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Convent Space and the Theater Stage in Early Modern Drama

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Convent Space and the Theater Stage in *The Jew of Malta*

Visual images of religious as well as secular monuments and spaces often create a sense of place within a community or territory. Globally, “nations invest in monuments, grand buildings and other projects to fill the place of the nation with meaning and memory and thus secure their power and authority” (Tim Creswell 62). In England, the “monastic buildings [of the monks, nuns and friars], especially their churches, were among the largest buildings to be seen, the largest on a par with cathedrals” (Bernard 390). These buildings could be seen everywhere, in towns as well as rural areas, and they provided charitable services, promoted art and music and education, provided relief to the poor and took care of the sick (Bernard 390). Their presence represented religious piety within the space of a powerful and conquering nation. During the 1530's, however, Henry VIII began to dissolve England's monasteries and by 1540, most were gone. The disappearance of the monasteries left a visible and religious void in England and the reforms that followed quickly established Protestantism as England's legal religion, and resulted in political and social upheaval not only for clergy, but for ordinary people. As a result, the theater became an expressive space for playwrights and audiences to address concerns raised by the Reformation. A common setting for plays that addressed religious conflict and a lack of religious tolerance was the monastery or convent. During the 16th and 17th centuries, it was the secular space of the theater stage that allowed playwrights and actors to demonstrate the hybrid nature of religious spaces in post-Reformation England.

One early modern drama play that addresses the authenticity of converted religious spaces is *The Jew of Malta*. In critical discussions of Christopher Marlowe's text, critics tend to focus more on the reasons for the seizure and conversion of Barabas' house into a convent, and less on the legitimacy of the conversion. Chloe Preedy argues that the differences between the

Christian government of Malta and Barabas' Jewish religion result in the conversion of his house by Ferneze, the Christian governor, into a nunnery, and that this loss of physical space leads to Barabas' mischievous behavior and the eventual disintegration of his relationship with his daughter Abigail. On the other hand, Shawn Smith contends Barabas is a stereotypical Jew who has no connection at all to the space he inhabits. And finally, Kimberly Reigle suggests the newly converted Christian convent offers the virginal Abigail physical protection from the secular world outside. While this criticism offers valid points of view in regard to the deterioration of Barabas and Abigail's relationship after the takeover of their home by Malta's government, it is based on the assumption that the takeover of Barabas' house is absolute. But, as historian William Cronon asserts, place is not just based on the occupation of an area by the individuals who currently live in the space, it is also the product of the connections that are made "through the paths that lead in and out" of said place (Cresswell 43). Hence, place is "imported from outside" (Cresswell 42) and is often the result of the desires of an occupying group or culture, ever changing, based on whom they choose to associate with, and whom they choose to exclude. Therefore, I suggest that by seizing Barabas' house for tribute and transforming it into a nunnery, Ferneze creates a tainted convent that cannot function as an isolated, religious space. Instead, the convent retains secular elements and remains connected to Barabas via his daughter Abigail and his slave Ithamore's ability to enter and exit the space upon Barabas' command. Also, Friar Bernardine and Friar Jacomo, two religious characters who occupy the converted convent space, betray the statutes of the Catholic Church by sharing Abigail's deathbed confession that Barabas is a murderer. In turn, the convent space becomes corrupt due to the religious figures who occupy it.

Although Barabas' wealth has afforded him a house and a place on the island of Malta, he is not considered a citizen, even though he owns and maintains a home and contributes to Malta's economy. Instead, Barabas is viewed as an "infidel" (1.2.62) by the local Christian government. Ferneze, the governor, considers Barabas' place on Malta to be illegitimate and impermanent, and uses the mistrust of the Jews to justify his seizure of Barabas' house: "through our sufferance of your hateful lives / who stand accursed in the sight of heaven / these taxes and afflictions are befall'n" (1.2.63 – 65). In Ferneze's mind, the government has allowed Barabas, a Jew, to live on Malta and to become wealthy; therefore, he considers Barabas' wealth government owned property. Unlike Barabas, Ferneze does not view the Jews as God's chosen people, but rather an "accursed" people with illegitimate wealth and treasures who live "hateful lives" as a result of Ferneze's Christian generosity; consequently, Barabas' house, his place, does not belong to Barabas, but to Malta's government.

At first glance, his former home does indeed appear to be a convent as Abigail witnesses the arrival of the nuns who will occupy the area and transform it into a pseudo religious space:

For there I left the Governor placing nuns,
Displacing me; and out of thy house they mean
To make a nunnery, where none but their own sect
Must enter in—men generally barred. (Marlowe 1.2.254-258)

The physical displacement of Abigail from her home and the occupation of the house by the nuns suggest Barabas' house is now a religious space, and lends credibility to the nuns as religious figures. However, it is Barabas' ability to gain access to the newly converted convent space, on more than one occasion, which affirms the idea that it actually functions as a hybrid space that is neither totally religious nor totally secular.

The convent space is first breached by Abigail in an attempt to recover Barabas' treasure, which is hidden underneath the floor. Although the nuns do exercise religious control over who enters the convent, they seem to have less control, or possibly little interest, in regard to who physically enters the area around the convent, and this affords Abigail the opportunity to sneak inside. Once there, her appearance seems to go unnoticed while she mumbles and searches for Barabas' treasure:

Now I have happily espied a time
To search the plank my father did appoint.
[Finding riches] And here, behold, unseen, where I have found
The gold, pearls, and jewels which he hid! (Marlowe 2.1.20-24)

Abigail infiltrates the convent to search for the treasure her father hid but the nuns are unaware of. David K. Anderson views Barabas' desire to recover this treasure as an act of retaliation against Ferneze, and suggests that "Barabas positions himself as the enemy of all Christendom" (88), and that "when he encourages Abigail to enter the nunnery. . . he is undoubtedly thinking of the Christian rulers of Malta, who have robbed him . . ." (89). Anderson is correct in regard to Barabas' eventual desire to seek revenge on Ferneze and the religious rulers of Malta. But, while Barabas' smuggling attempt may be his first act of deceitfulness against Malta's Christian leaders, and may also serve as a catalyst for his subsequent evil behavior in the remainder of the play, his treasure is less important than his need to reassert himself into his space, his home. And while the nuns now have physical possession of the house, their connection is shared with Barabas, who also has a physical connection to the space through Abigail, a counterfeit nun.

As the play continues, the physical space of the convent is once again invaded by another member of Barabas' household, his slave Ithamore, and this invasion permits Barabas to control, for a second time, what happens within the space of his former home. After Barabas finds out Abigail has entered the convent again and plans to convert to Christianity, he cooks a poisoned porridge and demands that Ithamore take it to the convent. Barabas gives Ithamore instructions in regard to how outsiders "send their alms into the nunneries" (3.4.78) via "a dark entry where they take it in / Where they must neither see the messenger / Nor make inquiry who hath sent it them" (3.4.80-82). By accepting donations from the outside world, the nuns relinquish partial control of the nunnery, which allows Barabas to use Ithamore to enter the convent from the outside in, just as he used Abigail to infiltrate the convent space from the inside out. In regard to the sisters and the occupation of the convent space, Reigle states, "the sisters [in *The Jew of Malta*] keep themselves hidden from corruption of the city" via the "safety enclosure provides" (506). Similarly, Caroline Bowden contends that "parts of the convent [contained] small openings in the walls . . . [which] permitted the passing of food, documents or other objects into the convent without either party being seen by the other" (489). While the convent offers some protection to Abigail and the nuns, the "isolation of the convent" (Reigle 505) does not offer complete protection from the outside world. By way of the "dark entry" Ithamore is able to approach the convent and wait, undetected, in the shadows of the second entry. He knows if he leaves the pot of porridge, the nuns will come out and "take it in" to the convent. This system of receiving alms is flawed in that it operates off of the assumption that every gift received into the convent is favorable, and every giver is ethical. This leaves the nunnery open to those who would oppose it, in this case, Ithamore. Therefore, just as Barabas' treasure allows him to stay connected to his former home, so does this entryway into the convent. The space of the convent

then, which is intended to be religiously pure, is instead porous and influenced by the outside world.

Marlowe also makes a couple of interesting connections in this scene between Christianity and the theater stage. First, the small openings built into the convent walls, and the passing of alms from the outside to the inside are similar, in presentation, to the act of confession in the Catholic Church, which allows transgressors to confess their sins to a priest. When Ithamore leaves the porridge, he introduces elements of negativity and corruptness into what is considered a religious environment. However, since the convent space is tainted, he does not require forgiveness for poisoning the nuns. Second, the layout of the confession stall is similar to that of the theater stage. It is a small space which utilizes a curtain or screen to separate a main character, i.e. a priest, from the audience, i.e. the confessors. This arrangement lends credibility to the idea that priests can be viewed as thespians, while penitents can serve as audience members, and it links the hybrid nature of religious spaces to that of post-Reformation theater space, thus allowing Marlowe to comment on religious practices and the act of Christian confession in a way audiences would have understood, without actually saying anything incriminating in regard to either Catholicism or Protestantism.

Just as outside influences affect the convent space in *The Jew of Malta*, the improper sexual behavior that occurs inside also calls into question the validity of the convent as a religious space. In regard to sexual misconduct that occurred within monasteries, G.W. Bernard states that those who visited the monasteries in the 16th century found evidence of sexual wrongdoing between the nuns, monks and friars. According to Bernard, those who confessed to acts of a sexual nature more than likely did so because “their misconduct was flagrant, and denial would be pointless, as, for example, when a nun was pregnant” (398) Additionally, “they may

well have had an acute sense that they had done wrong”(Bernard 398). This sense of right and wrong, however, seems to be absent in *The Jew of Malta*, and while the convent is intended to provide protection from the outside world, it does little to combat the impurity and hypocritical nature of the nuns and the friars who reside inside. Indeed, the sexual references in the play seem to imply sexual misconduct not only occurs, it is expected. When Bernardine laments to Giacomo after Abigail’s death that he is grieved because Abigail died a virgin (3.6.41), he insinuates his grief is due to Abigail dying without experiencing sex, an unacceptable act within the space of a convent. It may also be assumed that Bernardine is upset that he missed an opportunity to take Abigail’s virginity. Similarly, when Barabas hears the ringing of the Christian death bells and realizes the nuns are dead due to his poisoned porridge, he tells Ithamore, “I was afraid the poison had not wrought / Or, though it wrought, it would have done no good / For every year they swell, and yet they live” (4.1.5 - 6). Barabas’ observation in regard to pregnant nuns living in a convent calls into question the validity of the religious space within and on a broader scale, questions the right of the Christian government to occupy religious space on Malta.

Regardless of their religious affiliations, what all playwrights had in common, while “living in a period of religious upheaval, was the sense that ultimate questions were unsettled and the answers to those questions not obvious” (Maus and Bevington xlv).¹ Although censorship laws were enacted to prevent playhouses from staging plays with obvious religious themes, “the high-stakes spiritual dilemmas opened up by the Reformation offered irresistible dramatic

¹ According to Maus and Bevington, “Renaissance dramatists occupied just about every point on the confessional spectrum. Shakespeare was most likely brought up as a Catholic but seems to have made his peace with the established Church of England in early adulthood. [Ben] Johnson and [Elizabeth] Cary converted to Catholicism as adults; after about a decade as a Catholic, Johnson returned to the Church of England. [Thomas] Middleton, [Thomas] Dekker and [John] Fletcher were staunch Protestants. [Christopher] Marlowe was widely rumored to be an atheist, and [Thomas] Kyd was also accused of unorthodox beliefs” (xlv).

opportunities,” for playwrights to engage with this topic (Maus and Bevington xlv). Plays such as Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Johnson’s *The Alchemist*, Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet* all contain religious themes that proved controversial when acted out on the early modern stage. And as the Reformation progressed, the secular space of the stage became a constant in England’s unstable religious environment. As playwrights and actors created and performed plays that addressed religious transformation, as well as social and political change that resulted from religious intolerance, they also addressed issues of space and place in post-Reformation England. Once used by the Catholic Church as a way to “emphasize [their] distinctiveness and independence” (Cresswell 62) and as a means to establish religious domination, place now became muddled and difficult to define. Therefore place, or what Doreen Massey refers to as searching for a sense of place, became “a plea for a new conceptualization of place as open and hybrid” (Cresswell 53). This progressive view of place calls into question the right of a religion and in a broader sense England, to dominate the place of another simply by occupying physical space and renaming it.

Thus, space and its connection to place are not static but instead ever-changing, based on the thoughts and actions of the original occupying group or culture, and further affected by the desires of the subsequent occupying group or culture. By writing and performing plays in secular spaces that addressed religious, social and political concerns in England during the 16th and 17th centuries, Marlowe and his contemporaries not only utilized the stage to mediate the fears associated with religious occupation, they also gave voice to the idea that a religion of any denomination that dominates a specific space has the potential to create political and social instability. In regard to *The Jew of Malta*, we see not just a play about Jews, Christians and religious stereotypes, but rather a text that questions the importance of individual place in

society, the legitimacy of those who occupy another's place, and how a space functions once it is taken over. Additionally, "the indeterminate religious identities of Marlowe's characters are further reflected by the shifting statuses of Malta's houses, as physical place responds to the wider fluctuations within Malta's communities" and as "Barabas' first house . . . is transformed from Jewish family home to Catholic religious community" (Preedy 177). Also, the continued confiscations and conversions related to Barabas' house and his treasure attest to Marlowe's astuteness in regard to Henry VIII's desire to not only separate himself from the Church of Rome and dissolve the monasteries, but his willingness to confiscate and repurpose space at the expense of others.²

Finally, the transformation of Barabas' house into a convent is not authentic. The guise of the convent paired with the corrupt nature of the space within produces a hybrid space that does not allow true religious transformation to occur. Likewise, this hybridity is an imitation of what was viewed on the theater stage as night after night, secular stage space was repurposed into convents, brothels and romantic gardens, oftentimes more than once within the same night. Post-Reformation plays challenged audiences' preconceived notions about race, religion and politics (*English Renaissance Drama* 288), and made assumptions within the hybrid space of the theater that could not be made otherwise. And audiences, being well informed in regard to both Catholic and Protestant liturgy, were able to share in this experience.

² See John Stowe's *A Survey of London* for the names and locations of converted convents in England.