

Wheeling Strangers of Here and Everywhere. Present Issues of Integration and the Early Modern Crisis of Conversion

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In her monograph on religious conversion in the British empire and nation-state, Gauri Viswanathan claims that “by undoing the concept of fixed, unalterable identities, conversion unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these as permeable borders” (Viswanathan, 1998: 16). In this chapter I will argue that this observation can be seen as a key to understanding two interrelated developments in the history of the Western world: one that precedes Viswanathan’s study and concerns the early modern period, the other that follows it, relating to present issues of integration. To begin with the latter, according to the SCP (*Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*), the Dutch government agency which conducts research into the social aspects of all areas of government policy, the theme of immigration and integration has over the past years consistently been ranked as one of the most pressing problems in Dutch society.¹ Many are of the opinion that people with minority backgrounds, including refugees and other (non-Western) immigrants ought to do more or should behave differently to become fully-fledged members of Dutch society. This is problematized, however, by the notion that the Dutch disagree on what it means to be Dutch and what “Dutchness” entails. Manifesting themselves in fierce debates, for instance, about the holiday tradition of *Sinterklaas* and its blackface character *Zwarte Piet*,² these issues are often described in terms of a national identity crisis and have parallels in several other nations, especially the ones with a colonialist past.³ The recent developments of the refugee crisis, which concerns all European nations, and Brexit, which cannot be disentangled from the complexities of international migration flows, makes this issue more urgent.

The “crisis of religious conversion” that took place in early modern Europe, and how this manifested itself Shakespeare’s comedy *The Merchant of Venice* and tragedy *Othello*, offers a thought-provoking historical perspective on current questions of immigration and integration, allowing us to better understand some of the persistent paradoxes that are part of the debate about immigrant integration and the position of minorities. In addition, I will show that Shakespeare’s exploration of the theme of conversion is helpful, as this playwright was concerned not so much with the specifics of religious confessions as with societal and social implications of religious conversion. As such, his conversion plays present powerful narratives on what it means to be a minority or newcomer in a society that is anxious about the stability of its collective identity.

As a steady stream of recent publications and projects on the topic has shown, the early modern period was truly an age of religious conversion (Shoulson, 2013; Mazur, 2016; Ditchfield and Smith, 2017; Norton, 2017; and Shinn, 2018).⁴ The Protestant Reformation, but also increased encounters between Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Mediterranean, and native pagan inhabitants of Asian and American territories opened up new possibilities for religious conversion and proselytization. Early modern English theatre testifies to the appeal conversion had on its creators and audiences, offering tragedies, comedies, and all genres in between, about converts, conversions and near conversions across every imaginable religion. However, in my recent book-length study of this topic, I argue that rather than simply celebrate conversion, as their medieval predecessors had done, playwrights were more interested in reassuring their audiences that new Christians would never be able to revert to their old faith, for instance by having these characters assassinated by evil former co-religionists immediately after their transformations (Stelling, 2019). Similarly, conversion comedies ridicule the potential Christianization of caricatural Jews, Muslims and Pagans. Playwrights adopted these

narrative strategies because conversion posed a quandary in two respects. Ostensibly desired, and, according to some, in the case of Jews even an essential foreboding of the Second Coming, the adoption of the true faith also implied that converts were capable of radical change and thus of relapse. It is for this reason that converts were looked upon with suspicion, regardless of the faith they embraced. In addition, the phenomenon of conversion rendered religions exchangeable, undermining the absolute value of true Christianity. This becomes apparent from the fact that many plays draw explicit parallels between religious conversion and commercial transaction.

Important about Viswanathan's observation is that religious conversion is inextricably associated with secular issues of citizenship, nationhood and community. Indeed, it was in the early modern period that religion came to be employed as an instrument to fashion national selves and barbarous others to an unprecedented extent (Stelling, 2019: 5). More so than before the Reformation, the exchange of one religion for another was perceived as a betrayal, or, depending on one's confessional outlook, embrace, of a nation. It is because of this early modern association – and often conflation – of religion with secular issues that many of the mechanisms underlying the treatment of converts by their new communities are still recognizable today and comparable to the ways in which today's societies deal with immigrants. Indeed, while the world is significantly more secular than it was in the early modern period, with some Western European countries having populations where more than half say they are not religious, immigration is the new conversion as regards social crises. What is more, religion has, of course, not disappeared from today's societies and continues to play a defining role in debates about immigration and integration. This is notably so with regard to Islam, whose compatibility with what are described as "Western" values is often called into question. In relation to this, (religious) extremism and radicalization are often inseparably

bound up with questions of integration. Religious conversion is, moreover, part of discussions about immigration, for instance when it is claimed that Muslim refugees convert to Christianity to increase their chances of being granted asylum.⁵

The Merchant of Venice

In fact, the notion that Christianization could facilitate a smooth integration into a new community is also found in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, when the Jewish Jessica announces that she intends to turn Christian so that she can escape her detested life that is governed by her strict father and marry the man she loves. *The Merchant of Venice* is the best known early modern English conversion play, offering, in addition to Jessica's, also the forced Christianization of her father Shylock. The play is furthermore interspersed with literal and metaphorical references to conversion, including the unwitting and derogatory allusions to Shylock's conversion, articulated by several Christian characters, and Portia's assertion, after Bassanio's success in the test of the caskets, that "myself, and what is mine, to you [Bassanio] and yours / Is now converted" (3.2.166-67). Nevertheless, the play, like other early modern English drama, steers clear of portraying any fully-fledged conversions, let alone exploring the meaning of a true and radical transformation of religious identity.

As regards the storylines of Shylock and Jessica, the comedy is one about outsiders and addresses the question as to whether they can truly become insiders in Venice. Shylock's very obvious status as an outsider is often explained with the example of the insults he receives at the hands of Antonio, Bassanio and Gratiano, or with Shylock's own claim that he refuses to "eat," "drink," or "pray" with Bassanio, but the most poignant and powerful illustration is when Shylock is convicted for the attempted murder of Antonio (1.3.33-34). Shylock faces a legal penalty in the form of the confiscation of possessions and house, not so much because of the

attempt itself, but because there is a specific law against “alien[s]” who “seek the life of any citizen,” and Shylock is considered an alien (4.1.345, 347). There is no reason to assume that Shylock was not born and raised in Venice, so the only reason he is labelled as such is because he is a Jew. Thus, precisely by *not* problematizing Shylock’s status as an alien, the play shows how in early modern England religious identity had started to merge with citizenship and social identity.

The branding of Shylock as a foreigner despite his likely Venetian origin is similar to the way in which present-day minorities are considered alien despite being native-born. In his 2017 analysis of Shakespeare’s comedy in *The New Yorker*, Stephen Greenblatt recalls how as a student and prospective research assistant at Yale he was treated as a greedy “alien,” trying to “wheedle money out of Yale University,” simply because of his Jewish name and despite the fact that he was “born in this country, as [his] parents had been, and [he] donned [his] Yale sweatshirt without a sense of imposture” (Greenblatt, 2017, np). Greenblatt notes that he still feels “outrage” about this incident, and “wonder inflected by [his] recognition of the fact that African-American students have had it much worse, and that other ethnic groups and religions have now replaced Jews as the focus of the anxiety that afflicted my interlocutor” (*ibidem*). Indeed, a recent example exposing a similar treatment of minority citizens of a different ethnic background is the 2018 Windrush scandal, which concerned British subjects, born in the British colonies, in many cases people who had migrated to Great Britain as children.⁶ They were faced with deportation and sometimes even lost their jobs and homes because they were no longer considered full British subjects after renewed immigration checks.

The implication of Shylock’s conversion is, of course, that he exchanges his position as a Jewish outsider for that of a Christian insider. Yet, other than this very theoretical interpretation, there is nothing to suggest that Shylock actually becomes an insider, either from

his own perspective or from that of the Christians. To begin with, the play is strikingly evasive about Shylock's Christianization. Faced first with the death penalty, and later with the threat of having to surrender his house and possessions, Shylock is offered 'Christian mercy' and told to convert, or, "presently become a Christian" (4.1.383). This phrase betrays the utter implausibility of Shylock's true conversion to Christianity, as he is not given the time to prepare himself and study the Bible and is expected to instantly transform into a Christian. Instead of suggesting that Christianity is a belief and conviction that can be embraced, the phrase points to a social identity that is extremely difficult to shed or assume, perhaps only by a Pauline miracle of instantaneous conversion. Of course, Shylock's reluctant decision to accept the punishment and, more importantly, his permanent disappearance from the stage as well as from the narrative does not help in envisioning his true conversion and integration into the Christian community. What makes matters worse are the deeply ironic comments that unwittingly anticipate his conversion, including Antonio's: "the Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind" (1.3.174).

While also Jewish and a figure of conversion, Jessica seems to be Shylock's positive counterpart. She is repeatedly contrasted to her father and described as his opposite. The Clown, it is intimated, finds it difficult to believe that her father was not a "Christian" (2.3.11-12), and Salarino, for instance, asserts that there is "more difference between [Shylock's] flesh and [Jessica's] than between jet and ivory, more between [their] bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish" (3.1.34-36). In addition, Jessica's conversion is voluntary, and the audience is allowed to see her in her post-conversion identity. However, a closer examination of her offstage conversion shows that this change, like her father's, has little if no substance. Other than the references to her being her Jewish father's daughter, there are no allusions to Jessica's

Jewish identity; her conversion is not religiously motivated, and after her baptism, Jessica does not talk about her Christian identity, or, say, the significance of the New Testament or Christ.

As a matter of fact, Jessica's conversion produces the opposite effect: it is precisely *after* her change that she is confronted with her status as an irreducible outsider. This happens when she and Lorenzo arrive at Portia's court in Belmont and she is ignored by Bassanio (3.2.219). Most conspicuously, the validity of Jessica's conversion is denied, and her status as a damned Jewish other is emphasized, first by Gratiano, when he welcomes "Lorenzo and his infidel" to Belmont, and second by Lancelot the Clown, who explains to her that she is damned because she is still her father's daughter and "the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children" (3.5.1-2).

Jessica's situation as an outsider who attempts to integrate into a society, only to find her "otherness" emphasized in doing so, is not unlike that of many current-day immigrants. Having obtained qualifications from institutions in their new countries of residence, they face great difficulty breaking into the job market, as potential employers are wary of hiring foreigners, or, indeed, minorities (Wechselbaumer, 2016; Wrench, Rea and Ouali, 1999).⁷

While Jessica insists that "her husband [...] ha[s] made [her] a Christian," Lancelot's response betrays a deep early modern concern about the implications of religious conversion (3.5.17-18). He asserts that "this making of Christians will raise the price of hogs: if we grow all to be pork eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money," referring to the notion that Jews do not eat pork (3.5.21-23). Yet while Lancelot's remark concerns Venetian economy, the underlying issue is of the association of religious conversion with commercial transaction. The same analogy can be found in Portia's claim, mentioned above, in which she presents her own person as well as her possessions as items that can be "converted" to her husband. Likewise, and to the same effect, Jessica literally gilds herself with money when she

flees her parental home to convert and marry (2.6.49-50). Similar comparisons can be found in other early modern conversion drama (Stelling, 2019: 131-33). The point is that conversion renders religion exchangeable and turns it into a commodity; unsettlingly, it becomes something that can easily be donned or cast off for reasons of opportunity.

Othello

Othello, another conversion drama set in Venice, can be seen as a sequel to *The Merchant of Venice*, precisely from the point of view of conversion. While we are not given the opportunity to see Shylock after his Christianization, *Othello* is the only early modern English play entirely devoted to the fortunes of a convert in his post-conversion identity after a *radical* change of faith (unlike Jessica's). In my book I have described *Othello* as a conversion play and Othello's status as a convert (Stelling, 2019: ch. 7); in the present chapter, I would like to focus on a specific moment in the play that shows how Othello, despite his efforts at integrating as a Christian husband into his wife's community, is framed as an irreducible other, and I will compare the rhetorical strategy that is used with a current-day example.

The moment in question is when Othello is said to be an "extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (1.1.137-8), a comment made by Roderigo that is repeated by Iago, who turns it into a broad stereotype about all moors: "These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.339-40). The gist of this argument is that some people have no or unclear roots, which makes them unreliable. This frame was used in 2008 by a Dutch pundit who was commenting on Barack Obama's suitability for the presidency a day before the election. "Obama's afkomst is al een raadsel [Obama's origin is already a mystery]," Bart Jan Spruyt wrote tellingly in the Dutch quality newspaper *NRC*, adding:

Hij is de zoon van een studente uit Kansas en een buitenlandse student uit Kenia. Na de echtscheiding hertrouwde zijn moeder met een andere buitenlandse student, uit Indonesië. Obama ging naar school in Jakarta, en werd later in Hawaï door zijn grootouders opgevoed, voordat hij in 1979 op het Amerikaanse vasteland ging studeren.

[He is the son of a student from Kansas and a foreign student from Kenya. After their divorce, his mother married another foreign student from Indonesia. Obama went to school in Jakarta, and was later raised by his grandparents in Hawaii, before he went on to do a degree on the American mainland in 1979]. (Spruyt, 2008)

Striking about this passage is the emphasis Spruyt places on Obama's alleged "foreignness." This is not only obvious from his repetition of the term itself, but also from the notion that he distinguishes between Hawaii, where Obama was raised from the age of ten, and the "American mainland," as if the latter place were somehow more "American" than the island state (*ibidem*). It is a contrast that echoes Spruyt's earlier juxtaposition between "het enigma [the enigma]", Obama, and the "all American hero" and "open boek [open book]", John McCain, the rival presidential candidate (*ibidem*). While Spruyt does mention specific nations, such as Indonesia and Kenya, the thrust of his words is that Obama's origin is a mishmash of "exotic" (a term literally used by Spruyt) cultures and influences (*ibidem*). It is the same type of reasoning used by the so-called "birthers," Obama's political opponents who question the fact that he was born in the United States, spearheaded by Donald Trump. Furthermore, and tellingly, the passage is peppered with allusions to what Spruyt wants to present as a disturbed and uprooted upbringing: a divorce and remarriage of Obama's mother and his being raised by his grandparents. Spruyt's insistence on Obama's confused otherness and ostensible lack of rootedness serves to suggest that Obama cannot be trusted, that there is no firm and solid basis to which Obama's ideas can be traced, and, by implication, that his ideas might change at will. This is more dangerous than claiming that Obama's political opinions are ill-advised, as it

undermines his every potential opinion. Spruyt's attempt at mitigating his attack on Obama's trustworthiness is hardly convincing: "die exotische afkomst is natuurlijk geen politiek probleem, maar wel de zoektocht naar zijn identiteit die hem in contact bracht met rare radicale denkers en activisten [that exotic origin is, of course, not a political problem, but his search for his identity that exposed him to queer, radical thinkers and activists was]" (*ibidem*).

Spruyt continues his argument by discussing some of the people that he sees as radical thinkers, asserting that Obama was "bekeerd en getrouwd [converted and married]" by Jeremiah Wright (*ibidem*). It is interesting that Spruyt should mention Obama's conversion. Ostensibly, this is an offhand remark, but one to which special meaning is attached by Spruyt's other main assertion, that Obama is a radical. Just as Iago obsessively employs the term "moor" throughout the play, so does Spruyt sprinkle his column with the word "radicaal [radical]" (*ibidem*). Spruyt associates what he sees as Obama's radicalism with a disparate range of figures and themes, including the "racistische dominee Jeremiah Wright, de man van God damn AmeriKKKa [racist reverend Jeremiah Wright, the man of God damn AmeriKKKa]" (*ibidem*). In addition, Obama is "geïndoctrineerd [indoctrinated]" by the Jewish activist Saul Alinsky "die zijn aanhang leerde hoe het system te infiltreren om de massa rijp te maken voor change [who taught his followers how to infiltrate the system to make them ripe for change]," and has connections to William Ayers, "lid van de terroristische organisatie Weather Underground [member of the terrorist organization Weather Underground]" (*ibidem*). Spruyt's point seems to be that Obama is a radical convert, easily indoctrinated, and therefore radically untrustworthy.

Othello and *The Merchant of Venice* thus show the reluctance of communities to accept as new members people they regard as other. Whether it is the convert who expresses this desire (Jessica and Othello) or the community itself (forcing Shylock to convert), conversion followed

by true assimilation and recognition is not possible on the stage. As we have seen, conversion can even bring about the reverse effect: Jessica's change is questioned and she is called an "infidel," Shylock's is steered clear of by the play and ridiculed by other characters in earlier mocking allusions, and Othello is framed as an unreliable and dangerous enemy. In this way, the two plays present conversion as a form of continuity or stability, rather than change, betraying an early modern anxiety over its unsettling effects that appears underneath an explicit desire of Christianization. The same paradox can be found in the context of current-day issues of integration: there is a desire that "aliens," whether they be minorities or immigrants, adapt themselves to the majority society, but in their attempts they often find themselves excluded and stigmatized, as, to use Viswanathan's words again, the change itself "unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined."

In 2008, the Dutch theatre director Theu Boermans staged a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in which Shylock gradually transforms from a liberal Jew into a bloodthirsty, orthodox Jew (Stelling, 2009).⁸ It is a response to the way in which he is treated by the Christian community. After his offstage conversion, Shylock remains visible as a ghostlike figure at the back of the stage, standing in a pile of garbage. Boermans' Jessica responds to the unwillingness of her Christian environment to accept her as a new Christian by regretting her conversion. She concludes the play by lighting a menorah. Equally meaningful is her outfit when she escapes her father's house: a burqa. Of course, Boermans took great liberty in adding these elements to the narrative, but the purpose of his adaptation makes perfect sense and is close to the original, when we realize that the early modern crisis of conversion bears close resemblance to the modern paradox of immigrant integration and treatment of minorities. Boermans' most significant addition to the original is that he shows what happens to outsiders who are consistently excluded and branded as alien. Indeed, if, as Stephen

Greenblatt puts it, Shakespeare offers a “cure for Xenophobia,” it is because of the ability of today’s teachers, theatre-makers, and other interpreters to recognize the essence of his universal genius, but also the power of his narratives as products of his own age.

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¹ https://www.scp.nl/Nieuws/Zorgen_over_immigratie_nemen_weer_toe. See also their individual quarterly reports on the past years.

² <https://www.economist.com/europe/2013/11/04/is-zwarte-piet-racism>.

³ See: <https://www.trouw.nl/samenleving/de-nederlander-bestaat-niet-meer-of-toch-wel--a10866c2/>, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/dieter-borchmeyers-was-ist-deutsch-eine-nation-sucht-sich-selbst-a-1143259.html>; https://www.liberation.fr/france/2015/05/13/la-crise-identitaire-francaise_1308861; <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2018/04/why-britishness-identity-crisis>.

⁴ See also “Early Modern Conversions,” <http://earlymodernconversions.com>, an interdisciplinary project, led by Paul Yachnin at McGill University, that ran from 2013-2018.

⁵ See, for example: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-41040163/iranian-refugees-turn-to-christianity-in-the-netherlands>; <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/14/669662264/iranians-are-converting-to-evangelical-christianity-in-turkey?t=1552338440750>.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/windrush-scandal>.

⁷ See also https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/im_broken_depressed_foreigners_struggle_to_find_work_in_finland/10641139.

⁸ *De Koopman van Venetië* was performed by De Theatercompagnie and premiered in Amsterdam on 13 November 2008.