

Seminar Abstracts for 'Drama and Conversion'
SAA 2025
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- Sheila Coursey
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- Grace Kimball
- Hannah Korell
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- Group 1: Sheila Coursey, Hannah Korell, James D. Mardock
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“A parliament of these hell-hounds”: Criminal Conversion in Domestic Tragedy and City Comedy

Thomas Harman’s *A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds* (1566) envisioned London’s criminal underworld as a burgeoning social sphere with a complicated taxonomy and lexicon of its own, inspiring scenes such as Black Will and Shakebag’s criminal curriculum vitae in *Arden of Faversham* (c.1592) or Moll Cutpurse’s canting translation in *The Roaring Girl* (c. 1611). This essay explores the representation of criminal conversion in early modern domestic tragedies and city comedies, two genres that grapple with London’s contemporaneous criminal underworld and the impact of Tudor poor laws on paradigms of criminality. Texts like Harman’s *Caveat* framed crime not simply as an action or profession but rather as a social milieu or communal identity that one might be born into, achieve, or have thrust upon them. These plays explore (sometimes paradoxically) many early modern paradigms of or anxieties about conversion— questions of linearity and permanency, forgery and authenticity, the stakes of social or economic intercourse, and discernment of converso identity— all under the framework of becoming criminal. Moll’s gallants in *The Roaring Girl*, for example, play as voyeuristic tourists in the social space and language of the criminal underworld without lasting consequence, while Greene in *Arden of Faversham* is condemned by association for serving as an (unknowing?) go-between in Thomas Arden’s murder conspiracy. More broadly, this essay argues for criminality as an identity and phenomenon that informed and was informed by broader Tudor conversations and anxieties about conversion.

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“We all expect a gentle answer, Jew!”: Cynicism and racial ideology in *The Merchant of Venice*

This essay will explore, and attempt to explain, a series of contradictory statements made by the Christian characters in *The Merchant of Venice* towards Shylock. Throughout the play, characters regularly make statements that flatly contradict one another in relationship to Shylock. The quotation in this talk’s title comes at the end of a long statement given by the Duke of Venice towards Shylock at the beginning of the trial, in which the Duke explains his expectation that Shylock will take mercy on Antonio, not only stopping short of taking a pound of his flesh but also forgiving some of the original loan’s principal out of pity. This “expectation,” though, directly contradicts the Duke’s description of Shylock earlier in the scene as, “Un capable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy” (4.1.3-4). Elsewhere in the play, Antonio attributes Shylock’s violence to, “His Jewish heart!” (4.1.79) despite earlier acknowledging that he has often undermined Shylock’s business interests. Perhaps the main example of this contradiction can be found in Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity, a punishment that seems wholly at odds with the numerous efforts of Christian characters to frame Shylock’s Jewishness as an unalterable, quasi-biological trait.

My paper will draw on the work of psychoanalytic critic Slavoj Žižek to argue that these contradictions speak to the cynical attitude that Christian characters in the play have towards Jewishness. Žižek describes cynicism as a form of commitment that acknowledges inaccuracies and inconsistency in an ideological position, but remains committed to the ideology nevertheless. In Žižek’s words, the cynic, “Knows the falsehood very well... but still one does not renounce it.” Cynicism helps explain the many inconsistencies with which characters treat Shylock, and also help to explain why Shylock’s own responses fall on such thoroughly deaf ears. In political positions not governed by logic or reason, after all, argument holds little value.

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“[F]illipping with his fingers... *was Preaching of the Gospel*”:
Strategies of Anti-Ranter Commentaries in the English Interregnum

Vocal religious experimentation formed a central facet of the English Interregnum. Arguably, one of the more extremist groups during this period was the Ranters, whose short period in the public spotlight from 1649 to 1651 led to a prolonged outburst of criticism from the government and the general population. Although the Ranters constantly pushed boundaries through their lack of regard for property and Puritan morality, the fury at their behaviors outlasted the sect's performances by decades. As the group lacked organization, the remaining anti-Ranter materials significantly outweighs the concrete evidence of actual practice.

My conference paper, an excerpt from a dissertation chapter on performatives, highlights creative anti-Ranter commentaries. These artistic criticisms showcase distinctive Ranter behaviors, offering insight into appropriate Christian behavior through exaggeration and reflexivity. In particular, my extract studies S. Sheppard's *The Joviall Crevv, Or, the Devill Turn'd Ranter: Being a Character of the Roaring Ranters of these Times*, where two wives' conversion to Ranterism and punishment from their Christian husbands plays a central role in exposing the humorous perceptions of Ranter belief and lessons on Christian morality. My excerpt questions how Christian norms can be cultivated through artistic depictions of extreme behavior. In turn, my emphasis on S. Sheppard's play also ponders if there is any indication of a return to Christianity for radicalists should they experience regret after their conversion.

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Griselda Fights Back: Converting the Prodigal Husband in Domestic Comedy

This essay focuses on the conversional power accorded to the faithful wife archetype in domestic comedy. In one subset of domestic comedy, the fifth act conversion and reconciliation moment is inspired by the wayward protagonist's ever-faithful wife, as the prodigal husband ceases his ill treatment of her and finally embraces the expected rituals of marriage. These depictions of conversion, I argue, are derived from and dependent upon a deeply rooted cultural belief in the inherent spirituality of marriage and women's power to convert men. To make this argument, I bring together two plays, *The London Prodigal* (1604) and *The Tamer Tamed* (1609-1611), contextualizing them within a body early modern conduct literature and sermons about a wife's moral power over and responsibility for her husband's soul.

The faithful city wife is most often contextualized by scholars as an iteration of the exhaustingly obedient "Patient Griselda" trope. However, as I show throughout this essay, female rebellion was not only sanctioned but desirable when it was performed in service of taming one's husband, returning him to family values, economic and sexual restraint, and the spread of Christianity through reproduction. The domestic bliss found in a heteronormative union was thus the triumph of Christian patriarchy and nation-building, as women were granted a central role in advancing England's larger conversional mission within the domestic space of the home. Comedies like *The London Prodigal* and *The Tamer Tamed* brought to life this conundrum about female obedience, and staged scenarios in which women tamed their husbands for the better without permanently threatening patriarchal structures. These women characters thus offer an important contribution for studying gendered patterns of conversion.

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Anxieties of Converted Sense in *The Merchant of Venice*

The medieval and early modern English figuration of the Jewish person as racial and religious Other allowed for national self-definition via juxtaposition while simultaneously requiring the formation and policing of boundaries of Jewish and Christian difference. The event of Jewish conversion to Christianity marked a transgression of those boundaries that increasingly demanded empirical or perceptual evidence of the conversion's authenticity or inauthenticity as located in the material body of the ostensible convert. Anxieties surrounding the efficacy of the conversion itself existed alongside the desire to accurately identify and respond to the Jewish presence potentially disguised beneath a Christian exterior.

By the late sixteenth century, growing concerns regarding the potentially untrustworthy nature of visual perception resulted in new techniques of sensory interrogation and interpretation of the convert. This paper argues that while both Shylock and Jessica are subject to frequent visual surveillance and evaluation to establish their shifting degrees of Jewish identity in *The Merchant of Venice*, those identities are determined less by their outward appearance(s) in the eyes of the Christian beholder than by their location within a complex framework of auditory orthodoxy. Sound, hearing, and interpretative capacity function as the primary examples of ordered or disordered sensory perception linked to the status of conversion. By the play's conclusion, concerns regarding the nature of visual appearances in *The Merchant of Venice* give way to discourses of sound, particularly those of musical harmony attuned to a cosmic order both material and spiritual.

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The Breakaway: Conversions of Power in *Henry VIII* and
The Schism of England (La cisma de Ingalaterra)

“Conversion” can mean different things. On the one hand, it could suggest a “transformation from x to y, where x entirely disappears in the process of becoming y. On the other hand (and I think more probably), conversion could refer to a more developmental process in which the conversion from x to y does not completely leave the former thing or form in the past but rather contains some residues or remnants that live on in transformed ways. For Augustine, one of the most famous theorists of the phenomenon, the conversion of conversion has specifically to do with the turn (as the word suggests) toward the light that is God. This turning movement transforms the body itself. The converted “body” I examine in this paper is not (immediately) religious or even human. My focus, rather, is on the conversion of one sign-system into another. More specifically I read the following two “schism” plays as early markers and recognitions of conceptual and metaphorological change as the concept of sovereignty begins to break away from the political-theological figure of the sacred king and turn toward more abstract, fragmented and disembodied forms. With regard to our seminar specifically, my objective is to connect the conversion problematic to the themes of sovereignty and genre. This would entail, 1) linking considerations of “public presentation” and “conversional authenticity” to trials, legal testimony and oaths of allegiance. And 2. Connecting questions of individual conversion to a wider and more abstract problem of the conversion of one sign-system (for sovereignty) into another.

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Rehearsing Godly Lives

Moving across a variety of scholarly fields, the idea of lived religion is coming into focus as a topic. Encouraged by such syncretic acts of scholarship, I aim to bring and test insights of performance studies more fully into our historical analyses of nonconformist devotional practice. For instance, in light of Diane Taylor's categories of the repertoire and the archive, we can recalibrate our attention to the ephemeral and the scripted. With D. Sack, we can test distinctions between the possible and the potential in a new practice. With Gay McAuley, we can analyse the function of the built space of production in systemic terms.

While nonconformist becomes a legal status in the Restoration, for the purposes of our SAA discussions, I mean nonconformist to stand for those who come to be convinced of an elect status, or those who have converted to a more intense religiosity, still within the Protestant fold but outside the established church. Among the reasons to turn to performance studies is that many of them have been particularly concerned with performance in early modern England. And the history of performance in this time and space is roughly co-terminus, or at least can be broken into similar stages of development, with increasing attention to phases and stages of performance in non-purpose-built spaces, the better to focus on what Callan Davies has termed 'the idea of playhouse-ness.' Both the history of playgoing and the history of churchgoing involve the gathering of crowds for communal experiences in ways with potential to interrupt and reconfigure social and political stratifications. Their respective seventeenth-century histories frequently put them in spatial proximity with each other—and the consequences of those juxtapositions will become clearer as we examine the 'idea of church-ness' with equal attention.

My larger work-in-progress focuses on Restoration London and the development of new places for nonconformity, especially around the king's Declaration of Indulgence in 1672. Andrew Marvell's *Rehearsal Transpros'd* is one text where the circulation of energies among theatre and church—along with coffee houses and the book trade—is pronounced in its playfulness around the idea of rehearsal. In the SAA paper, I will touch on that example, but my hope is to see, through the larger discussion, how robust and 'transprovable' my adducement of performance theory to the development of congregational religious identities can be.

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Nothing Worth: Penitential Theology in *Henry V*

More than four decades ago, Gary Taylor's Oxford edition of *Henry V* included a dense seven-page appendix justifying his unique emendation of the puzzling final lines king's "O God of battles" prayer in 4.1: "all that I can doe, is nothing worth; / Since that my Penitence comes after all, / Imploring pardon." Taylor's solution, emending the second *all* to *ill*, was a bold, but hardly a neat solution to a crux that has puzzled editors since the eighteenth century. In this paper I want to suggest that the crux is better understood as theological than textual. If we consider the possibility that the ambiguity in the lines is at least subconsciously intentional, it falls as part of a pattern in the play that illustrates a larger tension in the project of reclaiming Henry V — a king with an uncomfortable dual legacy in Reformed England as both a national hero and persecutor of Lollards — as a Protestant icon. This essay will not attempt to shoehorn *Henry V* into an allegory for the birth pangs of the English Reformation, but putting the play in conversation with the claims of Calvinist English Reformers about the temporality and efficacy of penitence will reveal historical correspondences. The play's staging of the messy, misunderstood conversion of the seemingly reprobate Hal into the mirror of all Christian kings, a doctrinally acceptable hero for Elizabethan England, parallels the similarly messy conversion of England from its Catholic past to its uncertain future as a nation of the elect.

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“Guard me from their tongues”: Oath-breaking as Conversion and Conversation in Marlowe’s Dramas

My paper explores themes of conversion across the works of Marlowe; I focus on moments of oath-making and breaking as a discourse on conversion practices, paying specific attention to *Tamburlaine the Great I & II* and *The Jew of Malta*. In late Elizabethan England, as religious allegiance overlapped heavily with civic allegiance, oath-taking emerged as a highly significant act of loyalty to both church and state. However, as scholars have observed, Marlowe’s works often feature moments of oath *breaking*. This practice of staging an oath and its violation emerges as a kind of warped conversion practice, where a character violates religious and political norms. These oaths are not always religious in nature (although Marlowe does feature some literal conversions in his dramas), but they are often in conversation with Elizabethan religious and political oath-taking. I draw on “conversation” as a frame for linking the theatrical display of oath-breaking to the off-stage anxieties around conversion this working group prompts thinking about. Early modern conversation carries connotations of cohabitation, with additional implications of sexual intimacy and physical touch. I also rely on our modern use and understanding of conversation – simply, a discourse and exchange of ideas between two or more people, often, but not always, verbal. Theatrical oath-taking/breaking stages conversion anxieties as a powerful speech act that redefines a character’s conversation practices – that is, what they say, and to whom they say it. Through this frame, I consider the relationship between oaths, conversion and religious loyalty, and conversation as presented by Marlowe.

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Romeo, The Apostate Turned Martyr

The saturation of *Romeo and Juliet*'s language in religious imagery is hard to miss, especially for anyone who cut their teeth on Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film adaptation *Romeo + Juliet*. From pilgrims to saints to friars, the play abounds with Christian—and more particularly, Roman Catholic—language, figures, and ideas. The relation of this language to the culture of conversion in early modern England deserves further attention. Drawing on my analysis of the phenomenon of the serial convert in *The Drama of Serial Conversion in Early Modern England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), I will argue that Romeo is represented in the first act of the play as a serial convert or apostate, because his early devotion to Rosaline is quickly superseded by his desire to be “new baptized” as Juliet's devotee (2.1.93). The sincerity and reliability of serial converts is always called into question, so Romeo must then convince his audience that his latest conversion is the one that will “stick.” The logic of early modern conversion culture opposes the figure of the insincere apostate with that of the sincere martyr, so to prove his devotion, Romeo (and Juliet) must die. The “star-crossed” nature of the plot derives, at least in part, from the culture's overzealous desire for proof of devotion in a world of uncertain commitments.

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Last Words and the Contingency of Conversion in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *King Henry VIII*

This essay focuses on the contingent and ephemeral power of last words as they are expressed in speeches by the Duke of Buckingham, Cardinal Wolsey, and Katherine of Aragon in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *King Henry VIII*. I explore these three speeches in light of scholarship by Karl Guthke, Diana Fuss, and Robert Kastenbaum, all of whom note how expressions of divine revelation and larger cultural truths—two commonly accepted aspects of last words—contain the power to convert others. And indeed, in Shakespeare's other late plays characters are converted from destructive actions by either a benevolent character's speech or by some form of divine intervention. In contrast, *King Henry VIII* illuminates the contingency of conversion, particularly within last words, for these final speeches have little effect on events or characters in the play. Instead, they seem formed to have a profound effect on the audiences of the play. As such, these last words act upon audiences as akin to self-consuming artifacts: each dying character gives a last speech that is forgotten as the play proceeds, even as it is absorbed into a greater spiritual truth articulated by the character who follows; these, in turn, seem to find their final, apothecic revelation in the very last words of the play by Thomas Cranmer. But even Cranmer's grand spiritual vision is displaced by the play's Epilogue, which dwells on the limitations of the audience members' desire to be converted.

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Converting the Audience and God in Lodge's and Peele's *Looking Glass for London*.

During plague outbreaks, English parishioners publicly prayed three times a week for the “unfeigned turning and converting” (sig B4r) of each individual heart of the congregation to accomplish an even more challenging transformation: that is, the “turn[ing]” (sig A3r) of God from harmer into healer. This essay will consider the delicate balancing act made in early modern cultural artifacts between human performances of repentance and internal conversion, on the one hand, and God's providential interactions with the natural world, on the other. Failed conversions, relapses, and other hidden transformations earn characters on the early modern stage a stockpile of materio-spiritual contagions, whether seen directly, as with the divinely punished figures in Wager's interlude *Enough Is as Good as A Feast* (ca. 1570) and Lodge's and Greene's *Looking Glass for London* (ca. 1590), or more indirectly, in the corrupt world of poisons in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (ca. 1589). Picking up on Stephen Wittek's work on the period's more expansive understanding of conversion, this essay will consider how early plays that stage the plague as divine justice often pair contagion with conversion. I will focus on the failed conversions of *Looking Glass for London* and the metatheatrical call for audience conversion as a way to consider the uniquely suspicious way that the embodied transformation of conversion mirrors the contagious corruptions of the plague. Following from Holly Crawford Pickett's recent account of the externalizing conversion of Jonson's plague-set *The Alchemist*, I will consider the layered “places” of conversion in Lodge's and Greene's Biblical play.

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“Conversion of Pocahontas: Substitutions and Elisions”

The conversion of Pocahontas was the central sign of Virginia Company success, one used to expand their marketing of shares across England. Yet the conversion narrative itself is odd. In *A True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia* (1615) Ralph Hamor details her betrayal and kidnapping on an English ship, a scene actually illustrated, but her conversion is simply a brief aside on the way to her wedding. She is never described while held inside the settlements. For details of her year of captivity, Hamor substitutes the expansion of corn fields and descriptions of house building. Inwardness is confined to the extensive self-searching of her groom, whose letter to the governor is appended to Hamor’s account. Rolfe justifying his marriage provides a description of his bride “as one whose education hath been rude, her manners barbarous, her generation accursed” that remains notorious. Pocahontas’s silence about her conversion remains as cryptic as Isabella’s turn in *Measure for Measure* from her commitment to chastity to acceptance of marriage. Recent productions have opened up the conclusion of the comedy to allow Isabella to hesitate in her answer to the duke’s proposal. While anthropologist Helen Rowntree analyzes Pocahontas’s conversion as simply pragmatic, can consideration of the generic shifts of tragicomedy help us see Pocahontas as an agent shifting a narrative of destruction to one of intermarriage and shared knowledge? One reason her myth continues to resonate today.

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Virtue's Pour: Exemplarity and Conversion in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West, Part One*

Imagine Britomart tending bar. Reports of her supreme beauty and virtue spread, drawing all the town's gallants and gentlemen to her tavern. Those drawn to her are in turn converted by her—morally transformed and improved. That crew of converts joins her on a sea voyage to the Spanish Azores and Morocco in search of her beloved, an English gentleman she fears lost in the Anglo-Spanish War. In Morocco she tames the lascivious Muslim sovereign, turning him into a “noble” Moor, before being reunited with her beloved. Such is the plot of Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West, Part One* (c. 1600). The heroine's name is not Britomart but Bess Bridges, yet she occupies a similar position as an emblem of chaste, heroic virtue.

For Jean Howard (1994), what is most “astonishing” about this “exceptional woman” is her power to morally transform other characters. In this paper, I employ philosopher Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski's theory of moral exemplarity to extend Howard's analysis. Zagzebski observes that in every era and culture, there have been supremely good and therefore supremely admirable individuals, models who inspire imitation and moral development. For Heywood, Bess is one such magnanimous figure, as she and other characters both recognize. Her exemplarity enkindles deep admiration in others, their mimetic responses leading to *metanoia*.

This paper aims to explore several related topics: the relationship between conversion and the passions; the moral psychology of admiration; and drama and/as moral education.