



Figures of Conversion: "The Jewish Question" and English National Identity (Post-contemporary interventions)

Michael Ragussis

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"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."

—Daniel Defoe, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

When the hero of Defoe's novel listens skeptically to this anecdote related by a French Roman Catholic priest, he little suspects that in less than a century the conversion of the Jews would become nothing short of a national project—not in France but in England. In this book, Michael Ragussis explores the phenomenon of Jewish conversion—the subject of popular enthusiasm, public scandal, national debate, and dubbed "the English madness" by its critics—in Protestant England from the 1790s through the 1870s.

Moving beyond the familiar catalog of anti-Semitic stereotypes, Ragussis analyzes the rhetoric of conversion as it was reinvented by the English in sermons, stories for the young, histories of the Jews, memoirs by Jewish converts, and popular novels. Alongside these texts and the countertexts produced by English Jews, he situates such writers as Edgeworth, Scott, Disraeli, Arnold, Trollope, and Eliot within the debate over conversion and related issues of race, gender, and nation-formation. His work reveals how a powerful group of emergent cultural projects—including a revisionist tradition of the novel, the new science of ethnology, and the rewriting of European history—redefined English national identity in response to the ideology of conversion, the history of the Jews, and "the Jewish question."

Figures of Conversion offers an entirely new way of regarding Jewish identity in nineteenth-century British culture and will be of importance not only to literary scholars but also to scholars of Judaic and religious studies, history, and cultural studies.

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