A Convert’s Tale: Art, Crime, and Jewish Apostasy in Renaissance Italy

Review Number: 2398  
Publish date: Friday, 19 June, 2020  
Author: Tamar Herzig  
ISBN: 9780674237537  
Date of Publication: 2019  
Price: £39.95  
Pages: 400pp.  
Publisher: Harvard University Press  
Publisher url: https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674237537  
Place of Publication: Cambridge  
Reviewer: Allegra Baggio Corradi

A lack of institutional documentation has rendered it difficult for scholars of early modernity to reconstruct the significance of apostasy from Judaism before the Council of Trent (1545-1563). As such, the reasons behind the conversion of Jews to Catholicism, especially in Renaissance Italy, remain understudied to this day.

Tamar Herzig’s A Convert’s Tale offers a crucial contribution in this sense. By focusing on the microhistory of Salomone da Sesso, a Florence-born Jew who served as a goldsmith at the courts of Mantua and Ferrara between the 15th and 16th centuries, Herzig enriches our present understanding of apostasy through an interdisciplinary investigation of the artistic, political, social and psychological undertones of the phenomenon. She does so by charting Salomone’s life, work and words, painting a pen-portrait of a man constantly oscillating between glitter and grief.

As an integral part of the early modern divine plan for the salvation of humankind, Jewish apostasy was attributed a significance greater than any other non-Christian conversion. Unlike what happened to Iberian Jews and to the Jews residing in the Spanish-ruled regions of Southern Italy, in the central and Northern parts of the peninsula apostasy was never a mass phenomenon. Northern Italian Jews converted alone, or rather with their families, for their decision often prompted the conversion of their closest relatives.
Contrary to the apostasy of numerous other early modern Jewish converts, that of Salomone da Sesso is particularly well documented because of the prominent social role he held at the courts of the Gonzaga, the Este, and the Borgia. A celebrated goldsmith, Salomone left behind a conspicuous paper trail that allowed Herzig to reconstruct with utmost precision, and this despite some gaps in literature, the vicissitudes connected to both his artistic activity and his conversion. The study is divided into four parts, respectively devoted to Salomone’s early life and education as a goldsmith; to Salomone’s expulsion from the Jewish community in 1491 as well as the social, theological, judicial and historical significance of his apostasy; to the socio-economic consequences of Salomone’s apostasy, with a particular focus on the repercussions that his newly-acquired status as a Christian had on his wife and children; and to Salomone’s destitution after the death of his patrons during the Italian Wars.

Besides the obvious historical significance of Herzig’s study, *A Convert’s Tale* has the added merit of shedding light on the often-neglected aspects of material culture related to the phenomenon of apostasy. In choosing to focus on the contingencies that led Salomone to join the ranks of Christianity, Herzig shifts the attention from the sometimes abstracted and intellectual constructs of religion to the empirical means of a Jewish convert’s artistic production and social stance in Renaissance Italy. This allows for a deeper penetration into the otherwise documentary delineation of a prototypical early modern microhistory. The result is a multilayered investigation bringing to the fore the pantagruelian divide between the living conditions of a Renaissance artist and those of the court that employed him, between the expected and the real benefits of Jewish converts, between the perks of artistic fame and the stigma of religious belief and no less, between the solidarity of the family and the hatred of the community.

In part one, titled “The Virtuoso Jew”, Herzig sets the scene by providing a biographical context for her case study. The lifestory of Salomone da Sesso is reconstructed from its inception to his clash with the Jewish community in Mantua. Born in Florence in the 1450s to a family of moneylenders, Salomone defied his father’s desire that he take the helm of the family bank. A 15th-century Aby Warburg, Salomone was drawn more to the arts than to accounting. This led him to become a goldsmith, an obvious choice for artistically inclined Jews, who needed to comply with the biblical prohibition of pursuing the figurative arts. Upon leaving his native Florence, Salomone made a name for himself at the court of Ferrara, where Ercole d’Este and Eleonora of Aragon became his most fond patrons. So great was their admiration for Salomone that they even went as far as to pay for his kosher meals at the Jewish hostelry in their city.

One wonders to what extent the Dukes’ tolerance was staged ecumenism. What is certain, is that Ercole and Eleonora’s benevolence towards Salomone did not extend to their daughter Isabella and her husband Francesco Gonzaga. Rulers of the nearby Mantua, Isabella and Francesco did not partake in the Ferrarese display of pietas, and as Herzig amply illustrates in part three of her book, they set their priorities straight once the fruits that Salomone reaped through his conversion had long withered.

In part two, titled “Apostasy”, Herzig sharpens her focus on Salomone’s apostasy. Herzig paints a clear picture of early modern Ferrara as a safe haven for Jews because, starting in 1492, Ercole d’Este allowed some Jewish families who had been expelled from Spain to relocate to the city. Despite the tolerance, the local community also endured periods of persecution, sometimes also linked to the intestine wars between members of the local communities. An example of this comes from a 1493 letter by the Jew Abramo Tusolo di Mandolino, who accused Salomone of an abysmal yet undisclosed crime in Venice. Such allegations, however, were ignored by the Duchess and Duke of Ferrara, who, as zealously pious Christians, saw an opportunity in Abramo’s words to prove their devotion to the long-standing battle to convert the Jews. On the occasion of his baptism on 9 October 1491, Salomone lost his Jewish identity and became Ercole de Fidelis, his name acting as a token of his debt towards his patron Ercole d’Este. In the speech Salomone/Ercole delivered during the ceremony, he explicitly condemned his enemies and affirmed his innocence and integrity. Duchess Eleonora wrote her daughter Isabella a letter, in which she discharged the goldsmith from the accusations of sodomy, stressing the fact that he had repented and decided to become a Christian, and that he would therefore be pardoned in order to gain his soul. The newly-acquired Christian
status granted Salomone/Ercole the protection of his Mantuan patrons as well as providing him with a steady offer of work and sufficient benefits for his entire family. His success, however, fueled the animosity of the local Jewish community. In 1495, the Mantuan Jews wrote Marquis Francesco another letter, accusing Salomone/Ercole of further crimes. Unable to ignore such accusations for a second time, the Marquis decided to ban Ercole from Mantua. The convert never set foot in that city again and returned to Ferrara, where the Duke welcomed him.

One wonders to what extent Salomone’s apostasy granted him the social escalade at which he and his patrons aimed. What lies in a name, clearly, is not that which we call identity, or at least not merely. By any other name, even by the ducal one of Ercole, Salomone was still a Jew and as such, he continued to be regarded as a traitor by the community he was born into. Baptism and apostasy can in this sense be framed, and Herzig does so convincingly, as staged performances.

In part three, titled “A Family of Converts”, Herzig investigates the retaliations that Salomone/Ercole’s apostasy had on his wife and children and the benefits that the Este patronage brought to him. The strong ties to the Ferrarese Court were fundamental for Salomone/Ercole’s profession in that the Duchess’ intercession granted him access to the materials and the resources he needed for the production of his art works. While Salomone/Ercole continued to rely on Jewish individuals for money lending, the Duchess commissioned work from him on a regular basis.

Even after Eleonora’s death in 1493, Salomone/Ercole continued to be under the protection of her husband. After the death of his wife Eleonora, the Duke became a fervent believer and therefore implemented the presence of art works at court that he could employ to perform activities apt for the cleansing and the cure of his soul, notably tabernacles. Salomone/Ercole was extremely skilled in the production of such pieces and even 50 years before the Church started granting benefits to the newly converted, he was allowed to create Christian ceremonial vessels. It is important to recall here that in 1415 Benedict XIII (1394-1417) issued a Bull prohibiting Jews from manufacturing and trading in Christian liturgical objects. The aim was to push Jewish goldsmiths to convert to Christianity and to therefore avail themselves of the economic possibilities their profession could grant them only as Christians. It seems convincing, as Herzig argues, that Duke Ercole commissioned Salomone/Ercole to realise four tabernacles in order to prove his complete embrace and respect of Christianity even long after his apostasy.

Among the several advantages that came with conversion was also a right of precedence in family wills. In 1494, Salomone traveled to his native Florence to collect valuables that he claimed belonged to him as a share of his father’s inheritance. Despite the hostility of his relatives, the law favoured converts, so he was able to return to Ferrara with all that which he claimed. Especially important to Salomone/Ercole were Hebrew books bound in cowhide. His father, Mele, was most likely given the latter as a collateral pawn for a loan that was never paid back. Salomone/Ercole probably carried these books back to Ferrara, where he knew that Hebrew books were eagerly sought after.

Upon his return to Ferrara, Salomone/Ercole was the recipient of prominent artistic commissions. Unfortunately, most of the jewelry he produced in these years was melted down by subsequent owners to make new pieces in line with changing fashions and tastes. Some of his artifacts, however, can still be admired today, including many of the ceremonial swords he forged, the most renowned being the “Queen of Swords”, the cinquedea sword that he crafted for the illegitimate son of Pope Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia.

In describing the cinquedea, Herzig draws relevant connections between Salomone/Ercole’s work and that of early 16th-century humanists and artists active in the Northern city states of the peninsula. Notably, she mentions Andrea Mantegna and his Mantuan fresco cycle, with which Ercole was most certainly familiar, and upon which he drew for some of the decorative motifs and iconographic elements of his own work as a goldsmith. It is significant that, in 1505, upon learning of the admiration of the Mantuan courtiers for his work, Salomone/Ercole asked Isabella d’Este “to show them [his works] to Master Andrea Mantegna” (p. 135). It is unclear to what extent Ercole’s work was inspired by Mantegna; however, Herzig names two other
possible sources: a humanist adviser active at the Papal Court, or the painter Pinturicchio (Bernardino di Betto, 1454-1513). All in all, Salomone/Ercole’s iconographic choices as a goldsmith seem to strategically reference the work of the artists of whom Francesco and Isabella were most appreciative; a sly diplomatic move on Salomone/Ercole’s part that demonstrates his attempt at pleasing the Mantuan rulers who had previously rejected him.

The benefits of Salomone/Ercole’s conversion also extended to his family. The goldsmith’s youngest daughter Anna, Herzig reports, was appointed as damsel to Lucrezia Borgia. Salomone/Ercole’s son Alfonso was chosen as the goldsmith responsible for the safekeeping of Lucrezia Borgia’s jewels during her trip from Rome to Ferrara. Salomone/Ercole’s firstborn Caterina, instead, became a nun in the convent that Duke Ercole had built to celebrate the court prophetess Lucia Brocadelli (1476-1544). Under the name of Sister Theodora, Salomone/Ercole’s daughter, was among the tertiaries, who entered the order together with fellow daughters of Ferrarese courtiers under the Duke’s protection. Sister Theodora’s destiny, Herzig argues, should be read as a testimony of Salomone/Ercole’s financial difficulties rather than as a social victory. It was often the case in the 16th century that Jewish fathers who converted to Catholicism attempted to monetise on the option of sending their daughters to convents, unburdening themselves from procuring them a dowry for which they could not or did not wish to pay.

Despite the clear benefits that came with conversion, Salomone/Ercole still struggled to make ends meet. The situation escalated when Isabella d’Este was informed that her brother’s wife, Lucrezia Borgia, whom she scorned because of her lineage, had also become a patron to Salomone/Ercole. To prevent her sister-in-law from obtaining better and more jewels from the goldsmith, Isabella commissioned a large number of items from Salomone/Ercole, and constantly pressured him to prioritise her commands over those of Lucrezia.

One wonders to what extent converts and artists were puppets at the mercy of their patrons, rather than genuinely independent and innovative masters of their arts, as they are often described in the canonical books we study. So loud seem to be the written celebrations of their fame, that the toils of the men and women from the past are often silenced by a lack of sources or a disinterest in their inner worlds. Herzig’s book does justice to the most intimate aspect of Salomone/Ercole’s biography, exploring not just the mere context of his life and work, but also the content of his mind. The author does so through the analysis of his correspondence, at least what is left of it. It is through Salomone/Ercole’s own words that we learn about the pressure he felt to perform as a court goldsmith, the preoccupations he had regarding his family, the competition he felt with other artists, the enmity towards the same Jews among whom he was raised, and the poor health conditions from which he suffered because of the fumes he was exposed to in his workshop.

In part four, titled “Between Christians and Jews”, Herzig charts the destitution of Salomone/Ercole and his family. After the plague of 1505, Lucrezia appointed Ercole as one of her two official court goldsmiths, a title which he kept until 1519. During this time, despite his increasing health problems, he maintained the favour of the court, from which he kept receiving commissions for luxury items. Among the most prestigious commissions of this period, worthy of note are certainly the sword that Pope Julius II gave to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I to mark his admission to the Order of the Knights of St. Peter.

Upon Lucrezia’s death from childbirth in 1519, Salomone/Ercole lost the favour of the court, and the already precarious economic situation in which he and his family had endured up to that point deteriorated drastically. Ferrara’s involvement in the Italian Wars (1494-1530), reduced the demand for luxury goods, leaving Salomone/Ercole with little to no work. Herzig hypothesizes that the significant discrepancy between the luxurious creations Salomone/Ercole produced and the mean life he conducted, might suggest that he was unable to manage his fortune, most likely due to unsavory activities like gambling.

In 1521, Salomone/Ercole’s financial situation became disastrous, so much so that when Isabella sent him some gold to produce a set of buttons, he pawned it off. The offence was denounced by the Jewish pawnbroker to whom Salomone/Ercole had turned, who informed the authorities and caused the goldsmith’s
definitive ruin. Salomone/Ercole and his younger son fled the city, whereas his eldest son Alfonso was imprisoned. Salomone/Ercole’s wife and daughter-in-law wrote a petition to Isabella, begging her to concede the young man’s release. Isabella’s decision remains unknown, for a lack of relevant documentation. What Herzig was able to ascertain is that Salomone/Ercole’s younger son returned to Ferrara after the end of the Italian Wars and restarted the family workshop. Like all successful novels, the end of Salomone/Ercole’s life is cast in the shadow, leaving us the freedom to imagine its course.

Overall, A Convert’s Tale constantly crisscrosses the fine line between the novelistic and the historical; at once following in the footsteps of Ercole’s tumultuous life as a convert and investigating the socio-cultural context in which his activity as a courtier and artisan was embedded. At first, the fast-paced rhythm of Herzig’s book seems to outclass the slower and more archival tone of archetypal microhistories—one only needs to name Carlo Ginzburg’s The Cheese and the Worms to gain a full picture. A more in-depth reading, however, shows that there is more to Herzig’s book than it seems. A meta approach to scholarship distinguishes her multilayered monograph, one that reflects in its apparent lack of immediate penetration the mixed life of the man it investigates; secular and sacred, opaque and transparent, illicit and licit at once. As such, the interspersing of fact and fiction, characterising Ercole’s life as it is available to the contemporary researcher through primary and only scant secondary sources, is a needed act of coherence. In this sense, Herzig’s book could pave the way for a new genre, one not quite as freewheeling as historical fiction nor as stiffening as the academic monograph. In this lies much merit, for Herzig is able to turn a micro-historical case study into a macroscopic biopic of a self-fashioned virtuoso of the arts and the social life of 16th-century Ferrara. Without falling prey to the pitfall of over-interpretation and over-fictionalisation, A Convert’s Tale convincingly succeeds in painting a full-colour portrait of an equally raw and embellished life.

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2398

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/319632