Introduction

Few subjects of the English stage have proved more alluring and enduring than religious conversion. Medieval drama characteristically featured biblical scenes and the conversions of saints were used as inspiration for audiences, who were invited to cast off their sins, intensify their faith, and follow in the footsteps of exemplary characters. These miracle and mystery plays were later suppressed by Protestant authorities due to their Catholic origins and sacred content,[1] but conversion itself remained a popular theme in early modern theatre. This was especially true of its new manifestations. The Protestant Reformation, a catalyst in the development of confessional diversity, and an increasing number of encounters with religious others, such as the pagan inhabitants of the New World territories and Jewish and Muslim traders in the Mediterranean, unlocked new, dangerous and exciting potential for changing one's own or other people's confessional identity. Playwrights recognized the dramatic appeal of conversion in all imaginable Christian and non-Christian directions and incorporated this into numerous plays.

The emergence of Elizabethan theatre marked a profound shift in the way in which conversion was presented. If medieval drama had encouraged conversion without reservation, early Elizabethan plays started to question it. Indeed, this book argues that more so than any other medium, early modern drama engaged with the question of the possibility of undergoing a radical transformation of faith and presented the period's understanding of it as fundamentally unsettled. While conversion plays ostensibly celebrated and commended conversion – that is to say, spiritual renewal within Christianity; the Christianization of Jews, Muslims and pagans; and the embrace of Protestantism by Catholics – persistent patterns across genres and religions indicate a shared suspicion of conversion, that was founded on a conception of likely reprobation and of religious group identity as an inherent and indelible part of the self.

With this ambivalent message, early modern drama participated in two religio-political debates of the era: the first revolved around England's stable adoption of Protestant theology and dominated conversion drama from the beginning of Elizabeth's reign until the rise of commercial theatre in the late 1570s. The second religio-political debate was concerned with the diversification of confessions and it remained a subject of commercial theatre until the closing of the public playhouses in 1642. Both debates were marked by their own religious tensions, at the heart of which lay the issue of conversion. As such, this division loosely follows John Spurr's distinction between, on the one hand, the 'sixteenth-century Reformation' as an 'act of state and a coherent evangelical campaign, [seeking] national and personal conversion to a Protestant faith with a distinct theology, piety, worship and church structure', and, on the other, a period of 'religious diversity' that implied a 'struggle between different versions of religion'.[2] While Spurr takes James I's ascension to the throne in 1603 as the beginning of the latter period, I argue that concerns over religious diversity and rivalries between religious denominations had already begun to dominate conversion drama from the late 1570s onwards. By 1642, these rivalries had become more complex and fraught and they were still explored on the stage. As Matthew Birchwood has shown, Islamic-Christian conversion was one of the prime concepts that dramatists of the following decades explored in order to make sense of the rapidly changing religio-political events during and after the Civil Wars.[3] My reason for choosing the closing of the public theatres as the terminus of this study is informed by the knowledge that the nature of public drama, as well as its social and historical contexts, had altered considerably by the time theatres reopened eighteen years later.[4]

At this point it is useful to distinguish between two types of conversion, that, as I will explain in the next section, each informed the debates. I use the term 'spiritual conversion' to refer to the strong intensification of devotion, or, in the words of Arthur Darby Nock, 'great reorientation of the soul', within Christianity that does not necessarily or explicitly involve the embrace or denial of another organized religion.[5] For example, in pre-Reformation England, the term conversion was often used in this sense to denote the joining of a religious order, and in Reformation England, conversion in this sense was typically employed interchangeably with the term repentance. By contrast, I use the term 'interfaith conversion' to mean the exchange of one religious group identity for another, for instance Christianity for Islam, or Catholicism for Protestantism. It is important to remember, however, that spiritual and interfaith conversion did not

necessarily exclude each other. Indeed, as a deeply personal experience and decision, many interfaith conversions were modelled on the blueprint of spiritual conversion.

England's Adoption of Protestant Theology

The first three chapters of this book cover the period of England's national adoption of Protestantism as a single faith. Over the past decades, scholars have taken a revisionist view of how the Protestant Reformation was accomplished in England, reminding us of its complex, fractured and cyclical nature. This is often followed by the inference that religion had become so changeable during Elizabeth I's reign that people were utterly confused about their persuasion and had been left with varieties of Protestantism alongside varieties of Catholicism. Adrian Streete has convincingly argued that this conclusion runs the risk of caricature and is based on a lack of theological engagement with historical sources.[6] These show that the principal religion of post-1559 England was Reformed Protestantism.[7] Fundamental to this faith are the central doctrine of justification by faith alone and the Calvinist tenet of double predestination. God had opened salvation only to a small group of elect, it was believed, leaving damnation the only just destination for everybody else. This faith left no room for reassurance; the dominant status of Reformed Protestantism in Elizabethan England did not alter the fact that it was a 'rigorous, extreme expression of Christian doctrine, one whose central tenets [were] severe and uncompromising'.[8]

It is tempting to see England's embrace of Reformed theology as a conversion, indeed, as the last of a series of collective and partly coerced interfaith conversions to and from Catholicism that started less than thirty years earlier with Henry VIII's break from Rome. Thus, in 1581, the Catholic Cecily Stonor reminded her judges of the 'several changes [of the] state', comparing it unfavourably to her own steadfastness and desire to 'live and die' in the faith in which she was 'born and bred'.[9] Likewise, the religious controversialist Roger Williams spoke in 1645 of the '*Turnings* and *Turnings* of the body of [England] in point of Religion in few yeares'.[10] Yet these observations came from outspoken opponents of the Church of England, and it is hard to find evidence of them as widely shared interpretations and concerns among contemporaries. By the same token, Reformers portrayed their theology as one that could be unproblematically traced back to Christ's lifetime and was only interrupted by periods of Roman Catholic heresy.[11]

A more urgent way in which conversion informed the religious concerns of the Elizabethan Settlement was that it was no longer seen as partly instigated by human action. While theologians and Church of England clergymen presented spiritual conversion as one of the most fundamental aspects of faith, they were also faced with questions of how to achieve it in the context of a doctrine of salvation that did not allow humans to use their own will to actively participate in redemption. Spiritual conversion – or repentance – was presented as the cornerstone of Protestant thought, but paradoxically it was placed outside the reach of human influence. Ascribing it fully to God's grace, Reformers told their congregations to reconsider or even discard the human factors that had traditionally been seen as vehicles of conversion. These included the sacraments, the manner and form in which Scripture ought to be read, and devotional drama. Playwrights, who were used to employing drama as a tool that encouraged conversion by means of instruction and emotive spectacle, now began to convey the sense to spectators that conversion was beyond human endeavour. William Wager, Nathaniel Woodes and Christopher Marlowe, for instance, did this by staging unsuccessful attempts at spiritual conversion. Yet at the same time, their plays evince concern over the precise workings of reprobation, and the awkward implications of double predestination in relation to the very possibility of conversion. This concern is famously and powerfully dramatized in *Doctor Faustus*, where Marlowe lays bare the disconcerting consequences of the doctrine of election for the experience of faith, as it refrains from resolving the tension between double predestination and human agency in seeking redemption from God.

Diversification of Religion

The second half of this book is devoted to conversion drama that responded to the diversification of religion that was part of the confessionalization of Western Christianity. According to the confessionalization theory of Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard, after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, Christianity separated into confessional churches that each became a tool in the secular and social governing of polities in the Holy Roman Empire.[12] This theory was later successfully applied to various other nations on the European continent. England's absence from this list has been addressed by Peter Marshall, who argues that despite the ecclesiastically and politically exceptional course of the English Reformation, the theory could also be used for Elizabethan England, albeit with a less straightforward result than continental Europe; that is, England became 'simultaneously

a robustly confessional state and a de facto religiously plural society'.[13] The interest of the second part of this book lies precisely in the growing presence of multiple Christian and non-Christian religions in the religio-political discourse of the late sixteenth century. I use the term 'diversification of religion' to distinguish between the broader European development of confessionalization on the one hand, and, on the other, the diversification processes in England in which confessions began to define themselves against each other with increasing vigour, and in which faith became tied up with the formation of group identity. That is to say, early moderns began to use languages of race, gender and notably nationality to characterize religion.

With religion serving more and more as an instrument to fashion national selves and barbarous others, interfaith conversion started to play a crucial but paradoxical role in it. While the winning of souls could be construed in political terms and explained as a national victory, every conversion, regardless of its direction, simultaneously carried the subversive implication that religious group identity was also interchangeable. To make matters worse, by changing their religious allegiance, converts proved their inconstancy and potential untrustworthiness. Converts – of all denominations – were easy targets for accusations of expediency and inconstancy. This allegation itself was not new, but dated back to the early days of Elizabeth's reign and was powerfully illustrated in John Heywood's epigram 'Of turning', in which he portrayed converts as wavering opportunists: 'Halfe turne or whole turne, where turners be turning / Turnying keepes turners from hangyng and burning'.[14] Not surprisingly, converts who became notorious for their multiple recantations created a breeding ground for the distrust of converts in general.[15]

The paradox of interfaith conversion manifested itself in three contexts: first, in shifts of allegiance between Catholicism and Protestantism; second, against the backdrop of the growing and powerful Ottoman Empire that encouraged many poor European Christians to immigrate into its domains and convert to Islam; and third, as part of a colonialist ambition to convert native inhabitants of the New World territories. Of these three contexts, Catholic-Protestant conversion was the most immediate and visible. In his important study on this topic, Michael Questier notes that it is difficult to provide exact numbers on how many people actually left Protestantism for Catholicism and vice versa, but evidence suggests that 'flux in religion was the norm rather than the exception in religious experience, actually expected rather than regarded with astonishment'.[16] Though only a small number of Jews resided in early

modern England, the significances of their potential (mass) conversion to Christianity played an important role in Catholic-Protestant conversion discourse. As Jeffrey Shoulson observes, the Jew functioned as an ideal figure onto which the 'alarming implications' of the 'confessional transitions and shifts' of the Reformation could be projected; while the Jew's potential conversion was perceived to be of great Scriptural significance, it was the possibility of dissimulation and deceit that made Jews an embodiment of these fears.[17] Conversion from Christianity to Islam was considered the most disturbing form of interfaith conversion, not only because Muslims were religious enemies, but also because the perceived high numbers of European Christians adopting Islam were not mitigated by an equal number of Muslims turning Christian.[18] The Ottoman Empire, the largest Islamic territory of early modern Europe, attracted impoverished Christians, often pirates, who managed to improve their worldly prospects significantly by striking deals with the Ottomans and 'turning Turk', as the adoption of a Muslim identity was called. This was because the make-up of Ottoman society allowed for greater social, political and economic mobility than Christian societies at the time.[19] Renegades were able to join the army and even occupy important positions in administration.[20] At the same time, Islamic military forces managed to capture Christians in their European homelands, many of whom were reported to have converted to Islam under Ottoman pressure.[21] Finally, the European colonial expansion into Africa, Asia and the New World created an industry for the training of missionaries, with a central focus on methods of conversion. The Virginia settlers deployed various strategies to convince the native inhabitants of Protestant truth, and went as far as to instruct their Governor to take away or even execute the Indians' 'iniocasockes or Priestes'.[22] Most conversion attempts were directed at children who had to be 'procured and instructed in the English language and manner', which additionally shows the intimate relationship between early modern socio-cultural life and religious identity.[23]

Plays reflected on, and responded to, the diversification of religion by thematizing a wide variety of conversional directions including the three monotheistic religions and, in one case, even Sunni and Shia Islam. Audiences were presented with converts, conversions, near-conversions and an occasional feigned conversion. Despite the variety of plots, genres and the array of different religions under scrutiny, virtually all playwrights seemed aware of the paradox that in glorifying conversions to the (Protestant) Christian truth, they also undermined the much desired sense of religious stability that they were trying to cultivate. In ways that will be

stated below in this introduction, they presented conversions and converts that suggested that true Christian identity could not simply be shed or assumed.

Religion and Theatre

In their influential article 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies', Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti note that it is drama in particular that has been the centre of attention in the revived interest in religion *as religion*, rather than politics, culture or as 'a form of "false consciousness"'.[24] This latter approach is part of the secularization thesis, championed in the 1980s by critics such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, which argues that Elizabethan theatre became a basically secular institution that employed the '"charisma" of religion for secular ends'.[25] The present study builds on the work of scholars who have questioned this view and, in the words of Jackson and Marotti, 'argued for an ongoing intimate relationship between the drama and the religious culture(s) of the age'.[26] A notable example is Huston Diehl, who, in paying special attention to the Protestant suspicion of 'the visible, the theatrical and the imaginary', has claimed that Elizabethan and Jacobean drama can be seen as 'one arena in which the disruptions, conflicts, and radical changes wrought by the Protestant Reformation are publicly explored'.[27] Diehl took her cue from Martha Tuck Rozett, among others, who described how Elizabethan tragedy, and, specifically, the tragic hero, was inspired and informed by the Calvinist doctrine of election.[28] Jeffrey Knapp has taken matters a step further by contending that playwrights were not only interested in Christian religion on an artistic or intellectual level, but also devotionally. It was precisely this attitude, Knapp argues, that 'contribut[ed] to the cause of true religion' and inspired the creation of early modern drama.[29] While I do not deny the great significance of playwrights' pious outlook on life and their conscious desire to convey religious truth through their plays, I am less convinced by what Knapp sees as the perceived 'sacramental' aspects of drama. Indeed, this book deals with the stage's difficulty in conveying an urgent and fundamentally religious idea, namely that of conversion as a radical and lasting transformation. This bears on the function of theatre. As Katharine Eisaman Maus has observed, 'both critics and apologists agree … that theater, even more effectively than other art forms, inculcates patterns of behavior in the audience'.[30] By not staging conversions as drastic, convincing or durable changes, early modern theatre, unlike its medieval predecessor, appeared ambivalent if not sceptical about actual

conversion. Although it is impossible to determine with certainty whether or to what extent playwrights were conscious of this, it would be gratuitous to assume that none of them were, especially Shakespeare, who would become famous for his metatheatrical reflections.

In view of the prominence of drama in the 'turn to religion' in early modern literary studies, it is perhaps not surprising that an impressive number of studies have appeared on the richness of Shakespeare's dramatic responses to the complexities of early modern religion, showing how his works defy confessional or ideological categorization and are marked by a paradoxical stance towards organized faith.[31] Jean-Christophe Mayer, for instance, approaches Shakespeare through the lens of hybridity and notes that for Shakespeare religion was 'a matter of … *constant* debating and questioning'.[32] According to Ewan Fernie, in order to appreciate Shakespeare's distinctive treatment of matters of faith, we should think of how his plays present notions not of 'established theory or theology', but of spirituality.[33] Alison Shell seeks the solution to Shakespeare's religious elusiveness in a partial recognition of the secularization thesis, trying to reconcile the 'profoundly religious' and 'profoundly secular' interpretations of his works.[34] The present study discusses Shakespeare's understanding of religion in the closing chapter on *Othello*'s unique status within conversion drama, yet it will not attempt to label Shakespeare's exceptionality. Rather, it will bring it into sharper focus, by studying it alongside a comprehensive range of dramatic representations of conversion by other playwrights. This approach, moreover, allows me to show the extent to which Shakespeare was also a product of his time and unambiguously followed conventions in the early modern staging of conversion. As I will argue, this is not only true for his conversion plays *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, but also for *Othello* itself.

The subject of conversion has two advantages over the study of the relationship between drama and religion. First, it enables us to reconstruct thinking about faith in vocabularies early moderns used themselves. As such it builds on, but differs from more indirect approaches that have shaped our understanding of this relationship. Here, we can think of Katharine Eisaman Maus, on notions of inwardness; Adrian Streete, on subjectivity and Protestantism; Brian Cummings, on mortality and selfhood; Jennifer Waldron, on the body; and Steven Mullaney, on emotions.[35] While these works reconstruct debates on their respective topics on the basis of a select number of dramatic narratives, and explore them by means of inference, as many of their key concepts are part of a present-day mode of abstract thinking, this study investigates how theatre engaged in debates

about religious conversion in its own, explicit terms. The plays discussed in this book all use the word conversion, its grammatical derivatives, synonyms or similar terms, such as apostasy or proselyte.[36] It is because of their relative simplicity and straightforwardness, and indeed, that of the conversion narrative itself – from evil to good, from one denomination to another – that we can systematically and fruitfully compare a wide range of plays. This, then, is how we begin to understand how drama made a collective effort to define and comprehend religious conversion. That is not to say, of course, that early modern theatre did not also explore religious conversion in a broad array of other narratives and vocabularies, such as social, political and gender transformation, metamorphosis and translation, but that approach poses different questions, most obviously about the significance of these discourses in relation to religious conversion, that fall outside the scope of this study.[37] Second, and in relation to the breadth of religious conversion, it is not confession-specific.[38] Although conversion is a Christian concept and was viewed by the early modern English from a Christian perspective, it was used in reference to a wide range of other religions and confessions. As such, it throws light on key aspects of the early modern conception of faith, notably notions of religious difference and the boundaries of religion. This is something that most current scholarship on conversion and early modern theatre has neglected because of its exclusive interest in specific religions and confessions.

Conversion Drama

Over the past decades, scholars have begun to recognize the significance of conversion as a topic for the stage, as well as the importance of the early modern stage in giving meaning to conversion. Yet the studies that have appeared so far largely limit themselves to interfaith conversion, and, more specifically, to conversion between Christianity and a single non-Christian faith.[39] Indeed, the early modern diversification of religion still makes itself felt in the notion that despite the vast number and variety of conversion plays, critics have only investigated theatrical conversions and converts in relation to either of the two other monotheistic world religions: Islam or Judaism. These studies have nevertheless yielded invaluable insights into the way the early modern stage channelled anxieties over religious instability and contributed to the construction of group identities.

For Muslim-Christian conversion, much important work has been done by Nabil Matar, who was the first to examine the renegade as a stock Renaissance character, and as the embodiment of the religious

enemy within, who 'reminded priests and writers, urban theatergoers and village congregations of the power and allure of the Muslim empire'.[40] Matar has observed that contrary to their historical counterparts, who lived happily ever after, fictional renegades either met with divine retribution or repented.[41] He has also pointed to the similarities between the stage and church rituals that facilitated a return to Christianity for willing and repentant apostates.[42] Matar's publication has been followed by a large number of studies on early modern Anglo-Ottoman relations as represented on stage.[43] A particularly influential example is Daniel Vitkus' *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630*, which takes Matar's findings a step further by arguing for a generic approach to Christian-Islamic conversion plays by documenting patterns in conversion plots and their relation to the 'powerful conjunction of sexual, commercial, political, and religious anxieties in early modern English culture'.[44] As he demonstrates in his analysis of *Othello* (1604), Vitkus is particularly perceptive on the metaphoric significance of Christian-Islamic stage conversion, especially the trope of 'turning' and its sexual and political connotations.[45] Jonathan Burton, Bernadette Andrea and Jane Hwang Degenhardt also explore the wider economic, political, sexual and gender-related significance of dramatic conversions to and from Islam.[46] Burton and Andrea complicate Vitkus' analysis by considering the previously ignored viewpoints of early modern Muslims and women, respectively, and showing how these perspectives also affected dramatic portrayals of Islamic-Christian conversion. Degenhardt pays special attention to proto-racial conceptions of Islamic identity and to the ways in which (the threat of) conversion to Islam was construed in terms of erotic seduction. She also shows how these presentations are inextricably linked to national debates about Protestant reform.

The other form of stage conversion that has received a great deal of scholarly consideration is that of the Christianization of Jews. Much of the criticism devoted to this topic, however, is limited to *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) and to Shylock's forced Christianization in particular, which is generally seen as the most controversial conversion in Elizabethan drama.[47] In his important study *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James Shapiro sheds light on Shylock and Jessica's conversions by providing a rich overview of Elizabethan conceptions of national, racial and political identity and the questions they raised over the possibility of the conversion of Jews. In addition, Shapiro's work has sparked a range of analyses of Jewish conversion in Shakespeare's comedy and, to a much smaller extent, in other plays, such as Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589). As a rule,