



COMPARATIVE

LITERATURE

S T U D I E S



PENN STATE PRESS | VOL. 52, NO. 2, 2015

Lisi's book is a beautiful, promising debut. It links philosophy and literature in a persuasive manner and proposes a new, illuminating aesthetic category. Due to the influence of German idealist philosophy, Lisi's thesis may sometimes seem too strong, too willfully coherent. It might have benefited from taking into account Arthur Schopenhauer's strong impact on nineteenth-century literature and from discussing, at least in passing, another Baltic, equally influential adversary of autonomy, Fyodor Dostoevsky. But these are details. We should eagerly look forward to reading Lisi's next book.

Thomas Pavel
University of Chicago

Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic. By Ryan Szpiech. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 328 pp. Cloth \$59.95.

In the second part of Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1604), the rogue Guzmán tries to convince himself to mend his ways. Misfortunes, he tells us, helped him have a glimpse of the light of virtue; he would prefer to die rather than relapse into wrongdoing. He falls asleep in tears as he admonishes himself. The next day he wakes up and finds himself transformed. He has a new heart. Notwithstanding controversies regarding the authenticity of Guzmán's repentance, the structure, language, and tone of his account clearly resonate with the rhetorical and narrative models associated with conversion in the Christian tradition. These models authenticate Guzmán's tale as a recognizable and credible conversion narrative; they verify his story. Ryan Szpiech's *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic* not only makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of the complexity and subtlety that fictional conversion narratives like Guzmán's involve, but also provides valuable insights into the sources, development, and significance of conversion as a central religious construct as well as a narrative and rhetorical device in interreligious polemics.

Conversion and Narrative consists of six chapters devoted to close readings of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim conversion narratives drawn from polemical sources. In his introduction, "Conversion and History," Szpiech defines the theoretical principles underlying his study of narratives of conversion and places his study within the context of current scholarship in the field. By concentrating on documents narrating experiences of conversion, Szpiech productively challenges widely used methodologies in

the study of conversion. Rather than understanding conversion narratives as a mere product of a conversion experience ontologically as well as temporarily prior to them, Szpiech redirects our attention toward the narrative and rhetorical elements that make conversion stories recognizable as such, while investigating the role that these stories play in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic polemical literature.

The first chapter, "From Peripety to Prose: Tracing the Pauline and Augustinian Paradigms," adumbrates the sources and development of Christian views on conversion as "a textual drama of transformation" (30). Szpiech neatly illustrates the convergence of different paradigms of conversion in Christian sources by analyzing the conversion narrative of Juan Andrés, a *faqīh* from Xàtiva who converted to Christianity in 1487. Juan Andrés conceives of his conversion as both "a beginning that breaks with" his old religion (36) and a return to the truth from which he had previously deviated. This convert's contrasting conceptions reflect the disparate images of conversion found in Christian scriptures, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Epistles, which had only been harmonized in Augustine of Hippo's encompassing vision of history, time, and revelation. Szpiech's discussion of Augustine's influence and contributions is especially illuminating in its broad, comparative scope. Augustinian views of Judaism as a witness to the triumph of Christianity prophesied in the Old Testament, for instance, are shown to play a major part in Christian self-definition as well as in questions of selfhood and otherness with which Jewish converts like Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa María engage.

Chapter 2, "Alterity and Auctoritas," traces the changes brought about by a greater emphasis on reason as the foundation of argumentative authority in eleventh- and twelfth-century Christian polemical writings and the new understanding of textual authority and authenticity that these changes engendered. The expansion of the notions of authority and reason during this period, Szpiech argues, not only meant a "dismantling" of the influential Augustinian view of the theological stature of Judaism, but also implied the reformulation of theological arguments, a burgeoning rhetoric of anti-Judaism, and the increasingly important role of testimonies of Jewish converts in authenticating Christian polemical texts. Szpiech's close readings of Petrus Alfonsi's and Herman of Cologne's conversion stories convincingly situate them among responses to the crisis of *auctoritas* over the course of the twelfth century. The dual identity of these Jewish converts serves to dramatize Christian supersession; their testimony proves their "unified embodiment of both selfhood and otherness" (91) and attests to the evolving sense of *auctoritas* during this period. "In the Shadow of the Khazars: Narrating Conversion to

Judaism,” the third chapter of *Conversion and Narrative*, provides a fascinating discussion of the Jewish understanding of conversion in juxtaposition with the Christian models to which previous chapters allude. If ideas of Christian supersession are clearly consonant with conversion stories that dramatize a rupture from the past, Jewish sources call for a return to the truth of the original law (119) and affirm the superiority and endurance of this law. In this particular sense, Szpiech concludes, conversion narratives take a more central role in Christian polemical sources because these narratives align with the Christian model of sacred history as anchored in the idea of supersession and in the Augustinian and Pauline models of conversion.

In chapter 4, “A War of Words: Translating Authority in Thirteenth-Century Polemic,” Szpiech expands the scope of his discussion of twelfth- and thirteenth-century responses to the destabilization of *auctoritas* by investigating the unprecedented use of foreign languages as marks of authenticity in thirteenth-century polemical literature. Szpiech’s perceptive analysis of Ramón Martí’s monumental project in conjunction with Ramón Llull’s conversion narrative in his *Vita* traces the subtle changes in the understanding of authoritative discourse in the thirteenth century. If the works of Ramón Llull share Martí’s focus on language and translation, the conversion narrative at the beginning of his *Vita* implies a decisive response to the deepening crisis of authority in terms of a personal testimony to the revelatory experience behind his conversion and body of work. Szpiech’s focus on the language of personal testimony in Abner/Alfonso’s *Teacher of Righteousness* in chapter 5, “The Jargon of Authenticity: Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid and the Paradox of Testimony,” provides yet another layer to his detailed outline of the rhetorical and narrative foundations of authority in religious polemics from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Abner/Alfonso’s bold appeal to Jewish sources, allusions to contemporary attacks against Jews, and call for his fellow Jews to devote themselves to study so that they understand that conversion to Christianity is their way to salvation ratify his work as an ambiguous textual authority. The personal testimony of the convert seems here to gain in nuance whereas Abner/Alfonso’s fictional dialogue between a Christian teacher and a rebel Jew remains open-ended and fraught with doubt.

Chapter 6, “The Supersessionist Imperative: Islam and the Historical Drama of Revelation,” contrasts the conceptual framework of Islamic conversion narratives and the Christian and Jewish models discussed in the previous chapters. In a series of textual analyses, Szpiech demonstrates that conversion narratives to Islam “dramatize a general plot of soteriological history, just as the Christian sources do” (213), while, at the same time,

relying on structures and imagery that more adequately express Islamic ideas of abrogation, prophecy, and religious devotion and action. In discussing the implications and structure of Islamic conversion stories, Szpiech strikes the right balance between external and internal comparisons, and provides a comprehensive image of the commonalities and differences between the three Abrahamic religions of the Mediterranean.

By confirming the connections between belief, religious identity, and narrative forms, the conclusion provides a cogent summary of the common thread of Szpiech's study and reiterates the author's contention as to the intrinsic correspondence between Christian historical thought and conversion stories. His closing remarks point to new avenues of research in the field of Islamic hagiography and to the surplus of unexplored sources in the Cairo Genizah.

Conversion and Narrative is impressive in its breadth and variety. Given the number of languages, geographical locations, and periods covered in Szpiech's research, additional notes clarifying some central concepts and references might facilitate access to this outstanding work of scholarship. Moreover, this reader would have appreciated a more detailed discussion of the connections between conversion and penance, not only because these terms share a common background but also because of the increasing attention to penitential and confessional practice and doctrine concurrent to the development of Christian polemical literature. But these are minor quibbles that should not distract the reader from appreciating Szpiech's philological and critical acumen. Erudite, theoretically informed, and wide-ranging, *Conversion and Narrative* will prove valuable to scholars of comparative literature, religious studies, and medieval studies and to any serious student of the intersection between religion and literature.

Emmanuel Ramírez-Nieves
Harvard University

From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe. Edited by E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. 280 pp. Paper \$38.00.

The co-editors of *From Beasts to Souls* locate their project at the intersection of work on sexuality and gender, on the one hand, and critical animal studies on the other (4–6). They are right to observe that few medievalists have addressed those fields together, at least until the past few years.