraces of Christianity on the one hand, and, on the other, their need to reassure audiences that religious identity is impervious to the disquieting effects of change; it argues why the "old," positive meaning of conversion was still deployed by playwrights and how this manifested itself on the stage in relation to its "new" variant; finally, it clarifies what the stage reveals to us about the early modern experience of conversion and its treatment of converts.

Spiritual and Interfaith Conversion

To clarify the above points, I make a distinction between spiritual and interfaith conversion. The term "spiritual conversion" is employed to refer to an intensification of religious devotion, for instance by entering a monastery, a turn of

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[2] I use the words "faith" and "religion" interchangeably. The term "religious identity" I use in reference to a person's social, cultural and political allegiance to a collective religion. The word "self" is first and foremost employed in opposition to the concept of the religious "other" and less as an idea that implies introspection or reflection on one's subjectivity.

the soul towards God, or the repentant rejection of sin in favour of the pursuit of a life of godliness, that does not necessarily and explicitly involve the embrace or denial of an organized or institutionalized faith. I use the term "interfaith conversion" in the sense of the exchange of one denominational identity for another. Here, "denominational" refers both to confessions within a specific church, like Protestantism and Catholicism as forms of Christianity, and broader differences of religion, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and paganism. The distinction between Christian confessions on the one hand and Christianity and non-Christian faiths on the other may seem obvious to us, but, as we shall see, there is no fundamental difference between those categories in the early modern theatrical imagination. By far, most interfaith conversion plays revolve around conversions between Christianity and a single non-Christian church; only a small number feature Protestant-Catholic conversion.

Crucial to my approach to the two forms of conversion is that the one does not exclude the other. Conversions that are spiritual in the sense that they do not explicitly refer to a confession can sometimes be construed in denominational terms. Converts asserting that their spiritual regeneration is solely the will and work of God, for instance, are more likely to have embraced a Protestant denomination than Catholicism. More fundamentally, given that religious conversion is necessarily a personal experience, interfaith conversions are always modelled on the blueprint of spiritual conversion. The template of spiritual conversion verifies its denominational content. After all, without the profound personal conviction that defines spiritual conversion, the adoption of a particular religion can only be construed as opportunistic and disingenuous. Nevertheless, in most early modern plays, the question of whether a conversion is *predominantly* of an interfaith or spiritual nature is relatively easy to determine.

This specifically dual definition does not appear in scholarship on conversion. In his seminal study on the psychology of religion, first published in 1902, William James largely focuses on psychological experiences of moments of spiritual conversion and pays little attention to conversion as a change of religious identity.[3] Arthur Darby Nock's important investigation into conversion in classical antiquity, too, concentrates on spiritual conversion.[4] He draws a distinction between on the one hand the idea of conversion as a "great change" and a "reorientation of the soul," that is typically promoted within the prophetic

[3] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 137-184.
[4] Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Boston and London: University Press of America, 1988 [1933]).

religions of Judaism and Christianity, and, on the other, the gradual "acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes" that we find in classical forms of paganism.[5] Lewis Rambo lists "intensification" of faith and "institutional transition" (or "denominational switching") among five "types" of conversion, which largely correspond with my definitions of spiritual and interfaith conversion respectively.[6] Michael Questier distinguishes between "the way in which sinful man is made regenerate by grace" and conversion "between ecclesiastical institutions, which takes on a political character."[7] This description overlaps with mine, but does not suggest that switches between "ecclesiastical institutions" were understood as exchanges of religious identity, which is crucial to my interpretation. This is also true of Molly Murray's division between "a change of church and [...] a change of soul," that, in her view, accords with the opposition between "the ritual and the spiritual."[8]

The division between spiritual and interfaith conversion enables me to explore how on the early modern stage, the understanding of religion as a personal and spiritual relationship with God increasingly gave way to the conception of faith as a political factor and a social and cultural identity that was inextricably linked with other constituents of identity, such as gender and race. The religious pluralism of early modern England created a profound sense of uncertainty about the solidity and stability of religion. Competition between different (emerging) factions led to the politicization of religion.[9] Religion thus increasingly served as a tool to fashion national selves and barbarous others. In addition, interfaith conversion led to a disturbing sense that religious identity could be exchanged, a development that was fuelled by ideological framings of conversions as inauthentic and opportunistic.

Religion and Conversion in Early Modern England

In their article "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies," Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti argue that scholars of history and literature, New

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[5] Nock, *Conversion*, 7.

[6] Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 12-14.

[7] Michael Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 3-4.

[8] Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 7.

[9] The politicization of religion, was, of course, not a new phenomenon. What is important is that it was *felt* as such by early moderns themselves.

Historicists in particular, have often failed to correctly recognize the meaning of early modern religion; rather than treating religious issues as matters of faith, they "quickly translated them into social, economic, and political language."[10] Focusing on studies of the early modern English culture of theatre, Jackson and Marotti add that some scholars also mistakenly adhere to the "the secularization thesis," which they describe as

> the contention that there was, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an accelerating process of secularization taking place in English culture in which issues and conflicts traditionally expressed in a religious vocabulary also came to be formulated in other language(s).[11]

Although Jackson and Marotti present examples of critical works that convincingly challenge this hypothesis, and although I agree with them that many of the approaches they contest are informed by a simplistic view of religion as a "form of 'false consciousness,' " and by a "relentless 'presentism,'" this thesis will demonstrate that early moderns *themselves* began to use languages of nationality, race, gender, economy and politics to characterize religion.[12] Indeed, the major change in the theatrical portrayal of faith that this thesis will uncover is that the emphasis on spiritual conversion gave way to a passionate interest in interfaith conversion. Spiritual conversion implies what Jackson and Marotti describe as "a deep psychological and emotional experience, a core moral commitment, a personally and socially crucial way of transvaluing human experience and desire, a reality both within and beyond the phenomenal world."[13] According to the two scholars, this is what many scholars fail to recognize about early modern religion in general. Interfaith conversion, however, accords with the confessionalization of religion, a process in which faith became politicized and increasingly tied up with formations of group identity.[14] As such, early modern dramatic approaches to

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[10] Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies," *Criticism* 46.1 (2004): 167-90, 167.

[11] Jackson and Marotti, "The Turn to Religion," 172.

[12] Jackson and Marotti, "The Turn to Religion," 168.

[13] Jackson and Marotti, "The Turn to Religion," 169.

[14] The confessionalization thesis was first put forward by Ernst Walter Zeeden and elaborated on by Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard, who used it to describe a process in which, after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, Catholic and Protestant confessions in Germany began to define themselves against each other with increasing vigour. See Ernst Walter Zeeden, "Grundlagen und Wege der Konfessionsbildung im Zeitalter der Glaubenskämpfe," *Historische*

interfaith conversion are in fact closer to many New Historicist treatments of religion as politics than Jackson and Marotti seem to recognize.

The unprecedented confessionalization of religion in early modern England is rooted in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century developments that increased religious pluralism. The Protestant Reformation involved a dispute over the way in which Christianity ought to be practised and understood. This disagreement increasingly manifested itself in polarized socio-political terms, as a battle between Catholics and Protestants, and between conformists and dissenters, to name only the most obvious antagonists. In England, this battle was accentuated by the 30 years of instability in religious national identity, starting with Henry VIII's break with Rome, which was followed by a brief national return to Catholicism and yet another rejection of Papal authority under Elizabeth I. In addition to inter-Christian segregation along politico-religious lines, there was a growing number of English encounters with foreign Jews, Muslims and pagans, in London as well as abroad. This was a result of increasing commerce in Europe and of voyages of trade and discovery across the globe.

Not surprisingly, early modern religious pluralization implied an unprecedented rise in the number of doctrines and forms of piety it was possible to embrace or forswear. Firstly, interfaith conversion within Christianity became possiblity. As Michael Questier notes, it is difficult to provide exact numbers on how many people actually converted, but evidence suggests that "[d]uring this time, within the apparently rigid constraints of doctrinal formulation and political loyalism, flux in religion was the norm rather than the exception in religious experience, actually expected rather than regarded with astonishment."[15] Of course, not all cases of flux in religion can be understood as straightforward exchanges of denominational identity, but Questier convincingly demonstrates that a relatively large number did consist of conversions. Secondly, the Ottoman

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Zeitschrift 185 (1958): 249–299, Wolfgang Reinhard, "Gegenreformation als Modernisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977): 226–251 and Heinz Schilling, *Konfessionskonflikt und Staatsbildung: Eine Fallstudie über das Verhältnis von religiösem und sozialem Wandel in der Frühneuzeit am Beispiel der Grafschaft Lippe* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1981). For a brief overview of the confessionalization thesis as put forward by Reinhard and Schilling, see Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) 13. Krstić shows how this thesis can be applied to early modern Islam. I use the term, too, in a sense broader than Reinhard and Schilling's thesis encompasses and which applies specifically to the development of Christian confessions as religious identities.
[15] Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion,* 8 n17, 206.

Empire, the largest Islamic territory of early modern Europe, attracted impoverished Christians, often pirates, who managed to improve their worldly prospects significantly by striking deals with the Ottomans and "turning Turk." This was because the make-up of the Ottoman society allowed for social, political and economic mobility to a much greater extent than Christian societies at the time.[16] Renegades were able to join the army and even occupy important positions in administration.[17] At the same time, Islamic military forces managed to capture Christians in their European homelands, many of whom were reported to have converted to Islam under Ottoman pressure.[18] Finally, the European colonial expansion into Africa, Asia and the New World created an industry for the training of missionaries, with a central focus on methods of conversion. For Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, the sixteenth-century chronicler of the Spanish explorations in central and Latin America, proselytizing was the first objective that sprang to mind when he realised that indigenous peoples were, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it, "a tabula rasa ready to take the imprint of European civilization."[19] Martyr notes:

> for lyke as rased or unpaynted tables, are apte to receave what formes soo ever are fyrst drawen theron by the hande of the paynter, even soo these naked and simple people, doo soone receave the customes of owre Religion, and by conversation with owre men, shake of theyr fierce and native barbarousnes.[20]

English colonists nurtured missionary ambitions, too. The Virginia settlers deployed various strategies to convince the Indians of the Protestant truth. The Virginia Company went as far as to instruct its Governor to take away or even

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[16] Paul Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1968) 154. See also Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 28-29.

[17] Lois Potter, "Pirates and 'Turing Turk' in Renaissance Drama," in ed. Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Michèle Willems, *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 124-140, 129.

[18] This phenomenon has been extensively investigated. See, for instance, Matar, *Islam in Britain,* 23-27, 31-49; and Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar, *Britain in the Islamic World 1558-1713* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 124-55. This chapter focuses in particular on the "captivity narrative" of Christians who had converted to Islam. See also Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 81-83.

[19] Quoted in Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 17.

[20] Quoted in Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse,* 17.

execute the Indians' "iniocasockes or Priestes."[21] Yet most conversion attempts were directed at children who had to be "procured and instructed in the English language and manner," which additionally shows the intimate relationship between early modern socio-cultural life and religious identity.[22]

The apparent straightforwardness of the above religious labels and interfaith conversions belies the fact that early modern religious identities were much more fluid than they are today. In the words of Jean-Christophe Mayer, there was a "constant obsession with labelling, ascribing religious identities" and "setting down differences."[23] As Peter Lake insightfully points out about Christian religious identities in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England,

> depending on their initially contingent but increasingly structural relationships with events, different ideological factions, groups and individuals told themselves and others different stories about where they were and how they got there, producing in the process much of the vocabulary, the categories of religious affiliation and classification – Puritan, Papist, Protestant, Catholic, Familist, Separatist, Conformist, Church Papist – that modern historians habitually use to analyze describe, or evoke the religious scene of Elizabethan England.[24]

To the Christian categories mentioned by Lake we can add Judaism and Islam. This is not so much because these faiths were in a process of *de facto* solidification, but because early moderns used them rhetorically and polemically to consolidate their own and attack other denominations.[25] Inevitably, this process rendered early modern Christian understandings of Judaism and Islam dynamic as well.

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[21] Rebecca Ann Bach, *Colonial Transformations: The Cultural Production of the New Atlantic World, 1580-1640* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 15.

[22] W. Stitt Robinson, "Indian Education and Missions in Colonial Virginia," *The Journal of Southern History*, 18.2 (1952): 152-168, 153-154. The asymmetrical power relations between colonizer and colonized, however, often proved an obstacle to successful proselytizing. For instance, in 1622, disturbed trade relationships between the native inhabitants and the English residents in Jamestown resulted in the killing of a quarter of the English inhabitants, which temporarily ended conversion efforts.

[23] Jean-Christophe Mayer, *Shakespeare's Hybrid Faith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 7

[24] Peter Lake, "Religious Identities in Shakespeare's England," in ed. David Scott Kastan, *A Companion to Shakespeare* (London: Blackwell, 1999) 57-85, 58.

[25] James Shapiro, in *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), describes how Judaism was construed for these ideological purposes; Daniel Vitkus, in *Turning*

In this climate, in which people were anxious to stabilize religious identity and verify the truth of their faith, interfaith conversion came to play an ambiguous role within religious polemics. While conversion to the "right" faith was preached by polemicists and clergymen, it also had a corrosive effect on the stability of religious identity. Christianization of Jews, for instance, was used by Protestants and Catholics for ideological purposes. From around the middle of the sixteenth century a belief developed that the conversion of the Jews would herald the Apocalypse.[26] Many Reformers, including Luther, believed that the Jews' adoption of (Protestant) Christianity "had awaited the preaching of the true Gospel."[27] Thus the conversion of the Jews, foreshadowed by Christianizations of individual Jews, served as a powerful argument in defence of Protestantism. Rome, in turn, responded to these ideas by forcing Jews to attend conversion sermons, hoping they would turn Catholic. At the same time, converts – of all denominations – became easy targets for accusations of opportunism and inconstancy. John Heywood, for instance, noted in his epigram "Of turning" that "Halfe turne or whole turne, where turners be turning / Turnying keepes turners from hangyng and burning."[28] The converts who became notorious for their multiple recantations created a climate for precisely these allegations.[29]

A Cross-Religious Approach

The effect of early modern confessionalization makes itself felt in the way modern critics approach representations of conversion in early modern English drama. Despite the vast literature on this subject, scholars chiefly focus on interfaith conversion, and, in doing so, restrict themselves to Christianity and a single non-Christian faith.[30] Stage depictions of Islamic-Christian conversion and the

Turk, and Jane Hwang Degenhardt, in *Islamic Conversion and Christian Resistance on the Early Modern Stage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) do this for Islam.

[26] Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews,* 132.

[27] Steven Rowan, "Luther, Bucer and Eck on the Jews," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985): 79-90, 10.

[28] John Heywood, *John Heywoodes Woorkes* (London: Thomas Powell, 1562) Sig. A4v. I thank Abigail Shinn for drawing my attention to this poem.

[29] See Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion,* 54-57.

[30] There are some exceptions, such as John W. Velz's article "From Jerusalem to Damascus: Bilocal Dramaturgy in Medieval and Shakespearean Conversion Plays," *Comparative Drama* 15.4 (1981): 311-26. I find Velz's interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III* as "conversion plays" somewhat tenuous. Alizon Brunning, in " 'Thou art damned for alt'ring thy religion:' The Double Coding of Conversion in City Comedy," in *Plotting Early Modern London: New Essays on Jacobean City Comedy,* ed. Dieter Mehl, Angela Stock and Anne-Julia Zwierlein

Christianization of Jews in particular have been extensively analysed. These studies have yielded invaluable insights into the way the early modern stage channelled anxieties over religious instability and contributed to the construction of group identities.

Pioneering work on the subject of Muslim-Christian conversion was done in the 1930s by Samuel Chew, who discusses a number of Turk plays in relation to early modern English knowledge of Islam that circulated in news reports and travel documents.[31] Although Chew does address the issue of conversion, and although many of his observations are still relevant today, most of his findings do not pertain to dramatic works. It was not until the 1990s that scholars started to show a renewed interest in the representation of relations between Christians and Turks on the early modern stage, and from then on the stream of publications on

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(Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004) 154-62, discusses the theme of (what I call) spiritual conversion in relation to sincerity in a number of Jacobean comedies. In her chapter " 'Return unto Me!' Literature and Conversion in Early Modern England," in *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion*, ed. Jan M. Bremmer, Wout J. van Bekkum and Arie L. Molendijk (Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 85-106, Helen Wilcox presents an overview of conversion in early modern English literature. Yet she focuses exclusively on "the idea of spiritual and personal metamorphosis," and ignores the concept of interfaith conversion altogether (86). Erin Evelyn Kelly explores the idea of individual subjectivity and identity using stage representations of spiritual and interfaith conversion in a small number of early modern English plays, in "Changing Everything: Religious Conversion and the Limits of Individual Subjectivity in Early Modern English Drama," diss. University of Maryland, 2003. Holly Crawford Pickett analyses the phenomenon of changing one's religious identity multiple times in an early modern English context, and pays special attention to the performativity of serial conversion. Her analysis includes a limited number of interfaith conversion plays, in "The Drama of Serial Conversion in Renaissance England," diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005. See also Lieke Stelling, " 'Thy Very Essence is Mutability:' Religious Conversion in Early Modern English Drama, 1558-1642," in *The Turn of the Soul: Representations of Religious Conversion in Early Modern Art and Literature*, ed. Lieke Stelling, Harald Hendrix and Todd Richardson (Leiden: Brill 2012) 59-83.

[31] Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937). Unless indicated otherwise, I follow Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), in using the term "Turk" not to refer to a nationality but to the broad early modern English conceptions of a Muslim (16). See the same author for a useful chronological list of plays produced between 1579 and 1624 with Islamic characters, themes or settings, (257-58). For a discussion of the role of the acting company in the development and success of the Turk play as a genre, see Mark Hutchings, "The 'Turk Phenomenon' and the Repertory of the late Elizabethan Playhouse," *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 16, 10.1-39 (2007), 13 December 2012 <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/si-16/hutcturk.htm>.

the subject has never diminished. Much valuable work has been done by Nabil Matar, who was the first to examine the renegade as a stock Renaissance character, "represent[ing] the internal evil that threatened Christendom" and "an Other in the midst of English society because he reminded priests and writers, urban theatergoers and village congregations of the power and allure of the Muslim empire."[32] Matar remarks that contrary to their historical counterparts, who happily lived ever after, fictional renegades either met with divine retribution to "inject fear about the consequences of apostasy," or repented.[33] He also points to the similarities between the stage and church rituals facilitating a return to Christianity for willing and repentant apostates.[34] Matar's publication has been followed by a large number of studies on early modern Anglo-Ottoman relations as represented on the stage.[35] A particularly influential example is Daniel Vitkus's *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630*, which takes Matar's findings a step further by arguing for a generic approach to Christian-Islamic conversion plays, that is, by documenting patterns in conversion plots and their relation to the "powerful conjunction of sexual, commercial, political, and religious anxieties in early modern English culture."[36] As he demonstrates in his analysis of *Othello* (1604), Vitkus is particularly perceptive on the metaphoric significance of Christian-Islamic stage conversion, especially the trope of "turning" and its sexual and political connotations.[37] Jonathan Burton, Bernadette Andrea, and Jane Hwang Degenhardt, too, are interested in the wider economic, political, sexual and gender-related significance of dramatic conversions

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[32] Matar, *Islam in Britain,* 52, 72. For his analysis of the stage renegade see especially his chapter 2.

[33] Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 58.

[34] Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 52, 58-59, 69-70.

[35] See, for instance: Richmond Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East 1576-1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Gerald MacLean, *English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Sabine Schülting, Sabine Lucia Müller, and Ralf Hertel, eds., *Early Modern Encounters with the Islamic East* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); and Chloë Houston, "Turning Persia: The Prospect of Conversion in Safavid Iran," in Lieke Stelling, Harald Hendrix and Todd Richardson (eds), *The Turn of the Soul: Representations of Conversion in Early Modern Art and Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 85-107. See for a comprehensive and critical overview of the literature on this subject up until 2009: Linda McJannet, "Islam and English Drama: A Critical History," *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama* 12.2 (2009): 183-93.

[36] Vitkus, *Turning Turk,*162.

[37] Viktus, *Turning Turk,* 84-85. See also his chapter four, on *Othello*.

to and from Islam.[38] Burton and Andrea complicate Vitkus's analysis by introducing the ignored viewpoints of early modern Muslims and women respectively, and showing how these perspectives, too, affected dramatic portrayals of Islamic-Christian conversion. Degenhardt pays special attention to proto-racial conceptions of Islamic identity and to the ways in which (the threat of) conversion to Islam was construed in terms of erotic seduction. She also shows how these presentations are inextricably linked to national debates about Protestant reform.

The other form of stage conversion that has received a great deal of scholarly consideration is that of the Christianization of Jews. Much of the criticism devoted to this topic, however, is limited to *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) and to Shylock's conversion in particular, which is generally seen as the most notorious conversion of the Elizabethan stage.[39] In his important study *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James Shapiro has shed light on Shylock and Jessica's conversions by providing a rich overview of Elizabethan conceptions of national, racial and political identity and the questions these raised over the possibility of the

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[38] Burton, *Traffic and Turning*; Bernadette Andrea, *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*. See also Bindu Malieckal, " 'Wanton Irreligious Madness:' Conversion and Castration in Massinger's the Renegado," *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 31 (2002): 25-43; Jane Hwang Degenhardt, "Catholic Martyrdom in Dekker and Massinger's The Virgin Martyr and the Early Modern Threat of 'Turning Turk,'" *ELH* (2006): 83-117; Jane Hwang Degenhardt, "Catholic Prophylactics and Islam's Sexual Threat: Preventing and Undoing Sexual Defilement in the Renegado," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 9.1 (2009): 62-92; and Dennis Britton, "Muslim Conversion and Circumcision as Theater," in *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011) 71-86.

[39] See, for instance, John F. Hennedy, "Launcelot Gobbo and Shylock's Forced Conversion," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15.3 (1973): 405-410; Camille Pierre Laurent, "Dog, Fiend and Christian, or Shylock's Conversion," *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 26 (1984): 15-27; Martin D. Yaffe, *Shylock and the Jewish Question* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Heather Hirschfeld, " 'We all Expect a Gentle Answer, Jew:' *The Merchant of Venice* and the Psychotheology of Conversion," *ELH* 73.1 (2006): 61-81; Kenneth Gross, *Shylock is Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Marianne Novy, "*The Merchant of Venice* and Pressured Conversions in Shakespeare's World," in ed. Richard Fotheringham et al., *Shakespeare's World / World Shakespeares: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress Brisbane 2006* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008) 108–118. See also Jeffrey Shoulson's *Fictions of Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Cultures of Change in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), which does include a discussion of Jessica, but serves an example of the exclusive focus on Jewish-Christian conversion in early modern English drama.

conversion of Jews.[40] In addition, Shapiro's work has sparked a range of New Historicist analyses of Jewish conversion in Shakespeare's comedy and, to a much smaller extent, in other plays, such as Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589). As a rule, these studies redress a balance by paying special attention to Jessica as a female convert in *The Merchant of Venice*, and to the role of Elizabethan understandings of race in relation to her character. Examples are Janet Adelman's *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in* The Merchant of Venice, and Michelle Ephraim's *Reading the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage.*[41]

It is perhaps no surprise that early modern English dramatizations of forms of paganism have attracted little attention from scholars. To begin with, the category of paganism is diverse, including English understandings of Roman, Celtic and native American varieties of pagan faiths, which can be found, for instance, in Massinger and Dekker's *The Virgin Martyr* (1620), James Shirley's *St. Patrick for Ireland* (1639) and John Fletcher's *The Island Princess* (1621) respectively. In addition, these religions are less accessible and of less current interest for the Western critic. Although the number of plays featuring varieties of pagan-Christian conversion easily measures up to those presenting Jewish or Muslim converts, there is not a single book-length study on this topic. Nevertheless, recent studies of individual plays prove valuable for the study of conversion on the early modern stage. A case in point is Holly Crawford Pickett's analysis of *The Virgin Martyr*, which shows that the play's spectacular portrayal of conversion harks back to medieval drama that sought to provoke spiritual conversions of their audiences.[42]

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[40] Apart from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shapiro is, however, remarkably silent on other early modern English plays that feature Jewish characters in relation to conversion, such as Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1581).

[41] See also Kim F. Hall, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992): 87-111, which, of course, preceded Shapiro's study; Mary Janell Metzger " 'Now by My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew': Jessica, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity," *PMLA* 113.1 (1998): 52-63; Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference: From Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Lindsay M. Kaplan, "Jessica's Mother: Medieval Constructions of Jewish Race and Gender in the Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.1 (2007): 1-30; Brett D. Hirsch, "Counterfeit Professions: Jewish Daughters and the Drama of Failed Conversion in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice.*" *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 19 (2009) 4.1-37 <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/si-19/hirscoun.html> 22 January 2013; Lara Bovilsky, " 'A Gentle and no Jew:' Jessica, Portia, and Jewish Identity," *Renaissance Drama* 38 (2010): 47-76.

[42] Holly Crawford Pickett, "Dramatic Nostalgia and Spectacular Conversion in Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*" *Studies in English Literature* 49.2 (2009): 437-62. See also Alison

Each of the above approaches employs conversion to shed light on early modern understandings of specific religions,[43] rather than elucidate conversion itself. It is only through a broad, cross-confessional and pan-religious study that we are able to comprehend the dynamics of early modern conversion. This is important because a solid understanding of early modern notions of conversion is crucial to deepening our knowledge of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social experiences of identity and religion: in combining questions of faith with concerns for identity and change, and in inviting a "before and after" comparison, conversion offered a compact narrative tool – eagerly picked up by playwrights – to examine some of the dominant questions of the early modern period. This thesis provides the first investigation into early modern stagings of conversion from a wide-ranging cross-religious perspective. It maps unmistakable patterns in the way dramatists presented conversion, patterns that come into view precisely through a cross-religious approach.

Conversion and Early Modern English Drama

Throughout the early modern period, conversion remained a popular dramatic topic. Between 1558 and 1642, playwrights wrote more than forty works about spiritual conversion, and about potential, feigned and genuine conversions between Christianity on the one hand, and Islam, Judaism and various forms of paganism on the other, and, in a few cases, between Catholicism and Protestantism. In addition, they frequently referred to conversion in figurative senses. The popularity of conversion as a dramatic subject can be explained by the reciprocal relation between conversion and the theatre. Spiritual and interfaith conversion made for compelling stories, spectacle, and tragic and comic entertainment. Conversely, drama enabled playwrights and audiences to probe the existential questions that were raised by interfaith and spiritual conversion.

Playwrights often included conversion in their works because it provided a powerful narrative frame to investigate personal change, and lent itself well to both tragic and comedic scenes. As the late medieval authors of mystery and miracle plays were well aware, conversions provided spectacle. This could be the spectacle of instantaneous insight, provoked by divine intervention, such as in the case of the Pauline persecutor of Christians in Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin*

Searle, "Conversion in James Shirley's *St Patrick for Ireland* (1640)," in Stelling et. al. (eds) 199-223, who discusses Shirley's curious representation of paganism in relation to conversion in the context of early modern Irish religious politics.

[43] These need not necessarily be Islam, Judaism or forms of paganism. Many critics are aware of Catholic and Protestant overtones of dramatic representations of these faiths.

Martyr, or of a formidable and conversion-inducing confrontation with death, as is illustrated by the Duke of Florence in James Shirley's *The Traitor* (1631). However, plays such as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592) show that dramatic spectacle did not have to involve success in conversion, but could also follow from tragic failure in mending one's spiritual ways. Given that spiritual conversion is tantamount to a radical change for the better and, when presented as a miracle, did not require logical explanation, this form of conversion was also used as a plot device to provide a reassuring and festive ending for malicious characters. Examples are Oliver and Duke Frederick in *As You Like It* (1599). Interfaith conversion proved an attractive topic for playwrights due to its topical nature. People had converted themselves, knew converts, or learned about them through various genres of prose and verse, which rendered conversion an issue of strong contemporary interest. Finally, dramatists employed spiritual and interfaith conversion for their comedic effects, for instance by hinting at the implausible conversions of incorrigible rogues, grotesque Jews or pagans. The circumcision that renegades had to undergo was also made a source of uneasy laughter.

If the early modern theatre benefited from the remarkable versatility of conversion, conversion itself profited from dramatic treatments. That is to say, early modern theatre provided a medium for the analysis of the thorny problems entailed by conversion. One of the fundamental questions investigated in drama was whether and to what extent people were responsible for their own spiritual conversion. Protestant reformers questioned the active role of humankind in the process of conversion. Ascribing it fully to God's grace, they urged the laity and clergy alike to reconsider the human factors that had traditionally been seen as vehicles of conversion, such as the manner and form in which Scripture ought to be read, charity, mass, and sermons as well as images and devotional drama, such as saint plays and moralities. This meant that playwrights, who were used to employing drama as a tool for spiritual conversion, by means of instruction or emotive spectacle, now began to convey to spectators that conversion is beyond human endeavour. Dramatists such as William Wager and Nathaniel Woodes did so by staging failure in spiritual conversion for which humans were still considered responsible. Their plays nevertheless evince concern over the precise workings of reprobation and the awkward implications of double predestination in relation to conversion. This concern is perhaps most powerfully dramatized in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In both versions of this play, Marlowe lays bare the disconcerting consequences of election doctrine for the experience of faith, yet without passing direct judgment on reformed theology or on his main character and without resolving the tension between predestination and human agency.

Interfaith conversion raised wholly different but no less fundamental questions that were addressed and explored in drama. These revolved around forms of collective identity. Early modern understandings of identity, notably involving religion, nationality, race, gender were dynamic and subject to conflict, confusion, as well as fascination. As literary scholars and cultural historians have shown, the early modern public stage was a prominent medium in the construction of group identities.[44] The imaginary world of plays allowed playwrights to draw on a wide range of discourses and make these converge in order to fashion social and communal identities. According to Vitkus, this process was by no means straightforward or consistent, but "[involved] a particularly violent set of contradictions about alien cultures and peoples. They are both demonized and exalted, admired and condemned."[45] Critics have argued that by exploring interfaith conversion playwrights responded to actual changes of religion by attempting to allay fears over the destabilizing effect of interfaith conversion on collective identity. Nabil Matar writes, for example, that "on stage, Islam had to be defeated, and those who converted to it had to be destroyed. […] The English public would be made to see the divine retribution for rejecting Christianity."[46] He also notes that "in the verse and prose of the seventeenth century, the renegade was vilified to Satanic magnitudes, and English writers either reconverted or executed him."[47] Daniel Vitkus takes a slightly more nuanced approach when he observes that

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[44] Indeed, since the late 1980s, much of the scholarship on early modern culture has been devoted to ways in which national, racial and religious concepts of identity were negotiated and constructed on the early modern stage. To name only a few examples: Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Ton Hoenselaars, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: A Study of Stage Characters and National Identity in English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642* (Rutherford NJ.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992); Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*; Barbara Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes*; Michelle Ephraim, *Reading the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Jane Pettegree, *Foreign and Native on the English Stage, 1588-1611: Metaphor and National Identity* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[45] Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 22.

[46] Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 58.

[47] Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 71.

English anxieties about cultural pollution, miscegenation, or religious conversion were intense, but at the same time the cultural, ethnic, and religious differences were often embraced and internalized as English culture began to absorb and articulate those differences as part of its own process of self-identification. The playwrights who wrote for the Elizabethan and Early Stuart stage were shrewd observers of this aspect of their culture's development, and their plays offered performances of just those allegedly alien behaviors that were being emulated by the English.[48]

In asserting that concerns over real-life interfaith conversions were articulated and alleviated on the stage, however, scholars erroneously interpret *staged* interfaith conversions as fully-fledged transformations of identity. This error of interpretation arises from the fact that the classical paradigm of conversion that we find in Scripture is marked by radical change. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, for instance, it is described as a rebirth: "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." In addition, plays present *spiritual* conversions not only as sudden, but also as radical transformations. A case in point is *As You Like It*, where Oliver, when asked about his evil pre-conversion identity, expresses the paradox of continuity that such a conversion entails: " 'Twas I, but 'tis not I" (4.3.134). Oliver expresses his spiritual conversion in terms of a metamorphosis of identity, yet this identity is a moral and not a confessional one.

Another reason why critics read dramatic portrayals of interfaith conversions as transformations lies in the prominent role of transformation in drama: metadramatically, with actors turning into characters, on the level of the dramatic action, with characters undergoing a variety of changes, with men dressing up as women and vice versa, with tragic and comic cases of mistaken identity, and with allusions to classical myths about transformation, notably Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Thus, Jonathan Burton aligns play-acting with conversion: "in the theater, Christian actors were commonly 'converted' by means of make-up, props and costume into stage 'infidels' who, in turn, might be 'converted' into Christians before the eyes of their audiences."[49] Jane Hwang Degenhardt, too, uses conversion discourse to describe the theatre as a locus of transformation: "at its most basic level, the stage itself functioned as a technology of illicit conversion: it

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[48] Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 22-23.
[49] Burton, *Traffic and Turning*, 29.

converted male actors into gentlemen and women, Christians into Turks, Moors, and Jews, and audiences into believers."[50]

However, as this thesis argues, early modern playwrights took pains precisely to counter the idea that interfaith conversion, as an exchange of identity, was possible. A close examination of plays reveals, for instance, that audiences were invited not to take seriously the Christianization of grotesque religious others, or the sincerity of stage apostates. Moreover, in those cases in which spectators were presented with serious portrayals of genuine Christianizations, the converting Muslim, Jewish and pagan characters do not resemble their stereotypical coreligionists, but are depicted as being equally as attractive and virtuous as many Christian characters. In some instances, these non-Christian figures anticipate their Christianization by showing interest in Christian theology or rescuing Christians from oppression at the hands of non-Christians. Even in the case of apostasy, and, specifically, Christians turning Turk, dramatists contested the understanding of this conversion as an exchange of Christian for Islamic identity. They did so by presenting the conversions of their apostatizing characters as insincere or even counterfeited, and as a spiritual lapse from godliness instead of an embrace of Islamic orthodoxy. In these ways, playwrights did respond to the subversive implications of real-life interfaith conversions, but precisely by avoiding the analogy between the metamorphic reverberations of the theatre and an interfaith convert's religious transformation. Indeed, unlike cross-dressing, abundantly shown and exploited for its meta-dramatic echoes, interfaith conversion was portrayed as a form of reassuring constancy and continuity. One of the most famous early modern stage converts best illustrates this point. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the lack of perceptible religious transformation in Jessica's conversion from Judaism to Christianity is in stark contrast with the visibility of her temporary appearance as a boy – the gender of the actor playing her – that is necessary for her elopement to marry and convert.

Sources and Methodology

This study focuses on plays performed in England between 1558 and 1642. This relatively long time span allows me to identify both the important changes and continuities in representations of conversion in early modern drama. I consider the year of Elizabeth's accession the beginning of Elizabethan drama. This was, moreover, the moment when England, after 30 years of religious instability, officially converted from Catholicism to Protestantism and embarked on a period

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[50] Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*, 4.

in which it would develop a distinct form of English Protestantism. The theatres were closed by the Puritan government in 1642 (not to be reopened again in 1660), which is why this study ends in this year. During the time covered by this thesis, around 120 works were performed that feature conversion in a variety of ways, such as stagings of (near-) interfaith and spiritual conversions or converts, or references to religious conversion in a literal or figurative sense. These plays do not explicitly differentiate between interfaith and spiritual conversion.[51] Both the exchange of denominations and the transcendental turn to God and the rejection of sin are simply referred to as "conversion." Indeed, I consider a play relevant when it explicitly uses the term "conversion," its variant forms or synonyms, including "apostasy," "proselyte" or to "turn" Turk, Jew, etcetera.[52] Plays that specify the denominations involved I regard as portraying or alluding to interfaith conversion; plays that mention conversion without explicitly referring to an exchange of confessions or religions, by contrast, I categorize as spiritual, even though they are in most cases not entirely void of denominational clues. Since an important aim of this study is to identify dramatic patterns in depictions of conversion, I have tried to be as inclusive as possible in incorporating plays, regardless of their genre and geographic origin. Most works are tragedies, comedies or tragicomedies and were performed in London, where most of the public playhouses were established.[53]

The methodological approach of this thesis is in many respects indebted to the interpretative practice of New Historicism. In order to gain access to early modern English conceptions and experiences of conversion, I read drama in the context of a variety of contemporary non-literary sources, including sermons, pamphlets, travel writings and personal statements of conversion and recantation. In addition I pay special attention to literary aspects of non-dramatic sources, such as their use of figurative language. This approach is informed by an understanding of language "not as a transparent reflection of reality, but as a force which helps to

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[51] This number constists of nearly fifty works that feature spiritual and interfaith (near-) conversions, feigned conversions, (near-) converts, and works that thematize spiritual and interfaith conversion (see the appendix for a list of these works), and another 70 plays that occasionally use conversion in a metaphorical sense or employ tropes of conversion.

[52] My chief method of identifying "conversion plays" was to search the *Literature Online* database published by Chadwyck-Healy. Two exceptions are Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Othello*, which do not contain the word "conversion" or any of its derivatives, but, in my view, present enough evidence to establish their thematizing of religious conversion. I discuss this further in the relevant chapters.

[53] Exceptions are, for instance, Richard Zouche's university play *The Sophister*, which was probably performed in Oxford, and *St. Patrick for Ireland*, which was written and staged in Dublin. Its author, the Englishman James Shirley, spent most of his life in England.

constitute it."[54] Due to their capability to convey multiple, complex, and profound meanings, literary devices, or figures of thought and speech, play a fundamental role in constructions of reality. It is for this reason that they ought to be part of historical investigations. Thus, while Michael Questier's important study *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580-1625* (1996) provides a wealth of detailed information about early modern English political and religious interpretations of conversion between Protestantism and Catholicism in early modern England, his disregard for literary texts and the literariness of texts leaves a gap in our knowledge of more fundamental questions regarding early modern understandings of religious conversion and how it was given meaning.

A considerable part of this gap has been filled by Molly Murray's enquiry into the correlation between early modern English conversion and poetry. Murray shows how "particular formal qualities of poetry – its schemes and tropes, its distinctive styles of signifying – are used to confront the unsettling phenomenon of religious change."[55] Murray concentrates on the poetry of conversion as produced by poets who were converts themselves.[56] She observes that most playwrights are only interested in conversion "as insincere or inconclusive," as "not always faithful and not always final."[57] She suggests that dramatic representations are therefore also "satirical or ironical," which, she writes, is "to misrepresent'' conversion.[58] I find the term "misrepresentation" somewhat unfortunate, because it implies that there are objective criteria for what Murray intimates are correct representations of conversion. Besides, conversion is as much a social as a personal experience. That is to say, even if converts themselves felt that many dramatic approaches to conversion did not do justice to their transformative experience of faith, to state that drama misrepresents conversion disregards the fact that conversions were not isolated events but occurred within communities and social environments, and could have as profound an impact on the public as on converts themselves, particularly in a time of religious upheaval. It is precisely this impact that playwrights addressed when dramatizing conversion. For this reason, the versions of conversion that were offered by playwrights are at least equally important as

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[54] Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *Devil Theatre: Demonic Possession and Exorcism in English Drama, 1558-1642* (D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2007) 14.

[55] Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion*, 7.

[56] Indeed, I am not interested in attempting to align the lives of individual authors with their work. Despite the facts that some playwrights were converts themselves, such as Ben Jonson, or some appear to offer intriguing and ambiguous clues as to their own religious convictions, I do not believe it is possible to find biographical details in plays without much conjecture.

[57] Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion*, 29.

[58] Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion*, 29.

autobiographical accounts for the investigation of conversion as a social phenomenon, and certainly no less intriguing than the writings of converts themselves.

At the same time, this study intends to nuance a celebration of (dramatic) literature as a sanctuary for experiments of thought, a place where any imaginable reality can be staged, and a site that first and foremost served to play out fantasies. According to Kevin Sharpe, for instance, "the stage offers a laboratory for the examination of a difficulty, displaced – but not too far – from reality. On the stage in Jacobean England therefore we find plays that lack closure, as dramatists dared to imagine their world without meaning."[59] Similarly, Kirsten Poole notes that "the spatiality of the theatre offered the opportunity for enacted thought experiment," and she celebrates early modern drama as "the cultural equivalent of imaginative quantum foam – the chaotic, metamorphic, wonderful manifestation of the micro-activity of individual beliefs, fears, desires, fantasies, sensations, words."[60] Another case in point is Catherine Belsey's plea for the revaluation of literature.[61] She writes that "exploiting the power of the signifier to conjure worlds in their absence, fiction can treat any topic, record any point of view, however unpalatable, defy all propriety. Since nothing is outlawed, fiction can make the unseen visible, inscribe the unspeakable, and thus render it sayable."[62] This is in many respects true, but the practice of early modern conversion theatre reminds us that playwrights at the same time functioned within tight ideological constraints that precisely prevented them from portraying the "unseen" and "unspeakable" aspects of conversion. No playwright depicted or endorsed the possibility of the exchange of religious identity, which was one of the most urgent social phenomena of the early modern period. Indeed, many New Historicist studies tend to focus on a small number of plays or literary texts, which invites a relatively positive understanding of them as *the* creative, complex and ambiguous counterparts of non-literary texts. It is only when we investigate an extensive range of plays that their parameters reveal themselves, and that it becomes clear that playwrights exploited the creative

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[59] Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 63. See also, for instance, Jean-Christophe Agnew who writes that "the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre furnished a laboratory of representational possibilities for a society perplexed by the cultural consequences of its own liquidity," in *The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 54.

[60] Kirsten Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 21.

[61] Catherine Belsey, *A Future for Criticism* (Chichester, etc.: Wiley Blackwell, 2011).

[62] Belsey, *A Future for Criticism*, 123.

freedom of the stage precisely to convey the same ideological message about the possibility of conversion. In other words, when Belsey writes that literature has "no necessary agenda, no obligation to lay out a programme or defend a cause," this does not mean that playwrights therefore did not *follow* an agenda. [63] Early modern playwrights adhere to a consistent pattern of avoiding the full implication of interfaith conversion as a transformation of identity, that is, the genuine embrace of a new doctrine expressed through a radical change of manner and appearance. By the same token, they employ conversion precisely to consolidate religious identity as encoded in one's being. These dramatic solutions indicate the inherent problem of interfaith conversion, which is the disturbing thought that an exchange of religious identity also affects its stability. If there was one thought experiment of conversion that playwrights carried out on the stage it was showing a collective interest in conversion while at the same time attempting to contain its subversive implications.

Outline

This study is divided into two parts. The first four chapters are devoted to spiritual conversion, the following four to interfaith conversion. Chapter one shows how conversion came to be part of medieval and later of early modern English culture. In pre-Reformation England religious conversion was mainly defined in spiritual terms. As such, the word was used to denote an embrace of the monastic life or to refer to spectacular and iconic moral transformations, notably those of Mary Magdalene and Paul of Tarsus. In drama, spiritual conversion, and, to a lesser extent, interfaith conversion were staged as *exampla* with the aim to bring about the spiritual reformation of audiences. I discuss three late medieval and reformation plays that are clearly rooted in his tradition: the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* (1461-1500) the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* (*c.* 1480-1520) and *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* (*c.* 1550-1566) by Lewis Wager. At the same time, these plays foreshadow patterns in the way conversion is staged in the last decades of the sixteenth and the first of the seventeenth century. Chapters two and three treat the changing conception and role of spiritual conversion in the context of the confessional polemics of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The former contends that Church of England preachers began to equate repentance with spiritual conversion and to describe it as the kernel of Protestant Christianity, a process that I call the Protestantization of spiritual conversion. As part of this process, many Protestant preachers condemned play-acting as the negative and

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[63] Belsey, *A Future for Criticism*, 97.

inauthentic inversion of spiritual conversion. This hostility towards the theatre was fuelled by a rivalry — felt by preachers — between preachers and playwrights in drawing audiences.[64] These concerns were justified in the sense that in the course of the Elizabethan era the theatre began to flourish as never before. At the same time, the Protestantization of spiritual conversion forced playwrights to reconsider the manner in which spiritual change can be staged. The way in which playwrights responded to this question is shown in chapter three. This chapter reveals how the conflict between the didactic purpose of the popular morality play and the deterministic doctrine of election inspired dramatists to portray failed attempts at conversion, resulting in the (tragic) damnation of the protagonist. By way of illustration, it discusses four major conversion plays that were performed in the first decades of Elizabeth's reign: William Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest The More Fool Thou Art* (1559) and *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (1560), the anonymous *King Darius* (1565), and *The Conflict of Conscience* (1572) by Nathaniel Woodes. I also argue that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* must be read in the context of this tradition of failed spiritual conversion plays, and that it presents a dramatic culmination of concerns over predestination. After 1580, when interfaith conversion began to make its way onto the stage, successful spiritual conversion was revived in drama, yet never reaching the high level of prominence that it was given in medieval drama. Chapter four firstly traces three new theatrical significances that were given to successful spiritual conversion in this period: it was used as a plot device to arrive at unexpected happy endings for wicked characters, and it was employed as a source of romance and nostalgia. What these meanings have in common is that they present conversion as an ideal that is far removed from the realities of religion outside the theatre. At the same time, these meanings involve an emptying out of the religious significance of spiritual conversion. Secondly, the chapter shows how sinister implications of this development are explored in John Webster's tragedy *The White Devil* (1612), which is a scathing attack on aspects of contemporary religion, particularly the manipulation of faith in conversion. The play demonstrates that this abuse is facilitated by the loss and marginalization of spiritual meaning and by the politicization of early modern faith. Chapter five discusses how interfaith conversion gained currency in the early modern English society, and how it became a factor of disquiet and subversion. This was because it first and foremost

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[64] See, for instance, Martha Tuck Rozett, *The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 15-25; and Ineke Murakami, *Moral Play and Counterpublic: Transformations in Moral Drama, 1465–1599* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011) 63-64.

denoted an exchange of religious identity. As such, it conflicted with the desire for religious constancy, which was perceived as a reassuring confirmation of the stability of religious identity. This conflict is illustrated in two ways: firstly in sermons that by promoting the Christianization of Jews and Muslims paradoxically made a stronger case in favour of religious stability and against the conversion of their Protestant audiences. Secondly, interfaith converts themselves made various attempts to dispel suspicion of their being opportunistic and changeable. Chapters six and seven explore how the theatre used conversion to channel anxieties over religious instability, notably and ironically by celebrating religious constancy. The former focuses on the ways in which plays condemned or ridiculed forms of interfaith conversion, including apostasy and the Christianization of unlikely converts, such as racial caricatures of Jews and Indian cannibals. Chapter seven argues that even the seemingly positive and gratifying conversions of non-Christians to Christianity were either problematized or could not be shown as conclusive transformations of religious identity. Indeed playwrights, I argue, effectively employed conversion to present religious identity as an inherent part of the self that could not be shed or assumed.

Although most chapters explore similarities in representations, and therefore treat multiple plays, I seek to do justice to the specificity of individual plays as much as possible. Given the exceptional position Shakespeare's *Othello* takes up in conversion drama, I dedicate the final chapter to this work. This tragedy not only combines notions of interfaith with spiritual conversion, but is also unique amongst conversion dramas in that it revolves around the adventures of an interfaith convert *after* his Christianization. Providing the first analysis of this play in a broad context of conversion theatre, chapter eight argues that Othello's downfall is not so much the result of his racial or perceived religious difference (like the Venetians, Othello is a Christian), or, indeed Venetian (racist) xenophobia itself, but the tragic consequence of his success as a convert who fully adopts and internalizes Venetian understanding of religious identity as an inherent part of the self.