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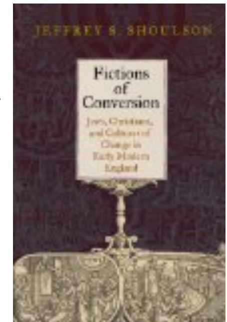

Jeffrey S. Shoulson. *Fictions of Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Cultures of Change in Early Modern England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 263 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4482-3.

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Jeffrey S. Shoulson's *Fictions of Conversion*, a study of radical change in early modern England, is an important work, delivering more than its title promises. Religious conversion in a nation of believers amply demonstrates that all things change--as the famous aphorism of Heraclitus, *panta rhei* (everything flows), attests. The dry definition in a social science textbook cannot hide its drama: "conversions are transitions to identities which are proscribed within the person's established universes of discourse, and which exist in universes of discourse that negate these formerly established ones.... The person becomes that which was specifically prohibited."[1] Religious prohibitions were legally and rigorously enforced during the twenty-four years (1534-58) that began with the national mass conversion of Roman Catholic England to Protestantism by Henry VIII, which Edward VI reinforced. From 1553 to 1558, under Mary Tudor, England returned to Catholicism, and from 1558 to 1603, Elizabeth brought back Protestantism, but with a difference, that is, the Elizabethan Settlement, a compromise that did not prevent the Puritans from challenging it.

One of the great strengths of this book is its application of three different methods of understanding conversion during a period that Shoulson calls "fraught"[2]: fictions (which includes philosophical inquiry), figures, and historical context. Regarding fictions, Shoulson asks, "When conversion is said to have transpired, how can one be certain that the transformation is complete, reliable, stable?... Is the fiction of conversion the constructed and contrived nature of the transformation or the fictive assertion of the continuity of identity, or even of identity itself?" (pp. 14, 152).

Can conversion as transformation take place without destroying the convert's irreducible identity, or is identity itself a mere fiction? Authenticity is of capital importance, and Shoulson's depth of approach is not compromised by his admirable clarity. How does one tell a good person from a bad one? The quote from Macbeth is apt: "There's

no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.11-12; p. 27). These questions are directed most forcefully and most safely at the Jew who converts to Christianity: the Jew as an alien figure at a safe distance from England was made the target of national anxiety about identity and authenticity. On the one hand, his conversion was welcomed by many, who saw it as a step closer to achieving a universal religion and thus to establishing the conditions necessary for Christ's second coming. On the other hand, many Christians opposed conversion, fearing its illegitimate motivations, its temporariness, or even that its success would eliminate "the organizing differences that gave definition to Christianity in opposition to Judaism" (p. 5). The specter of false Jewish conversion--especially in the figure of the *converso*, one who professes Christianity to avoid persecution--haunts many of the English fictions of conversion analyzed by Shoulson. The converso's impossible predicament was worse than a catch-22: the law of blood purity (*limpieza de sangre*) made him a Jew, which the Inquisition did not allow him to be, and it prevented him from being a true Christian, even if he wanted to be. In England, *marrano was* the term used and was associated with "counterfeit behavior, deception, and secrecy" (p. 33).

At the heart of the book are three major *figures* of conversion, which provide an opportunity for literary analysis and at their most successful reveal an analogical imagination that one usually associates with poets.[3] These three master tropes--translation, alchemy, and religious enthusiasm--are also subjected to the scrutiny of philosophical analysis (fictions of conversion) that underscores their equivocal status, and all are given a broad and deep historical context. Thus, for example, Shoulson's nuanced reading of translation reveals its methodological similarity to religious conversion. A text is transformed from its original state and turned into another text. Even an initially resisting reader comes to see translation as an apt trope for conversion, with its hope to expand the number of the faithful and with its anxiety about "heresy, corruption, and impurity" (p. 90). In addition to philosophical questions about losses and gains in translation, the book supplies many examples from the early modern period, when translation flourished. And of course reading texts, whether in the original language or in translation, can convert souls, as Shoulson amply demonstrates, as when Henry Vaughan declares himself "the least" of the pious converts, transformed by reading the poetry of George Herbert, following a paradigm that goes back even farther than St. Augustine (p. 146).

The chapter on alchemy--especially on the transmutation of base metal into gold--reveals the depth of Shoulson's approach. He quotes from treatises that discuss alchemy as a Jewish science and in an eschatological context, so that the successful end of days, like the successful end of an experiment, is the transmutation of the Jew into the Christian. This learned chapter contains valuable information and provocative ideas, but it might best be read as a kind of thought experiment that demonstrates indeterminacy. Certainly there are insightful readings of individual words in these treatises suggestive of alchemical refinement and the danger of corrupting "admixtures" (p. 115). And the idea that Ben Jonson, aware of the connection between Jews and alchemy, converted William Shakespeare's Shylock, in a play where conversion is an overt theme, into his own alchemist, is interesting, although Shoulson's question is more satisfying than his answer. Why, he asks, if Jonson had been thinking about Jewish converts, did he not make conversion an overt theme in *The Alchemist* (1612)? His answer--that Jonson's own conversion to Catholicism made him sensitive to the topic--may not convince all readers (p. 129).

About two matters, in a chapter that gets a great deal right, Shoulson is probably wrong. He argues that Jonson expresses ambivalence by naming one of his Anabaptist characters Ananias. But the creator of Tribulation Wholesome and

Zeal-of-the-Land-Busy is not ambivalent about the Puritans who would have closed the theater. Shoulson has in mind the Ananias summoned to restore Paul's sight after his conversion (Acts 9). More likely, Jonson refers to a different Ananias, most often referred to in early modern England, who withheld some of his proceeds from the apostles after the sale of his possessions and fell down dead after Peter rebuked him (Acts 5). The high priest Ananias who ordered bystanders to smite Paul is another possibility (Acts 23).

This is a superb work of scholarship, but one minor correction merits attention. For those of us unfamiliar with the scholarship of Elias Ashmole, great astrologer and antiquarian, relying on Shoulson's reading of two passages might cause us unfairly to regard the founder of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum as an enemy of the Hebrew language and an opponent of Jewish conversion, which would suggest opposition as well to Jewish readmission to England. In the first passage, decrying superficial scholarship, he compares those who impose on the credulous with their superficial knowledge of astrology with those who would pass themselves off as "Cabalisticall Rabbi[s]"--both lacking "the full and intire knowledge of the Language." But Shoulson reads the passage as an attack on the Hebrew language itself and on those who would "fetishize" it (p. 140).

In the second passage, Ashmole intended the beginning of Mark 4:12, "that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand," not as a reference to the Jews at all but, in context, to those with only a superficial knowledge of astrology, who fail to dive deep to retrieve the mysteries. Surprisingly, Shoulson interprets his not quoting the rest of the verse as proof that he believed that Jewish conversion to Christianity is impossible. But of course this conclusion could only be drawn if Ashmole had continued: "lest any time they should be converted, and their sins be forgiven them." This attempt to exonerate Ashmole should not crowd out the abundant examples of Shoulson's insightful, learned, and persuasive scholarship. He provides a historical context that first documents the belief that alchemy owes its origins to Jewish wisdom and then relates the proliferation of ambivalent alchemical imagery in the mid-seventeenth century to the controversy at that time regarding the readmission of the Jews.

In the final chapter, on John Milton's response to religious enthusiasm in his brief epic *Paradise Regained* (1671), philosophical, literary, and historical analyses are seamlessly integrated. Radical religion promises transformation, and, as Shoulson points out, "to discount the possibility of true inspiration ... would ... undermine the very foundation of revealed religion itself" (p. 157). Shoulson masterfully demonstrates the hermeneutic differences between Milton and the religious enthusiasts, whether Quakers, whose "radically spiritualizing reading of the Bible and Christ [resulted in] the utter de-historicizing of the gospel accounts of Jesus" (p. 168), or the militant Fifth Monarchists with their millenarian expectations of an imminent temporal theocracy.

Shoulson introduces the figure of the Jew in this chapter by extending Michael Fixler's elegant argument in *Milton and the Kingdoms of God* (1964) that through his friendship with Henry Oldenberg or his relationship with John Evelyn the blind poet would have known about Sabbatai Zevi, the notorious Messianic claimant, who unsettled all of mid-seventeenth-century Jewry in Europe, North Africa, and Asia Minor. The materialistic form of Sabbatai's messianic kingdom was compared with Fifth Monarchist expectations of the Kingdom of Christ. Fixler's argument is as fresh and compelling as it was fifty years ago, and Shoulson's merits a place by its side. After surveying the forms of enthusiasm during the period that Milton was composing *Paradise Regained*, Shoulson convincingly demonstrates the poem's rejection of the language of enthusiasm. He concludes that "zeal, for Milton, is a thing indifferent," and that "Satan speaks in the language of

millenary urgency and expectation" (pp. 171, 177). In fact, the poet of ***Paradise Regained*** exhibited "an unease (and at times an outright hostility) toward the dissenting poetics of the literary enthusiasm he was regarded as having initiated" in ***Paradise Lost*** (1667) (p. 168).

An entire review could be devoted to the virtues of Shoulson's chapter on figures of an alien culture in the Hebrew Bible--Jethro, Rahab, Naaman, and Ruth--whom the rabbis would "convert" to Judaism and Reformation expositors would identify as types of the faithful Christian. The breadth and depth of learning--the footnotes alone constitute mini-bibliographies of biblical scholarship--and Shoulson's eye for the telling detail make this chapter an especially rewarding reading experience. For example, the predicament of Naaman, the enemy Syrian general who worships the God of Israel yet who must bow down when he attends his king at the temple of Rimmon, is seen as possibly relevant to that of Catholics seeking permission to attend Protestant services as required under the Elizabethan Act of Uniformity (p. 55). But the highlight of the chapter is the discussion of Ruth, in which virtually every sentence holds an insight. Where the rest of the book addresses only the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, this chapter adds rabbinic opinion on the conversion of heathens to Judaism to Christian typology, itself a form of conversion. Shoulson has read almost everything on these topics, but it is worth adding that John Selden's ***De Jure Naturali et Gentium*** (1640) devotes at least eleven chapters to converts to Judaism. In fact, regarding the "conversion" (yet another fiction) of Ruth the Moabite, Shoulson cites a Talmudic passage from bYebamoth that interprets the prohibition against marriage to a Moabite to apply only to males, but without an early modern source (p. 68). Selden quotes the very same passage and adds to bYebamoth references to the Jerusalem Talmud as well as to Moses of Coucy's Sefer Mitzvot ha-Gadol, negative precept #114: "They [the rabbis] also point out that it says 'an Ammonite,' and not an Ammonitess; 'a Moabite,' and not a Moabitess. In other words, they ruled that natural-born Jews were in fact allowed to marry the women of these nations as long as they had legally become Jews. In fact, they considered this one of the traditions given to Moses on Sinai."[4]

Shoulson's first book, ***Milton and the Rabbis: Hebraism, Hellenism, and Christianity*** (2001), was awarded the Salo W. Baron Prize for 2002 by the American Academy of Jewish Research, which recognized the qualities that made it of interest to readers outside the field of seventeenth-century English literature. In ***Fictions of Conversion***, Shoulson has gone from strength to strength. The product of years of immersion in the relevant primary and secondary sources and of instant flashes of insight, it will reward readers whether their primary interest be fictions of conversion (and the philosophical questions they raise); figures (and the literary critical approach they invite); or broad and deep historical contexts. This is a book by a scholar and critic at the height of his powers.

Notes

[1]. Richard Travisano, "Alternation and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations," in ***Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction***, ed. G. P. Stone and H. A. Farberman (Waltham: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), 600-601.

[2]. Perhaps "fraught" is his favorite word, as in "this fraught history" of national conversions (p. 2); he also applies it to "anxieties," "stakes," "ancestry," "synthesis," and "conditions."

[3]. The book could as easily have been titled ***Figures of Conversion*** (1995), except that it was already taken by my late and much-missed Georgetown colleague Michael Ragussis. His book's subtitle alone--"'The Jewish Question' and English National Identity"--hints at its influence on Shoulson, who graciously acknowledges it. Indeed, in all of his writings, Shoulson is uncommonly generous in observing the scholarly courtesies.

[4]. John Selden, *De Jure Naturali et Gentium*, 5.14:621-22: “Et observant heic dici Ammonitam non Ammonitidem, & Moabitam non Moabitidem, adeo foeminarum ex hisce gentibus quae in Judaismum rite transirent, nuptias nunquam statuerint Originariis vetitas. Id quod etiam inter Sinaicis Mosis traditiones censent.”

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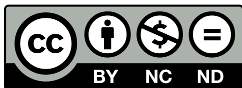
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