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Wittek, Stephen. Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of Conversion

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Wittek, Stephen.

Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of Conversion.

Early Modern Literature in History. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. xiv, 200 + 5 b/w ill. ISBN 978-3-031-11960-6 (hardcover) US\$109.99.

In no small part because of the exciting, varied research that has emerged from the Early Modern Conversions project led by Paul Yachnin from 2012 through 2019, Stephen Wittek's monograph is best understood—and he does situate it—in the context of recent humanities-centred investigations of conversion that rely on cultural studies approaches. These recent books and essay collections build on both theologically focused and social science (especially psychological) studies of religious conversion while putting more emphasis on textual evidence, especially on the textuality of conversion accounts and representations. *Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of Conversion* helpfully summarizes much of this existing scholarship in its first two chapters, and anyone interested in learning more about the complex topic of conversion will find Wittek's second chapter, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Conversion" (23–56), both useful and inspiring.

Five remaining chapters present readings of individual plays by Shakespeare. In chapter 3, *Taming of the Shrew* is analyzed as a text that "moves the essential problems of conversional discourse into the domestic sphere" (57), and Wittek unpacks the play's concerns with how both physical force and persuasion might lead to a less-than-sincere conversion. Chapter 4 demonstrates that since Prince Hal (the future King Henry V) is represented as a miraculous convert in both prose histories and earlier literary texts (including the Queen's Men play *The Famous Victories of Henry V*), it is significant that Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* stages a transformation that seems both psychologically and politically motivated. Wittek's chapter 5 shows how, especially through Jessica and Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice* foregrounds questions about who can successfully convert. These issues are further explored in chapter 6's reading of *Othello*, which discusses the title character as constrained both by assumptions he can't be a successful convert to Christianity and by identification with Venetian Christian ideals that foment self-loathing. Most ambitious, the final chapter on *The Tempest* posits that the play disrupts early modern justifications of colonialism as a process that made converts and saved souls by staging Prospero as

a ruler who strives to naturalize inequality and Caliban as a figure who might not be constitutionally able to change.

The organizational scheme for these chapters is roughly chronological in order of presumed dating for each of the play's composition, but it also relies on Wittek's broad definition of conversion as encompassing "movement in and out of identity groups" (1). The chapters on *Taming of the Shrew* and *1 Henry IV* focus on one type of identity shift—from what might be seen as problematically rebellious or sinful behaviour to a positive moral orderliness. Discussions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* highlight characters presumed to shift from one religious tradition to another. One appendix (161–63) presents detailed dictionary definitions of conversion, and a second (165–72) catalogues every instance of "conversion" and related cognates in the Shakespeare corpus. These contents are symptomatic of the difficulty inherent to any study of conversion, the challenge of pinning down exactly what the term means. Wittek's decision not to limit conversion to instantaneous and profound spiritual transformation (much less to rejection of one faith or confessional identity in order to follow another) may frustrate some readers, especially as it is coupled with a tendency to describe conversion as "relatively fluid" (11) and "a fundamentally metaphorical, fundamentally mysterious phenomenon" (20); at times, the author's sense of "conversional thinking" (11) might seem to risk becoming merely a synonym for change. I believe even those who disagree with this expansive definition of conversion will still benefit from Wittek's book, however, as the author makes his assumptions and their implications so clear.

The individual readings of the plays could be approached separately and still yield new insights about key characters and scenes. (The chapters on *Othello* and *The Tempest* seem well-suited to be readings for upper-level undergraduates in a Shakespeare course as they would surely provoke discussion.) What holds the chapters together is Wittek's overarching sense that Shakespeare's work seems consistently skeptical of religious conversions and converts in ways that would encourage an early modern English audience that had lived through a period characterized by religious change to ask questions. I find particularly rich the idea concisely presented in this book's epilogue, that Shakespeare helped to shape those who came to see performances of his work into "a public around a shared set of conversional questions" (156). And yet I found myself wondering repeatedly while reading this monograph whether Shakespeare as a playwright was characteristic of the period or exceptional. That's a question that

neither Wittek nor a book he repeatedly references, Lieke Stelling's *Religious Conversion in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), fully engage. Given that Wittek has produced a single-author study, though, it seems more incumbent upon him to systematically demonstrate rather than simply state that "Shakespearean theatre [...] expressed the essential problems of conversional culture in a uniquely open, uniquely resonant register" (159). Given the complexity of the topic of conversion, future studies may come to different conclusions. It is certain, however, that any forthcoming work on conversion and Shakespeare (or early modern English drama) will be strengthened by engaging with Wittek's argument.

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