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Britton, Dennis Austin. Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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excel in qualities of mind and body” (122). To be sure, Barbaro’s work reflects the values of his class and the richness of his humanist education and circle. But King also highlights the significance of Barbaro’s emphasis on a woman’s character, rather than merely her wealth and/or lineage, and of his elevation of mothers to the centre of the business of child-rearing.

King’s introduction is a superb companion to her lucid translation of Barbaro’s text. Of nearly equal length to the treatise itself, the introduction provides an essential context for understanding the importance of Barbaro’s achievement on multiple levels: as a humanist text, as a contemporary account of Venetian patrician values and marriage practices, and as an aspirational portrait of an ideal wife and mother. Any student of humanism or Renaissance society will find this volume an excellent companion to, or substitute for, Alberti’s treatise.

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Britton, Dennis Austin.

Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 259 + 2 ill. ISBN 978-0-8232-5714-0 (hardcover) US\$55.

In this fascinating exploration of early modern representations of non-European conversions to Christianity in poetry and drama, Dennis Austin Britton provides an innovative and insightful discussion of the role the Church of England’s baptismal theology played in linking notions of race with those of religion. *Becoming Christian* examines the way Protestant authors and translators adapted the motif of “infidel conversion” within romance—a motif that traditionally supported the erasure of difference within Christian society and that originated in an erotic attachment between a racialized other and a Christian. This study thus offers an important contribution to discussions by Daniel Vitkus and Jane Hwang Degenhardt concerning European anxieties over conversion and its role in identity formation in Renaissance England. According to Britton, this linkage between religion and race in Anglican discussions of baptism is rooted in their comparison of the sacrament to circumcision—God’s covenant with Abraham and his nation, the Israelites. This analogy between the two rites of initiation,

he notes, “provided a theological foundation for the construction of a Christian racial identity” (43). And this theology, he convincingly argues, significantly influenced representations of non-European conversion in English romance. Unlike Catholic romances, which underscored baptism’s ability to remove race as a visible marker of religious difference, their English counterparts, asserts Britton, downplayed the sacrament’s efficacy and insisted instead that Christian identity originates within the individual: faith but also race and lineage thus become the means for ensuring salvation.

The first chapter offers a rigorous exploration of the way that race operated within Anglican baptismal theology. Britton carefully reads prominent reformers such as William Tyndale, Thomas Becon, Alexander Nowell, John Hooper, and John Whitgift to demonstrate the process by which race replaced baptism as that initial marker of Christian identity. He then turns to the racial other and draws attention to concerns among Anglican divines over the salvation of non-Europeans who convert to Christianity. How does one ensure a conversion is genuine? This anxiety, Britton further argues, lies at the heart of Protestant adaptations of the infidel-conversion motif in romance.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on two critical engagements with Ariostan romance. Britton first explores Spenser’s rejection of the motif of infidel conversion in *The Faerie Queene*. Although deeply indebted to Italian romance, Spenser, he argues, employs an Ovidian notion of metamorphosis that undermines the transformative power of baptism by insisting on the permanence of original identity. Consequently, the poet fixates on the purity of origin and the dangers of miscegenation; Britton persuasively supports this reading by comparing Britomart’s desire for the Cornish changeling Artegall with their Ariostan antecedents, the Christian knight Bradamante and the North African Muslim Ruggiero. He then shifts focus to examine John Harrington’s translation of *Orlando Furioso* as an expression of Protestant notions of translation and the transformative potential of reading. Harrington’s departure from Ariosto is exemplified in his transformation of Ruggiero, who converts to Christianity and marries Bradamante at the end of Ariosto’s poem, to Rogero, a stand-in for the Christian reader who must disavow all that is alien to maintain a Protestant Christian identity. Building on the work of Tiffany Jo Werth, Britton argues that the paratextual material Harrington includes further guides readers from the eroticism and Catholicism embedded in the Italian original. In this way, as Britton observes, Harrington’s translation is not unlike Protestant translations

of scripture like the Geneva Bible, which are rooted in a belief in the transformative power of reading and whose apparatus channels the reader's interpretation of the text.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore adaptations of the romance motif of infidel conversion on the early modern stage. Britton argues engagingly for Shakespeare's balancing of the transformative power of Ariostan romance, exemplified by conversion and marriage, against implacable notions concerning the "persistence of origins" (114), embodied in Iago's efforts to restore Othello's "infidel" identity. In this most compelling chapter, Britton situates Iago at the heart of two competing modes of romance: whereas the play looks back toward a traditional (Catholic) vision of the transformative power of the sacraments in which baptism and marriage cement Christian identity, Iago's vision looks toward a future in which biology rather than religion serves as the marker of difference. The final chapter considers female conversion in *The Merchant of Venice*, Fletcher's *The Island Princess*, and Massinger's *The Renegado*. Each play suggests an audience more or less able to accept the incorporation of non-European *female* converts into Christian society—a prejudice explained through Britton's recourse to classical medical theory and contemporary theology delineating the subsidiary biological and spiritual contribution of women to their offspring. Examining both *The Island Princess* and *The Renegado*, Britton further explores how the discourse of martyrdom underwrites the veracity of conversion: for Quisara and Donusa—the female protagonists of these two plays—a willingness to die for their new faith signals the removal of any doubt that the impetus of their conversion lay primarily in an erotic attachment and demonstrates the depth of their spiritual commitment to Christianity.

Becoming Christian offers a valuable contribution to discussions of the construction of early modern racial and national identities that draws insightful and convincing connections between the Church of England's baptismal theology and the motif of infidel conversion in English romance. And this thoughtful, balanced study will surely invite future scholarship that we hope will show an equal sensitivity to the way in which contemporary belief led early modern poets and playwrights to exploit the forms and conventions of particular literary genres.