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Overell, M. Anne. Nicodemites: Faith and Concealment between Italy and Tudor England

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[See table of contents](#)

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This is a book that scholars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poetry will appreciate for its detailed, precise, and accurate analysis of canonical works. It provides a re-reading of such works through a peculiar lens: the pursuit, or fear, of the sense of isolation that allows us to find, but also lose, ourselves.

The questions Mattison tries to answer can be posed by contemporary authors as well, and not only poets. For whom do we write? For ourselves? For future glory? For the public? And if we do write for a public, do we envisage an ideal reader who understands but also appreciates our work? Do we risk being read—and judged—by a reader whom we have not considered? Or worse, that our work will not be read and will thus be lost? These are the questions that many living authors are asking themselves.

I appreciated the clear exposition, the detailed analysis of texts and sources, and above all the opportunity to meditate on the fact that, whether for work or for pleasure, many of us write, both for ourselves and for a public that we cannot foresee. We should ask the same questions that the English poets put to themselves and that this book illustrates with abundance of detail.

This is not an “easy” book, but it is a book that deserves to be taken as a model. Although it looks at the past, it is relevant to our own times. *Solitude and Speechlessness* makes us think, and this is what books should do.

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Overell, M. Anne.

Nicodemites: Faith and Concealment between Italy and Tudor England.

St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History 11. Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. xiii, 280. ISBN 978-90-04-33166-2 (hardcover) €125.

Anne Overell's volume presents a subtle and captivating study of the experiences, and behaviours of a particular group of individuals who found themselves, for political, confessional, or personal reasons, trapped between different fronts of religious and diplomatic controversies, and compelled by fear of ostracism and persecution to adapt, disguise, conceal, or silence their religious beliefs. Looking carefully at the fast-changing and challenging circumstances that led

them to Nicodemite choices, Overell offers a fresh and humanized picture of this rather diverse cluster of early modern believers who have often been shunned, by their contemporaries as well by scholars, as “spineless” and “un-heroic” in an age of martyrs and warriors. Yet in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe “nicodemites were legion” (238), and this book clearly shows the importance of considering their contribution if we are to fully understand early modern spirituality in its European and multi-confessional context.

Although in part based on the author’s published works, the volume reorganizes and develops previous research into an appealing and accessible narrative that traces the journeys, both physical and spiritual, of an Anglo-Italian, intellectual, and diplomatic network across a European landscape plighted by dramatic religious and political upheaval. Taking its cue from Carlo Ginzburg’s classic work, *Il Nicodemismo. Simulazione e dissimulazione religiosa nell’Europa del Cinquecento* (1970), Overell’s account reaffirms the importance of adopting a broad and inclusive perspective when examining religious attitudes and their trajectories in early modern Europe while at the same time rightly rejecting depictions of Nicodemism as a clearly defined and cohesive movement. This allows the author to detect parallels and patterns of Nicodemite choices and perceptions across communities and confessional groups, without undermining the multiplicity of their forms and manifestations, the variability of the circumstances in which they occur, and the range of their psychological and doctrinal spectrum.

The volume is divided in two parts. The first (“Lives,” chapters 1–5), after introducing the readers to the “Landscape of ‘Holy Cunning,’” examines the circumstances and actions of prominent Nicodemite figures such as Cardinal Reginald Pole, the Englishmen in his “flock” in Italy (including Thomas Starkey, Richard Morison, George Lily, Edmund Harvel, and especially Michel Throckmorton), the ambassador Pietro Vanni, and Edward Courtenay. Mapping “patterns of thought and action” (4), Overell depicts effectively the psychological dimension of their fears and the emotional implications of their dilemmas, helping readers understand their decisions and motivations.

The second part (“Texts,” chapters 6–12) focuses on a group of key texts of Italian origin (*Il beneficio di Cristo*, Pier Paolo Vergerio’s anti-Nicodemite polemics, Negri’s *Tragedia del libero arbitrio*, and the proliferating accounts of Francesco Spiera’s death) and on their English circulation, reception, translation, and repurposing, especially in Elizabethan England. As the main

agents of this textual and intellectual transmission are often figures we have met in part 1, the two parts are closely interconnected. This second part also highlights how the circulation and exchange of books were often responsible for driving political change and confessional thinking (or re-thinking) within the fragile and volatile system of European power structures.

The interest and originality of Overell's lively account lie above all in its ambition to present a broader analysis of the phenomenon of early modern Nicodemism, which supersedes the boundaries of both confession and national identity normally delimiting this kind of historical research, and connects the experiences and behaviours of a wide network of individuals travelling between Renaissance Italy and Tudor England. This allows the author to convincingly demonstrate, on the one hand, how widespread and accepted the phenomenon of Nicodemism actually was; on the other, it enables her to establish the influence of external and practical circumstances—such as political hostility and conflict, the risk of persecution, the fear of imprisonment or torture, the social and reputational damage brought by accusations of heresy or apostasy—in determining what are generally considered as inner, spiritual decisions.

There are risks, of course, in trying to interpret the extremely elusive evidence of Nicodemism, a conduct defined by evasiveness, concealment, and secrecy at best, but more often marked by dissimulation, posturing, and downright deception, and triggered by emotions, like fear, notoriously difficult to decipher. While Overell openly recognizes “the profound instability that haunts this subject” (174) and the “miasmatic, anachronistic and imprecise” character of the term “Nicodemite” (3), she consciously sidesteps the hazardous, perhaps impossible, task of attempting to define what specifically the term “Nicodemism” should (or should not) cover: relying on the one hand on the broad currency it has acquired among early modern scholars since Ginzburg's work; on the other, on its general (emotive and psychological) relatability. Given Overell's knowledge and expertise, this might perhaps appear to some readers as a missed opportunity to disperse the fog of contention and offer a reliable path through this treacherous historical terrain. However, it is precisely the elasticity and inclusivity with which Nicodemism is here articulated that warrants the book's broad perspective, allowing it to engage with a wide range of choices and attitudes, political and ideological, as well as confessional and doctrinal.

The other important merit of this study is to highlight the stark discrepancy between the public rhetoric employed in contemporary texts discussing the doctrinal validity of Nicodemite behaviour (or lack thereof, as was often the case), and the pragmatic necessity in real life to manage communities in which individuals, belonging to opposing sides of religious or political divides (whether openly or “in their hearts”), simply had to coexist. This, Overell convincingly argues, often demanded compromises and practical *ad hoc* solutions that had to circumvent or just ignore the strictures of doctrine, progressively undermining its influence in everyday decision-making. Together with a diminishing appetite for religious persecution, this pragmatism allowed for a reassessment of Nicodemite practices, which prepared the ground for a significant turn away from rigid condemnation and towards compassion and reconciliation. Thus, rather than the silent and secretive victims of pre-modern culture wars we are used to, Overell’s Nicodemites emerge as unsuspecting catalysts of a more tolerant future and ultimately as the moral winners of the terrible battles that were fought over their consciences.

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Posset, Franz.

***Respect for the Jews*. Foreword by Yaacov Deutch.**

Collected Works 4. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019. Pp. 310. ISBN 978-1-5326-7090-9 (paperback) US\$28.80.

Respect for the Jews is a collection of studies originally presented at various conferences or lectures. As Franz Posset explains, his studies, with the exception of chapter 8, “may be considered contributions for evidence of some provocative, early philosemitic elements within a world and a society that was filled with Christian protoantisemitism in the early sixteenth century. [...] My intention here is not to offer a comprehensive investigation into philosemitism (nor into antisemitism) in the sixteenth century, but to highlight some friendliness, or at least some respect, toward the Jews—on a stage that is dominated by the gloomy and terrifying backdrop of hate and persecution” (4).