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### Michelson, Emily. Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews: Early Modern Conversion and Resistance

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**Michelson, Emily.**

***Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews: Early Modern Conversion and Resistance.***

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. Pp. xiii, 331 + 11 b/w ill. ISBN 9780691211336 (hardcover) US\$39.95.

Every Saturday, the Catholic Church mandated that a substantial proportion of Rome's Jewish inhabitants attend sermons aimed ostensibly at their conversion. This is the subject of Emily Michelson's new monograph. Using manuscript sources from eleven Italian archives, *Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews* introduces interlocking and exciting conceptual innovations that merit historians' careful consideration. First and most important is Michelson's argument for the distinction between the "imagined" Jews in Catholic conversionary preachers' sermons and the real Jews who inhabited the early modern Eternal City. Conversionary preachers rarely referred to specific Jews from their own audience or time. Instead, preachers created a "fictive, polemicized" Judaism whose theology and place in sacred history were diametrically opposed to Roman Catholicism. This Judaic straw man served as a moralizing mirror and foil, contributing to the development of global early modern Catholicism's self-definition. Second, Michelson shows how Roman conversionary preaching had an international audience, giving it cultural and intellectual import far beyond Rome. Catholics from abroad attended conversionary sermons and read them in printed form, galvanizing Catholic identity against the Other. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne himself reported witnessing the "admirable" former rabbi who was baptized as Andrea de Monte give a conversionary sermon in 1581 (135). As a global pilgrimage destination and later as a tourist attraction for Christians of all confessions on the Grand Tour, Rome and its brand of Catholicism thrived on the religious spectacle of conversionary preaching about imagined Jews.

From the start, Michelson reminds readers that the scholarly activity of conversionary sermon composition and delivery was always embedded in a physical urban environment rife with religious conflict. Her "Introduction, with Pig" recounts a documented Catholic counter-demonstration in which a pig's head was placed in a casket to farce a rabbi's funeral. In an especially visceral manner, this episode shows how conversionary sermonizing fit into a broader civic milieu in which Jews "suffered largely because of the preconceptions of others" (16). Michelson follows this vignette with seven chapters focusing

on various aspects of Roman sermonizing and spectacle. Chapter 1 provides useful context for a history of Roman conversion, with especially illuminating discussions of the city's house of catechumens, college of neophytes, and the global missionary networks centred in Rome. Furthermore, she reminds readers that conversion was not always strictly religious. Former prostitutes known as *convertite* were equally important demonstrators of Rome's piety. The marshalling of diverse "pious peer groups" and the gathering of multitudes made for pious spectacle and moralizing propaganda (25). The mere ability to force a mass of the city's Jews to attend sermons every Saturday reminded all of the Roman Catholic Church's authority and pious initiative.

Chapter 2 turns to the logistics and patronage structures that supported regular conversionary sermons, while chapter 3 introduces readers to the city's principal preachers. Some of these high-level preachers were learned converts themselves. Their styles and personalities ranged from vitriolic to blandly cerebral. But their shared connections in Rome's high-level political and patronage networks show the centrality of conversionary preaching in the development of early modern Roman Catholicism. Chapter 4 follows with a discussion of how conversionary sermons were consumed locally as public ritual and across the Catholic world in print form. Chapter 5 then turns to "consider [issues related to conversionary sermons' audience and purpose] chronologically from the medieval precedents for conversionary sermons through the early modern period" (168).

From a historiographical standpoint, chapter 6 is the most innovative. Here, Michelson focuses on the preacher Gregorio Boncompagni Corcos to demonstrate how imaginary Jews were "highly useful for selling conversion as a theological and intellectual conviction," both within Italy and across the Catholic world (200). As Boncompagni's sermons show, religious outsiders such as imagined Jews existed "under the skin" of developing early modern Catholicism, constantly shaping Catholic identity as foils. Performative efforts to convert Jews in Catholicism's geographical core fit snugly into the world of missionary Catholicism. To close, chapter 7 switches gears to discuss the manifold active and passive methods of resistance that Rome's Jews mounted against their forced attendance at sermons.

By focusing on a traditionally studied city while acknowledging the ways in which that city's public rituals contributed to the development of global Catholicism, *Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews* implies the argument that

Italianists need to look beyond their comfortable corner of the Mediterranean. For this reason, it is somewhat regrettable that Michelson did not take the global angle much further beyond chapter 6. But for purposes of length and focus, this is understandable. This monograph provides a discrete angle on Rome's place in global conversionary Catholicism and has the potential to inspire much future work.

*Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews* will be at home on the shelves of scholars with interest in Italian and global early modern religious, cultural, and intellectual history. The book reveals the challenges and opportunities that lie before historians of global Catholicism. In other words, this work demonstrates a method for writing excellent early modern global history. Michelson's religiously diverse and confessionally fraught Rome looks outward as it receives forces from beyond, without losing its own (ever-shifting) identity. She shows how historians can discover the universal and the particular in our localities of interest and our human subjects, whether they were real or imagined.

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