Religious conversion in early modern English drama

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PART 1: Spiritual Conversion

CHAPTER 1 'Be by Me Converted:' Conversion in Medieval and Reformation Drama

From the arrival of Christianity in England onward, the term "conversion" was used to denote interfaith and spiritual conversion. In fact, the very establishment of Christianity was defined by both meanings. In 597, the Roman monk Augustine began his mission to procure the interfaith conversion of Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity, beginning with King Aethelberht. At the same time, Augustine founded a monastery in Canterbury, which enabled English men, and later women to adopt a monastic life of spiritual contemplation and live according to the rules of their order. Indeed, it was the act of embracing the cloister that became the most common meaning of the word conversion throughout the Middle Ages.[1]

Augustine of Canterbury also introduced the Rule of Saint Benedict into England. This set of instructions was composed by St. Benedict of Nursia (480–547) as a spiritual and practical guide to managing and living according to the rule of a cloistered community, and was soon adopted as a founding text for Western monasticism. In addition to stability and obedience, the third of its tripartite vows was that of the *conversatio morum suorum*, literally meaning "the lifestyle of one's character," or, in the context of the Rule, "the monastic life of one's character."[2] Several times in his Rule, Benedict uses the term *conversatio* in specific relation to the turn towards monasticism, for instance in 58.1: "Do not grant newcomers to the monastic life an easy entry," and in 73.1: "The reason why we have written this rule is that, by observing it in monasteries, we can

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[1] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 2009), 342.

[2] It is likely that this syntactically problematic phrase was a medieval idiom and "no doubt clear to St. Benedict's contemporaries." Timothy Fry, ed. *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) 459. The term *conversatio* came to be amended to *conversio* by copyists. This was probably because they failed to recognize the meaning of *conversatio*, which in combination with the almost synonymous *morum* looks a little peculiar, and because they understood *conversio* as a key component of Christian life, Fry, *RB 1980*, 459–61; Terrence Kardong, ed. and trans., *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville MN: The Order of St. Benedict, inc., 1996), 24. Today, editors have re-adopted the word *conversatio*. The vow can be regarded as the promise to abide faithfully and to the best of one's ability by the rules of the order. It cannot be separated from the vows of stability and obedience, because the newcomer promises to remain constant in his newly adopted holy life as a Benedictine monk and to observe the rules of the monastic community. The root of *conversatio*, *convert-*, is still visible in the notion that the monastic life involves a change, a conversion to it. See Kardong, *Benedict's Rule*, 465.

show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life." At the same time, Benedict envisioned the monastic life as a sequence of spiritual conversions by means of the continuous effort to serve God in the ways laid out in his *Rule*. This is illustrated by his assertion in 49.1,4 that the "life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent," something that requires "refusing to indulge evil habits and by devoting [oneself] to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and self-denial."

It was not only monastic culture that rendered conversion an important part of everyday life; the theatre did so too. Liturgical drama, mysteries, interludes and moralities featured conversions and were designed to edify audiences. By staging the conversions of saints, biblical and ordinary characters, spectators were invited to follow their examples. Morality plays, which constitute a dramatic genre rooted in the thirteenth century, for instance, typically "promote the path of righteousness and demonise the morally wrong paths a Christian might take in the familiar journey through life."[3] Playwrights relied on a variety of techniques to encourage audiences to become better Christians. In addition to the thematizing of conversion itself, these included attempts at triggering the audience's emotional and physical involvement with various degrees of immediacy, for instance, by staging spectacular tableaux of the Crucifixion, conversion and miracles.

The present chapter is devoted to the analysis of three late medieval and reformation conversion plays that were performed in the time leading up to the period of this study: the mid-fifteenth century *Play of the Sacrament*, The Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* (*c.* 1480-1520) and the morality *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* (*c.* 1550-1566) by Lewis Wager. These works allow me to illustrate the spiritual nature of stage conversions in pre- and early-Elizabethan drama, as well as their strategies to bring their audiences to conversion. In addition, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The long Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* allow me to discuss the way in which Paul and Mary became the most important figureheads of conversion in the medieval period. Although all three plays are clearly rooted in either medieval or Reformation theatrical traditions, they anticipate patterns in the staging of conversion that we find in Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline drama. *The Play of the Sacrament* invites its audience to intensify their faith in Christ by presenting the conversion of a Jew and a lapsed Christian merchant. Their changes of heart are provoked by a dramatic spectacle

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[3] John C. Coldewey, "From Roman to Renaissance in Drama and Theatre," *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, vol. 1, eds. Jane Milling and Peter Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3–69, 54.

involving the appearance of Christ after the Jew's maltreatment of a consecrated host. Unlike Elizabethan and later drama, the play fully stages the conversion of the Jew, but, as Lisa Lampert points out, the Jew's conversion and baptism do not result in his inclusion in the Christian community.[4] In this way, the *Play of the Sacrament* foreshadows early modern English drama that refrains from presenting interfaith conversion as a transformation that enables religious others to become part of the (Protestant) Christian community. The Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* is well-known for its stage directions that invite its audience to follow the character Paul to different locations, and thus to imitate his conversion as a journey. The play presents Paul's conversion above all as a spiritual rejection of sin, but a number of clues hint at an interfaith interpretation of this change. Critics have established that these were added to the original pre-Reformation text by an anonymous editor and advocate of the Protestant Reformation. The clues suggest that Paul converts not only from Judaism to Christianity, but also from Catholicism to an early form of Protestantism. *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* was written and performed when the Reformation was well on its way. This Protestant reworking of a Saint play presents Marie's spiritual conversion to incite its audience to internalize the Reformed faith and reject Catholicism. In this way, the play anticipates the confessionalization and politicization of religion and religious identity that we find in later drama.

The Play of the Sacrament

The Play of the Sacrament was composed after 1461, the year of a historical conversion on which the play itself claims to be based, and staged in Croxton in Suffolk.[5] Performing it for an audience a hundred years later would in many respects have been inconceivable. The most obvious reasons lie in the liturgical and Catholic nature of the play. It confirms, for instance, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In addition, it is likely that the costumes of the bishop who presides over a baptism were sacred garments provided by the church, and

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[4] Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference: From Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 117.

[5] *The Play of the Sacrament from Croxton*, in David Bevington, ed. *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975) 756–88. This year is mentioned in the play (l. 58). The only surviving manuscript, however, is of the "mid-sixteenth century." Elizabeth Dutton, "The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, ed. Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 55–71, 56.

the props for this scene probably included a real font.[6] The play also could have ended with religious rites in an actual church.[7] Between 1535 and 1575 different governments made various efforts to frustrate "the Catholic stage […] and ultimately directly forbade its continuance."[8] Moreover, in the 1570s government authorities made rules that "suppressed" biblical drama and the staging of any part of the Trinity.[9] A less obvious aspect of this play that would become equally unimaginable to perform for Elizabethan and succeeding generations of audiences is the authentic and complete Christianization of a Jew.

The Play of the Sacrament is an East-Anglian miracle play that revolves around the conversions of Jonathas the Jew and his four coreligionists, and of Aristorius, a blaspheming Christian merchant. According to the Banns, the public announcement of the play spoken by two Vexillators, the play is a retelling of an event that took place in Aragon in 1461, which also provides its setting. Determined to prove that the "beleve of […] Cristen men" in the Eucharist is "false," because "the[y] beleve on a cake", Jonathas and his companions persuade the wealthy and covetous merchant Aristorius to steal a host from the church in order to test it (ll. 199–200). Echoing the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, Aristorius agrees to thieve the host for a hundred pounds. When Jonathas and his fellow Jews receive the Eucharist, they first repudiate the truth of Christianity as manifested in the miraculous birth of Christ, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, after which they proceed to desecrate the host. In so doing they decide to reenact the crucifixion of Christ: "with owr strokys we shall fray him as he was on the rood" (l. 455). With their daggers they inflict five wounds that correspond with the five sacred wounds that Christ suffered on the cross. The sacrament then suddenly begins to bleed, which prompts the Jews to boil it for three hours in an oil-filled cauldron. However, before they have the chance to do so, the host clings to Jonathas's hand. When they attempt to remove the sacrament by nailing it to a post, the hand comes loose from his body and sticks to the crucified host. Jonathas throws both the host and the hand into the boiling oil which then begins to appear as blood. As a final torment, the Jews decide to put the sacrament in an oven. According to the

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[6] David Bevington, *The Play of the Sacrament* from Croxton, in Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 754-56, 755.

[7] Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 755.

[8] Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300–1660: Volume One 1300–1576* (London: Routledge, 2002) 117.

[9] Alexandra Johnston, "Tudor Drama, Theater and Society," ed. Robert Tittler and Norman Jones, *A Companion to Tudor Britain* (Malden MA, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 2004) 430–47, 431.

stage direction "*Here the ovyn must rive asundere and blede owt at the cranys, and an image appeare owt with woundys bleding*." The image is that of Christ (referred to as "Jhesus"). Christ begins to speak to the Jews, asking them why they refuse to accept his teachings and put him "to a newe tormentry" (l. 732). This prompts the Jews to accept Christ and beg forgiveness. Jhesus instructs Jonathas to wash his "hart with grete contrition" and place his arm in the cauldron (l. 775). Jonathas's faith is verified by the miraculous healing of his hand. Aristorius, too, comes to see the error of his ways and expresses his repentance over his blasphemous act of selling the Lord's body. A bishop tells Ariostus and the Jews that they can redeem themselves by "fasting and pray[i]ng and othere good wirk" (l. 917). The Jews are then baptized "*with gret solempnité*" by the bishop. The play concludes with Jonathas's announcement that he and his fellow-converts will leave the country and "walke by contré and cost" to restore their "wickyd living" (ll. 964–65). Aristorius, by contrast, declares he will go to his unspecified country ("Into my contré now I will fare") to amend his wicked life and "teache this lesson to man and wife." (l. 972, 975).

According to David Bevington, *The Play of the Sacrament* "aims both at the penitent recovery of wayward Christians and at the conversion of non-believers."[10] Given the pervasiveness of Christian faith in late medieval England, it is not likely, however, that the play addressed many non-Christians. After their expulsion from England in 1290, there were hardly any Jews left in England and it is improbable that there were any of them among the audience. Some critics argue that the play's depiction of doubting Jews targeted members of the Lollard movement that attacked, among other things, the doctrine of transubstantiation.[11] Lisa Lampert argues that this view does not rule out the relevance of Jonathas's Jewish identity.[12] She reads the play in the context of the play's Spanish setting and the fifteenth-century Spanish persecution of Jews which led to their mass conversions, and shows how these events could have been known to an English audience.[13] Regardless of their precise denomination, the play certainly strove to edify and enlighten the doubting or depraved members of its audience. It does so by means of a plot that rewards and celebrates its main characters for their conversion. Aristorius' spiritual conversion teaches the playgoers that even grave

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[10] Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 754.

[11] See, for instance, Cecilia Cutts, "The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece," *Modern Language Quarterly* 5.1 (1944): 45–60; Victor I. Scherb, *Staging Faith: East Anglian Drama in the Later Middle Ages* (Madison and Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 74; and Dutton, "The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*," 57.

[12] Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference*, 108–22, 110.

[13] Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference*, 108–22, 110–11.

sins can be expiated through honest and full confession, repentance and a great deal of praying, fasting and performing acts of charity. This is also true for the conversion of the Jews, but in the case of Jonathas, the miraculous healing of his arm serves as an extra acknowledgement of his newly adopted faith in Christ. By the same token, the disintegration of Jonathas's hand after his profanation of the host could be seen as a warning against sacrilege. In this respect *The Play of the Sacrament* corresponds to Stephen Hawes's long poem, entitled *The Conuersyon of Swerers* (1509). Like the play, this poem presents a speaking Christ, and it aims to convert people who commit crimes that smack of those carried out by Jonathas and the other Jews. The poem's speaker Christ exhorts kings and rulers to "refourme" their servants on pain of punishment so that they refrain from the swearing by which they "crucify" him again.[14] Christ extensively and graphically describes the wounds he suffers at the hands of those who "lyveth yll and wrongfully."[15] In pre-Reformation fashion and like *The Play of the Sacrament*, Hawes's speaker suggests that sinners are their own agent of reform. If people refuse to amend, Christ will "take vengeaunce," and if they spend their lives well, they will be rewarded with celestial joy.[16]

Both *The Play of the Sacrament* and *The Conuersyon of Swerers* present themselves as instruments of conversion. Hawes's speaker urges its readers, for instance, to "print" the poem in their minds.[17] In addition, the poem, which for the most part consists of seven-line rhyming stanzas, contains a woodcut image of Christ rising from his grave and an accompanying shape poem which tells the reader "Be by me converted."[18]

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[14] Stephen Hawes, *The Conuersyon of Swerers* (London: Wyllyã Copland, 1551), sig. A3r, B3r.
[15] Hawes, *The Conuersyon of Swerers*, sig. B1r.
[16] Hawes, *The Conuersyon of Swerers*, sig. B3r.
[17] Hawes, *The Conuersyon of Swerers,* sig. A3v.
[18] Hawes, *The Conuersyon of Swerers*, sig. A4v, fig. 1.

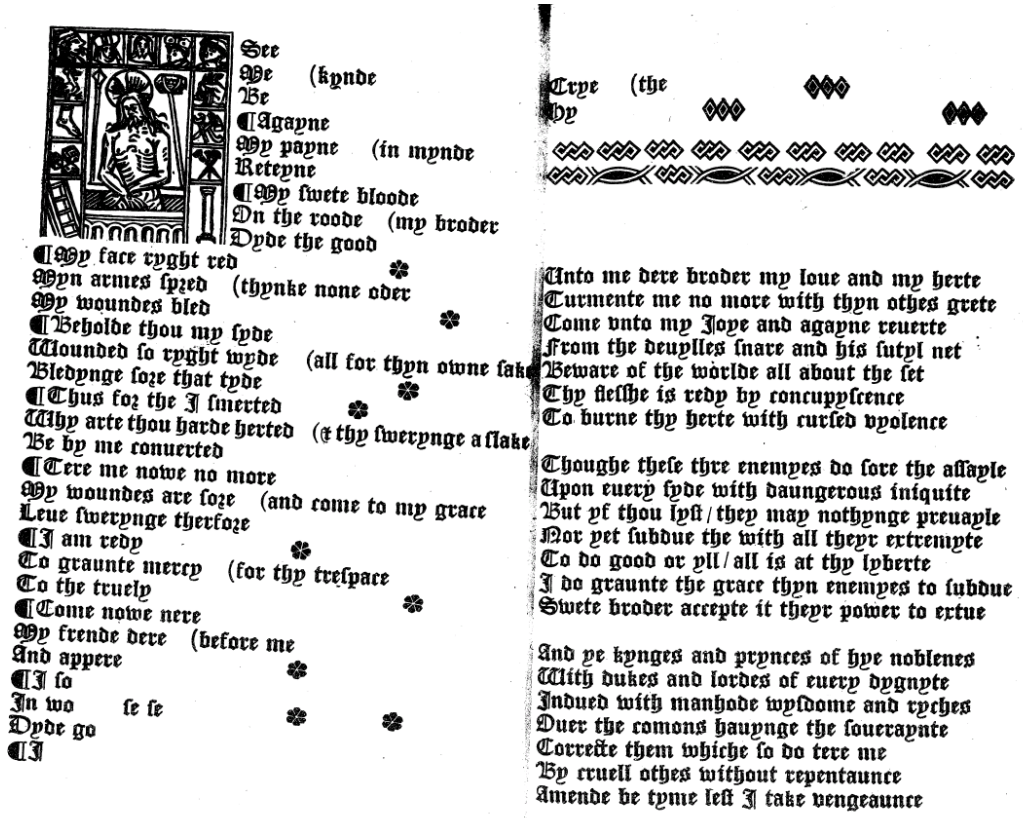

Figure 1. Stephen Hawes, *The Conuersyon of Swerers* (London: Wyllyã Copland, 1551), sig. A4v-A4r.

The Play of the Sacrament functions as an instrument of conversion when the audience is confronted with the transformation of the host into Christ. As Heather Hill-Vásquez observes about this moment, the "belief" of the audience "transfigures the disbelief of the Jews and enables miracle. As a speaking image that offers forgiveness and redemption, physical and spiritual healing, the Christ image is a miraculous incarnation of the audience's recognition, driven by their belief, of the parable of the physician."[19]

According to my definition of spiritual and interfaith conversion, the Christian merchant Aristorius's change of heart accords with the former and that of Jonathas with the latter. That is to say, Aristorius's conversion takes place within a single denomination and is tantamount to "a stronger embrace of the faith."[20] Jonathas, on the other hand, undergoes an exchange of religious identities. His Jewish identity is predicated on anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as

[19] Heather Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players: The Politics of Response in the Middle English Religious Drama* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 98.
[20] Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference*, 115.

bloodthirsty and callous killers of Christ, and probably expressed through his costume. The fact that the Jewish characters worship "Machomete" or "Machomyght" (l. 209, 332) illustrates that contemporary Christians perceived of Jews and Muslims in generalized terms.[21] To these Christians, non-Christianness rendered the distinction between different non-Christian denominations largely irrelevant. Jonathas's genuine and authentic embrace of Christian truth implies a shedding of his grotesque Jewish identity. This is confirmed in the term of address that Jhesus adds to his name, "Ser Jonathas," after his baptism (l. 770).

The way in which *The Play of the Sacrament* portrays the Christianization of the Jews is salient, because it is absent in the drama performed between 1558 and 1642. As will become clear in the course of this thesis, interfaith conversions, regardless of the faiths involved, are hardly ever fully depicted onstage, and if they are, they do not involve a radical change of identity, or they are presented in an ironic manner. Virtually nowhere in Elizabethan and later drama do we find stereotypically evil Jews like Jonathas, or Muslims or Pagans who undergo a plausible transformation into sincere Christians. By the late sixteenth century, playwrights had become suspicious of the possibility of interfaith conversion and begun to portray it in ways that precisely confirmed religious identity as an inherent part of one's self. Conversions of non-Christians were ridiculed, or these religious others were portrayed as highly sympathetic and attractive, and effectively already Christian, before their Christianization.

At the same time, *The Play of the Sacrament* anticipates the early modern dramatic trend of denying the possibility of interfaith conversion as a radical exchange of identity by preventing the Jews' absorption into the Christian community. Jonathas's announcement that he and his fellow converts embark on a life of travelling implies that they lose the possibility to "fix [their] identity." [22] More importantly, their plan suggests that it is impossible for Christianized Jews to substantiate their Christian identity in its most effective way: by becoming part of a Christian society. As Lampert observes, "the Christian community,

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[21] The perceived association between Judaism and Islam was quite common in the late medieval period. According to Ania Loomba, this can be explained by the "interlocking history" of Jews and Muslims in Spain. "Their expulsions and forced conversions had provoked analogous anxieties about the nature of religious and racial identity. Some of those associations spilled over into England, which had its own worries about English conversions to Islam as well as Jewish conversions to Christianity." Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 146–47.

[22] Dutton, "The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*," 58.

despite a basis in universal inclusion through conversion, seems unable to completely absorb Jewish particularity."[23]

The Conversion of Paul and Its Rendering in the *Digby Play*

The Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* is a late medieval mystery play that stands in a long tradition of celebrations of Paul as the most important biblical convert. Before I turn to an analysis of this play, it is worth considering the conversion of Paul itself, as there is an important dichotomy between the way in which this conversion is described by Paul himself and how it has come to be understood in Christianity. This contrast corresponds with the distinction between spiritual and interfaith conversion. Paul only very briefly touches upon the most famous moment of his reformation and does not use a term that directly translates as "religious conversion." Most specifically, he describes his experience as a revelation of Jesus Christ and as a divine call inciting him to abandon his zealous persecution of the followers of Christ to spread Christ's gospel (Gal.1:11–16). The absence of the word "conversion" in the narrative can partly be explained by the fact that "conversion" is hardly a biblical term. As Frederick Gaiser reminds us, "readers of the English version of the Bible will run across terms like 'conversion' or 'convert(s)' or 'to convert' only rarely […]. Yet definitions abound, and the phenomenon – the unconditional turning of the human toward God – is seen as fundamental to biblical religion."[24] Many of these definitions relate to the concept of repentance, a word that does occur regularly in Scripture. Three terms in the Old and New Testament frequently understood as conversion are the Hebrew *shubh* and the Greek *epistrefein* and *metanoein*. *Shubh* literally means "return," but is often glossed as "repent," for example in Jeremiah 3:14: "Turn [*shubh*], O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion." *Metanoein* is most often translated as "to repent," *epistrefein* as the act of turning oneself to a person or God. Examples of both terms can be found in Acts 26: 20, which describes Paul's efforts at converting the Gentiles after his own spiritual transformation:

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[23] Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference*, 117.

[24] Frederick Gaiser, "A Biblical Theology of Conversion," in ed. Henry Newton Malony and Samuel Southard, *Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992) 93–107, 93.

> But [he] shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent [*metanoein*] and turn to [*epistrefein*] God, and do works meet for repentance [*metanoias*].

In her compelling 1986 article, Paula Fredriksen explores the way in which the conversion of Paul has been anachronistically explained, in the terminology of this thesis, as an interfaith conversion from Judaism to Christianity, while historically it is more properly considered as a spiritual conversion. As she writes, it is essential to realize that Paul's conversion, what he himself called a "prophetic call," took place in 34, a year so quickly after the crucifixion that, instead of a "Christian" belief, it only witnessed a "Jesus movement" that consisted of Jewish adherers.[25] Paul's conversion has nevertheless come to be known as the legendary transformation of a violent persecutor of Christians, who exchanged Judaism for the Christian religion. The reason for this, Fredriksen argues, must be sought in Acts, which was written by Luke, and in Augustine. As opposed to Paul's own description of the conversion, Luke's gives the impression that the latter indeed converted from Judaism to Christianity. This is due to the "constant and terrible Jewish hostility to Christianity," the "theme" of Luke's text, which is "crucial to his concept of Paul's conversion and already important in his Gospel."[26] Fredriksen furthermore notes that Augustine played a vital role in disseminating the interpretation of Paul's divine experience as an interfaith conversion. Presenting his own conversion narrative, Augustine heavily relied on Luke's account of Paul:

> Through Luke and the Pastorals, Augustine can appropriate Paul, his prototype of the sinner saved despite himself because God so willed [...]. The New Testament canon thus serves as a sort of chamber for this mythic feed-back system, where Augustine the convert interprets Paul's conversion through his own, and his own through what he sees as Paul's. Taking his cue from Luke, Augustine holds Paul's conversion as the hermeneutic key to Pauline theology – identical, for him, with Catholic tradition.[27]

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[25] Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37.1 (1986): 3–34, 9, 15–16. Although Fredriksen does not use the terms interfaith and spiritual, the distinction she makes, between what she considers conversion proper and no conversion respectively, is the same.

[26] Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine," 9.

[27] Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine," 27.

During the Middle Ages Paul's conversion was understood both as an interfaith and a spiritual conversion. At the time of the crusades, for instance, artists depicted Paul's reformation as a transformation into a combatant fighting against pagans in the name of Christianity.[28] We also find an interfaith interpretation in the *Conversio Beati Pauli Apostoli*, a play that was performed on the occasion of the annual Festival of the Conversion of St. Paul on 25 January. The preserved text of this play is from the late twelfth-century *Fleury Playbook*, of which there are no surviving early Latin manuscripts in England. Due to their similarities, it is nonetheless likely that the *Conversio Beati Pauli Apostoli* served as a source for the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul*. The *Conversio Beati Pauli Apostoli* is closely based on the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9: 1–31. It opens with Saul explicitly lashing out against "Christians," whom he considers deceivers.[29] After his blinding by God and encounter with Ananias, Paul "as if now believing" preaches to people who are explicitly described as "Jews" about their unwarranted refusal to recognize Christ as the Messiah.[30] Jacobus de Voragine's immensely popular thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives *The Golden Legend,* translated into English by William Caxton in 1483, also describes Paul's turn as an interfaith conversion. Paul is said to be a persecutor of "Christians," and God is quoted to condemn Paul's "*Jewish* way of judging things," which means that he thinks of God "as being dead."[31] Nevertheless, De Voragine notes that Paul's conversion serves as the ultimate example for sinners, thereby interpreting the conversion in spiritual terms: "no sinner, no matter how grievous his sin, can despair of pardon when he sees that Paul, whose fault was so great, afterwards became so much greater in grace."[32] This line recurs in the sermon on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul in most popular sermon collection of the late Middle Ages: the *Festial*, a book of homilies for all the principal holidays of the year, composed by the Augustinian prior John Mirk (*fl.*

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[28] Anne Granboulan, "Paul, Apostle: Iconography," *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, vol. 1 ed. André Vauchez, trans. Adrian Walford (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2000),1100–1, 1101.

[29] *[The Service] for Representing the Conversion of the Blessed Apostle Paul: (Ad Repraesentandum Conversionem Beati Pauli Apostoli* from Fleury in Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 164–68, ll. 1–16.

[30] "*Tunc surgat Saulus et quasi iam credens, et praedicans alta voce, dicat:* Cur, Judaei, non resipiscitis? / Veritati cur contradicitis? / Cur negatis mariam Virginem / peperisse Deum et hominem?" in *Ad Repraesentandum Conversionem Beati Pauli Apostoli,* ed. Bevington, ll. 61–64.

[31] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, with an introduction by Eamon Duffy, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 120. My emphasis.

[32] De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 120.

1382–1414).[33] Mirk's description of the conversion, too, is largely in spiritual terms:

> he was converted from a curset tyrand ynto Goddys servant, from an hegh man and a prowde ynto a meke man and a devot, and from þe devellys dyssypull ynto Goddys holy apostoll. Soo, for þis man was so yturnet from all wyckednesse ynto all goodnesse, yn gret strengþe and helpe to holy chyrch, þerfor holy chyrch halewoþe his conversyon.[34]

Mirk's reference to the "chyrch," as well as his assertion that Saul persecuted "crysten men and woymen," on the other hand, point to an interfaith reading of Paul's conversion.[35]

Like the above sermons and plays, The Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* contains elements of both spiritual and interfaith conversion. However, in this play the two interpretations are likely to have served audiences of different periods. That is to say, the play's confessional clues are part of a section that was added two to five decades later. Besides, the interfaith conversion in question is not so much between Judaism and Christianity as between a precursor of Protestantism and Catholicism.

The play consists of three "stations," the first introducing Saul[36] as a relentless persecutor of "all rebellious" who are "being froward and obstinate/ Agains [their] lawes" (ll. 135–36). He is ordered by the Priests Caiphas and Anna to go to Damascus where he should subdue the adherents of Christ. In the second station, Saul experiences his miraculous conversion (though it does not mention Saul's change of name). According to the stage directions, "*Saule faulith down of [f] his horse.*" He then hears God's voice who tells him that he will save Saul. God also instructs Ananias to find Saul and cure his blindness. Ananias carries out God's command and baptizes Saul. Unlike the first two stations, the third station, that is believed to be an addition, does not draw on the New Testament story of the conversion. Here, Caiphas and Anna are confronted with Saul's "rebellious treytory," as they call it, and ordered by the two devils Belial and Mercury to kill Saul. Meanwhile, Saul presents a sermon on the seven deadly

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[33] John Mirk, *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies by Johannes Mirkus (John Mirk)*, part 1.ed. Theodor Erbe (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1905), 55.

[34] Mirk, *Mirk's Festial*, 52.

[35] Mirk, *Mirk's Festial*, 52, 53.

[36] The character is consistently called Saul throughout the play. For this reason I will be using the same name.

sins. When he learns that his life is at stake, he decides to escape the city with the aid of the disciples. In the epilogue, the Poeta, a character that comments on and explains the action, informs the audience that Saul has safely arrived in Jerusalem.

Paul's physical and spiritual journey in the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* is possibly one of the strategies with which this play invites the audience to join him in his conversion. Audiences were supposed to walk in procession from the first location of the play representing Jerusalem to the second, Damascus. Thus, after the first of the three "stations" of the play, the Poeta invites the spectators to "folow and succeed / With all [their] deligens this generall procession" (ll. 157–58).[37] According to John Velz, this means that in so doing, the audience "would be miming Saul's morally significant movement from one locus to the other; figuratively they would undergo conversion and fulfill a high purpose of the play."[38] However, in the right margin of the Poeta's request to move to a new playing space, we find the phrase "*si placet*," meaning "if desired." According to Heather Hill-Vásquez, this comment was inserted by a reformist editor who wanted to criticize the participation of spectators "while nevertheless leaving the processional intact as an archaic oddity of Catholic practice and performance ritual," and to denounce it "as an earlier misuse of the play." [39]

The reformist interpolations in *The Conversion of Saint Paul* have a stronger and more obvious effect on the play's portrayal of Saul's conversion itself. The turning point of Saul's conversion is presented in the second station and portrayed first and foremost as an edifying spiritual regeneration.[40] When Saul first reflects on his divine experience, he describes it as an experience of profound repentance: "From sobbyng and wepyng I can not refrayne / My pensyve hart full of contryccyon: / For my offencys, my body shal have

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[37] Bevington glosses this line as follows: "seemingly, the audience is to march in procession to the next 'station,' unless *procession* means 'process of argument' " 670.

[38] John W. Velz, "From Jerusalem to Damascus: Bilocal Dramaturgy in Medieval and Shakespearian Conversion Plays," Comparative Drama 15.4 (1981/1982): 311–326, 314. See also Scherb, *Staging Faith*, who notes that "processional movement, where the audience progresses with the chief actor from station to station, allows the audience to participate physically in Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, but also serves as an emblem of the spiritual movement within both Paul and the audience" (97).

[39] Heather Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players: The Politics of Response in the Middle English Religious Drama* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007) 68–69.

[40] *The Conversion of Saint Paul* in Bevington, 664–86. There is one passage that could be referring to the notion of interfaith conversion, and is spoken by Ananias when he baptises Saul: "I cristen yow with mind full perfight, / Reseiving yow into *owr religion*" (ll. 325–26, my emphasis).

punycyon" (ll. 301–3). The idea that this change involves a rejection of Jewish and an embrace of Christian identity is virtually absent in the first two stations.[41] Unlike *The Play of the Sacrament*, for instance, the *Conversion of Saint Paul* does not portray Saul as a stereotypical Jew. In fact, it does not even mention terms that indicate religious identities, such as "Jew" or "Christian." Before his conversion, Saul refers to the adherers of Christ not as Christians but in the much more elusive terms of the "rebellious" and "the discipulys" (l. 142, 170). The only moment that intimates that Saul undergoes an interfaith conversion is when Ananias says that in baptizing Saul, he receives him "into owr religion" (l.326). Yet as opposed to the first two stations, the third clearly invests Saul's conversion with confessional significance. Saul, for instance, explicitly differentiates between Judaism and Christianity when he speaks of "the religion /And templys of the Jues" and describes them as "very hedious" (ll. 584–85). Yet it is not the distinction between Christianity and Judaism that the play foregrounds. The third station is of a strong-anti-Catholic nature which, in the words of Hill-Vásquez, makes it possible to "interpret Paul's religious awakening […] as a proto-conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism."[42] She demonstrates that the added scenes are between twenty and fifty years newer than the main text and are therefore approximately contemporary with the writings of the early reformers.[43] For this reason, "Paul's conversion, along with the struggles between the old and the new faiths portrayed in the *Saint Paul*, could become for some reformists divinely sanctioned prefigurations of their own activities and beliefs."[44] A case in point is when the devil Belial refers to the priests Caiphas and Anna as "my busshopys" and "prelates" (l. 418, 419). Belial here "draws a parallel between Catholic religious authorities and diabolical forces that characterized the thinking of a number of Reformation advocates and Protestants who connected the overturning of Old Testament religion with the subversion of Catholicism."[45] For this reason, and because Churches often sold their clerical vestments to producers of plays during the Reformation, it is moreover likely that Caiphas and Anna were dressed in Catholic robes, and not, as Scherb suggests, in Jewish garments.[46]

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[41] There is one passage that could be referring to the notion of interfaith conversion, and is spoken by Ananias when he baptises Saul: "I cristen yow with mind full perfight, / Reseiving yow into *owr religion*" (ll. 325–26, my emphasis).

[42] Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players*, 60.

[43] Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players*, 54.

[44] Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players*, 53.

[45] Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players*, 55.

[46] Hill-Vásquez, *Sacred Players*, 57. Scherb, *Staging Faith*, 97.

It is important to note that the advent of the Reformation did not encourage all theatre producers to employ Paul's conversion for the Protestant cause. In his discussion of a mid-sixteenth-century Dutch version of the play, *De Bekeeringe Pauli* (*The Conversion of Paul*), Bart Ramakers argues that its primary goal was to bring its audience members to an expression of a personal relationship with God that is experienced inwardly.[47] Significantly, this purpose lacked the (proto-) Protestant ideology that we find in the English play. As Ramakers notes: "insofar as the playwright wanted to engage in propaganda, he did so for an attitude to faith that transcended contemporary religious controversy, and that, due to its intimate, individual nature, was not directly connected with, let alone dependent on, any theological persuasion, denomination, or church."[48]

The coexistence of spiritual and interfaith conversion in the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* can be explained by additions that were made during the Protestant Reformation. The portrayal of Paul's conversion in spiritual terms chimes with the interests of audiences before the Reformation. By the same token, the interpolated sections carry anti-Catholic overtones and include an explicit reference to Judaism. Indeed, the possibility of conceiving of Paul's change as a rejection of Jewish and adoption of Christian identity, an understanding that was not unheard of during the Middle Ages, provided reformers with a template that allowed them to construct tentative notions of Catholic and Protestant identity, perhaps even to picture them in an interfaith conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism. The next play that will be discussed, *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, shows that even a conversion which before the Reformation could *only* be interpreted in spiritual terms could serve as a model for the adoption of Protestant identity.

Mary Magdalene and Reformed Conversion in Lewis Wager's Morality

During the Middle Ages Mary Magdalene came to be known as an archetypical convert despite the absence of Biblical evidence. Scripture identifies her as the follower of Christ who was present at the crucifixion and burial, as well as the first to see Christ after his resurrection. In Luke 8 and Mark 16 Christ performs an exorcism on Mary, and casts seven demons out of her, an event which does

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[47] Bart Ramakers, "Sight and Insight: Paul as a Model of Conversion in Rhetoricians' Drama," *The Turn of the Soul: Representations of Religious Conversion in Early Modern Art and Literature*, ed. Lieke Stelling, Harald Hendrix and Todd M. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 341–72.

[48] Ramakers, "Sight and Insight," 368.

invoke the idea of a conversion, but resists a complete equation with it.[49] The late sixth-century pontiff Gregory the Great was the first to identify Mary Magdalene with, among others, the nameless woman in Matthew 26, Mark 14 and John 12, who venerates Christ by anointing his head with expensive perfume, and the repentant sinner who wets Christ's feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair, in Luke 7. It is this humble act of repentance that led Magdalene to be regarded as an exemplary convert, a paragon of "'hope and repentance' for all sinners," and it was Gregory's depiction of her that determined the cult of the Magdalen "for the entire Middle Ages and well beyond."[50]

In addition to Gregory's interpretation, *The Golden Legend* also contributed significantly to the dissemination of Mary's status as a repentant convert. This work portrays her as the embodiment of spiritual conversion:

> Mary is called Magdalene, which is understood to mean 'remaining guilty,' or it means armed, or unconquered, or magnificent. These meanings point to the sort of woman she was before, at the time of, and after her conversion. Before her conversion she remained in guilt, burdened with the debt of eternal punishment. In her conversion she was armed and rendered unconquerable by the armor of penance: she armed herself the best possible way – with all the weapons of penance – because for every pleasure she had enjoyed she found a way of immolating herself. After her conversion she was magnificent in the superabundance of grace, because where trespass abounded, grace was superabundant.[51]

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[49] Although exorcism does involve an obvious spiritual transformation from evil to good, the presence of evil is not so much part of a person's identity (which is the case for converts), as a separate and external entity, for instance the devil. What is more, an exorcism often renders a subject more passive than a conversion, which requires active repentance for former sins.

[50] Katherine Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35.

[51] De Voragine, *The Golden Legend,* 375. "[…] Magdalene is as moche to saye as abydyng culpable; or Magdalene is interpreted closed or shette, or not to be ouercomen, or ful of magnyficence. By whiche is shewed what she was to fore her conuersion, and what in her conuersion, and what after her conuersion. For to fore her conuersion she was abydyng gylty by oblygacion to euer lastyng payne; in the conuercion she was garnysshyd by armour of penaunce – she was in the best wyse garnysshed wyth penaunce, for as many delyces as she had in her, so many sacryfyses were founden in her – and after her conuersion she was praysed by ouer haboundaunce of grace, for where as synne habounded, grace ouer habounded, and was more, etc." David A. Mycoff, ed., *A Critical Edition of the Legend of Mary*

In the *vita* that follows Mary is described as a woman of rich stock and notorious for her lewd behaviour, "so much so that her proper name was forgotten and she was commonly called 'the sinner.'"[52] Having shown her devotion to Christ by wiping his feet and anointing his head, Mary is said to arrive in Marseilles after her expulsion from the Holy Land by unbelievers. She converts its people as well as the governor and his wife to Christianity. Mary herself spends thirty years as a hermit, devoid of food, but nourished with spiritual delights that she receives during her diurnal visits to heaven. After Mary's death, her relics are brought to a monastery at Vézelay in France. The story ends with accounts of miraculous healings and the forgivings of repentant sinners praying to Mary and visiting her tomb.

Medieval culture identified Mary Magdalene's spiritual transformation to a greater extent with repentance than Paul's conversion. As medieval contemporaries saw it, her contrition was specifically articulated in her humble and perceived feminine tending of Christ's body. According to their standards, her tears and hair, the two crucial physical components of her act of penitence, rendered Mary's reformation an essentially female conversion. Katherine Jansen notes that women were considered to be more prone to mystical experiences and penitential conversion because from a humoral perspective, their bodies were considered to be cold and wet and therefore more suitable to shed tears of remorse. These tears were thought to cleanse them simultaneously of their sins: "medieval science in the service of theology […] explains why Mary Magdalen, a woman, rather than Peter or Paul, penitents both, became the exemplar of perfect penance."[53] Moreover, both a means of female seduction and an instrument of repentance, Mary's long hair became a powerful emblem of her transformation from a wanton to a saint.

After the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene became the most important saint in England with more than 60 medieval hospitals, 172 parish churches and a college devoted to her, and her image was venerated in a wide range of cultural genres, including plays,[54] poetry, sermons and church art work.[55] As a convert in

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Magdalena from Caxton's Golden Legende *of 1483*, diss., Universität Salzburg, 1985, Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies 92.11 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1985)118, ll. 32–48.

[52] De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 375.

[53] Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 210–11.

[54] Among the works that featured characters who were modeled after Mary Magdalene we can include a large number of early modern plays that presented stories of reformed prostitutes. As Daniel Vitkus notes, these were particularly popular in the first decade of the

particular, the Magdalene figure had a special place in the discourse of the Protestant Reformation. In her study *The Maudlin Impression*, Patricia Badir writes that Mary Magdalene escaped the Protestant and post-Tridentine purge of the medieval cult of the saints because she was considered to be a biblical figure. She explains how the figure of Mary Magdalene functioned as a "site of memory," both to commemorate the medieval religious past and to "formulate the look and feel of English Protestantism."[56] Indeed, as the "examplar of perfect penance," Mary was a particularly suitable convert for the encapsulation of Protestant conversion doctrine. A case in point is the morality play *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* by Lewis Wager

A brief look at a pre-reformation dramatic version of Mary Magdalene's conversion allows us to understand how Wager adapted Mary's conversion to suit the agenda of reformers. One of the most popular plays about Mary appearing before Wager's work is the *Mary Magdalene* from the Digby manuscript. The Digby *Mary Magdalene* (*c.* 1480-1520) is like the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* a Medieval Saint play, both being the only surviving English examples of their genre.[57] *Mary Magdalene* presents the story of Mary's entire adult life until her peaceful death and portrays her conversion as an exemplum of spiritual conversion. It is the longest and most complex of the surviving Digby plays, interweaving three plots: the (minor) story of Tiberius Caesar, Pilate and Herod's mutual efforts to suppress the rebels against Roman paganism, Mary Magdalen's degeneracy induced by vices and devils and her subsequent conversion and exorcism by Christ in the house of Simon the Leper, and thirdly, Mary's missionary activities in Marseilles where she performs miracles and converts the king and queen (from paganism) to Christianity. Unlike their becoming "a Cristeyn," Mary's conversion is of a spiritual nature and virtually synonymous with the rejection of sin and repentance. As Mary puts it herself:

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seventeenth century and include Thomas Middleton's *Blurt, Master-Constable* (1602), *Michaelmas Terme* (1607), *Your Five Gallants* (1608), and *A Mad World, My Masters* (1608); Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Woman Hater* (1607); and Edward Sharpham's *The Fleer* (1607); John Marston's *Dutch Courtezan* (1605) and Thomas Dekker's *Honest Whore* (1604). *Daniel Vitkus, Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) 89. Since many of these plays are too far removed from the theme of *religious* conversion, I do not discuss them in this thesis.

[55] Patricia Badir, *The Maudlin Impression: English Literary Images of Mary Magdalene, 1550–1700* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 6, see also Jansen, 111.

[56] Badir, *The Maudlin Impression*, 3–4.

[57] Coldewey, "From Roman to Renaissance in Drama and Theatre," 54.

Grace to me [the Lord] wold never denye;
Thowe I were nevyr so sinful, he seyd, "*revertere*!"
O, I, sinful creature, to grace I woll aplye.
The oile of mercy hath helyd min[e] infirmité. (ll. 756–59, original emphasis)

Although it is not certain if the Digby *Mary Magdalene* served as a direct source for Lewis Wager's *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, the latter play is clearly a Reformation revision of the popular medieval Catholic saint play, like the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.[58] Wager's morality was probably first performed during the reign of Edward VI, which saw the establishment of Protestantism as a national religion. The play's portrayal of Mary's conversion is based on the conflation of Luke 7:36–50, where a woman named Mary washes Christ's feet with her tears when visiting the house of Simon the Pharisee, and Luke 8:1–3, which mentions Mary Magdalene, from whom Christ had exorcised seven devils.[59] Like the author of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Wager portrays Mary as a penitent prostitute. Yet *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* has an unmistakable Reformation agenda which is most apparent in its treatment of Mary's conversion, followed by her "perversion" by a number of Vices. Instead of a single and sudden turn to God, the conversion comprises different stages, each also personified by a Virtue. These Virtues, such as Repentance, Love and Iustification are presented in a way that confirms the teachings of Calvin as they can be found in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.[60]

Marie's process of conversion commences when she encounters the character of The Lawe, who confronts her with the notion of original sin and the reprobation of all offenders against God's will. A little later Knowledge of Synne also appears to side with The Lawe. Although Marie realizes that she will be

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[58] Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, patronage, and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 82. White adds that the Digby author, like Wager, based himself on the stories of Mary in Luke 7 and 8 (82). See also Patricia Badir, " 'To Allure vnto their loue': Iconoclasm and Striptease in Lewis Wager's *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*'" *Theatre Journal* 51.1 (1999): 1–20. Badir takes this notion as a starting point to investigate Wager's portrayal of Mary as in the words of Barthes " 'the dialectic between iconiphilia and iconophobia'" which is "now recognized as integral to the propagation of Protestant culture," (1).

[59] Lewis Wager, *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, ed. Frederic Ives Carpenter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904).

[60] For an overview of resemblances between passages of Wager's play and Calvin's *Institutes*, see White, "Lewis Wager's Life."

damned because of her profligacy, the effect of their words is bitter cynicism rather than a change of heart:

> If there be no more comfort in the lawe than this,
> I wishe that the lawe had never ben made.
> In God I see is small mercy and Iustice,
> To entangle men and snarle them in such a trade (ll. 1139–42)

The Lawe then explains to her that if she believes in the Messiah, her sins will be forgiven by him. Soon after this Christ appears to her in person and reiterates that there is still a path to salvation in the form of true repentance. In addition, Christ casts seven devils out of Marie. Certain of the saving power of God's grace, Marie prays for the consolidation of her still "waveryng and insufficient" faith (l. 1325). This is the moment the characters of Faith and Repentance make their appearance, clarifying that their virtues are "joyned continually" (l. 1388). Throughout these scenes the Vices interfere in the discussions and attempt to remove Marie from the sphere of influence of the Virtues, for instance by claiming that the term "man" in Scripture only applies to men and not to women, but their efforts are eventually in vain. The remaining part of the play is devoted to the well-known allegory in which Marie washes the feet of Christ, in Luke 7. Marie, now "sadly appareled" and asserting that she is "converted from hir impietie," expresses her sincere regret over her past behaviour (l. 1682). It is then indicated in the stage directions that Marie "doe[s] as it is specified in the Gospell;" she washes Christ's feet with her tears and anoints them with precious oil. After this, Christ declares that Marie's faith "hath saved [her]" (l. 1855). The play ends with declarations of faith by Marie, Justification and Love, the latter recapitulating the different stages of Marie's conversion.

The order in which the different Virtues appear strongly suggests a Reformed soteriology. To begin with, the play emphasizes God's vital role in the fulfillment of Old Testament law. As Christ explains,

> blessed are they, as the Prophete doth say,
> Whose sinnes are forgiven and covered by God's mercy;
> Not by the dedes of the lawe, as you thinke this day,
> But of God's good will, favour and grace, freely. (ll. 1832–34)

Also significant is that the characters of Faith and Repentance are presented to Marie by Christ *after* he has exorcised her and Marie has asserted her belief in the "omnipotent" God, asking him for help. As Paul White reminds us,

> faith and repentance, then, like the other spiritual benefits of regeneration, are not the causes, but rather the consequences of man's salvation. In accordance with Calvinist doctrine, they do not originate in man, but are bestowed on him by God.[61]

What is more, "while others in the Reformed tradition assumed that man must repent of sin before faith is possible, Wager, like Calvin, consistently places faith before repentance in the process of conversion."[62] Insisting on this strict sequence of spiritual virtues, Calvin underlined the more generally Protestant doctrine of man's complete dependence on God's grace for salvation. Marie explicitly confirms this when she says "O Lorde, without thy grace I do here confesse / That I am able to do nothyng at all" and "I am not able to doe sufficient penance, / Except thy grace, good Lord, do helpe me therto" (ll. 1379–80, 1701–2)

The Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, is expressed by the character of Christ when he tells Marie "thy faith hath saved thee." Moreover, Faith himself takes pains to avoid the impression that Mary acquired belief as a result of her own effort, stressing St. Augustine's assertion, which was revived in the Protestant Reformation, that faith "is the gyft of God" (l. 1395). The character of Justification, who appears after Faith and Repentance, claims: "it were a great errour for any man to beleve / That your love dyd deserve that Christ shold forgeve / Your synnes or trespasses, or any synne at all" (ll. 1973–75), and "by faith in Christ you have Justification / Frely of his grace, and beyond man's operation" (ll. 1997–98).

It is somewhat ironic that Marie's conversion is not only set off against her perversion in the first half of the play, but also against her changeability. Marie's instability is accentuated by the ease with which she is perverted, her trouble in accepting God's saving faith, but also by the Vices who time and again relate Mary's unsteady character to her female identity. According to Infidelity, "the promise of maidens" are "as stable as a weake leafe in the wynde; / Like as a small blast bloweth a feather away, / So a faire word truele chaungeth a maiden's mynd" (ll. 122–25), while elsewhere Malicious Iudgement asserts that "Women's heartes turne oft as doth the wynde" (1529). Although Marie's turn to God also implies (yet) another change of character, Wager counters the suggestion that she might relapse into impiety by presenting her conversion as a consolidation of faith. Thus, Repentance declares that "true repentance never turneth backe again" (l. 1375), and Marie's treatment of Christ's body is presented as proof of

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[61] White, "Lewis Wager's Life," 512.
[62] White, "Lewis Wager's Life," 512.

her sincerity. Moreover, the very Protestant suggestion that Marie's conversion is the work of God rather than herself adds to the idea that her change of heart is not the symptom of an inconstant character.

In discussing its transitionary characteristics, scholars have shown how *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* retains and reworks many features of the Saint play to convey a Protestant message. Like the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul*, the play can also be seen, however, as an early manifestation of a transition from spiritually to denominationally oriented conversion drama. The play presents Marie's spiritual conversion with a denominational purpose: to incite its audience to renounce Catholicism and internalize the Protestant faith. Although Catholicism and Protestantism are not explicitly named, various clues indicate that Marie's rejection of sin and turn to God form a conversion from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. For instance, the play opens on a "parody of the Catholic service" with Infidelitie chanting Latin phrases that audiences would have recognized as allusions to the Catholic mass.[63] The vices are also in other ways presented as Catholic enemies in other ways, since they are on good terms with bishops and priests; these clergymen, moreover, are consistently bracketed together with "pharisees" to make them appear even more disingenuous. Finally, and most importantly, Christ's evangelic message has strongly Calvinist overtones, while he himself is also portrayed as the bringer of Protestantism as the only true faith.

Conclusion

Spiritual conversion formed an intrinsic part of late medieval English culture. Often determined by monastic life, it meant to enter the monastery, to reject worldliness, as well as to reach deeper levels of spirituality while living according to the rule of a specific order. Like monasticism, the medieval theatre was closely identified with spiritual conversion and played an important role in the way it was perceived. It did so by staging the reformations of characters and by aiming at the spiritual edification of its audiences. Spectators witnessed spiritual and sometimes interfaith transformations of ordinary people, but particularly popular were the lives of Paul of Tarsus and Mary Magdalene – figures whose conversions were widely honoured in medieval culture. While stage conversions offered entertainment, they also served to provoke conversions in audiences. Since spectators were Christians to begin with, this can best be considered as, in the words of Lisa Lampert, "bringing the audience to a fuller,

[63] Ives Carpenter, *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, 89 (note 2–4).

deeper, renewed belief in Christian truths."[64] The three plays that I have discussed in closer detail give us clues as to how they could have furthered this aim. Conversions did not only constitute the climax of dramatic narratives, they were also presented as spectacles of wonder, thus eliciting immediate emotional responses from the audience that were aimed at triggering their spiritual reformations. In addition, plays caused audiences to physically reenact stage conversions by inviting them to take part in (church) processions and move between places that correspond with different stages of characters' conversions. Finally, reformation plays presented spiritual conversions in ideological terms, thereby encouraging audiences to internalize reformed values and beliefs.

While *The Play of the Sacrament*, the Digby *Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* are clear examples of medieval and reformation drama for the reasons mentioned above, each of these plays contains elements that are typical of Elizabethan and later conversion drama. The earliest of the three, *The Play of the Sacrament* anticipates a development that will be discussed in the chapters six and seven: the reluctance of playwrights to suggest that religious identity is transferable by presenting interfaith conversion as radical change of faith. Thus, unlike the play's spiritual convert, the Christianized Jews are not allowed to become members of a Christian community, but forced to live a roaming life. The strong interest of early modern playwrights in interfaith conversion at the expense of its spiritual variant is heralded in *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*. Both works adapt spiritual conversions to push a reformist agenda, and in doing so they portray these changes as proto-conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism. The next chapter looks in detail at the way in which reformers appropriated spiritual conversion and how they defined precisely the theatre as its negative inversion.

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[64] Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference*, 102.