

## Conversion narratives @ RSA

### Schedule and Abstracts

*All panels will be held in the Folger Shakespeare Library Boardroom*

8.45 – 10.15

#### **Between Orthodoxy and Heresy: Conversion in the Catholic Counter-Reformation**

**Chair:** Thomas M. Cohen, The Catholic University of America

**Respondent:** LuAnn Homza, The College of William and Mary

#### **Iberian False Conversion and the Legality of Dissimulation**

**Seth Kimmel, Stanford University**

The agreement between Christian and Muslim leaders at the fall of Granada in 1492 protected Muslims' right to practice their own religion while under Christian political authority, but forced conversions nevertheless followed. And though the Inquisition did prosecute some Moriscos, as these Muslim converts to Christianity were known, an official policy of "dispensation" or "dissimulation" lasted until the late sixteenth century. This paper examines the legal justifications for royal "dissimulation" regarding Morisco heterodoxy throughout the middle of the sixteenth century. Scholars drew on New Testament and patristic sources, as well as civic law and local custom, to justify non-enforcement of restrictions on Morisco religious and cultural freedom, and in so doing Christian interpreters of traditional legal texts created the conditions for Iberian crypto-religion. I argue that the very laws designed to stimulate assimilation and prosecute heterodoxy tell the early modern Iberian story of false conversion in a new way.

#### **Scrutator Cordium: The Catholic Church and the Conversion of Henry IV**

**Peter A. Mazur, University of York**

The news that Henry IV of France was intending, in 1593, to seek a definitive reconciliation with the Catholic Church provoked contradictory reactions in the Roman curia. One group, mainly identified with the Dominicans, argued against any concessions to a heretic who had proven untrustworthy in the past, while another party, more loosely constructed, posited reasons both practical and spiritual in favor of the king. This position was not predominant at the beginning of the debate, and its success depended on a reconsideration of a number of apparently non-negotiable aspects of Catholic policy toward the Protestant world that had long been in place. I will outline some new understandings of the history of the counter-reformation papacy that can be used to reframe the classic accounts of the debate and consider the impact of the reconciliation on attitudes towards Protestants who found themselves in Italy in later decades.

#### **Serving a Master Who Cannot Die: The Conversion of St. Francis Borgia**

**Maria del Pilar Ryan, United States Military Academy, West Point**

Years before Francis Borgia became a Jesuit, he accompanied the body of the Empress Isabel from Toledo to Granada for burial. When her coffin was opened in Granada for final identification before burial, her body was badly decomposed. Borgia was horrified and was supposed to have said, "Never more will I serve a master who can die." Yet within weeks of Borgia's return to the court, Charles V named him lieutenant general of Catalonia. Borgia learned the harsh realities of politics in this job, which would later serve him as a Jesuit. Borgia served both Charles V and Ignatius Loyola in difficult social, political, and financial battles. Borgia's entrance into the Society of Jesus combined spiritual consolation with his worldly recognition; it did not reject it. The conversion of Francis Borgia was not a dramatic confrontation with mortality; it was a continuation of the life into which he was born.

10.30 – 12.00

## **Conversion and the material book**

Chair: Bill Sherman, University of York

### **How does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity?**

**Kathleen Lynch, Folger Institute**

Few scholars would defend the thesis that print fixes texts. But I propose that it is still worth considering how the printed text manifests a desire for fixity. I take my case from the genre of the seventeenth century Protestant conversion narrative. This mode of autobiography is teleologically oriented towards a stable end. I ask if we can shift our attention from fixity to fixation, where the issue is not whether or not the text is fixed but rather what does the desire for fixity serve? How does it work as a conditioning factor of textual production? And what are the implications for the interiorized identities that are modelled in the printed texts of spiritual experience? I will address these questions with a study of the textual history of multiple editions of one such narrative, Henry Jessey's *Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced* (1647), a report of Sarah Wight's fast-induced prophecies.

### **Reading as Re-collection in Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners***

**Vanita Neelakanta, Rider University**

It is a Reformation commonplace that the way to salvation is through reading and understanding the scriptures. However, the trajectory of John Bunyan's conversion narrative, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, indicates that rather than read in order to be saved, Bunyan is only capable of reading correctly *once* he believes he has been saved. Conversion is thus a pre-requisite for—not a consequence of—correct scriptural reading. This paper considers the startling inversion in the relationship of reading to election presented in Bunyan's text by examining the way reading is predicated as a function of remembering. Memory operates as the hermeneutical tool with which the converted Bunyan recalls and re-collects, in writing, previously fragmentary and elusive scriptures to reveal the graceful workings of Providence. Post-conversion reading catalyzes the conversion narrative—a form structured upon remembering and recognition—in order to instruct others in the signs of divine mercy.

### **'bookes, Beades and Images': the objects of conversion in early modern England**

**Helen Smith, University of York**

Narratives of conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism in early modern England frequently chart a move from the objects of Catholic error to the reading practices of the Reformed church. These stories insist upon the distinction between 'Popish' books, listed as things among other things, and 'godly' books described in terms of their content and the actions of reading. Thus, for example, Lettice Dudley took away Marie Gunter's 'bookes, Beades and Images, and all such trumpery' as part of a conversion which saw Marie turn to devotional texts and diligent reading. In this paper, I will explore the apparent instability of the book's object status by tracing the particular histories of objects used to prompt or confirm conversion, and will argue that a careful attention to devotional practice blurs the boundaries between Catholic things and Protestant words, situating the experience of both confessions within a rich material environment.

2.00 – 3.30

## **The literature of conversion in early modern England**

Chair: Molly Murray, Columbia

### **Conversion and Piety in Robert Southwell's 'Epistle to his Father'**

**Hannah Crawforth, King's College, London**

This paper considers the relationship between conversion and piety in Early Modern England, taking as its case study Jesuit priest Robert Southwell's 'Epistle to His Father' (1586), a work that entreats the conformist Richard Southwell to abandon Protestantism and to join his son in recusancy. In post-classical Latin the word 'pietas', from which 'piety' derives, encompasses not only a 'fervent attachment to the service of God and to the duties and practices of religion' but also the notion of compassion, or pity. In Middle English the nouns 'pity' and 'piety' both include these twin senses, and it was not until the seventeenth-century that the separation of the two words was completed. This paper explores the process of conversion by which these two distinct words evolved, in order to document the role of these two senses of 'piety' in Southwell's attempt to bring about the conversion of his father.

### **Material Faith: Gendered Conversion and Richard Crashaw's Transformative Poetics**

**Jenna Lay, Lehigh University**

This paper traces representations of religious conversion as a gendered form of domestic education in order to elucidate Richard Crashaw's transformative poetics. Conversion, the spiritual transition that characterizes many of the poems in both *Steps to the Temple* and *Carmen Deo Nostro*, was repeatedly linked to women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, despite the fact that numerous converts were male. However, in order to account for the gendered aspects of Crashaw's transformative religious poetics, it is necessary to recognize the limits of readings that focus on his supposedly feminine style or on his autobiographical relationships with women. Instead, I propose a reading of Crashaw that attends to Catholic women's engagements with religious education and conversion in England and Scotland, thereby revealing not simply a devotional culture marked by transformation but a language and poetics open to redefinition and interpretive multiplicity.

### **Conversion at Paul's Cross**

**Holly Pickett, Washington and Lee University**

The outdoor pulpit on the grounds of London's old St. Paul's Cathedral, known as St. Paul's Cross, was the site of many sermons announcing the conversion of clerics from Catholicism to Protestantism in post-Reformation England. My paper examines the conventions peculiar to St. Paul's conversion sermons—such as the convert's choice of preaching text, allusions to St. Paul, other references to venue, and the rhetoric of conversion—to explore the relationship between conversion and place in early modern England. My contention is that Elizabethan and Jacobean converts exploited the pulpit's connection to St. Paul in order to model the sincerity and seriousness of their conversions, which often would have been called into question by their skeptical audiences.

3.45 – 5.15

**Panel 4: The places and spaces of conversion**

**Chair: Agnès Guiderdoni, Université catholique de Louvain**

**Apostate “Pilgrim”: Crises of Conversion in James Wadsworth’s *The English Spanish Pilgrime***  
**Sara Torres, UCLA**

James Wadsworth’s *The English Spanish Pilgrime* (1629) details the travels of the son of a Catholic convert who spent his childhood years in Spain, only to return to England and denounce the “Popish” faith. It articulates its author’s perspectives on his own hybrid identity, an identity that is redeemed by his return to his “proper nation”, his recantation of Catholicism, and his incorporation into the Protestant state as a spy. Yet, despite his rhetoric of condemnation, he participates in the commodification of knowledge through his affiliation with linguistic and religious communities outside of England, which culminates in Wadsworth’s “espionage”—his denunciation of his former companions as Catholics. The negotiation of multiple fields of knowledge allows the “hybrid identity” of reformed recusant English subjects to find a place within the Protestant state, which, in turn, affirms that their political utility lies in the preservation, not erasure, of their apostate, cosmopolitan backgrounds.

**The Geographies of Conversion**  
**Abigail Shinn, University of York**

Early Modern English conversion narratives frequently use physical movement or displacement as a way of demonstrating spiritual progress. Whether it is travel between countries – typically from such archetypal religious spaces as London and Rome or Naples and Geneva – from one English city to another, or between a rural and an urban environment, a journey provides a useful sense of narrative progression, as well as evoking the powerful image of the pilgrimage. The central position afforded to movement in time and space by converts, does however draw attention to the fictive qualities of these narratives and associates them with the wandering errant knights of romance and myth. This paper will argue that an examination of the geographies of conversion succeeds in unravelling some of the literary frameworks and narrative typologies adopted by writers concerned with matters of faith.

*Unfortunately, our final speaker for this panel has had to withdraw. However, we hope this will allow us the opportunity for a lively closing questions session, bringing together the themes and continuities that have emerged throughout the day, and across the conference.*