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Religious conversion in early modern English drama

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CHAPTER 4 'Licentious Religion' and Nostalgia: Dramatic Responses to the Erosion of Spiritual Conversion

In the epistle dedicatory to his translation of Luis de Granada's *A Memoriall of a Christian Life*, the Catholic exile Richard Hopkins (c. 1546- c.1596) complains about Protestant reformers who "have maliciously endeavoured, by procuring Schismatical innovations in Religion in divers Countreys of Christendom [...] to found a new devised politik licentious Religion, consisting of manyfould different sectes."¹ These sects, Hopkins asserts, "are not ashamed openlie to protest, that their doctrine is to professe and use divers variable formes of Government of their new Churches, in every Countrey and State, conformable to the divers, and several variable formes of Government, used in every Commonwealth in Christendome."² This emergence of different denominations and mingling of religion with political affairs could only result in endless religious instability; these new sects "shallbe evermore tottering, & wavering, in altering, & changing, diversly, & variably, the formes of governement of their Churches, in every Countrey, and State [...]."³

In this description of what he sees as a "corrupted age," Hopkins argues that the Protestant faith, in all its "divers variable formes" has become interchangeable with national politics. Hopkins's concern was met with similar anxieties by Protestants who, accusing Catholics of political scheming, engaged in denominational politics with equal zeal. He was not alone in his fear that faith was tainted by political interests either. The religious polemics triggered by the Protestant and Catholic reformations made it increasingly difficult for early moderns to perceive of faith in impartial and purely spiritual terms. Despite the fact that early moderns contributed to this development themselves by lashing out against confessional enemies, the undermining effect of religious politicization on spiritual devotion did not go unnoticed. It is significant, for instance, that Hopkins's epistle was composed as an appendix to his translation of Granada's guide to spiritual piety and conversion. As I have explained in chapter two, Granada's spiritual writings lacked polemical language and were embraced by Catholics and Protestants alike. By translating and commending

¹ Richard Hopkins, "The Translatours Dedicatory Epistle" in Luis De Granada, *A Memoriall of a Christian Life wherein are treated all such thinges, as appertaine vnto a Christian to doe, from the beginning of his conuersion, vntill the end of his perfection* (S. Omers: 1625) 3-31, 6-7.

² Hopkins, "The Translatours Dedicatory Epistle," 7.

³ Hopkins, "The Translatours Dedicatory Epistle," 7.

Granada's guide, Hopkins attempted to rescue what he saw as true Christianity from the realm of factional politics.

Dramatists, too, responded to the politicization of religion. The ways in which they did so become particularly clear in their treatment of conversion. Most obviously, from the 1580s onwards, playwrights began to lose interest in spiritual conversion and started to focus on its interfaith variant. It is significant, however, that spiritual conversion did not disappear entirely from the stage. As this chapter will show, depictions of spiritual conversion that we find occasionally in drama until 1642 reveal a wistful longing for a pre-Reformation past of what was construed as honest and simple religiosity. In addition, they suggest that this nostalgia arose from the contemporary climate of religious politicization and polarization, which stripped faith of its spiritual content and turned it into an instrument of secular power.

The same stagings of spiritual conversion differ significantly from those in morality drama (discussed in the previous chapter) in that conversion was now marginalized and no longer presented in terms of a failed attempt or an unattainable goal. These changes can be explained by the fact that the new and commercial form of drama, that emerged after the first public theatres were opened in the 1570s, required a less didactic approach to matters of spiritual faith. Examined in the previous chapter, *Doctor Faustus* (1592) is an illustrative example of this new theatre in that it abandons religious moralism. At the same time, Marlowe's tragedy is the last work that revolves around spiritual conversion and investigates its theological significance. Indeed, in works performed during and after the last decade of the sixteenth century, spiritual conversions generally take place offstage, are relegated to subplots, used as plot devices rather than key themes, or spiritual conversion is only alluded to in the form of imagery. As a plot device, it is always conceived of as successful and employed precisely for its celebratory, marvellous and redemptive qualities. It is presented as an unnamed and mysterious force that makes for unexpected plot twists, for instance to arrive at romantic and happy endings for wicked characters. Contrary to what we saw in morality plays, spiritual conversion is thus not used to explain faith or to address theological concerns, but applied as a solution to – often secular – problems. A particularly illustrative example is Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599), but we find similar portrayals of conversion in a variety of other works, including James Shirley's *The Witty Fair One* (1628) and *The Traitor* (1631), and William Habington's tragicomedy *The Queen of Aragon* (1640). While all of these plays, to various degrees, dissociate spiritual and theological content from religion, this development is particularly well illustrated in the common metaphorical use of spiritual conversion. This was

often used to define aspects of romantic love, but some dramatists also evince an awareness that this usage involved an erosion of religious meaning.

The same playwrights who use conversion as a joyful plot resolution also present it as the adoption of a hermit's life of solitude and sobriety, and associate it with the spectacle of medieval drama that functioned to engender spiritual conversions of audiences. In this way, they betray a longing for the past of their parents and grandparents that they imaginatively reconstruct as a time when conversions were not yet politicized and were still chiefly determined by spiritual interests. Indeed, the theatrical use of or allusions to spiritual conversion in this period must be seen as sudden eruptions of "old-fashioned" belief in a religious landscape dominated by vitriolic polemical debates. A work that elucidates this point further, but defies the unproblematic portrayal of spiritual conversion that we find in *As You Like It*, is John Webster's tragedy *The White Devil* (1612). With its treatment of conversion, *The White Devil* touches an open nerve of early modern English religion. Rather than playing off different denominations against each other, it registers how spiritual faith and conversion, turned into rhetorical devices and into profane means of unjust oppression, lose their religious significance. By presenting male characters as manipulators of faith and women as its defenders, and by associating women with oppressed and marginalized religion, Webster's tragedy, moreover, acutely depicts the marginalization of spiritual conversion as a social problem.

As You Like It

Shakespeare's *As You Like It* presents spiritual conversion in a way that is typical of its marginalized portrayal in contemporary and later drama. Although there are two important figures who convert, the conversions themselves are sketchy and strikingly uncomplicated in comparison with those of late medieval and reformation stage characters. This is due to the fact that they carry hardly any theological significance; the change is straightforwardly from evil to good. The malignancy of the first convert, the wicked son of the deceased Sir Rowland the Boys, Oliver, manifests itself in denying his brother Orlando his rightful patrimony. At the moment of his conversion, his wickedness is represented by a serpent and a lioness preying on his sleeping body.⁴ When Orlando sees that his

⁴ As John K. Hale, notes, the lion and the serpent were traditional symbols of evil that originated from Psalm 91 verse 13: "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet." Hale furthermore writes that "just as the deceitful snake recalls Oliver's earlier duplicities, so the fight becomes Orlando's struggle

brother is in danger, he fights the lioness with his bare hands to save him. Impressed by the fact that Orlando did not take just revenge on his brother, Oliver experiences a change of heart. This event is not acted out, but recounted by Oliver himself, who explains his experience as a “conversion,” and an awakening “from miserable slumber” (4.3.135, 131).

Oliver’s spiritual transformation foreshadows the similarly uncomplicated change of the usurper, Duke Frederick. This character sets the plot in motion by banishing the play’s protagonists from the court. Like Oliver’s, Duke Frederick’s reformation is not staged. In an unexpected announcement at the end of the play, it is divulged that the Duke, having conversed with “an old religious man” (5.4.149), “was converted / Both from his enterprise and from the world” (5.4.150-1), to have “put on a religious life / And thrown into neglect the pompous court” (5.4.170-71). Oliver’s conversion in particular has Biblical echoes and resonates with Christian conversion language. As Marjorie Garber notes, “Oliver’s ‘conversion’ accords with the Christian doctrine of salvation; like the late-arriving laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16).”⁵ In addition, Oliver describes his regeneration as something “sweetly tast[ing]” (4.3.136), a way of capturing the experience of turning to Christ through a proper understanding of the Gospel that we typically find in the writings of reformers.⁶ In addition, John K. Hale observes that the biblical significance of Oliver’s conversion is anticipated in the brief allusion to the Prodigal Son (1.1.32).⁷

Nevertheless, the conversions of both Oliver and Duke Frederick lack any soteriological complications, for instance in the form of the concerns over predestination that we find in conversion moralities. As such, they act out a fantasy of reformation that first and foremost enables the play’s festive ending. In Oliver’s case it paves the way for his marriage to the friend of the play’s heroine, Celia; in Duke Frederick’s it serves to enhance the comedic celebration

with his own natural anger towards Oliver.” John K. Hale, “Snake and Lioness in *As You Like It*, IV.iii,” *Notes and Queries*, 47.1 (2000): 79.

⁵ Marjorie Garber, “The Education of Orlando,” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: As You Like It*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publications, 2004) 58-72, 68.

⁶ See Peter Marshall, “Evangelical Conversion in the Reign of Henry VIII,” *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 14-37, for a discussion of how early modern reformers used the notion of sensual “sweetness” to capture the experience of understanding the Gospel and turning to Christ (25-27). Marshall, writes, for instance, that “in his account of the early career of Martin Luther, Foxe noted that those hearing his sermons ‘received good taste of this sweet doctrine’ and began to understand the difference between the law and the gospel” (26).

⁷ Hale, “Snake and Lioness,” 79.

of reconciliation.⁸ The straightforwardness of the reformations confirms, moreover, the pastoral significance of the Forest of Arden as a space that guides and takes care of the soul.

What adds to the fanciful, romantic nature of the conversions in *As You Like It* is the fact that they are presented as radical transformations of character. Duke Frederick, who is chiefly known as the usurper of his brother's dukedom converts by rejecting the court and every aspect of life that is associated with it. Oliver, whose wickedness is defined by his spiteful maltreatment of Orlando, comes to love his brother. This is something he moreover explains as a change of person. When Celia asks him if he really is Orlando's malicious brother, he cryptically answers "'Twas I but 'tis not I" (4.3.134). This emphasis on the transformative nature of Oliver's conversion chimes with the metamorphic imagery and Ovidian allusions that permeate the play.⁹

Conversion and Nostalgia

Critics have argued that many early moderns felt nostalgia for the monastic religious culture of their ancestors, a sense famously captured in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73": "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."¹⁰ English monasticism was largely destroyed by Henry VIII, who passed his first act to dissolve the monasteries in 1536. Yet just as the (ruined) buildings and foundations of the friaries and convents continued to define the English landscape, monastic meanings of conversion were preserved in early modern discourse of conversion. We have seen in chapter two, for instance, that Benedict's insistence on conversion as a continuous process and mode of life returned as a key theme in Protestant conversion sermons. In addition to this, playwrights continued to celebrate the exchange of a worldly life for the pursuit of spiritual holiness in drama.

⁸ Duke Frederick's moment of sudden spiritual enlightenment is, in this respect, faintly echoed in *The Tempest*, where Caliban, in his last speech, regrets his mistake of worshipping Stefano and Trinculo as idols and reveals his intention to "seek for grace" (5.1.299-301).

⁹ See for a discussion of conversion in relation to metamorphosis in this play, Alan Brissenden, introduction, *As You Like It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1-86, 18-23.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Peter Milward, *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) 78; Eamon Duffy, "Bare Ruined Choirs: Remembering Catholicism in Shakespeare's England," *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 40-57; and Arthur F. Marotti, "Shakespeare and Catholicism," in Dutton, Findlay and Wilson, *Theatre and Religion*, 218-41, 228.

Both *As You Like It* and William Habington's tragicomedy *The Queene of Aragon* include a nostalgic glance at the past by staging a liberating embrace of eremitic solitude. In the first work, the spiritual conversion of Duke Frederick is emphatically portrayed as something of a bygone day. It is provoked by a conversation with an "old religious man," an image that evokes former times because of the use of the word "old," and because the figure in question is suggestive of a hermit or a monk. This idea is heightened by the Duke who is said to have "put on a religious life" – a phrase that conjures up the image of putting on the habit. As Arthur Marotti observes, the mysterious religious man "recalls the older Marian clergy in hiding in the Warwickshire of Shakespeare's youth."¹¹ Significantly, *As You Like It* not only invites comparison between Oliver and the Duke's conversion, but embeds the Duke's life-changing encounter with the alleged hermit in a framework of similar stories that elicit new conversions. Thus, the Duke's reformation is foreshadowed in the remark of Rosalind, here posing as Ganymede, to Orlando that she was "taught to speak" like a courtier by an "old religious uncle" (3.2.311-312). It was the same uncle, Ganymede asserts, who instructed him to cure a man's love by driving him "from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness, which was to forswear the full stream of the world and to live in a nook merely monastic" (3.2.373-75). At the end of the play, when the characters are informed of the Duke's sudden spiritual withdrawal from the world, Jacques not only expresses his esteem for the Duke's spiritual turn, but suggests that it is worth imitating – "To him will I. Out of these convertites / There is much matter to be heard and learned (5.4.173-74). Jacques confirms his determination when he announces that he will follow in Duke Frederick's footsteps by taking up lodgings in the "abandoned cave" that had been used by the benevolent brother of Duke Frederick, Duke Senior (5.4.185). It is significant that it is Jacques who is portrayed as a potential convert, as he is presented as the most contemplative character of the play, reflecting on the follies of the courtly life. While Duke Frederick and Oliver's regenerations are presented as transformations from evil to good, Jacques's desire for reclusion identifies spiritual conversion with a spiritual homecoming. Indeed, as the play's melancholic outcast, Jacques is going to join what might turn into a community of kindred spirits. In this way, his spiritual conversion is a form of continuation and, as such, in line with Benedict's understanding of the monastic life, discussed in chapter one.

¹¹ Marotti, "Shakespeare and Catholicism," 228. See also Milward, *Shakespeare's Religious Background*, 37.

Around forty years after *As You Like It* was first performed, William Habington presented his tragicomedy *The Queen of Aragon*, that carries some striking (verbal) echoes of Shakespeare's depiction of spiritual conversion. Decastro, the general of Aragon, is said to have vowed to "Forsake the flattered pompe and businesse of / The faithlesse world."¹² After a reversion to old habits, he reconverts and reports the reconversion of his friend Ossuna, who, at the time, made the same declaration. Part of the play's closure involves a return to this vow and both pledge to "observe [it] religiously" (sig. I2v). Like Jacques, Decastro announces that he desires to live in a cavern: "To a Cave / Some undiscover'd Cave, to which no path / Doth leade the wandring Lover, I have vowed / The remnant of my dayes" (sig. I2v). What is more, like the Duke's conversion, that of Decastro immediately proves contagious, inspiring Florentio, general of the forces of Castile, to follow his example: "A strange conversion, / And 'twill behoove my fate to follow him" (sig. I2v).

Another way in which dramatists revived spiritual conversion as experienced by their ancestors was by associating it with spectacle. As I have shown in chapter one, in miracle and saint plays, the spectacle of wonders and miraculous conversions served as theatrically self-conscious devices to exhort audiences to turn away from sin or to internalize Reformed faith. Shakespeare, in *As You Like It* and James Shirley, in *The Witty Fair One* and *The Traitor*, allude to this practice by showing that spiritual reformation is caused by a miraculous experience. More specifically, they stage characters who convert after a formidable confrontation with mortality, such as Shakespeare's Oliver who suddenly repents of his cruelty after his narrow escape from death.¹³

The Witty Fair One not only employs death to provoke conversion, but presents it as a doubly meta-theatrical device. That is to say, it *stages the staging* of a death spectacle to induce conversion. This event is part of the subplot and of a hoax played on Fowler, a young libertine and the fiancé of the virtuous Penelope. The latter desires Fowler's reformation because she has good reason to suspect that Fowler will fail to remain faithful to her when they are married. Assisted by her friends, Penelope provokes the conversion of her profligate lover by means of a trick in which everybody pretends that Fowler has died. Before his own

¹² William Habington, *The Queene of Arragon*, London, 1640, sig. H2r.

¹³ In her article on Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*, a play featuring interfaith conversion between Christianity and Paganism, Holly Crawford Pickett shows that this spectacular dramatic representation of conversion is not restricted to plays that strictly feature spiritual conversion only. Holly Crawford Pickett, "Dramatic Nostalgia and Spectacular Conversion in Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*" *SEL* 49.1 (2009): 437-462.

funeral service begins, Fowler reads the elegies written for him and hears Penelope encouraging his reformation. She does so by hypothesizing out loud what his conversion would involve – aware that Fowler overhears her:

But wert thou now live againe with us
And that by miracle thy soule should with thy
Body have second marriage, I beleeve
Thou woo'dst study to keepe it a chast Temple, holy
Thoughts like fumes of sacred incense hovering
About this heart, then thou wo'dst learne to be
Above thy frailties, and resist the flatteries of
Smooth-fac'd lust.¹⁴

The trick comes to an end when Penelope no longer pretends Fowler is dead and tells him that he is only “dead” to her if he does not profess his true love for her by reforming his life:

Y'are dead to virtue, to all noble thoughts
And till the prooffe of your conversion
To piety winne my faith, you are to me
Without all life [...]. (sig. J4r)

This prompts Fowler to convert as well as propose to Penelope: “revive me in my thoughts / And I will love as thou hast taught me nobly / And like a husband” (sig. J5v).

While both *As You Like It* and *The Witty Fair One* use conversion for comedic purposes and the latter presents it, and even its trigger of death, with a great deal of playfulness, James Shirley demonstrates in *The Traitor* that spiritual conversion was no less appropriate for tragedy.¹⁵ Indeed, *The Traitor* fully exploits the dramatic overtones of a near-suicide that sparks the conversion of the wicked and lecherous Duke of Florence. The Duke, in love with Amidea, the sister of the quick-tempered Sciarrha, has agreed with Sciarrha to meet Amidea in her apartment. Sciarrha's initial purpose was to kill the Duke, but Amidea promises her brother that she will deal with the Duke in a way that will save his life. When the Duke attempts to rape Amidea, she draws a poniard, but instead of striking him, she wounds her own arm, warning him that she will kill herself.

¹⁴ James Shirley, *The Wittie Faire One: A Comedie* (London, 1633), Sig. J3r.

¹⁵ James Shirley, *The Traitor*, ed. John Stewart Carter (London: Edward Arnold, 1965).

Amidea thus becomes a Christ-like figure, willing to sacrifice herself to redeem the sins of another person. She tells the Duke that the wound she intends to inflict upon herself will “weep” for him, and, “extol” her death if it “may teach [the Duke] to correct [his] blood” (3.3.101-3). Upon this the Duke immediately repents: “I am sorry, sorry from my soul” (3.3.109), begging Amidea for mercy: “Again I ask Forgiveness. / In thy innocence, I see / My own deformity” (3.3.119-21). Afterwards, various characters refer to this moment as the Duke’s “conversion.”¹⁶

Conversion as Dramatic Imagery

In addition to staging it as a (sub)plot device, late Elizabethan and later dramatists also relied on spiritual conversion as a trope. Numerous works testified and added to the extraordinary expressiveness of spiritual conversion by deploying it in a figurative sense. Yet this use is also telling of the marginal position of spiritual conversion in drama, as well as its theological erosion. Its frequent appearance in metaphors and similes teaches us that spiritual conversion had become a natural part of early modern English vocabulary, but in this way spiritual conversion was often only briefly mentioned and no longer highlighted and explored as a component of dramatic action. It was, moreover, stripped of much of its complex theological significance and reduced to a vehicle to illuminate or convey a secular tenor.

The secular concept most commonly described in terms of spiritual conversion was romantic love. The overwhelming emotions generated by the yearning for a lover, or promises of faithfulness were powerfully expressed in terms of a complete and unconditional submission to what was perceived as a divine Other. A case in point is presented by Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), who finally learns that she can marry the object of her infatuation, Bassanio. After Bassanio has qualified himself to become Portia’s husband by choosing the right casket in a contest, Portia says of herself and to Bassanio in joy:

¹⁶ In *Staging the Old Faith: Queen Henrietta Maria and the Theatre of Caroline England, 1625-164* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), Rebecca A. Bailey interprets the play, and particularly its language and “image of regicide” in the light of the perceived threat of (recusant) Catholics. In the Duke’s conversion by Amidea after she has threatened to kill herself, Bailey notes, “Shirley stages the possibility of displaying loyalty to both temporal and spiritual rulers” (99).

Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted. (3.2.163-67)

Portia employs the idea of spiritual conversion not only in her explicit use of the verb "to convert" but also by asserting that her "spirit" "commits itself" to the authority of "her lord, her governor, her king." As M.M. Mahood reminds us, the last three words are also uttered by Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* when she makes her well-known plea for the submission of women in matrimony (5.2.142).¹⁷ Mahood adds that "the Elizabethans would have approved [this line] with a text: 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord' (Eph. 5.22, BB)."¹⁸

The identification of religious faith with love was itself not new. Indeed, by using spiritual conversion to describe secular love, playwrights inverted a common practice of capturing conversion in amorous terms. As we have seen in chapter one, in Lewis Wager's *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* (c. 1550-1566) the character named Love plays a crucial role in Marie's elaborate conversion process, emerging "as a testification / Of God's mercy and her justification."¹⁹ In addition, Peter Marshall observes that in the early years of the English Reformation, the description of conversion experience was "often sensual, somatic, sometimes even sexual in its emphasis."²⁰ As examples he mentions the courtier George Zouche, who "was reported to be '[...] ravished with the spirit of God' upon reading a copy of Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man*," and Archbishop Cranmer, who "spoke of the need to 'allure men to embrace the doctrine of the gospel.'"²¹ The Church of England clergyman Thomas Cooper (1569/70–1626) described true conversion and the best way to persevere in it with an extended metaphor of romantic love. In his meaningfully entitled treatise *The Converts First Love Discerned, Justified, Left, Recovered* he précised conversion as falling in love, out of love and then recuperating this first love so as to make it stronger:

¹⁷ M.M. Mahood, ed. *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 120.

¹⁸ Mahood, *The Merchant of Venice*, 120.

¹⁹ Lewis Wager, *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, ed. Frederic Ives Carpenter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904) II. 2047-48.

²⁰ Marshall, "Evangelical Conversion," 25.

²¹ Marshall, "Evangelical Conversion," 25.

every convert hath a first love, that is, when God hath revealed his love unto him in Christ, and by the spirit of God, it is *shed abroad in his heart*, then is the heart of a sinner inflamed to love God againe, then is it enlarged with joy unspeakable and glorious.²²

Like Zouche, Cooper did not shun sexual metaphors, conceiving of conversion also as “being ravished with the sweetnesse of the love of Christ.”²³

Some playwrights who used the conversion-as-being-in-love metaphor did not simply reverse it, but showed an awareness of the problematic nature of this inversion, too. In Thomas Heywood’s comedy *The Fayre Mayde of the Exchange* (1601-2), for instance, a character who is madly in love is scorned by his brother for worshipping a woman instead of God:

A man as free as aire, or the Sunnes raies,
As boundlesse in his function as the heavens,
The male and better part of flesh and blood,
In whom was powrde the quintessence of reason,
To wrong the adoration of his Maker,
By worshipping a wanton female skirt,
And making Love his Idoll: fie dotard, fie,
I am ashamde of this apostacie.²⁴

Indeed, for this character, loving a woman constitutes a mirror image of true faith and resembles the lapse into pagan idolatry. A more subtle critical commentary on the identification of conversion with romantic love can be found in Portia’s declaration of love that was quoted above: “Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted.” Perceptive members of Shakespeare’s audience would have appreciated the meaning of conversion as an economic transaction, too.²⁵ This serves as the play’s ironical comment on Bassanio’s

²² Thomas Cooper, *The Converts First Love Discerned, Iustified, Left, and Recouered* (London: F. Kingston, 1610) 13.

²³ Cooper, *The Converts First Love*, 14.

²⁴ Thomas Heywood, *The Fayre Mayde of the Exchange* (London: 1607) sig. C3v.

²⁵ The OED registers 1607, after the first publication of *The Merchant of Venice*, as the first time when “conversion” is used in a monetary sense. That is, as a “substitution of or exchange for something else; esp. of one kind of property for another. spec. The change of an issue of public securities, of bonds, debentures, stocks, shares, etc., into another of different character, or with an altered (generally reduced) rate of interest.” “Conversion, n.” def. 3.16,

prevailing interest in Portia's wealth, as well as Portia's own inability to express her love in terms other than of finance. Indeed, Portia's announcement of her figurative conversion is anticipated in the same speech by her metaphorical transformation into a sum of money: "I would be trebled twenty times myself, / A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich, / That only to stand high in your account" (3.2.153-55). Thus, although the religious meaning of conversion invests Portia's loving submission to Bassanio with exalting spiritual significance, this process is simultaneously undermined by the monetary echoes, resonating throughout her speech, that reduce Portia to her worldly possessions. This emptying out of the meaning of religious conversion is presented and explored as a key problem in John Webster's tragedy *The White Devil*.

The White Devil

The White Devil is a highly acerbic commentary on what the play presents as early modern manipulations of faith. Its story is based on Italian accounts of a real-life scandalous liaison of a Duke and a gentlewoman in Rome and its bloody outcome, which took place thirty years before the play was first performed. The plot revolves around the secret love affair between the Venetian Lady Vittoria Corombona and the Duke of Brachiano which leads to a series of retaliations started off by Brachiano's wife Isabella. An inherent part of this tale of passion and violent revenge is the unscrupulous exploitation of faith for political ends, something that is particularly well expressed in its portrayal of spiritual conversion.

While *The White Devil* does not stage any conversions, the issue is explored in three particular instances. In the first, the married couple Brachiano and Isabella use conversion imagery to withdraw their love from each other; in the second, conversion marks the climax of a trial scene where the accused Vittoria is sentenced to confinement in the local house of "convertites;" and, in the third, two murderous characters pose as capuchin monks and are aided by a third conspirator who invents for them a personal history that is saturated with

OED Online, March 2013, Oxford University Press. 31 March 2013, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40773?redirectedFrom=conversion>>. Still, the verb "to convert," and its cognates were used in a non-religious sense to describe a turn or change, before and during the early modern period. It is for this reason, as well as the fact that Portia refers to the conversion of her property – "what is mine" – that we can interpret her use of the term "convert" as part of the economic imagery interspersed in her speech.

sham conversions. What these three cases have in common is that they point to the erosion of religious significance in spiritual conversion, as well as the politicizing of faith, something that is also underlined in several of the characters' comments on religion in general. What is more, the tragedy confirms and illustrates the erosion of an apolitical theological conception of faith in its depiction of female characters. The most prominent victims of the subversion and manipulation of faith, the women are also shown to fight this abuse. Although they are unable to win this battle, these female acts of resistance mark the rhetorical and dramatic culminations of the play. This not only turns the tragedy into a polyphonic comment on developments in early modern religion; it also effectively thematizes the marginalization of spiritual faith at the expense of religious politics, by associating this marginalization with the suppression of women.

In a discussion about their marriage Brachiano and Isabella give yet another turn to the above love-as-conversion metaphor, a twist that is indicative of a general corruption of faith that pervades the society of *The White Devil*. Having first falsely accused her of adultery, Brachiano informs his chaste and devout wife Isabella that he does not love her anymore and uses apostasy imagery to explain his point. In a scene that can best be described as a perversion of a marriage vow, Brachiano swears on her wedding ring that he will "ne'er lie" with her (2.1.195).²⁶ He means that he will no longer share the marital bed, but the word "lie" also suggests that Brachiano, by sleeping with her, has only *pretended* to love his wife. When Isabella protests, Brachiano claims that her love for him prevents her from recognizing the truth:

Let not thy love
Make thee an unbeliever. This my vow
Shall never on my soul be satisfied
With my repentance. (2.1.200-4)

Brachiano ironically suggests that Isabella's love for her husband, ratified in a marriage vow, clouds her judgment and even turns her into an "unbeliever," because she is unable to understand that he has chosen not sleep with her anymore, a decision he frames as the Christian Truth.

Isabella, however, is unwilling to be victimized. In an unexpected change of character, she dramatically takes control of the situation by declaring that she will take on a male role and "make [herself] the author of [Brachiano's] cursed

²⁶ John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. Christina Luckyj (London: Methuen, 2008).

vow" (2.1.216-17). She does so in the presence of her brother Francisco, the Duke of Florence, by declaring never to sleep again with her husband, and by scornfully echoing Brachiano's words:

Let not my former dotage
Make thee an unbeliever; this my vow
Shall never on my soul be satisfied
With my repentance: *manet alta mente repostum*. (2.1.259-62)

The Latin phrase – "it shall be treasured up in the depths of my mind" – from Virgil's *Aeneid* (1.26), betrays her repressed anger.²⁷ This anger is not only directed at double standards that allow men more freedom in marriage but also at their capacity for brutality, making her desire to be a man herself: "O that I were a man, or that I had power / To execute my apprehended wishes, / I would whip some with scorpions" (2.1.242-44). Nevertheless, with a pun on her radical conversion, her brother Francisco, who considers husbands' acts of adultery "slight wrongs," considers her a "foolish," "mad" and "jealous" woman: "What? Turned fury?" (2.1.263-4, 244). By turning the metaphorical use of conversion inside out and upside down, Brachiano, Isabella and Francisco prefigure the debasement and exploitation of religion that will dominate the action in the rest of the play, including Vittoria's show trial.

Like Isabella, Vittoria is falsely accused of sexual license, in this case of prostitution, and like Isabella, Vittoria defiantly re-appropriates the discourse of spiritual conversion that is employed to silence her. After having encouraged Brachiano to kill Isabella and her own husband Camillo, so that they can enjoy a life together, Vittoria is arrested for murder. In addition, she is accused of being a whore, an allegation that is never substantiated and exposes the sexism that is deeply ingrained in the Roman society of the play. Vittoria expresses her anger at this, like Isabella, by adopting a male form of aggression. Alluding to Perseus' heroic and "masculine" deed of cutting off Medusa's head, she notes:

[...] my modesty
And womanhood I tender; but withal
So entangled in a cursed accusation
That my defence, of force, like Perseus
Must personate masculine virtue to the point. (3.2.132-36)

²⁷ The translation is from Luckyj, ed. *The White Devil*, 40.

Although there is no evidence against her, the misogynist cardinal Monticelso sentences her unto a “house of convertites,” adding that it is a house “for penitent whores” (3.2.264, 267). Webster’s audiences were probably familiar with this institution. According to Christina Luckyj, they may have been reminded of Bridewell, the “Jacobean London [...] ‘house of correction’ for reformed prostitutes;” in addition, it was suggested in a contemporary report translated by John Florio that the historical Vittoria was “put into a monasterie of Nunnes.”²⁸ The house of convertites has its roots in a long tradition of female repentance and conversion that came to be personified by the figure of Mary Magdalene.²⁹ *The White Devil* shows how its institutionalization has a corrupting effect on repentance as conversion. It signals, for instance, the unstable distinction between the sinfulness and saintliness of the women living in the institution (an ambiguity that is also exploited by Hamlet when he urges Ophelia to enter a “nunnery”). Vittoria uses this point against the court authorities when she sarcastically asks if the place was established by the “noblemen in Rome” for “their wives” (3.2.67-68). In addition, the cardinal presents the house in a way that subverts the essence of spiritual conversion as a form of repentance, since Vittoria is forced to become penitent for a crime she has not committed. To emphasize this wrong, she depicts her conviction by the cardinal as his “rape” of “Justice” (3.2.274). Just before she is taken away, Vittoria realizes that inner conviction is her only weapon against institutionalized injustice, and announces her plan to reinvest the house of convertites with spiritual truth with the force of her religious conscience:

It shall not be a house of convertites.
My mind shall make it honester to me
Than the Pope’s palace, and more peaceable
Than thy soul, though thou art a cardinal (3.2.289-92)

This passage, that is literally at the centre of the plot and determines the tragedy’s moral climax, contains two major detrimental consequences of the awareness of the politicization of faith in post-Reformation England: a perceived loss of sincerity and of peacefulness. These consequences are further explored in the denouement of the plot.

The fifth act includes the most blatant case of religious corruption that, eventually, leads to the brutal deaths of all of the surviving major characters. The

²⁸ Christina Luckyj, ed. *The White Devil*, note to 3.2.164.

²⁹ See chapter one for a discussion of Mary Magdalene as a figure of conversion.

Count Lodovico and his friend Gasparo disguise themselves as Capuchin monks as part of a scheme to murder Brachiano and Vittoria. The bitter cynicism of their crime is underscored by their co-conspirator Flamineo, who provides Brachiano's officer with an account of their supposed religious careers.³⁰ Flamineo relates that the two were Hungarian noblemen and commanders who,

contrary to the expectation of the court entered into religion, into the strict order of the Capuchins: but being not well settled in their undertaking they left their order and returned to court: for which being after troubled in conscience, they vowed their service against the enemies of Christ; went to Malta; were there knighted; and in their return back, at this great solemnity, they are resolved for ever to forsake the world, and settle themselves here in a house of Capuchins in Padua. (5.1.13-22)

Flamineo portrays Lodovico and Gasparo as conscientious monks in order to convince their hosts of their sincerity and peaceful intentions. Their alleged spiritual purity is also suggested in the name of the monastic order they have entered, as the Capuchin order was founded to re-establish St. Francis's rules of penance, poverty and solitude. Yet, as Luckyj notes, the account could still have been intended to "arouse suspicion in the minds of the audience" due to the figures' conspicuous waverings between religious and military service.³¹ Indeed, what Flamineo presents as their unproblematic shifts in loyalty between worldly and spiritual institutions serves as yet another illustration of the spiritual erosion of religion.

In portraying religion as an instrument of profane power, Webster appears to foster anti-Catholic and anti-Italian sentiments among his audiences. After all, the Catholic setting of the crime-ridden play is unmistakable. Playgoers would, moreover, have typified many of the play's actions as Machiavellian, after the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli who was famously portrayed in early modern England as advocating the exploitation of religion as an instrument of

³⁰ In respect of the corruption of religion, it is also telling that Lodovico (wrongfully) believes he has the blessing of the Pope to murder Brachiano, when he is given a thousand ducats and is told they were sent by the Pope. This happens just after the Pope in person had ordered him to refrain from bloody deeds. It was Francisco who provided the sum and arranged the trick to secure Lodovico's participation in the conspiracy.

³¹ Luckyj, ed. *The White Devil*, note to I. 5.1.16.

power.³² Yet this does not imply that *The White Devil* is simply anti-papal or uncritical of the way faith was practiced in England. The Roman setting of the tragedy largely serves to expose the corruption of religion in a much more general sense that could easily be translated to the English post-Reformation context which had witnessed a tightening relation between religion and politics. This is illustrated in Flamineo's remark about "religion" in general when he pretends to be mad to save himself from suspicion of murder: "Religion; oh how it is commedled with policy" (3.3.35). Flamineo uses the word "policy" in the now obsolete sense of "cunning."³³ In doing so, he defines the unsettling effect of the erosion of spiritual and religious content. It is tellingly ironic, moreover, that Flamineo expresses this truth precisely as a symptom of his own cunning, his feigned madness. A further indication of the play's impartial stance towards specific Christian denominations is given in the same scene, when Flamineo is approached by Brachiano's Ghost carrying a skull. Like Hamlet, Flamineo wonders if the silent ghost resides in heaven or in hell (5.5.120-21). To make him speak, Flamineo mentions a Catholic doctrine to the Ghost: "Our Italian Churchmen / Make us believe dead men hold conference / With their familiars" (5.5.131-33). Significantly, the play here simply registers a Catholic principle without judging it, even suggesting that Flamineo himself is not certain about what he should accept as true. That Flamineo is desperate to know what he should believe or which doctrine to embrace, is suggested earlier in the same passage, when he asks the Ghost: "Pray, sir, resolve me, what religion's best / For a man to die in?" (5.5.122-23). The Ghost responds with disturbing vagueness by throwing earth upon him and showing him the skull.

Conclusion

Despite their obvious differences in genre, content, and even in their portrayal of conversion, *As You Like It* and *The White Devil* in their use of conversion convey a concern about the corrupting effect of religious polemics on spiritual piety. For many of Shakespeare and Webster's contemporaries, the meaning of spiritual conversion as a complete submission to an undenominational God was overrun by the pervasive politicization of faith. *The White Devil* registers how this

³² An illustrative example of this conception is Christopher Marlowe's character and prologue Machiavel in *The Jew of Malta*, who turns out to be a source of inspiration for many of the plays' characters.

³³ "policy," n.5 *OED Online*, March 2013. Oxford University Press. 17 April 2013 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146842?rskey=Bs6h5n&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

development paves the way for religious scheming. It points to the danger of faith that has lost its spiritual substance and has thus become the ideal instrument of manipulation and opportunism. *As You Like It* presents another dramatic response by portraying a highly stylized and idealized version of spiritual change to conjure up an old religious world in which people were still able to make a strict separation between the world and spirituality. What is more, contrary to its pivotal role in morality drama, spiritual conversion is of marginal importance to Shakespeare and Webster's plots. This is partly due to the fact that it is employed as a device, rather than explored for its own (theological or spiritual) sake, yet the two plays do so with different purposes. In *As You Like It*, it is Shakespeare who uses spiritual conversion as a secular dramatic tool to bring the plot to its comedic closure. This is in some respects analogous to the metaphorical use of spiritual conversion, which enables playwrights to express forcefully notions of love. In Webster, spiritual conversion is wielded as a secular instrument by the *characters*. This allows Webster to expose and problematize the manipulation of faith. Indeed, by identifying the corruption of spiritual conversion with the unjust suppression of women, and making the same women speak out against the abuse of faith, Webster presents the evisceration of spiritual worship as a social injustice.