



# **FIGURES OF CONVERSION**

**“THE  
JEWISH QUESTION”  
& ENGLISH NATIONAL  
IDENTITY**

**MICHAEL RAGUSSIS**

## Figures of Conversion

Post-Contemporary Interventions

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Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson

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*"The Jewish Question" & English National Identity*

MICHAEL RAGUSSIS

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## Contents

Illustrations   vii

Acknowledgments   ix

Introduction   i

### I

The Culture of Conversion   15

*"The English Madness," or "This Mania of Conversion"*   17

*History, Memoir, Novel: "My own darling Jew, Jesus Christ loves you"*   26

### 2

Writing English Comedy: "Patronizing Shylock"   57

*The Primal Scene and the Return of the Repressed in Harrington*   65

*Figurative Conversion, from the Church Fathers to Freud*   76

### 3

Writing English History:

Nationalism and "National Guilt"   89

*Apostasy, Conversion, and Genocide in Ivanhoe*   94

*The Emergence of Anglo-Jewish History*   104

### 4

Writing Spanish History:

The Inquisition and "the Secret Race"   127

*Daughter and Father(land)*   136

*Conquest and Conversion: Moors, Indians, Jews*   159

5	
Israel in England:	
English Culture and the "Hebrew Premier"	174
<i>Disraeli and Crypto-Judaism</i>	176
<i>Arnold's Hebraism and the "Science of Origins"</i>	211

6	
Moses in Egypt: The Secret Jew in England	234
<i>"Despoiling the Egyptians": Trollope's Jewish Criminals</i>	238
<i>"An accomplished Egyptian": Eliot's English Gentleman</i>	260

Epilogue	291
----------	-----

Notes	301
-------	-----

Index	333
-------	-----

## *Illustrations*

1. "Is There No Room for the Wandering Jew?" 6
2. "Helena, Do Not Weep for Me" 43
3. "He Is Your King for All That!" 48
4. "The Conversion of Nathan" 52
5. "Immolation of the Jew" 53
6. "The Jew Rabbi Turn'd to a Christian" 54
7. "A Jew Turning to a Christian" 55
8. "The Birmingham Moses" 123
9. "Moses Chusing His Cook" 124
10. "Strange Bed-Fellows!" 134
11. "Professional View of the Situation" 201
12. "Neutrality Under Difficulties" 202
13. "The Great 'Trick Act'" 204
14. "The Sphinx Is Silent" 207
15. "The Asiatic Mystery" 209
16. "The Jew" 213
17. "Cartoon for the Merchant Tailors" 237
18. "D'israel-i in Triumph; The Modern Sphynx" 238
19. "The House of Commons According to Mr. Disraeli's Views" 241
20. "Courtship" 254





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## Introduction

*I knew a Man, who having nothing but a summary Notion of Religion himself, and being wicked and profligate to the last Degree in his Life, made a thorough Reformation in himself, by labouring to convert a Jew.*

A French Roman Catholic priest relates this anecdote while the English hero of *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) listens skeptically.<sup>1</sup> But the ironies of history are such that, in less than a century, the kernel idea of this implausible anecdote would represent the model for a national project—not in France (where the revolutionary government was granting the Jews their civil liberties), but in England. During the Evangelical Revival, the conversion of the Jews functioned at the center of a project to reform the English nation, which had become “wicked and profligate” in the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

In the following pages I will explain the remarkable role that the idea of Jewish conversion played in Protestant England from the 1790s through the 1870s. This will allow me to record and analyze the representation of Jewish identity in Christian culture not in the conventional way—through a broad range of anti-Semitic stereotypes<sup>3</sup>—but through a specific discourse: the rhetoric of conversion and the figure of the Jewish convert. In my view this rhetoric of conversion is the oldest and most persistent ideological setting within which the representation of Jewish identity has functioned, originating in the textual invention of “the Jew” for the purposes of evangelization in the writings of Paul and the early Church fathers.<sup>4</sup> In the course of history this rhetoric has been reinvented periodically, and one of the most notable moments of such reinvention occurred during the Evangelical Revival.

I have begun with a quotation from Defoe because his two novels of the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, published within months of each other, are based entirely on the ideology of conversion and thereby anticipate

the Evangelical drive to convert the nation. In the first book of his adventures Crusoe gives up what he calls the wickedness of his past life, asks repentance of God, and begins reading the Bible every day, but his own conversion seems finally realized only when he converts the “savage” Friday. This is a critical pattern in the Christian ideology of conversion: the conversion of the Other (heathen, infidel, or Jew) is the surest sign of the conversion of the self, so that the true convert proves himself by becoming a proselytizer. In *The Farther Adventures* Crusoe completes the work of conversion by returning to his island, where he converts a group of captured “savages” as well as the colony of his own countrymen and their “savage-wives.” Such events are harbingers of the Evangelical crusade to reform England through a national conversion at home and the dissemination of the Gospel to “the heathen” abroad, a crusade that swept through every corner of England and every class of English society and whose effects were felt around the world, especially in India and Africa.<sup>5</sup> What these two novels failed to anticipate was the pivotal role that the conversion of the Jews would assume in such a cultural project and the critical function that “the Jewish question” would have in defining the national identity of England from the period of the French Revolution through the Victorian era.

But already in *The Farther Adventures* we find the kind of critique of Roman Catholic proselytism that prepared the way for Protestant England to see itself as the inheritor and the reformer of the work of conversion. In China, Crusoe meets “three Missionary *Romish* Priests” whose work, “the Conversion *as they call it*, of the *Chineses* to Christianity, is so far from the true Conversion requir’d, to bring Heathen People to the Faith of Christ, that it seems to amount to little more, than letting them know the Name of Christ, and say some Prayers to the Virgin *Mary*, and her Son, in a tongue which they understand not, and to cross themselves and the like.”<sup>6</sup> The Evangelical project was designed at least in part to demonstrate to the world precisely how to bring the Gospel to both the heathen and the Jews, particularly in light of the Roman Catholic Church’s patent failures. Defoe’s novels are sprinkled with barbs aimed at these failures as part of a conventional English discourse that critiqued those nations whose religion had led them to commit the most heinous crimes. We find, for example, a consistent pattern of remarks aimed at the Inquisition in Spain and Italy—though without reference to the Jews, a

telling anomaly that I will explain—and at the Spanish conquest and conversion of the native populations of the Americas.

What is being developed here is a nationalist discourse that evaluates and contrasts different nations on the basis of religious tolerance. So Defoe demonstrates the way in which national reputations are ruined—for example, “the Conduct of the *Spaniards* in all their Barbarities practis’d in *America*, where they destroy’d Millions of these People, . . . for which the very Name of a *Spaniard* is reckon’d to be frightful and terrible to all People of Humanity . . . : As if the Kingdom of *Spain* were particularly Eminent for the Product of a race of Men, who were without Principles of Tenderness, or the common Bowels of Pity to the Miserable.” To understand the nationalistic function of such a discourse, we must recognize Defoe’s attempt to make his hero the very model of tolerance, as if Crusoe represented the English national character par excellence. On the island that he rules as a king “we had but three Subjects, and they were of three different Religions. My man *Friday* was a Protestant, his Father was a *Pagan* and a *Cannibal*, and the *Spaniard* was a Papist: However, I allow’d Liberty of Conscience throughout my Dominions.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a description exposes in brief the complicated double ideology of Protestant England. “My man Friday,” a convert to Protestantism (and a servant to his master), is the critical sign of the way in which the ideology of conversion is located inside the English national (and nationalist) ideology of tolerance. Crusoe’s treatment of Friday, including Friday’s conversion, is seen as the liberal antithesis of the historical record of Catholic Spain—that is, the destruction of the natives as part of their conquest and the notorious efforts that were made to force their conversion. Thus, in Crusoe’s deliverance of the “savage” Friday, first from death, and then from idolatry, we have an anticipation of an ideological paradigm that will dominate nineteenth-century English discourse, defining England as a nation that gives “pity to the miserable”—including colonizing and converting the heathen and establishing missions throughout England, Europe, and Asia to convert the Jews.

But it was precisely when the missions to convert the Jews became the subject of public scandal in the opening decades of the nineteenth century that the English national character and its reputation for tolerance were called into question. In the opening chapter of this book I will explore the public controversy that surrounded the missions to the Jews, but here I

wish to locate the origins of these missions in the renewed interest in the Jews that occurred after the French Revolution. Such missions were an outgrowth of a well-known and long-standing English tradition of millenarian discourse in which the ideas of toleration and conversion were inseparable. What had been throughout most of the eighteenth century a steady (if somewhat negligible) stream of literature on the conversion of the Jews and their restoration to Palestine became nothing short of a torrent in the 1790s.<sup>8</sup> In the tumultuous events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, millenarians saw the signs of the Second Coming, which, according to biblical prophecy, was to be preceded by the restoration of the Jews to Palestine and their conversion. In 1794 the subject of the poetry prize at Cambridge was “The Restoration of the Jews”; in 1794–95 Richard Brothers’s declarations that, as Prince of the Hebrews, he would lead the Jews back to Palestine produced numerous pamphlets and books, large crowds in London, and a speech in the House of Commons by one of Brothers’s disciples, a member of Parliament who unsuccessfully protested the government’s decision to confine the prophet on the basis of criminal insanity;<sup>9</sup> and in 1799 Napoleon invaded Palestine, and soon thereafter issued his Egyptian Proclamation that called on the Jews to return to Palestine and thereby incited a controversial debate among English millenarians over whether England or France would lead the Jews back to their homeland. Such historical events allow us to understand the different degrees of importance assigned to the conversion of the Jews early in the eighteenth century (by Defoe in 1719, for example) and after the French Revolution.

Writing in 1841, James Huie noted this shift in his *History of the Jews*, explaining how in the period after the French Revolution the religious revival rediscovered the idea of the conversion of the Jews: “It was not expected that Christians should feel a great anxiety about the spiritual welfare of the Heathen, without, at the same time, taking a deep interest in the condition of the Jews. . . . ‘They forget,’ says Archbishop Leighton, ‘a main point of the church’s glory, that pray not daily for the Jews’ conversion.’”<sup>10</sup> It was precisely such a view that was preached by Charles Simeon, minister of Trinity Church at Cambridge for fifty-three years and called “the finest flower of Evangelicalism.”<sup>11</sup> Simeon took the message of the Jews throughout England and beyond, establishing “a Jews’ Society” at Cambridge and traveling tirelessly in support of the London Society

for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews.<sup>12</sup> His influence at Cambridge was so wide and so profound—one bishop claimed that Simeon had a larger following than Newman, over a longer period of time—that his followers, the “Simeonites,” “for nearly half a century went out from King’s, Queens’, St. John’s, even Trinity, to spread the Evangelical gospel at its most characteristic over England and exert their influence on the morals of the English people.”<sup>13</sup> His message was simple: “In our own land, an unprecedented concern begins to manifest itself in behalf of all the nations of the earth who are lying in darkness and the shadow of death. The duty of sending forth missionaries to instruct them, is now publicly acknowledged by all our governors in church and state. . . . And in this ebullition of religious zeal, can we suppose that the Jew shall be forgotten?” Soon it became commonplace to argue that the evangelization of all nonbelievers had to begin with the proselytization of the Jews: “in converting the Jews to Christ, we adopt the readiest and most certain way for the salvation of the whole world,” for “the Jews in their converted state will be eminently instrumental in converting the Gentile world.” So, the English people were instructed: “If you have any love to the *Gentile* world, you should bestow all possible care on the instruction of *the Jews*, since it is by the Jews chiefly that the Gentiles will be brought into the fold of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

From this perspective, the proselytization of the Jews took primacy over the missions to the heathen and even gained a kind of urgency, so that both strict millenarians and the larger Evangelical public began to see themselves as the benevolent guardians of the Jews. The Jews were to be preserved, “as God’s ancient people,” until their national conversion at the advent of the Second Coming. The conversionist societies were intended to aid in this divine plan, and with a kind of reverse logic their establishment was viewed as a sign of the proximity of the Second Coming.<sup>15</sup> Simeon argued that England’s “Benevolence Towards God’s Ancient People” was manifest in their evangelization and that the rise in missionary activity in England was a divine sign: “See what is at this moment doing amongst the more religious part of the Christian community, in the circulation of the Scriptures, and especially of the New Testament; and what efforts are making by Christian missionaries for the conversion of the Jews! And I must say, that this is a call from God to us, and that it is no less our privilege, than it is our duty, to obey it.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, while



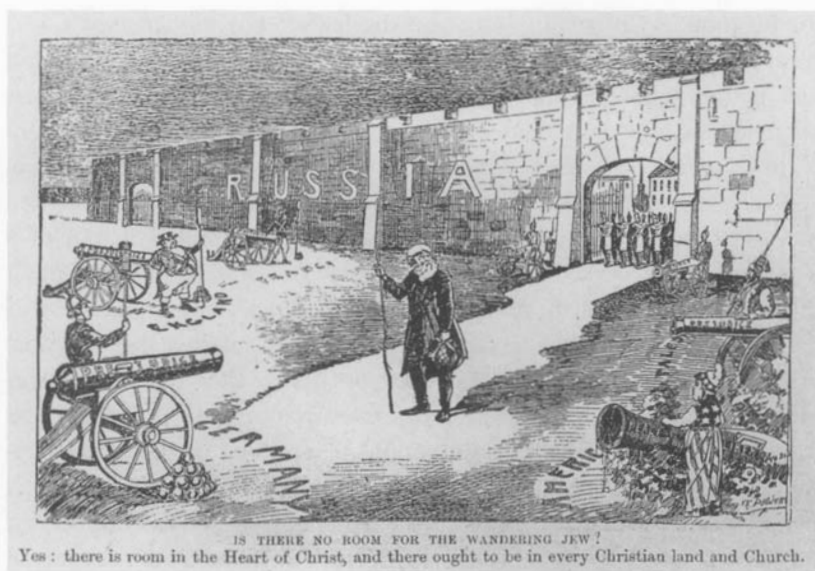


Figure 1. A typical piece of conversionist propaganda in which the prejudices of various nations (including England) make the Jew a homeless wanderer, while Christ offers the only refuge. From Reverend John Dunlop, *Memories of Gospel Triumphs Among the Jews During the Victorian Era* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1894), p. 449.

based on the exegesis of those biblical prophecies that revealed the role of the Jews in the Second Coming, the idea of toleration was soon put into practice in the establishment of conversionist societies and in the summons that called on the average English citizen to take every opportunity to bring the Gospel to the Jews. In either case, toleration and conversion went hand in hand, so it should not surprise us to find Lewis Way, who saved the most famous Jewish missionary society in England from financial ruin, defending the zealous efforts of the conversionists by arguing “that Christian conversion is not inconsistent with Christian toleration. . . . In the vocabulary of a Christian, conversion does not stand opposed to *toleration* but to *persecution*”<sup>17</sup> (figure 1).

My project begins with the claim that the novel participated in the public controversy over the missions to the Jews, and, more especially, that a particular tradition of the novel attempted to secularize this notion

of tolerance toward the Jews. Emerging in the decades when millenarian discourse flourished and when the abuses of the missions to the Jews became a public scandal, this revisionist tradition of the novel attempted to reinvent the representation of Jewish identity by calling into question the ideology of conversion. Such a reinvention required disengaging the representation of Jewish identity from the sphere of biblical discourse—that is, from the narrow notion of “God’s ancient people.” From Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott in the opening decades of the nineteenth century through George Eliot in the 1870s, this tradition of novelists recorded and examined English anti-Semitism in both its contemporary and historical forms, defining what such writers characterized as England’s national guilt. This idea of national guilt was the bedrock of Evangelical activism. William Wilberforce consistently threatened that God would punish England for such “national crimes” as the failure to abolish the slave trade and to Christianize India, while Charles Simeon developed the same notion for England’s failure to evangelize the Jews.<sup>18</sup> But if for the Evangelicals toleration was typically absorbed by the idea of conversion—Wilberforce went so far as to claim that the evangelization of India was more important than the abolition of the slave trade<sup>19</sup>—for these novelists England’s liberal reputation could be recuperated only when toleration was divorced from conversion, and only after a full accounting had been rendered of England’s past and present persecution of the Jews.

By restoring this novelistic tradition to the discursive and historical setting within which it operated, I hope to explain the way in which the novel functioned at the center of a crisis in national identity. This setting included the highly influential tradition of millenarian discourse, which became distinctly nationalistic when the threat of French revolutionary ideas forced on England a (re)definition of the English national character, and when war with France dragged on, almost without interruption, from 1793 to 1815, with periodic threats of a French invasion.<sup>20</sup> The question of which nation, Protestant England or “atheistical France,” would lead the Jews back to their homeland combined religious enthusiasm with patriotic fervor and even economic self-interest, for millenarian writers did not hesitate to remind the English public of France’s designs on commerce in the Near East.<sup>21</sup> But even more importantly, this novelistic tradition must be resituated in dialogue with the controversial literature generated by the crisis over the missions to the Jews, including a specifi-

cally conversionist literature (memoirs and novels advocating the conversion of the Jews) and a body of countertexts produced by the Anglo-Jewish community. Like the discourse of millenarianism, the memoirs and novels produced by conversionists formulated the issue of Jewish conversion in terms of national identity, defining English Protestantism for the potential Jewish convert as a superior alternative to the Roman Catholicism of Italy or Spain and the atheism of France. It is specifically in relation to these popular conversionist novels, which typically announced their ideology in their titles—*Leila Ada, The Jewish Convert* or *Julamerk; or, The Converted Jewess*—that I will define what I am calling the revisionist novel of Jewish identity, a tradition that extends from Edgeworth through Eliot. Finally, to comprehend the widest boundaries of this discursive setting, I will argue that under the influence of England's religious revival the rhetoric of conversion became so widely disseminated that it was used in a host of cultural projects, like Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which worked to define English national identity in relation both to other European national identities and to Jewish identity. In other words, these different discourses constituted a unified—if deeply contested—field, organized around the figure of conversion.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, this field of discourse was not static; in fact, it was a particularly acute register of the kinds of historical developments that occurred from the 1790s through the 1870s.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, I will articulate such developments by opening up “the Jewish question” to the multiple questions that often are amorphously subsumed by it—that is, by understanding how “the Jewish question” was periodically refocused in the course of the nineteenth century as a theological question (based on arguments over scriptural exegesis), a political question (based on the parliamentary debates over the civil and political disabilities of the Jews), and a racial question (based on the racial theories of the new science of ethnology). In the end, I locate the ideology of (Jewish) conversion, which stands behind all these variants of “the Jewish question,” at the center of a profound crisis in nineteenth-century English national identity.

The most obvious trace of the controversy over the conversion of the Jews in the nineteenth-century novel can be found in the many satirical allusions aimed at the conversionist societies. The use of such allusions became a regular part of the comic repertoire of the novel, a kind of satirical

novelistic trope. In a well-known episode from Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, for example, Bertie Stanhope writes home with the news that "he was about to start with others to Palestine on a mission for converting Jews. He did go to Judea, but being unable to convert the Jews, was converted by them."<sup>24</sup> In William Thackeray's *The Newcomes*, Mrs. Thomas Newcome epitomizes Evangelical enthusiasm by giving up her time "to attend to the interests of the enslaved negro; to awaken the benighted Hottentot to a sense of the truth; to convert Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Papists," while her husband, bored with his wife's enthusiasms, "yawned over the sufferings of the negroes, and wished the converted Jews at Jericho."<sup>25</sup> And Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* attempts a pious image: "She worked flannel petticoats for the Quashyboos—cotton night-caps for the Cocconut Indians—painted hand-screens for the conversion of the Pope and the Jews."<sup>26</sup> This kind of satire is especially interesting when it comes from the pen of the most famous Jewish convert of nineteenth-century England, Benjamin Disraeli, whose own conversion was the subject of suspicion and bitter satire. In *Tancred*, the third novel of his celebrated political trilogy of the 1840s, Disraeli pokes fun at the self-righteous English family that takes its relaxation in "a meeting for the conversion of the Jews," at the "journals [which] teemed with lists of proselytes and cases of conversion," and at the bogus successes that conversionist societies typically produced—"five Jews, . . . converted at twenty piastres a-week."<sup>27</sup>

But the participation of the novel in the public controversy over the missions to the Jews was not limited to a string of satiric allusions. Such allusions frequently functioned to trigger a critique of the ideology of conversion by influencing the entire design of a novel—that is, by exposing and undermining the conventional plot that had as its goal the conversion of the central Jewish characters. In novels such as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, such a critique is initiated through a direct allusion to the society at the center of the controversy, the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews. In Eliot's novel, when Daniel relates the story of Mirah Cohen, the young Jewish woman he saves from drowning, he is met with a plan for her further rescue: "Lady Mallinger was much interested in the poor girl, observing that there was a Society for the Conversion of the Jews, and that it was to be hoped Mirah would embrace Christianity."<sup>28</sup> But *Daniel Deronda* de-

liberately resists the conventional plot of conversion for the Jewish heroine, while transferring the plot of conversion to the Gentile heroine, Gwendolen Harleth, who neglects the Evangelical placards calling on her to repent and convert but who nevertheless comes under Daniel's powerful proselytizing influence. Similarly, in *Ulysses* the methods of the missionary societies, such as tempting poor Jewish children with food or money—so brutally skewered by critics of the London Society—make Leopold Bloom recall his father's conversion: "They say they used to give pauper children soup to change to protestants in the time of the potato blight. Society over the way papa went to for the conversion of poor jews. Same bait." This direct allusion to the missions' abuses assumes a larger function in the course of the novel, shaping the entire story of Bloom when his own conversion is positioned inside the conversion of his father: "in 1880 he had divulged his disbelief in the tenets of the Irish (protestant) church (to which his father Rudolf Virag (later Rudolph Bloom) had been converted from the Israelitic faith and communion in 1865 by the Society for promoting Christianity among the jews) subsequently abjured by him in favour of Roman catholicism at the epoch of and with a view to his matrimony in 1888."<sup>29</sup>

In her famous essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," George Eliot provides a model for understanding the way in which the plot of conversion operated in the nineteenth-century novel: "'Adonijah' is simply the feeblest kind of love story, supposed to be instructive, we presume, because the hero is a Jewish captive, and the heroine a Roman vestal; because they and their friends are converted to Christianity after the shortest and easiest method approved by the 'Society for Promoting the Conversion of the Jews.'"<sup>30</sup> By using Eliot's comparison between the goals of the London Society and the conversionist novelist, we can see that the plot of conversion was institutionalized at the same time in the missions to the Jews and in the discourse of nineteenth-century England. My project attempts to identify and explore the intersection of important literary and cultural forms—that is, to locate the ideological juncture at which novelistic form and Christian culture meet. The plot of *Adonijah*, for example, is not the construction of one "silly lady novelist" but of an entire culture; countless conversionist novels like it were produced during the nineteenth century. Only by recovering this long-forgotten tradition of conversionist

fiction is it possible to identify and analyze a revisionist tradition based on a critique of the ideology of Jewish conversion.

I begin this book by exploring the controversy over the conversion of the Jews, emphasizing the institutionalization of the ideology of Jewish conversion in both the conversionist societies and the conversionist novel. I then turn to the revisionist novel of Jewish identity by exploring this tradition's attempt to invent a plot that exposes and ironizes the hegemonic plot of conversion. In this way I situate a group of more or less canonical English novels within the public debate over the missions to the Jews and the larger culture of conversion. But I do not limit myself to the study of novels only, or to texts that are simply revisionist. For the revisionist novel was in continuous dialogue with other forms of discourse, and the representation of Jewish identity was the site of continuous textual conflict, where even texts that critiqued conversionism could be based not on revision but on reactionary anti-Semitism (attacking conversion because it provided the Jew with a passport into English culture).

The central narrative of my book begins with Maria Edgeworth's self-conscious initiation of a revisionist tradition in *Harrington* (1817), a novel based on a critique of the conversion plot in *The Merchant of Venice*, the ur-text of the representation of Jewish identity in England. After exploring the use of the figure of conversion in a variety of discourses, both ancient and modern, I examine the nineteenth-century novel's dialogue with a specific tradition of historical discourse that used the figure of conversion to define English national identity. The tradition of medievalist historiography extending from Sharon Turner (1768–1847) to Edward Augustus Freeman (1823–92) was no mere antiquarian enthusiasm for the distant past, but an inquiry, often patriotic in nature, into the origins of the modern English nation-state—an inquiry typically based on an ideology of conversion and assimilation. In England after the French Revolution, history became the final arbiter in discussions of national character; after all, in the face of the threatening events in France, where revolution was seen as the rejection of tradition and the abrogation of history, both a political philosopher like Edmund Burke and a historian like Sharon Turner turned to English history to establish the nature of English national identity. History, in fact, began to dictate the boundaries of English national life—hence the immense contemporary power in-

volved in defining the origins of English national life, whether in the medieval histories of Turner and Freeman or in the medieval novels of Scott, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Charles Kingsley. In its apparent ability to uncover the origins of the English nation, history was used to define the limits of English national life—its religious tradition, its racial composition, its cultural heritage.

Scott's absorption of historical discourse into the novel was a way of situating the novel at the center of national life. In fact, Scott's creation of the historical novel and his writing of *Ivanhoe* in particular are the most patent signs of two parallel developments on which my book is founded: the use of history to formulate the basis of English identity, and the use of the novel to revise the representation of Jewish identity. The revisionist novel critiqued the English national character by subjecting it to a moral reevaluation on the basis of English attitudes toward the Jews. It was Scott who historicized such a project. By depicting the persecution of the Jews, including the attempt to convert them, at a critical moment in history—the founding of the English nation—*Ivanhoe* located “the Jewish question” at the heart of English national identity. Scott also located woman (in his case studies of Rebecca, Rowena, and Ulrica) at the heart of a crisis in the survival of oppressed races and cultures. Finally, the history of England (especially its treatment of the Jews) began to be used in a comparison with the histories of other European nations such as France and Spain to define different national identities. The representation of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews from medieval England and Spain, the emancipation of the Jews in revolutionary France, all became a way of marking the different European national characters. Hence my emphasis on a kind of dialogical relationship between historical and novelistic discourses.

The last phase of this study records the emergence of a new ground on which the figure of conversion was represented and debated: Benjamin Disraeli, the most famous Jewish convert in English history. As both a popular novelist and the nation's leader, Disraeli became the new center of representations of Jewish identity in England, though scholars have neglected his profound influence on such writers as Matthew Arnold and George Eliot. I study Disraeli's attempt to establish and to enhance the place of the Jew in England and the place of Hebraism in English culture, and I go on to examine the attack on this attempt made in the name of

ethnology. Locating Arnold's celebrated work on Hebraism within the context of Disraeli's project, I demonstrate the way in which Arnold appropriated and undermined it. I argue further that Disraeli, claiming as his ancestors the Jews who fled from the persecutions of the Iberian Peninsula, became the center of a particular form of anti-Semitic representation: "the secret Jew" who invades England through the passport of conversion in order to undermine English culture (whereas Disraeli argued that Hebraism was the foundation of English culture, just as Judaism was the foundation of Christianity). I focus on the moment when, during Disraeli's second prime ministry, the conversion of the Jews was attacked from two entirely different ideological positions—by Anthony Trollope, who attacked conversion because it facilitated the Jew's invasion of English culture, and by George Eliot, who attacked conversion because it annihilated the Jew's religious and cultural identity. Trollope's and Eliot's novels of the 1870s constituted a kind of public debate over the idea of "the secret Jew" and the definition of English national identity, with Disraeli as the crystallizing figure in this debate. The history of the representation of Jewish identity in England reaches a new stage, I argue, at the radical moment toward the end of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* when the goal of defining the English national character is superseded by the goal of constructing a Jewish national identity, that is, the goal of establishing for the Jews a nation-state of their own.





## I

### *The Culture of Conversion*

In nineteenth-century England the clearest sign of the ideology of Jewish conversion was its institutionalization in such well-known societies as the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews (founded in 1809) and the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews (founded in 1842).<sup>1</sup> Numbering among their members some of England's best-known citizens, from powerful members of Parliament to influential clergymen (including William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, and Lord Shaftesbury), and even enjoying the royal patronage of the duke of Kent, such societies became the subject of immense public attention and intense national debate. While the ideology of the conversion of the Jews was based on the scholarly exegesis of certain key texts of the Bible, the institutionalization of such an ideology—raising money, publishing journals and books, distributing tracts, setting up Christian schools for poor Jewish children, giving financial support to prospective converts—engaged the wider public in what became a debate over the religious, social, and political status of the Jews.

This chapter explores the public debate over the conversion of the Jews in general, and, more specifically, the controversial literature that grew out of the scandal surrounding the London Society. How did what otherwise might have been a local and self-contained controversy over the misadventures of one conversionist society at the beginning of the century reach such proportions, emerging into a debate that included the entire nation and lasted for decades? I will answer this question in part by showing how the controversy over the conversion of the Jews intersected with other important nineteenth-century debates, but my emphasis will

be on the various literary forms (especially the conversionist novel) that disseminated, popularized, and reinvigorated the ideology of conversion even amid growing criticism of it.

The origins, development, and ultimate impact of the nineteenth-century conversionist novel is a largely unnoticed cultural phenomenon. Especially under the influence of the Evangelical Revival, novels became for the English public a major source of information about the Jews. Robert Southey, for example, recommended to a member of Parliament that he read, in preparation for debating Jewish Emancipation, the novel *Sophia de Lissau*, the subtitle of which defined the function of such novels: *A Portraiture of the Jews of the Nineteenth Century; Being an Outline of their Religious and Domestic Habits With Explanatory Notes.*<sup>2</sup> The novel's preface made clear why the English public needed this information about the Jews: "how important is an intimate acquaintance with their most minute prejudices to those who would speak to them of Jesus!"<sup>3</sup> Novels became a tool in the work of conversion, laying the groundwork for the English public to participate in this mission and preparing (in the case of Southey's correspondent) a member of Parliament to take part in the debates over Jewish emancipation—for the ideology of conversion played an important role in the parliamentary debates on Jewish civil and political disabilities. Novels about the Jews became so popular and wielded such influence that the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge decided to enter the field with *Sadoc and Miriam: A Jewish Tale*. This novel makes especially visible what can be found in subtler forms in the conversionist novel in general, namely, the vestigial traces of the oldest form of conversionist literature. In *Sadoc and Miriam*, narrative form is almost entirely erased in the debates between characters over the comparative values of Judaism versus Christianity, recalling those literary dialogues written by the Church fathers in which a Christian tries to convert a Jew through scriptural argument.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the London Society used the popularity of novels to advertise and support its own cause, regularly quoting *Ivanhoe*, for example, and even altering a passage in a famous novel like *Daniel Deronda* to make it serve the ideology of conversion.<sup>5</sup>

In turning to the controversy over the Jewish conversionist societies and the way in which this controversy began to raise questions about English national identity, I explain in the first part of this chapter how the critics of such societies saw in them the sign of a kind of national insanity,

"the English madness," which threatened to stain once again England's national character by being the latest development in a long history of England's abuses of the Jews. I go on to show how the literature of conversion represented England's missionary project as the sign that England was the chosen nation, the spiritual guide to all nations, initiating the salvation of the world by beckoning "the poor love of a Jew" to find refuge in "the Israel of modern times."

*"The English Madness," or "This Mania of Conversion"*

Writing in 1833, Isaac D'Israeli, the father of the future prime minister, offers a picture of the kind of activity that surrounded the missions to the Jews in nineteenth-century England: "The most learned Christians have composed excellent treatises; Jewish lectures have been delivered, even by converted Jews; conferences, both public and private, have been held; and societies, industrious like the 'the London,' assisted by every human means. We have arguments the most demonstrative on one side, and refutations the most complete on the other; exhortations which have drawn tears from both parties, and satires the most witty and malicious." D'Israeli, who eventually broke with the synagogue and had his children baptized—though he himself was never a convert to Christianity, as the London Society incorrectly claimed<sup>6</sup>—goes on to explain those practices that turned Christian proselytism into "this trade of conversion," such as "hunting after miserable proselytes in the dark purlieus of filthy quarters, parentless children, or torn from their disconsolate parents; . . . or importing young Polanders, who lose their Jewish complexion by fattening at the tables of their generous hosts."<sup>7</sup>

D'Israeli here is reiterating the charges that had been brought before the public on many occasions, but perhaps most directly by a series of texts, published between 1816 and 1825, that were devoted exclusively to exposing the abuses of the London Society. When Robert Southey attacked the Society in 1830, he based his remarks on one of these popular critiques: "The Society for converting Jews has *wasted* more money than any other society in this country, which is a great deal. Norris published a most complete exposure of it."<sup>8</sup> H. H. Norris's book, heavily indebted to two shocking exposés written by M. Sailman and B. R. Goakman, discusses the Society's notorious mismanagement of funds, its extraordi-

nary expenditures, and its failure to win legitimate converts—as in the case of the learned rabbi from Jerusalem, the society’s famous first convert, meant to convince both Christians and Jews of the success of Jewish conversion, who “went back again to the Jews” when it was discovered “that he frequently resorted to a house of ill-fame.” Similar charges were leveled at no less a figure than the founder of the London Society, the Rev. Joseph Samuel Christian Frederic Frey: “his crime [was] *adultery*, not committed *once only*, but *voraciously* pursued and persisted in *in the face of detection*.” Such incidents were already so well known, having been articulated in serious critiques and bitter satires, that the intention of Norris’s book, it may surprise us, was not to undercut the ideology of conversion but to recuperate it.<sup>9</sup> Norris was attempting to preserve the goal of conversion in the face of the miserable business the London Society had made of it, arguing “that *it is alone* responsible for its own *total failure*; and that the conversion of the Jews remains, what the Society found it, an object of the most intense interest, left in charge to the Christian Church, as one of its most imperative obligations.” Norris worried that the London Society’s notorious reputation, extended across Europe with the recent establishment of foreign missions to the Jews, was giving a bad name not only to the missionary enterprise, but to England itself: “the very work itself of fetching home these out-casts to the flock of Christ, is become a bye-word and an object of scorn and ridicule amongst them, being scoffed at as ‘*the English madness*.’”<sup>10</sup>

Such critiques, while agreeing on the abuses of the London Society, were frequently based on very different ideologies. While a conversionist like Norris who saw himself as a protector of the Jews decries “all the *cruel wrongs* it [the London Society] has *itself* inflicted on that grievously oppressed people,”<sup>11</sup> other critics worked to another end, not to protect the Jewish community from such abuses, but to maintain the basest stereotypes of Jewish identity. This kind of critique was based on the idea that the Jews were not worth the money or the effort spent on them by the missionary societies. In *The British Critic* in 1819 a reviewer of several works dealing with the London Society used the critiques of Sailman and Goakman to reiterate the abuses of the Society—“how the half-naked and hungry Jew boy has become tempted by food and clothes”—in what was finally a conventional Christian attack on the Jews themselves: “the guilt of that blood [of Jesus Christ] still rests upon them with all its original

weight." Yielding to the idea, so prevalent at the time, that "the situation of the Jews, that once highly favoured, now outcast and despised people, will ever be a subject of intense interest and awful contemplation," the reviewer claims that, even with recent advances in education, science, and morals, "their blindness has not been removed, their prejudices have not been softened, their condition not improved: they are yet a wandering, unsocial, and despised people." In short, "the Jews remain the same, in features, in habits, in customs, and in character," and their unchangeable nature becomes the basis for claiming their unconvertibility: "the real conversion of a Jew has been at all times as rare, as their whole history is wonderful."<sup>12</sup>

The Anglo-Jewish community suddenly found itself the object of frequent publicity and heated controversy. Quick to respond to the establishment of the London Society, the Jewish community was eager to get a hearing from the English public, for the Society attempted to forestall all debate, as Joseph Crool, an instructor of Hebrew at Cambridge, complained: "it is said that they have answered almost everything, and that a Jew has no more to say for himself." Crool's widely read work, studied by missionaries and cited by conversionist novelists,<sup>13</sup> took aim not at the abuses of the London Society, but at the scriptural arguments that the missionaries employed in their attempt to convince Jews that Jesus Christ was their Messiah. Crool was careful to insist that he was not "an enemy of Christianity," and to use a strategy that was a standard feature of the works written by English Jews against conversionism—the acknowledgment of a special relationship between the Jewish community and the English nation: "how much more is it our duty to pray for the nations at the present time, in particular for this country, for here we are used well, and treated better than in any other country: here we enjoy ease and security."<sup>14</sup>

The Anglo-Jewish community consistently appealed to the English public's generosity, its reputation for tolerance, even when attacking the London Society with a biting irony and the voice of outrage, as in a pamphlet written immediately after the Society's establishment, entitled *Letter to Mr. Frey, of the Soi-Disant Jews'-Chapel, Spitalfields; Occasioned by the Question Now in Debate at the London Forum* (1810). The author, who signed herself "A Daughter of Israel," attacked the character and actions of Frey—whom she called a "Purchaser of Babes! Corrupter of

thoughtless Youth!”—condemning his “bribery system” of conversion, “the *trade* you are now employed in.” Such attacks were carefully aimed at a foreign Jew, not an English Christian: “you are not a Christian, you are an Apostate Jew, alike the disgrace of the community you have entered, and that you have quitted.” The author ended, first, by counseling Frey to “imitate the benign tolerant principles of the *Anglican Church*,” and second, by proving the Jews’ loyalty to the English nation on the basis of their loyalty to their religion: “the Jews are not to be led aside from their duty to the Almighty, nor their loyal attachment to the Government which protects them; for they are equally as firm to their God, as they are to their King.”<sup>15</sup> In such strategic remarks we see how carefully the Anglo-Jewish community had to aim its attacks at the conversionist societies while not offending the English Protestant public in general.

In addition to attacking the scriptural arguments of the missionaries (Crool), and the character of Frey and his methods (*A Daughter of Israel*), Jewish critics of the London Society began to represent themselves as the protectors of England, praising the English for their generosity while warning them that they were being duped, especially as the Society’s immense expenditures and the hypocrisy of its converts became better known. In *Conversion of the Jews: An Address from an Israelite to the Missionary Preachers Assembled at Liverpool to Promote Christianity amongst the Jews* (1827), M. Samuel lists the better uses to which such money could be put:

To plead the case of distress for the poor Irish, or for the Spanish emigrants, to preach charity sermons for any particular asylum, is not sufficient for your exalted views; you aspire to a more lofty and extensive scope, to paint in a pathetic manner the blind obduracy of a chosen race, and to convince your audience, that charity cannot be better bestowed than in reclaiming the sons and daughters of Abraham from darkness to light. . . . Was there ever a more specious pretext invented to rouse the charitable spirit of the British nation!!!

Samuel leaves the English public with a startling image of the converted Jew, “his purse . . . filled with the reward of his labour,” departing from England to return to his native land, “there to revel in luxurious delight over British wealth—British credulity!” Samuel addresses the members of the Society—“For twenty years you have been infected with this *mania of*

conversion”—and he leaves the impression that the entire English public is in danger of becoming infected: “Now the conversion of a solitary Polish Jew in London is hailed with such triumph as to require a public announcement in all the newspapers of so glorious an accession to the strength of christianity; and . . . thousands of credulous enthusiasts flock to the sanctuary to witness this holy Patriarch undergo the first degree of apostasy.”<sup>16</sup>

The London Society so angered and alarmed the Jewish community that even in pamphlets and books whose major focus pointed elsewhere, we find critiques of the missions to the Jews. In this way attacks on the London Society found their way into a variety of different discourses and motivated a range of different projects. For instance, in *The Inquisition and Judaism* (1845), an attempt to record a portion of the history of the Inquisition in Portugal, the strikingly contemporary and local remarks of Moses Mocatta’s preface may at first seem out of place. “In many parts of the Old and New World, but more especially in Great Britain, the conversion of the Jews has become an organized system.—Here, societies and branch societies are formed, schools are established for infants and adults, and enormous sums are annually placed at the disposal of mercenary agents to further what the maudlin fanaticism of the day calls ‘the good cause.’” The body of Mocatta’s book presented a translation of a sermon by a Catholic archbishop and its refutation by a Jew, from another time and place, under conditions that must have seemed vastly different from those of Victorian England, but in “the history of the controversy between the ‘Converters’ and the disciples of the faith of Moses . . . the weapons employed have been invariably taken from the same armory.” Mocatta published these translations in the hope that they would “protect them [Jewish youth] against the insidious efforts of the missionaries” in Victorian England.<sup>17</sup>

So, a study of the discursive practices produced by this controversy cannot be limited to those texts that took the London Society as their sole, or even their primary, subject. Moreover, a study of these practices introduces us to the various cultural issues with which the conversion of the Jews was entwined—as, in the case of Mocatta’s book, the history of the Inquisition in Spain, and the nationalist contrast between intolerant Spain and tolerant England (that Mocatta’s book threatens to deconstruct in its pointed if brief reference to the conversionist societies of



nineteenth-century England). I now wish to turn to certain anticonversionist texts that, whether or not based primarily on a critique of the conversionist societies, show how the conversion of the Jews was linked to such pressing nineteenth-century issues as nationalism, colonialism, and race.

The debate over Jewish conversion became situated at the crossroads of a number of important social discourses and a number of national crises in England and on the Continent. Particularly with the rise of European nationalism and the spread of colonialism, “the Jewish question” began to assume central importance in the nineteenth century as different European nations sought the means to assimilate or expel “foreign” populations at home and to convert and govern “heathen” populations abroad. After the defeat of Napoleon and the expulsion of the French from the German states, for example, the Jews came under attack when German nationalists called for the expulsion of *all* foreigners—not simply the French—from Germany. While conversion was one of the suggested solutions to “the Jewish question” in Germany, one pamphleteer, who endorsed both the expulsion and the extermination of the Jews, suggested a solution linking Germany’s Jews and the British empire’s blacks by calling for a system of eugenics: “Let the children of Israel be sold to the English, who could employ them in their Indian plantations instead of the blacks. That they may not increase, the men should be emasculated, and their wives and daughters be lodged in houses of shame.”<sup>18</sup> And in England, while in their critiques of the London Society the Jews argued that their loyalty to the nation was like their loyalty to their God, many of England’s leading intellectuals and statesmen questioned the Jews’ allegiance to a “Christian nation” and refused to grant them full civil and political liberties until they converted. Thomas Arnold’s famous formulation of the Jew as a “voluntary stranger” in a Christian nation with no claim to being a citizen—unless converted—became a central obstacle to Jewish Emancipation in the debates in Parliament.<sup>19</sup> A more virulent version of Arnold’s view of the Jew as alien occurs in William Cobbett’s scolding 1830 Good Friday Sermon: “This is a *Christian nation*,” Cobbett argued, and Scripture proved that the Jews “should, in no country on earth (as long as they adhered to their blasphemy), have any immunities, any privileges, any possessions in house, land or water, any civil or political rights; that they should, every where, be deemed *aliens*; and always at the *absolute*

*disposal of the sovereign power of the state, as completely as any inanimate substance, thrown on the land by the winds or the waves. This was the judgment passed on them by God himself.*"<sup>20</sup>

In this way, the question of Jewish conversion, which had been primarily a matter of scriptural exegesis in the decades immediately following the French Revolution, became situated from the 1830s through the 1850s at the center of the political debate over Jewish Emancipation. Conversion became the only path not merely to Christian salvation, but to English assimilation; Jewish identity and English national identity were mutually exclusive. So while the procedures of the London Society were being aggressively attacked in many critiques, the ideology of conversion was maintained, even supported, by the idea that only when once converted could the Jews become English citizens with all the civic and political privileges of their neighbors, such as sitting in Parliament or receiving degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. One could argue that "the bribery system" of the London Society, attacked by both Christians and Jews, was the same system that the English nation at large used to convert the Jews, holding out the temptation of full civil and political emancipation on the condition that they convert. A pamphlet, originally appearing in Holland and translated into English, argued this point: "will you continue to exclude the Jews from everything, in order, by these means, to compel them to the adoption of the Christian faith? Is then a forced adoption your doctrine—*forced*, in order to escape shame and contempt, an hypocritical faith—a desirable thing for you?" The English translator of this pamphlet, who is "desirous to see the Jews placed in civic situations,"<sup>21</sup> reveals how the ideology of conversion was institutionalized in both the conversionist societies and in a governmental system of assimilation that sought religious homogeneity as the basis of the nation-state.

Attacks on the conversionist societies consistently used the strategy of referring to England's reputation for tolerance—the pamphlet's translator addresses "the British nation, where the beneficial consequences of Liberty are so highly conspicuous"<sup>22</sup>—as if to embarrass the nation into recognizing the ways in which its tolerance did not extend to Jews. By such means, critiques of the conversionist societies attempted to unravel the conjunction between tolerance and conversion that had become the mainstay of Evangelical preaching. In a short satire that appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1865, Anthony Trollope imagines a Zulu's trip to

England "to visit the great centre of the Christian religion" in what eventually becomes a test of the celebrated idea "that toleration was the grand characteristic of the English Protestant Church." The Zulu attends an Evangelical meeting "devoted to the propagation of Christianity among the Jews," with a hymn "sung by converted Jew children." At this meeting the well-known failure of the missions to the Jews is made clear when the Zulu records that the speaker's "report dealt only with tens and twenties, whereas among us our dealings are with hundreds and thousands. But the Jews are a stubborn people, and from such the evil spirit does not come out without many struggles"—the Zulu, himself a product of the missions to the heathen, having perfectly imbibed the ideology of Christian proselytism, including its origins in anti-Judaic stereotypes. Trollope's parody of the proselytizing mania reaches its highest pitch when the Zulu is told that, dressed in black coat and black gloves, he would pass unnoticed at the meeting, for everyone "would take me for a converted Jew."<sup>23</sup> Such a remark suggests the blind self-centeredness of Evangelical fervor, perhaps the clearest sign of "the English madness."

But such a remark also suggests the kind of racism that often surrounded the ideology of conversion in general and "the Jewish question" in particular. The conversionists' failure to recognize the difference between African and Jewish proselytes suggests a variety of racist propositions. On the one hand, the conversionists fail to recognize the cultural and religious differences between African and Jew, seeking only conformity to English Protestantism, or to mere Englishness, pictured in a kind of disguise of English gentility, "black coat and black gloves." But at the same time we can see how the anticonversionist rhetoric of Trollope's piece makes fun of both African and Jewish proselytes who try to become English, an idea to which Trollope returned in his representation of the Jewish infiltration of English culture in his novels of the 1870s.

Frequently, the anticonversionist position was fueled by a more or less blatant racism. The impossibility of the conversion of the Jew was formulated through the Jew's racial traits (and even the African's racial traits). In a satiric pamphlet, *Jewish Conversion. A Christianic Farce. Got Up With Great Effect Under the Direction of a Society For Making Bad Jews Worse Christians* (1814), the attack aimed at Frey and his company of missionaries overflows into a vicious attack against the Jews themselves. Here we have an attack on the ideology of conversion based not on philo-Semitism

but anti-Semitism. The author, who characterizes the Jews as “the beggar tribe, / Who sold their God, and took the bribe!,” associates “the bribery system” of conversion not so much with the conversionists, but with the Jews themselves: “Cash *buys* but cannot *keep* a jew.” The conventional stereotype of the Jews as usurious traders is fitted to a system of conversion in which the Jews make themselves into a kind of high-priced commodity: “The jews advance so much in price, / And must be purchased twice or thrice.” But this pamphlet’s opening verses reveal the deepest way in which the issue of Jewish conversion was used to evoke a variety of contemporary racist feelings:

The fool who scrubbed the Ethiop’s back,  
Although he did not make him white  
Rubb’d all the dirt from off the black,  
And left him in a tolerable plight.  
But had he painted him as angels fair,  
If fair as poets tell us angels are,  
A dirty devil he would still have been;  
For like a chimney-sweepe’s back,  
Bedizened to disguise its black,  
He still had worn his hue within.  
So thus our christian makers out of Jews,  
Have this same painting system much in use. . . .<sup>24</sup>

The impossibility of racial transformation—the black man becoming white—becomes an analogy for the impossibility of religious conversion—the Jew becoming a Christian. Moreover, the racial slur that links and sometimes confuses black and Jew pinpoints a particular strand of English racist discourse, as in Edgeworth’s *Jewish Lady Rackrent*, a “heretic blackamoor,” or Trollope’s Ferdinand Lopez, “a black Portuguese nameless Jew,” or Thackeray’s Miss Swartz, “the rich woolly-haired mulatto” whose father was a German Jew.<sup>25</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century the debate over conversion often shifted from religious to racial grounds, and the analogy that compared religious conversion to racial transformation began to receive the support of “science.” The new science of ethnology was used to “prove,” from a racial standpoint, the impossibility of converting the Jews, making the goal of the missionary societies impossible. The religious view that