English Literature and the Invention of Atheism, 1564–1611

Fraser Buchanan
Jesus College,
University of Oxford

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

11 November 2020

95,000 words

Abstract

English Literature and the Invention of Atheism, 1564–1611

By the 1580s, Western European writers were discussing atheism with increasing urgency. The Greek term *ἄθεος* and its Latin equivalent *atheos* had largely fallen out of use since the decline of the Roman Empire. When these terms were readopted in the early sixteenth century, first by writers in France and soon after in Germany, Italy, and the British Isles, they immediately gained currency, becoming central to political, religious, and literary discourses. This thesis examines writing about atheists and atheism in sixteenth-century England from the 1560s to the early seventeenth century. Rather than seeking historical evidence for rising levels of 'real' atheism during this period, this thesis explores the role of literature in 'inventing' atheism as a cultural category. I use 'unbelief' to refer to lack of belief in the existence of God or gods and argue that 'atheism' is a conceptualisation of unbelief explicitly developed to attack and discredit unbelievers. Following an initial survey of the histories of atheism and unbelief, I examine the objectives and rhetorical strategies of three forms of writing in which the development of early modern conceptions of atheism is most visible. Firstly, dialogues with fictive atheists written by John Lyly, George Gifford, and Philip Sidney; secondly, the religious polemics of William Whitaker, William Rainolds, and Henry Smith; and finally, dramatic representations of atheism by Christopher Marlowe. These chapters demonstrate that atheism is a hostile designation of unbelief which emerged in response to post-Reformation anxieties about religious division and the recovery of ancient philosophies of unbelief, such as Epicurean annihilationism and Stoic pantheism. Ultimately, this thesis shows how literary techniques that allow motives and inner convictions to be inferred as 'character' and 'voice' contributed to the emergence of the atheist as a powerfully imagined cultural presence in dialogues, plays, and polemics.

Contents

Acknowledgements i

Note on texts ii

Introduction 1

Atheism and unbelief 5

Early modern anti-atheism 9

Early modern literature and the invention of atheism 17

Historiography 22

Scope 27

Chapter 1 Atheism and unbelief in the sixteenth century 32

Early modern unbelief 36

A brief history of pre-modern atheism 44

Atheism: its Renaissance and Reformation 52

Machiavelli and politic religion 68

The emergence of an accusation 77

Chapter 2 Disputing unbelief: humanism and the atheist *ethos* 85

Disputing unbelief 91

Lyly's Euphues and Atheos 105

Gifford's Atheos and Zelotes 118

Sidney's Pamela and Cecropia 132

Chapter 3 From insult to accusation: atheism and post-Reformation polemic 149

Atheism as ‘supreme insult’ 151

Atheism and the Bible: the Rheims New Testament 156

Atheism and religious division: Henry Smith’s *Gods Arrowe* 177

Chapter 4 Atheism on stage: the effects of implicit atheism in three Marlowe plays 200

Performing Inward and outward atheism 205

Atheism, tyranny, and anti-providentialism in *Tamburlaine* 216

The Machiavellian Vice in *The Jew of Malta* 223

Conjuring, scoffing, and Epicureanism in *Doctor Faustus* 231

Dramatic precedents for Marlowe’s representations of atheism 246

Marlowe’s influence: early modern atheism on stage 256

Conclusion 265

Bibliography 274

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Jesus College for co-funding the three-year scholarship that allowed me to write this thesis. I am especially grateful to both institutions for extending my funding by three months while libraries were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. My supervisors, Leif Dixon and Lorna Hutson, have been invaluable sources of knowledge and support and my thesis would be much diminished without their contributions. I would also like to thank my friend and fellow doctoral student, Jake Arthur, for generously reading the first draft and helping motivate me to reach the final draft. Doctoral research has a reputation for being an isolating challenge, so I am grateful to everyone in the early modern community at Oxford who has made the past three years an enjoyable and collegial experience.

Note on texts

For primary texts, I use modern scholarly editions wherever possible. Where these are not available, I cite and quote from early modern printed works. When doing so, I maintain original punctuation and orthography but modernize u/v and i/j, normalise long s, and silently expand contractions. All italics in direct quotations are original except where specified. For early modern texts with very long titles, I have used compressed versions to save space, indicating omitted words using ellipses in square brackets. When citing the Bible, I use the standard abbreviations listed in the Chicago Manual of Style. Wherever a non-dramatic primary text is first mentioned in the body of the thesis, I give the date of its first printed edition in parentheses. For plays, I give the estimated date of first performance according to the ‘Best Guess’ listed in Martin Wiggins’ *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–).

Introduction

The questions this thesis sets out to address may be illustrated by comparing two different literary representations of unbelief, one published in the 1560s and the other in the early seventeenth century. Both are fictive conversations in which one character confesses unbelief to another who also admits to being without faith. The first occurs in an exchange between a doctor and his rich patient in William Bullein's *A dialogue both pleasant and pietifull* (1564); the second is between the antagonist and his accomplice in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1610). In terms of publication dates, these works bookend the dialogues, plays, and polemics of the 1580s and 90s that this thesis primarily focuses on. Bullein's text, with its varied episodic narratives, possesses a generic hybridity that anticipates the plays and dialogues of the later Elizabethan period.[1] Conversely, Tourneur's play, with its inactive revenger who lets providence take its course, looks back to and subverts the revenge tragedy conventions established in earlier works like *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587).[2] Just as their literary sensibilities respectively anticipate and respond to the literature of the late sixteenth century, so too do the representations of unbelief in these texts anticipate and respond to developing ideas about atheism. Tourneur's text knowingly invokes established anti-atheist tropes that were still emerging when Bullein was writing. In this thesis, I aim to identify and explain the role of literature in shaping conceptions of atheism in early modern England.

Let us examine the later work first. At the beginning of *The Atheist's Tragedy,* the titular atheist D'Amville complains to his accomplice Borachio about the hypocritical puritan Languebeau Snuffe. D'Amville observes that although Snuffe professes to 'divert the world

[1] Phil Withington, '"For This Is True or Els I Do Lye": Thomas Smith, William Bullein, and Mid-Tudor Dialogue', in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485–1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 463.
[2] Katharine Eisaman Maus, 'Introduction', in *Four Revenge Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxvii–xxxi.

from sin,' he is incapable of living purely himself, prompting audiences to read Snuffe as a typical stage puritan.[3] Snuffe and the post-Reformation confessional divisions that he represents fuel D'Amville's scepticism, leading him to assert that by Snuffe's hypocrisy, 'I am confirmed an atheist'.[4] The basis for D'Amville's declared atheism, along with many other aspects of his character, are formed in accordance with ideas about atheism that were commonplace by the early seventeenth century. D'Amville rejects the immortality of the soul and pursues temporal pleasure at the expense of Christian morality; embraces a kind of pantheism and applies syllogistic reasoning to traduce the status of man; develops Machiavellian schemes to deceive others; outwardly behaves as an atheist while inwardly suffering from an afflicted conscience; and ultimately abandons his atheism as he faces death.[5] Each of these beliefs and behaviours has a precedent in contemporary sermons, treatises, and religious polemics that taxonomize and condemn atheism. D'Amville is presented as a comically unlikeable character who does not sincerely or persistently deny the existence of God because this is how atheism was portrayed in the corpus of anti-atheist writing that became popular in England from the 1580s onward.

Fifty years earlier, this collection of ideas was not yet fully formed, and the word atheist was used far less frequently. In Bullein's *Dialogue*, the doctor Medicus and his patient Antonius do not describe themselves as atheists at all, but as '*Nulla fideians*', a term that has the same denotative meaning as atheist, but which attained neither the popularity of this term, nor its breadth of connotations. Medicus is an exponent of a much older tradition in which physicians were associated with unbelief: it was proverbial that of every three doctors, two

[3] Cyril Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.2.205–214. Literary historians are comfortable with the idea that stage puritans were recognisable figures in the popular culture of early modern England, but atheists are rarely considered in the same way. See, e.g. Patrick Collinson, 'Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism', in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, 1995, 150–70; Huston Diehl, 'Disciplining Puritans and Players: Early Modern English Comedy and the Culture of Reform', *Religion & Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 81–104.
[4] Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, 1.2.214.
[5] Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, 1.1.17–21; 1.1.3–6; 1.2.233–9; 4.3.211–43; 5.2.255–7.

were *'athei'*.[6] In Bullein's *Dialogue,* Medicus' unbelief is presented as a regrettable reality rather than a new societal affliction that needs to be systematically condemned. Medicus is nonplussed when Antonius critiques him for omitting from a Biblical quotation lines that attribute a divine origin to medical knowledge: 'I care not, for I medle with no Scripture matters, but to serve my tourne'.[7] Yet, Medicus is circumspect enough to ensure the two men are alone before discussing his unbelief further: 'Commaunde your folkes to departe out of the chamber'. The scene Bullein invites us to imagine is one in which two men recognise that 'we two are of one religion'—that is, no religion—and that while this is something they must be discreet about, it is not so acutely dangerous or unthinkable that they avoid the conversation.[8] Perhaps surprisingly, their decision is not revealed to be hubristic.

Unlike Tourneur's D'Amville, Medicus and Antonius are not punished for revealing their unbelief. Though Antonius later suffers from an afflicted conscience and returns to a theistic position before his death, Medicus is unmoved by this recantation and at the end of the dialogue his life, career, and unbelief are intact. Whereas the transience of Antonius' unbelief conforms to the emerging idea that atheists were hypocrites, Medicus' unbelief seems more deep-rooted. As with Antonius' inconstancy, some aspects of Medicus' unbelief do seem to follow a nascent early modern conception of atheism. For example, when Medicus admits that he is 'neither catholike, Papiste, Protestante, nor Annabaptiste […] I am a *Nulla fidian*, and there are many of our sect', Bullein emphasises the extent to which divisions within Christianity—epitomised by the presence of various 'sect[s]'—could serve as an inducement to unbelief, just as D'Amville's atheism is 'confirmed' by his hatred of

[6] See Paul H. Kocher, 'The Physician as Atheist in Elizabethan England', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1946): 229.
[7] William Bullein, *A Dialogue Bothe Pleasaunte and Pietifull Wherein Is a Goodly Regimente against the Fever Pestilence with a Consolacion and Comfort against Death* (London, 1564), sig. B3r. N.b. this is the second of two editions printed in 1564. Here, Bullein closely follows the Geneva translation of Ecclus. 38.1–2: see Cathy Shrank, 'Citing Scripture in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Morality Drama', in *Enacting the Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama*, ed. Eva von Contzen and Chanita Goodblatt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 113–16.
[8] Bullein, *Dialogue Bothe Pleasaunte and Pietifull,* sig. B4r.

Snuffe, the hypocritical puritan.[9] Medicus is also like D'Amville in that he is acquisitive, seeking to profit from his patients, and in the way he rejects Christian explanations of the universe in favour of Aristotelian and Epicurean philosophy. Yet, despite their similarities, the representation of unbelief we see in Bullein's Medicus feels categorically different to that found in Tourneur's D'Amville.

I contend that what stops the unbelief of Medicus from falling into the category of atheism is the absence of a clear confutational agenda in Bullein's *Dialogue.* Whereas D'Amville is established as a villain whose unbelief justifies his role as an antagonist; acts as a foil for the hero's piety; and sets up the climax of his providential downfall, the unbelief of Medicus and Antonius reads more like a satire of a certain kind of unbelief present in contemporary English society. This is not to say that Bullein approved of it; he was a committed Protestant who would have considered figures like Medicus and Antonius important targets for evangelisation.[10] Rather, I would suggest that Bullein's view of unbelief is not informed by an established tradition of anti-atheist confutation in the same way that Tourneur's was in 1610. Writing at a time when the concept of atheism was still relatively unknown in England, Bullein produced a representation of two men discussing their lack of faith to highlight the degradation of English society. As anti-atheist discourse became more prominent and sophisticated, portrayals of quotidian unbelief gave way to hyperbolic attacks and gross caricatures, with the figure of the atheist becoming more and more entrenched in the English imagination. This thesis is about the invention of early modern conceptions of atheism and how these ideas related to the forms of unbelief present in England during this period.

---

[9] Bullein, *Dialogue Bothe Pleasaunte and Pietifull,* sig. B4.

[10] George Gifford's *Countrie Divinitie* also uses a dialogue with an invented unbeliever to demonstrate the need for Protestant evangelisation; see chap. 2, 118–132.

Atheism and unbelief

In the above discussion of Tourneur and Bullein, I use the terms 'unbelief' and 'atheism' to denote two separate ideas. While I discuss these terms at length in Chapter 1, a shorter explanation of how I distinguish between them is in order here. As Stephen Bullivant points out, 'there is no clear, academic consensus as to how exactly the term [atheism] should be used'. Some scholars define the term broadly as the mere absence of positive belief in god(s), while others adopt a more specific conception of atheism as a conscious rejection of 'God', usually the Judeo-Christian one.[11] I prefer to group these rejections and absences under the broader and less ideologically charged term 'unbelief'. *OED* defines unbelief simply as 'Absence or lack of belief; disbelief, incredulity', with its primary application being 'In matters of religion'.[12] Since the term is not strongly associated with the rejection of one particular idea, like the existence of God or gods, it usefully captures the many forms of unbelief that early moderns were concerned about. English anti-atheist writers in this period not only condemned outright rejection of the Christian God, but also other forms of unbelief not generally included in modern definitions of atheism, such as denials of providence, the immortality of the soul, and the divinity of Christ. Irreligious scoffing, blasphemy, and a general lack of interest in religion (which is sometimes associated with the modern term 'agnosticism') were further forms of unbelief that early modern anti-atheist writers attacked. Although it may seem wrong to conflate quite different ways of rejecting religion within the single category of unbelief, thus aligning casual scoffing with intellectual scepticism, doing so creates a useful sense of neutrality. Creating different sub-groups of unbelief and judging some to be more or less significant than others is precisely the function of 'atheisms'.

---

[11] Stephen Bullivant, 'Defining "Atheism"', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11–20.
[12] 'Unbelief, n.', in *Oxford English Dictionary,* accessed May 2020, oed.com.

While I use unbelief as a neutral term for referring collectively to the absence or rejection of various religious beliefs, I make a case for treating atheisms as conceptual frameworks developed to explain or justify different forms of unbelief. Rather than taking the contemporary Western definition of atheism as a normative standard, I contend that historically and culturally diverse societies develop distinct conceptions of atheism that taxonomize the forms of unbelief they consider particularly significant or threatening. While this thesis centres on Christian understandings of atheism in the early sixteenth century, a brief digression into Islamic conceptualisations of unbelief may reveal how the ways a culture categorises unbelief can reveal much about its moral and philosophical priorities. The modern Islamic world does not have a single direct equivalent for the Western term atheism. Rather, Muslims tend to group different varieties of unbelief into distinct categories. For example, *Dahrism* specifically denotes forms of unbelief that reject divine creation as the only possible origin for the universe, particularly with reference to astronomy, medicine, and other scientific challenges to religious orthodoxy.[13] More broadly, a *kafir* is anyone who rejects the idea of God as defined by the Quran (whether non-Muslim theists like Christians and Jews should be included in this category is a matter of contention).[14] The term *ilhad,* meanwhile, refers to any heresy that distorts the fundamental teachings of Islam. Though often seen as the closest Arabic equivalent of atheism, *ilhad* is better understood as a radical tradition *within* Islam, in contrast to the more oppositional reputation of Western atheism.[15] Because *ilhad* denotes 'theological deviancy or heresy', it is applied to many more forms of unbelief than the outright rejection of God's existence, a form of *ilhad* that remains rare in

[13] Patricia Crone, 'Dahrīs', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, third edition, accessed May 2020, referenceworks.brillonline.com.
[14] 'Kafir', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito, accessed May 2020, oxfordislamicstudies.com.
[15] Samuli Schielke, 'The Islamic World', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 648.

the contemporary Muslim world.[16] As Sumuli Schielke points out, the grouping together of different forms of unbelief within the concept of *ilhad* indicates that ‘in the contemporary Arab world at least, the dividing line between theism and atheism is often less important than one’s stance towards other key issues of a religious worldview’.[17] Rejecting the existence of God does not have its own category because it is not a privileged form of unbelief; rather, Islamic atheisms focus more on circumscribing forms of unbelief that lead to deviation from Islamic values and teachings.

The contingent relationship between different forms of unbelief and the atheisms into which they are categorised is visible in a different way in the Judeo-Christian world. In contrast to Islamic atheisms, which group multiple forms of unbelief into various categories, Western atheisms tend to repackage the same form of unbelief in different ways. John Gray identifies at least seven different ‘types’ of post-Enlightenment Western atheism all predicated upon the same form of unbelief, ‘the absence of the idea of a creator-god’.[18] However, these atheisms conceptualise this disavowal in different ways, rejecting or reformulating Christianity’s gnostic, millenarian, and deifying tendencies to form new belief systems. In Gray’s view, ideologies like secular humanism and Bolshevism—while ostensibly sharing little in common—are atheisms rooted in the same form of unbelief and the same Christian heritage. A further indication of how this form of unbelief can be conceptualised differently may be provided by examining the terms agnosticism and antitheism. Agnosticism is a negative expression of the form of unbelief usually denoted by atheism: maintaining that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists is as much a rejection of theism as saying outright that he does not.[19] Yet, anecdotally at least, it seems

[16] Carool Kersten, ‘Atheism (modern)’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, third edition, accessed May 2020, referenceworks.brillonline.com.
[17] Schielke, ‘The Islamic World’, 639.
[18] John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 2.
[19] Bullivant, ‘Defining “Atheism”’, 14.

that many modern unbelievers prefer to identify as agnostics because of the negative connotations of atheism, which is often perceived as aggressively proselytising.[20] This reputation likely derives from the high-profile 'New Atheist' movement that emerged (or was invented) in the early noughties.[21] New Atheists like Christopher Hitchens not only express unbelief but do so with a strident moral opposition to religion: 'I am not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist […] I am relieved to think that the whole story is a sinister fairy tale'.[22] Agnostics and antitheists may espouse the same form of unbelief, but they construct different atheisms to explain why they don't believe in God in ways that are meaningful to them. If, as Alec Ryrie has argued, unbelief originates in emotional rather than logical reasoning, then one's decision to identify with one form of atheism over another may be a reflection of which atheism best reflects the emotional state precipitating one's unbelief.[23]

Atheisms may therefore be considered frameworks for conceptualising forms of unbelief in ways that explain or condemn them. Atheisms may originate in orthodox condemnations of unbelief (as with *dahrism*), or they may be self-fashioned identities devised by unbelievers themselves (as with antitheism). In this thesis, I am concerned specifically with the form of atheism invented in England in the latter half of the sixteenth century and the forms of unbelief to which it putatively responded. I say putatively because although anti-atheist writers often presented their works as engaging urgently with a rising tide of unbelief, the atheism they describe seems to have been more an invention of the discourse itself than a historical reality. Though evidence from trial records and life writing indicates that some unbelief was present in early modern England, such evidence rarely bears a strong

---

[20] Callum G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 70–76.
[21] Like early modern atheism, the cohesiveness of this movement may have been exaggerated by hostile media coverage; see Thomas Zenk, 'New Atheism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 255–56.
[22] Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (Oxford: Perseus, 2001), 55.
[23] See Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (London: William Collins, 2019).

resemblance to the atheism attacked in contemporary confutations.[24] For example, we have evidence that in moments of anger, many ordinary early modern people blasphemously railed against God and Christ, lost their faith in periods of depression or anxiety, or sceptically questioned the divine authorship of the Bible. These forms of unbelief are a long way from D'Amville's Machiavellian scheming and Epicurean philosophy. This is not to say that the image of atheism established in anti-atheist discourses bore no relation to the reality of unbelief in this period but rather that caution must be taken when considering early modern atheism and unbelief alongside one another. The history of unbelief in early modern England has received relatively little scholarly attention and still presents many possible avenues of inquiry. However, this thesis is primarily concerned with the history of atheism as a discourse and the literary processes through which early modern atheism was invented.

EARLY MODERN ANTI-ATHEISM

So, if this thesis is first and foremost about atheism in early modern England, as distinct from unbelief, then what was characteristic about the atheism of this period, and what does it mean to say it was 'invented'? Throughout this thesis, I refer to the proliferation of anti-atheist writing in the 1580s and 90s as an anti-atheist 'discourse'. Not all scholars use this term: Hunter refers to such writing as a 'literature', while Dixon prefers 'genre'.[25] The term discourse if taken literally (rather than in its Foucauldian sense as a system of language, thought, and power dynamics) is actually quite misleading since writers with different views about atheism rarely engaged in active discussions with one another.[26] Some authors did

---

[24] See chap. 1, 36–44.

[25] Michael Hunter, 'The Problem of "Atheism" in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35 (1985): 144; Leif Dixon, 'William Perkins, "Atheisme" and the Crises of England's Long Reformation', *The Journal of British Studies* 50, no. 4 (2011): 795–99.

[26] An exception to this is Whitaker's response to Rainolds, see chap. 3, 174–176.

acknowledge existing works they considered useful and sometimes a recurring idiosyncratic phrase will suggest unacknowledged influence.[27] However, only a minority of writers consciously positioned themselves within a broader anti-atheist conversation.[28] John Dove acknowledges that his treatise reiterates the work of George More, who 'hath learnedly and religiouslie handled the same subject', but Dove still commits himself to 'tread the same wine-presse againe'.[29] Dove writes not because he has something new to add, but because atheists are always worth confuting. Even when the existence of dissenting opinions about the nature of atheism was acknowledged, writers tended not to identify those who held them, or engage in any kind of debate with them.[30] Rather, confuters of atheism conveyed information about the beliefs, characteristics, and motivations of atheists directly to their readers as if they were describing self-evident facts that could be verified through direct observation or common sense. The anti-atheist discourse is therefore best understood as a series of assertions that came to be considered 'true' because they were repeated frequently without being challenged, either by writers with alternative opinions or by contradictory evidence presented by the emergence of 'real' atheists.

Given the limited references included in most works of anti-atheism, it is difficult to recreate by conjecture possible sources for common motifs and ideas and thus to trace their precise origin and transmission history. Historians have therefore tended to organise

---

[27] E.g. Meres refers readers interested in Marlowe's atheism to Beard's *Theatre of Gods Judgements*; Nashe and Hooker describe the cause of atheism as, respectively, a 'superaboundance of witte' and a 'superfluity of wit'; and Fotherby participates in a tradition beginning with Aquinas and culminating in Mornay's *De la verité* and Persons' *Christian Directory.* See Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury Being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth* (London, 1598), fo. 286v; Thomas Nashe, *Christs Teares over Iervsalem*, ed. R. B. McKerrow, *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, vol. 2 (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1910), 124; Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15; Martin Fotherby, *Atheomastix Clearing Foure Truthes, against Atheists and Infidels [...]* (London, 1622), sig. A5v. On the 'derivative element' of the anti-atheist literature, see Hunter, 'Problem of "Atheism"', 145.

[28] For examples, see Kenneth Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England, 1580–1720: The Atheist Answered and His Error Confuted* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 53.

[29] John Dove, *A Confutation of Atheisme* (London, 1605), sig. A2r.

[30] E.g. Mornay rejects the views of 'two sortes of people' who claim it is ineffective or inappropriate to confute atheism using rational arguments but does not give any indication of who these 'people' are. See *A Woorke Concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion [...]*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1587), sig. **5r.

discussions of the discourse thematically rather than chronologically, identifying recurring ideas without attempting to establish exactly when they first took hold. This is not inherently problematic since conceptions of atheism remained fairly consistent throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. However, it does make it difficult to determine how well established particular ideas were at specific times, and consequently to gauge the extent to which writers were invoking existing tropes or creating new ones. One of the most consistent elements of the discourse was the tendency of anti-atheist writers to distinguish between inward and outward atheism. William Vaughan formulates the distinction concisely: 'Of Atheists there are two sorts: the inward, and the outward'.[31] 'Inward' atheism (sometimes referred to as 'speculative' atheism) could comprise several positions, ranging from outright denial of God's existence, to denial of the immortality of the soul, to denial of providence. Most importantly, 'inward' atheism was perceived as being concealed, hidden behind outward conformity and thus undetectable. On the other hand, 'outward' atheism (sometimes referred to as 'practical' atheism) consisted exclusively of speech and behaviour that implied but did not necessitate unbelief. Scoffing at scripture, swearing, blaspheming, carousing, and otherwise behaving as if one neither feared God nor respected Christian morality were all liable to result in one being branded an outward atheist.

The earliest extended discussion of inward and outward atheism seems to be Nashe's treatment of the subject in *Christs Teares over Jerusalem* (1593), though George Whetstone makes a passing reference to inward atheism in 1582.[32] Whetstone seems to have expected his readers would be familiar with the concept because he does not explain it in any detail,

---

[31] William Vaughan, *The Golden-Grove Moralized in Three Bookes [...]* (London, 1600), sig. C3v. Cf. George More, *A Demonstration of God in His Workes Against All Such as Eyther in Word or Life Deny There Is a God.* (London, 1597), 31–32; Thomas Stoughton, *A Generall Treatise against Poperie and in Defence of the Religion by Publike Authoritie Professed in England [...]* (Cambridge, 1598), 173; Arthur Dent, *The Plaine Mans Path-Way to Heaven Wherein Euery Man May Cleerely See, Whether He Shall Be Saued or Damned.* (London, 1607), 90.

[32] Nashe, *Christs Teares*, 118–19; George Whetstone, *An Heptameron of Civill Discourses Containing: The Christmasse Exercise of Sundrie Well Courted Gentlemen and Gentlewomen* (London, 1582), sig. L2r.

which suggests that ideas about inward and outward atheism may have been 'circulating', in the New Historicist sense, for much of the late sixteenth century.[33] References to 'inward' and 'outward' atheism were common and even when these exact terms were not used, a distinction between the two forms was often maintained. John Dove, for example, begins his *Confutation* by identifying six kinds of atheist. The first three have a definite, internalised lack of belief and the remainder are described as having adopted atheistic behaviours. Dove's introductory taxonomy therefore implies that the treatise will address both inward and outward atheism, but he quickly dismisses the former category and turns his attention to the latter. Dove's rationale is that his work could not possibly help an inward atheist because, he contends, this form of unbelief is restricted to people living in pagan societies who are 'ignorant of the true God', those who are too foolish to recognise God's omnipotence, and 'olde Philosophers' such as Diagoras and Epicurus.[34] Dove's decision to ignore half the categories he identifies and focus exclusively on outward atheistic behaviour may seem like an egregious omission in a work that is entirely dedicated to confuting atheism, yet it reflects a prevailing bias of the anti-atheist discourse as a whole. Most early moderns claimed that sustained inward atheism was impossible in the contemporary Christian world and that outward atheism was mere hypocrisy.

Early modern writers were invested in the distinction between inward and outward atheism because it enabled them to dismiss unbelief as an intellectual frivolity. In the preceding comparison of D'Amville and Medicus, I suggested that the distinguishing quality of the later text, Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, is its confutational agenda. This is the most important attribute of early modern atheism. While atheisms are never neutral descriptors of unbelief, early modern atheism is particularly hostile toward it. Yet, it would

---

[33] On the 'circulation' of ideas, see esp. the first two essays in Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
[34] Dove, *Confutation of Atheisme*, 1–6.

be insufficient to say that this hostility emerges simply because unbelief was anathema to early modern Christians. As we saw with the representation of Medicus, writers like Bullein were capable of critiquing unbelief through satire without resorting to the more elaborate kinds of anti-atheism that proliferated later in the sixteenth century. The nature of the hostility levelled at figures like D'Amville is a product of the fact that atheists like him were largely hypothetical during this period. As I suggest above, the atheists described in confutational literature bear little resemblance to instances of unbelief recorded in official trials and investigations. I contend that this is because anti-atheist writers sought to attack forms of unbelief that they feared would become commonplace, but which did not yet have any outward proponents.

Sophisticated expressions of unbelief predicated upon Epicurean philosophy, Machiavellian policy, or critical assessments of post-Reformation Christianity appear to have been rare in early modern England, typically appearing only in the speeches of fictional characters like D'Amville. To ensure that this kind of unbelief remained consigned to the hypothetical realm of the literary, anti-atheists repeatedly asserted that the forms of unbelief they collectively feared were, in fact, impossible. By dismissing unbelief as the product of an addled mind or insincere posturing, anti-atheist writers confuted unbelief 'by denying its existence', creating in effect a 'Discourse without [a] Subject'.[35] That is, they committed thousands of words to taxonomizing and discrediting as many forms of unbelief as possible, regardless of their actual prevalence. For this reason, anti-atheist writing was generally governed by two apparently contradictory principles: that unbelief was a serious problem in England that needed to be dealt with urgently; but also that no one could genuinely deny the existence of God for any extended period of time. This is why differentiating between inward and outward atheism was so useful. According to this distinction, people who expressed their

[35] Manfred Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism: Discourse without Subject', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 127 (1991): 79.

unbelief outwardly through blasphemous jokes, drunken disavowals, or wittily devised arguments against religion could be attacked as insincere scoffers who hypocritically maintained an inner core of faith.

This strategy of confuting unbelief by denying its existence follows a similar logic to the model of 'paranoid reading' developed by the literary theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.[36] Sedgwick observed that American critical theory is dominated by what Paul Ricœur described as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion': methods of reading texts against the grain to uncover their hidden meanings.[37] For anyone marginalised by conservative American culture, applying the hermeneutics of suspicion to their immediate environment enables the detection of oppression already perceived as possible or likely, a critical habit that Sedgwick refers to as paranoid reading. For Sedgwick, 'The first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises*', which is to say that in a world where oppression is routine, anticipating oppression by pre-emptively identifying it in new forms ensures the paranoid reader is never confronted with an unpleasant truth they were unprepared for.[38] Early modern anti-atheist writers influenced their culture more than they were marginalised by it, but they may also be considered paranoid readers because of how they sought to identify and taxonomize forms of atheism they feared would become widespread in society, but which were not yet prevalent. Pre-emptively confuting such arguments ensured that Christians were never caught out by unexpected arguments against theism or surprised that some people would be convinced by such arguments. Furthermore, the tendency of early moderns to scrutinize outward behaviour for signs of concealed inward atheism is a critical habit that approximates the modern

---

[36] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.
[37] See Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).
[38] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', 130.

hermeneutics of suspicion. Sedgwick's model of paranoid reading therefore offers a useful illustration of how a literary approach to early modern anti-atheism allows us to understand how an idea that was considered impossible become widespread. Sedgwick argues that for paranoid readers, oppression is inevitably present and that by locating it, they reify oppression at the cost of 'reparative' approaches. In an analogous way, the forms of unbelief confuted by anti-atheist writers did not necessarily exist in early modern England, but these ideas were likely reified by attempts to dismiss them before they emerged.

The neat distinction that early moderns attempted to draw between hypocritical outward atheism and aberrant inward atheism rarely remained stable. Attacking outwardly atheistic behaviour prompted questions about whether scoffing and swearing were to be condemned partly because they implied or could lead to more substantiated forms of unbelief. Conversely, if outward atheism was dismissed as hypocritical posturing that belied suppressed inward faith, then ostensible commitment to religion must also be scrutinised. In a period saturated with anxieties about 'mental reservation', Nicodemism, and Machiavellianism, outward religiosity could easily be dismissed as a mere pretence.[39] As Katherine Eisaman Maus notes, 'the sense of discrepancy between "inward disposition" and "outward appearance" seems unusually urgent' in early modern England, where 'hypocrisy and atheism are often nearly synonymous'.[40] The hypocrisy Maus refers to is that of ostensibly pious subjects, rather than of insincere outward atheists. The religious hypocrite's apparent belief that it is possible to get away with misdeeds provided these are concealed from the view of society suggests that he does not fear his behaviour will be observed and punished by God, implicitly because he believes God does not exist.[41] Thus, the charge of

---

[39] Cf. Andrew Hadfield, *Lying in Early Modern English Culture: From the Oath of Supremacy to the Oath of Allegiance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 308–9.
[40] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13, 10.
[41] Maus, 38–39.

hypocrisy was deployed to dismiss both inward and outward atheism by positing discontinuity between behaviours and beliefs. While the force of an outward atheist's disavowals could be deflected by accusing him of insincerity, it was just as difficult to prove that one was *not* an atheist once accused. This is particularly notable in the ways religious polemicists exploited the inscrutability of intention to assert that the speeches and actions of their enemies were motivated not by the piety they professed, but by concealed inward unbelief.[42]

Thus, in early modern England, negotiating the threat of atheism meant developing narratives about the relationship between outward behaviour and the inward (un)belief that was perceived to motivate it. This mode of inference is an inherently literary phenomenon, and one that Victoria Kahn has argued was particularly 'troubling' during this period. For writers 'steeped in the humanist rhetorical tradition of poetics and maker's knowledge, faith itself becomes a human artifact, a product of poetic making'.[43] This thesis is about the literary strategies that early modern writers used to make audiences believe in the existence of individuals who denied Christian belief, which largely revolved around developing a coherent atheist persona. Because outward expressions of both unbelief and piety could be dismissed as hypocrisy, discussions of atheism revolved as much around the moral character of atheists as they did their actual beliefs. The emergence of a consensus that atheists were inherently wicked, ignorant, and selfish at a time when few people openly expressed unbelief was made possible by the way early modern schools and universities equipped writers to invent arguments and create appropriate personas to voice them. For example, the widespread practice of conducting disputations *in utramque partem* produced graduates capable of arguing on both sides of any question, encouraging them to entertain the contentions of

---

[42] See, e.g. chap. 2, 118–132; chap. 3, 163–167.
[43] Victoria Kahn, *The Trouble with Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 31.

hypothetical unbelievers.[44] Meanwhile, preliminary writing exercises involving the creation of *prosopopoeiae* encouraged writers to invent voices and associated subjectivities to accompany the expressions of these arguments.[45] We may, therefore, think of the emergence of atheism in this period as a product of rhetorical invention.

Early modern literature and the invention of atheism

When scholars of early modernity claim that new epistemological categories were 'invented' during this period, they often highlight the productive interplay between modern and early modern meanings of invention.[46] In current usage, invention means creating something 'new' through 'original thought or ingenuity'.[47] Conversely, the primary early modern sense of invention was 'to come upon', 'find out', or 'discover' knowledge that already existed.[48] This meaning is derived from classical rhetoric, in which *inventio* refers to the 'part' of an oration involving 'the discovery of valid or seemingly valid arguments to render one's cause plausible'.[49] Early modern writers were trained to collect arguments and persuasive sentences whenever they encountered them in classical and religious works and they used such 'commonplaces' as 'starting points for arguments or illustrative quotations' in their letters and speeches.[50] Effective writing was therefore not praised for its originality, but for its use of *imitatio*—'thinking, debating, and writing by means of *topoi*, common places, sources of

---

[44] See chap. 2, 91–105.
[45] See chap. 2, 140–142.
[46] See e.g. Evelyn Lincoln, *The Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), Introduction, ¶12; Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1; Hannah Jane Crawforth, *Etymology and the Invention of English in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.
[47] 'Invent, v. 3', in *Oxford English Dictionary,* accessed May 2020, oed.com.
[48] 'Invent, v. 1', in *Oxford English Dictionary,* accessed May 2020, oed.com.
[49] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 1.7.9.
[50] Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44–45.

received ideas and expressions'—and finding or 'inventing' the most persuasive of these rhetorical tools to suit the task at hand.[51] The pedagogical and literary culture of the period therefore conceived of literary writing as analogous to classical oratory, in that its primary function was to win the assent of audiences by inventing arguments likely to persuade them.

The rhetorical basis for the early modern meaning of invention has three important consequences for the argument of this thesis. Firstly, when I contend that early modern literature invented atheism, I mean not only that atheism was established in this period as a new way of categorising unbelief, but also that this category was formed by writers who found and appropriated existing arguments about people who denied the existence of God. For example, the early modern atheist was often described as a 'fool' in reference to the line from Psalm 14, 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God'.[52] This line was often quoted as a commonplace by writers seeking an established precedent for explaining unbelief and thus became integral to early modern conceptions of atheism. Another popular trope was that atheists were afraid of thunder because it suggested providential retribution, an idea popularised by Suetonius' description of Caligula, who 'set so light by the Gods and despised them as hee did, yet at the least thunder and lightning, used to winke close with both eyes'.[53] Even though the atheism invented in early modern England was a new category with its own purpose and logic, the tropes of this discourse were largely assembled from arguments and ideas borrowed from other contexts.

Secondly, rhetorical invention and the persuasiveness to which it aspired were fundamental to early modern conceptions of literature. Though we now usually think of literature as fictive writing produced by authors who self-consciously use language for

[51] Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 12.
[52] Ps. 14:1 (GNV). For Francis Bacon's analysis of this line, see chap. 4, 234.
[53] Suetonius, *The Historie of Twelve Caesars Emperours of Rome*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1606), 147.

creative purposes, early moderns would describe this category of aesthetic writing as 'poetics' or 'poesy'.[54] Conceptions of 'literature' (from the Latin *bonae litterae* for 'good letters') were much more expansive and encompassed most forms of serious writing undertaken by Renaissance humanists, 'from moral philosophy to history to epic, from political pamphlets to collections of letters'.[55] Regardless of the genre or form, early modern writers sought to make arguments that would persuade readers toward particular positions on the issues raised by their texts. Throughout this thesis, I draw attention how writers invent arguments about atheism to amass support for their views on other topics. For example, I argue that writers like Philippe Du-Plessis-Mornay and Henry Smith use anti-atheist rhetoric to promote unity among Reformed Christians.[56] By emphasizing the antipathy toward atheism shared by all Protestants, writers like de Mornay and Smith sought to minimize the damaging effects of interconfessional conflict. Although the array of commonplace arguments against atheism deployed by early modern writers was fairly homogenous, writers were highly creative in arranging and imitating these arguments to serve unique rhetorical purposes.

The third and most important interaction between literary invention and anti-atheist confutation concerns the role of *ethos* as a mode of rhetorical persuasion. *Ethos* is described by Aristotle as persuasion that 'depends on the character of the speaker', operating in conjunction with *pathos* ('putting the listener into a certain frame of mind') and *logos* ('the speech itself, in so far as it proves or seems to prove').[57] Of these three modes of rhetorical persuasion, Aristotle argues that *ethos* is the 'most effective' because 'we feel confidence in a

[54] Clark Hulse, 'Tudor Aesthetics', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33–37.
[55] Kahn, *The Trouble with Literature*, 19–20.
[56] See Chap. 2, 137–139 and Chap. 3, 177–198.
[57] Aristotle, *The 'Art' of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 1356a3.

greater degree and more readily in persons of worth'.[58] *Ethos* is considered just as important by Roman legal rhetoricians like Quintilian, who observes that 'Proofs may lead the judges to *think* our Cause the better one, but it is our emotional appeals that make them also *want* it to be so'.[59] For Quintilian, the orator's *ethos* is most persuasive when it 'flows from the nature of the facts and the persons, so that the speaker's character shines through his speech and is somehow recognized'.[60] The perceived inextricability of a speaker's moral character from the arguments he makes is fundamental to how early moderns understood atheism. Given the extent to which unbelief was feared and reviled during this period, a consensus was quickly established that only the most ignorant, insincere, and morally deficient individuals would be capable of denying the existence of God. Thus, early modern conceptions of atheism were largely predicated upon a view of the atheist as epitomising negative *ethos.* In this case, rather than positive *ethos* working to convince audiences of the merits of an argument or the verisimilitude of a fiction, here the poor moral character of the atheist persuades us of the fallacy of his arguments and thus the plausibility of his existence. The hypocrisy, greed, cunning, and arrogance of a character like D'Amville are emphasised because it was axiomatic that atheists were morally reprehensible. Of course, literary representations like Tourneur's played a significant role in establishing this idea in the popular imagination. From the 1580s onward, atheist characters began to appear with increasing frequency in popular stage plays, usually as villains whose denial of God was presented as coextensive with their greed, ignorance, and self-delusion.

The chapters of thesis therefore set out to explore the literary environments in which early modern writers invented atheism. I argue that literary writers not only shaped the conception of atheism that emerged during this period but drew upon the developing anti-

---

[58] Aristotle, 1356a4.
[59] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. D. A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.2.6.
[60] Quintilian, 6.2.13.

atheist discourse to make arguments about contemporary politico-religious issues. Chapter 1 is an introductory overview of how anti-atheist discourse initially developed in sixteenth-century England, accounting for influences such as classical models of atheism and unbelief, post-Reformation religious conflict, and anti-Machiavellianism. Chapter 1 also examines the forms of unbelief that people were accused of in early modern England, noting that once the burgeoning anti-atheist discourse had established a precedent for attacking the *ethos* of unbelievers, people often accused their enemies of atheism to damage their credibility in legal suits.

The following two chapters explore the literary basis for the invention of atheism, focussing respectively on humanist techniques of literary invention and the polemical rhetoric of post-Reformation religious controversy. Chapter 2 reads prose dialogues by John Lyly, George Gifford, and Philip Sidney as demonstrative of how a disputatious pedagogical culture along with the influence of classical texts such as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* enabled writers to invent atheist subjectivities, to which were assigned negative characteristics that would become fundamental to how atheism became associated with negative *ethos*. Chapter 3 deals with two of the biggest perceived inducements to unbelief introduced by the Reformation: the availability of competing versions of the Bible and the proliferation of confessional groups with divergent beliefs. These issues are explored, respectively, in discussions of the polemical exchanges that followed the publication of the Rheims New Testament (1582) and a reading of Henry Smith's anti-atheist treatise, *Gods Arrowe Against Atheists* (1593). There is a great degree of overlap between Chapters 2 and 3, which together demonstrate how interactions between humanist culture and post-Reformation conflict shaped early modern understandings of atheism.

Finally, Chapter 4 examines representations of atheism in drama, which of all the forms of writing discussed in this thesis likely did the most to cement the idea of atheism in

the popular imagination. I focus particularly on the influence of Christopher Marlowe, whose atheistic protagonists were frequently imitated by contemporaries, thus establishing a trend for villains like Tourneur's D'Amville. The chapter positions *Tamburlaine 1 & 2* (1587), *Doctor Faustus* (1588), and *The Jew of Malta* (1589) within a tradition of onstage representations of unbelief that extends back into the medieval period and forward into the seventeenth century. I argue that these works encourage audiences to read between the lines to identify Marlowe's protagonists as atheists, drawing upon the commonplace distinction between inward and outward atheism to invite inference about the nature and extent of these characters' unbelief.

Historiography

My argument, then, is that the category of atheism was invented in early modern England to explain and discredit unbelief before philosophically substantiated rejections of Christianity became widespread. I contend that taxonomies of unbelief published by anti-atheist writers, accusations of atheism in polemical writing, and representations of atheists in plays and dialogues were not responses to a rising tide of unbelief. Rather, they were the products of a literary culture's way of giving shape to a broad range of anxieties, especially concerns about religious hypocrisy and about the division of Western Christendom following the Reformation.[61] The confutational principles described above became a feature of most writing about atheism published from the late sixteenth-century onward, which meant that unbelief was understood in almost exclusively pejorative terms for at least the next three hundred years. The cultural ascendancy of this conception of atheism meant the marginalization of unbelief. Since this may sound rather broad, I want to give an overview

[61] On religious division as an inducement to unbelief, see chap. 3, 180–184.

here of the key historiographical questions this thesis sets out to answer, summarise the existing scholarship on these issues, and clarify what I am *not* covering.

The first question scholars in the twentieth century asked of early modern atheism was whether it was 'real'. That is, they examined anti-atheist writing, atheist characters in literature, and accusations of atheism levelled at figures like Sir Walter Ralegh and Christopher Marlowe with the goal of determining whether these historical traces indicated the presence in Elizabethan society of forms of unbelief that were equivalent to those found in the modern world.[62] Because many of the sources used in these studies were works of fiction, and because detecting evidence of modern unbelief in these sources required a certain degree of contrivance, studies of this kind often risked sacrificing historical rigour in order to find the kinds of atheism they were looking for. The most notorious example of this is the supposed existence of the 'School of Night': an underground network of freethinking unbelievers and occultists including Ralegh, Marlowe, and Thomas Harriot. Building upon a dubious line in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (1596), a reference to a 'school of Atheisme' by the Jesuit Robert Persons, and other very slight textual traces, scholars of the 1920s and '30s like M. C. Bradbrook produced 'detailed literary analyses of alleged allusions to the School in its members' writings', even though 'corroborating archival evidence affirming the existence of the School of Night failed to accumulate'.[63] When the theory began to collapse under increasing scrutiny in the mid-twentieth century, the perceived value of literary analysis as a means of accurately uncovering the history of atheism and unbelief took a serious hit.

[62] George Truett Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1932); Paul H. Kocher, 'Marlowe's Atheist Lecture', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 39, no. 1 (1940): 98–106; Roy W. Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine, a Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941), 21–50.
[63] Lindsay Ann Reid, 'The Spectre of the School of Night: Former Scholarly Fictions and the Stuff of Academic Fiction', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Special Issue 23 (2014): 8–9,

Just as the School of Night theory was beginning to wane, the status of early modern atheism as a valid subject of academic enquiry was called into question for another reason. When Lucien Febvre published his influential study of Rabelais in 1942, he invited historians to consider the extent to which modern atheism was even conceivable in the sixteenth century, suggesting that prior to the Enlightenment, forms of unbelief substantiated by serious intellectual reasoning were impossible.[64] The upshot of Febvre's provocation was that 'the history of unbelief became, and long remained, intellectually disreputable', prompting scholars to focus instead on related traditions of thought for which there was extant empirical evidence, such as scepticism and fideism.[65] This tendency is mirrored in the field of literary studies, where scholars influenced by Popkin's work have explored the influence of sceptical philosophy on early modern writers while avoiding the topic of atheism as far as possible.[66] The relative lack of scholarship on early modern atheism and the widespread view that substantiated unbelief was inconceivable in this period has meant that general histories of Western atheism usually take the late-seventeenth century or Enlightenment as their starting points.[67] Even when intellectual historians have explicitly set out to trace the origins of Enlightenment atheism further back in history—to the Reformation, say, or to the 1580s—emphasis is still usually given to the second half of the seventeenth century.[68] In studies such

[64] Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance Au XVIe Siècle: La Religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1942). On Febvre's argument and influence, see chap. 3, 152–153.

[65] David Wootton, 'New Histories of Atheism', in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20. The two most influential post-Febvre works of this kind are Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The Myth of Renaissance Atheism and the French Tradition of Free Thought', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6, no. 3 (1968): 233–43; and Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, revised and expanded edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003). For an overview of Febvre's arguments and influence, see David Wootton, 'Lucien Febvre and the Problem of Unbelief in the Early Modern Period', *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 4 (1988): 695–730.

[66] See, e.g. Richard Strier, 'Shakespeare and the Skeptics', *Religion & Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 171–96; William M. Hamlin, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[67] E.g. Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croom Helm, 1988); Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

[68] E.g. Michael Hunter and David Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism*; Don Cameron Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith*

as these, the goal has either been to trace the intellectual genealogy of philosophical unbelief or to read between the lines of questionably theistic philosophers to detect evidence of clandestine unbelief.[69] More recently, Dominic Erdozain and Alec Ryrie have reconsidered the history of unbelief from emotional and ethical perspectives, arguing that fully fledged rejections of religion emerge from the 'moral or spiritual anxieties' of believers who 'found they needed arguments to justify their unbelief'.[70] According to Erdozain and Ryrie, religious anger and anxiety following the Reformation prompted Enlightenment philosophers to develop retroactive justifications of unbelief.

While studies of early modern atheism have predominantly been conducted in the field of late-seventeenth-century intellectual history, attention has also been paid to the anti-atheist discourse that emerged in sixteenth-century England and to representations of atheism in contemporary literature. These subjects are often linked. One of the first studies to examine sixteenth-century anti-atheism as a coherent discourse used it to evaluate the works of Ralegh, arguing that the writer and explorer should not be considered an atheist by the standards of his age.[71] William Shakespeare has also attracted attention from literary scholars interested in unbelief, though the focus is usually on the religious ambivalence of his plays rather than their relationship to contemporary anti-atheist discourse.[72] Explorations of the

---

in the Renaissance (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964); Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France: 1650–1729. Volume 1. The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990); idem. *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650–1729* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); idem. *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650–1729* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See further chap. 3, 153–156, below.

[69] See Denis J-J Robichaud, 'Renaissance and Reformation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 179–94. Good examples of the latter methodology include David Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); idem. 'Unbelief in Early Modern Europe', *History Workshop*, no. 20 (1985): 82–100; and Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* esp. chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5, 9.

[70] Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5; Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 4.

[71] Ernest A. Strathmann, *Sir Walter Ralegh: A Study in Elizabethan Skepticism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1951), chap. 3.

[72] George Santayana, 'The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare', in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 147–65; William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966); Eric Scott Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare* (London: Continuum, 2007).

style, scope, and objectives of early modern anti-atheist discourse have appeared sporadically, often focussing on the same core group of primary texts and posing similar questions.[73] However, recent work in this area has moved away from earlier attempts to explain and taxonomize the entire discourse and instead toward examining how and why writers participated in it. Ethan Shagan argues that for Reformers like Calvin who sought to impose a new kind of belief based upon conformity to specific doctrines, the notion of the unbeliever or atheist (Shagan does not distinguish between these terms) usefully allowed Protestant authorities to proscribe individuals who did not conform. Because of the flexible range of meanings inherent in atheism, it could be used to imply that certain kinds of deficient belief were tantamount to unbelief.[74] Other scholars have taken a similar view, examining how individual Protestants used the concept of atheism to attack specific threats to the kind of belief authorities desired to impose in post-Reformation England. For example, Leif Dixon examines how William Perkins used anti-atheist rhetoric to attack Catholics, anti-Calvinists, and adherents of 'workaday Protestantism that sought conformity at the expense of doctrinal emphasis', while Melissa Caldwell explores how Thomas Nashe deployed anti-atheism to attack the widespread 'illiteracy' caused by England's failure to educate its citizens adequately, inhibiting their ability to read signs from God.[75] Dixon and Caldwell take into account the environments in which Perkins and Nashe were writing and read beyond the surface-level meanings of their anti-atheism to demonstrate how the genre was made to serve specific authorial agendas. This thesis takes a similar approach. Rather than setting out to

---

[73] The most useful of these remains Hunter, 'Problem of "Atheism"'; see also Gerald E. Aylmer, 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill*, ed. Christopher Hill, D. H. Pennington, and Keith Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 22–46; Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism'; Tiffany Jo Werth, 'Atheist, Adulterer, Sodomite, Thief, Murderer, Lyer, Perjurer, Witch, Conjuror or Brute Beast? Discovering the Ungodly in Shakespeare's England', *Literature Compass* 10, no. 2 (2013): 175–88; Roger Pooley, 'Unbelief and the Bible', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530–1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 613–25.

[74] Ethan H. Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), chap. 3.

[75] Dixon, 'William Perkins', 809–10; Melissa M. Caldwell, *Skepticism, Belief and the Reformation of Moral Value in Early Modern England* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2016), chap. 4.

provide yet another overview of the anti-atheist discourse and its tropes, I focus instead on the ways in which individual writers invented arguments against atheism to serve their own ideological and literary purposes.

SCOPE

Most of the writing examined in this thesis was published by English authors in the late sixteenth-century, giving this project a much narrower scope than a lot of existing scholarship on early modern atheism. As the preceding historiographical summary suggests, studies of atheism written by intellectual historians tend to adopt a pan-European outlook, mapping relationships between temporally and geographically diverse figures known for innovative religious thought, such as Michael Servetus (Spain, 1511–1553), Giordano Bruno (Italy, 1548–1600), Edward Herbert (England, 1582–1648), Baruch Spinoza (Dutch Republic, 1632–1677), and Pierre Bayle (France, 1647–1706). By comparison, this study of anti-atheist literature published in the 1580s and 90s largely by obscure members of the English clergy may appear peculiarly insular and parochial. Yet, my decision to treat the literary history of English anti-atheism separately from the broader intellectual history of European speculative unbelief is shared by others who have written on the subject. For example, Michael Hunter cautions against viewing philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Toland as precipitating the existence of seventeenth-century anti-atheist discourse. Rather, Hunter contends, these figures were convenient targets for a genre that was a 'fusion of the imaginary and the real' which articulated concerns about immorality, scoffing, naturalism, and secularism often without identifying individual exponents of these tendencies.[76] I contend that this is even

[76] Michael Hunter, 'Science and Heterodoxy: An Early Modern Problem Reconsidered', in *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 448.

more true for sixteenth-century anti-atheist writing. English writers in this period were for the most part not producing learned confutations of philosophical writing and they rarely attacked named individuals. Instead, they were responding to the unusual conditions of the English Reformation, in which authorities demanded outward conformity to the state religion while in practice permitting a slightly broader range of beliefs and practices. English anti-atheist discourse should therefore be viewed as a response to anxieties about religious hypocrisy among ostensibly conforming subjects, rather than to the immediate spread of philosophical justifications for unbelief.

The story this thesis tells is about the development of the internal logic of English anti-atheism. While the development of speculative forms of unbelief in contemporary Europe are relevant to this narrative, they appear in it only in distorted forms. The ideas of a writer like Machiavelli, for example, are discussed by anti-atheist writers only as simplified abstractions. Machiavelli therefore becomes a signifier for religious hypocrisy, rather than a serious writer whose ideas required a thoughtful response.[77] This is not to say that English anti-atheism was completely inward-looking or free from external influence. Like the word atheist itself, many components of English anti-atheism were European imports absorbed from the work of writers like Innocent Gentillet, Philippe Du-Plessis-Mornay, and Pierre de La Primaudaye.[78] I highlight continental influences like these wherever possible, though the limited cross-referencing present in most anti-atheist writing of this period means there is probably even more intertextuality in the discourse that remains to be discovered.

Though substantial comparative work would be beyond the scope of this thesis, it is likely many of the arguments made here would also be applicable to France, Italy, Spain, and possibly other European countries as well. As George T. Buckley confessed in his still useful

[77] See chap. 1, 68–76.
[78] For Gentillet, see chap.1, 72–74; for Mornay, see chap. 2, 137–139; for La Primaudaye, see chap. 4, p.211 and p.217.

1932 thesis, 'what I have to say about classical sources and the thought of the Paduan school is little more than the treatment of English literature in the way that M. Busson had already treated French'.[79] More recent intellectual histories of atheism also tend to have an international outlook: Wootton, for example, engages with Italian scholarship by Tullio Gregory and French scholarship by François Berriot, Busson, and Kors.[80] Yet, the scope of this comparative work tends to be limited to tracing the intellectual lineage of particular forms of unbelief influenced by the shared inheritance of classical philosophy and similar post-Reformation religious environments across Europe. Comparisons of the internal logic of different anti-atheist discourses and the literary uses to which they were put have been attempted far less frequently, though there are indications such work could be fruitful. For example, a recent study of early modern Spain indicates that, as in England, a 'mixture of hypocrisy and dissimulation, heresy and unbelief' came to characterise '"the little Spanish sin"' of atheism.[81] For the most part, however, studies of atheism in early modern Europe remain rooted in the history of ideas, making comparative work on the anti-atheist discourses themselves somewhat difficult. For instance, although Nicholas Davidson's work on early modern Italy includes the observation that Italian anti-atheist discourses demonstrate 'a generalized fear of atheism in early modern Italy', Davidson is more interested in considering whether a writer like Giulio Vanini may be considered an unbeliever than in examining Italian conceptions of atheism.[82] Kors' work on early modern France is similarly rooted in the field of intellectual history and attempts to locate the foundations of substantiated forms of

[79] Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, viii; Henri Busson, *Les Sources et Le Développement Du Rationalisme Dans La Littérature Française de La Renaissance (1533–1601)* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1922).
[80] Wootton, 'New Histories of Atheism'.
[81] Stefania Pastore, 'Doubt and Unbelief in the Early Modern Era: Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and the Spanish Tradition', in *Formations of Belief: Historical Approaches to Religion and the Secular*, ed. Philip Nord, Katja Guenther, and Max Weiss (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 73; Cf. John Edwards, 'Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria circa 1450–1500', *Past & Present*, no. 120 (1988): 3–25.
[82] Nicholas Davidson, 'Unbelief and Atheism in Italy, 1500–1700', in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 71, 58.

unbelief within late seventeenth-century learned culture. Kors therefore does not discuss the emergence of atheism as a category, which was fully developed by 1650 where his study begins.[83] The value of the literary approach I adopt here is that it uses these broader narratives about the rise of unbelief to offer insights into how the anti-atheist discourse was shaped and drawn upon by individual writers who often sought to address other issues specific to their own politico-religious environments.

This brings us to the question of periodization and why this thesis mostly focusses on the twenty-year period between 1580 and 1600. As I suggest above, Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* trades on a conception of atheism that was well established by 1611, while Bullein's *Dialogue* anticipates many features of the anti-atheist discourse that were still inchoate in 1564. These publications supply the terminal dates used in the title of this thesis, which examines how and why the conception of unbelief present in Tourneur's text became dominant. The significance of the final decades of the sixteenth century to this process may be indicated by searching for references to atheism among the printed works digitally transcribed by EEBO-TCP.[84] Hits appear in two records from the 1530s, four from the 1550s, twenty from the 1560s, and 87 from the 1570s. In the 1580s, there are 228 works that contain hits and in the 1590s, there are 272. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, this figure rises to 528, while the 1610s contain 505 and the 1620s contain 483. A similar pattern emerges when counting the total number of hits per decade: not only were more people writing about atheism, but it appears that those who used the term did so with increasing frequency. These are back-of-the-envelope figures that do not account for multiple printings of the same text, transcription errors in EEBO-TCP, or the overall increase in the number of books printed each decade. What they do show, however, is an exponential rise in the number

---

[83] See n.66, above.

[84] Searches were conducted on eebo.chadwyck.com on 27 May 2020 using the search term athei*. The truncation operator '*' represents zero or more terminal characters, allowing the search to capture words like 'atheist', 'atheism', 'atheisticall' etc., but not alternative terms like '*atheoi*' or '*nulla fidian*'.

of texts mentioning atheism over the course of the sixteenth century, with the growth of the term's popularity levelling out in the early 1600s. Whereas in the 1530s, the word atheist appeared in print only a handful of times, it had become common by the seventeenth century. Considering that a total of 382 books were published in the year 1600, the presence of 'atheist' or 'atheism' in 43 of them—over ten percent—indicates that the term had become firmly established in English literary culture by the turn of the seventeenth century.[85] By focussing on the 1580s and 90s, this thesis examines the development of anti-atheist discourse during its fastest period of growth, when use of the term was most innovative and its meanings most malleable. Later developments in anti-atheism are therefore beyond the scope of this thesis. However, other scholars have explored in some detail the changes to the perceived nature of the atheist threat following the Civil War, as well as the influence of science on the emergence of more systematic forms of anti-atheist confutation in the later seventeenth century.[86] To my knowledge, this is the first book-length study of the origins of anti-atheism in sixteenth-century English literature.

---

[85] For annual totals of books published, see John Barnard and Maureen Bell, 'Appendix 1: Statistical Tables', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 4: 1557–1695*, ed. D. F. McKenzie and John Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 782.

[86] On atheism during the revolutionary period, see Aylmer, 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England'; Christopher Hill, 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution', in *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, ed. J. F. McGregor and B. Reay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 191–211; Leif Dixon, 'England's "atheisticall Generation": Orthodox and Unbelief in the Revolutionary Period', in *Revolutionary England, c.1630–c.1660: Essays for Clive Holmes*, ed. George Southcombe and Grant Tapsell (London: Routledge, 2017), 146–62; on the influence of natural philosophy on anti-atheist discourse, see Hunter, 'Science and Heterodoxy'; John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996); *Boyle on Atheism*, ed. J. J MacIntosh (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

Chapter 1

Atheism and unbelief in the sixteenth century

In the introduction to this thesis, I explained why I distinguish between unbelief (to denote the denial or absence of theistic ideas) and atheism (to denote the way unbelief is conceptualised in a particular cultural context).[1] I asserted that in the late sixteenth century, thoroughgoing confutations of atheism that attacked the moral character of unbelievers while denying their intellectual seriousness superseded earlier approaches to unbelief. Bullein's portrayal of the '*Nulla fideian*' doctor, Medicus, for example, conceives of unbelief as a social problem in need of criticism and reform. The emerging idea of the atheist as someone who insincerely denied the existence of God, providence, or the immortality of the soul to justify his pursuit of worldly pleasures and ambitions is epitomised by Tourneur's D'Amville. This chapter examines how this development took place by providing an overview of the forms of atheism and unbelief that were present in sixteenth-century England. Since chapters 2, 3, and 4 primarily examine texts published during the 1580s and 90s when anti-atheist discourse was becoming more prolific and undergoing rapid stylistic development, here I aim to establish the historical background against which these later innovations may be contextualised.

As we shall see, there are records that suggest unbelief was widespread in pre-modern England, probably to a greater degree than the extant evidence for it can prove. However, most unbelievers whose blasphemy, scepticism, and heterodoxy has been preserved by legal records expressed themselves in idiosyncratic and uncodified ways. They did not propose alternatives to Christianity, nor articulate persuasive forms of denial likely to incite unbelief

---

[1] See intro. 5–9.

in others. I contend that works of anti-atheism were written by authors who feared that if England's irreligious tendencies were not confuted, more substantive forms of unbelief supported by classical philosophy and Machiavellian political theory might begin to emerge. It is likely that some people in pre-modern England doubted God created the world out of nothing and that the soul was immortal. Many others probably suspected that organised religion was a human invention created to enforce social order. But if these opinions were articulated using nothing more than unsubstantiated contrarian scepticism by unbelievers who offered no alternative moral or aetiological framework to explain the world, such denials could carry limited persuasive power and pose little threat to Christian hegemony.[2] This is one reason the medieval Catholic Church was more concerned with confuting heretical versions of Christianity than unbelief. Lollards had the potential to incite widespread changes in how Christians believed in ways that people who stubbornly denied the immortality of the soul did not.[3] As sixteenth-century Christians became increasingly aware that naturalism, annihilationism, and politic interpretations of religion could be supported by the arguments of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Machiavelli, they took it upon themselves to pre-emptively discredit the formation of codified forms of unbelief centred on the ideas of these figures.

To do so, they borrowed the same confutational term that had been used in the ancient world to attack the irreligion of figures like Hippo of Samos and Diagoras of Melos: *ἄθεος*.[4] The transliteration of the term into Latin as *atheos* and its subsequent appearance in vernacular European languages took place in the early sixteenth century.[5] Medieval Europe had less need for a vocabulary to describe the absence of specific forms of belief because

---

[2] Cf. Ryrie's comparison of medieval unbelievers to modern flat-earthers, *Unbelievers*, 15–16.
[3] On the case of Thomas Semer, whose unbelief only came to light when he was investigated for Lollardy in 1448, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 394; Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 22.
[4] On Hippo and Diagoras, see Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 116–17.
[5] Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*, 101–5; Henri Busson, 'Les Noms Des Incrédules Au XVIe Siècle', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 16, no. 3 (1954): 273–83.

religious authorities had not always systematically policed the inward beliefs of individuals.[6] The increased focus on individual belief prompted by fifteenth-century anxieties about witchcraft, Lollardy, and Hussitism became even more pronounced after the Reformation. For Protestant countries, monitoring the extent to which individuals personally assented to Reformed doctrines was a major existential concern. Shagan has argued that 'the invention of the unbeliever in the Reformation structured a new form of authoritarianism' whereby Reformers like Calvin attacked all but the 'the starkest and most unforgiving interpretations of what it meant to believe' as atheism.[7] While Shagan is undoubtedly right that the Reformation played a central role in the development of sixteenth-century conceptions of atheism, it is important to acknowledge that polemicists and apologists were not only using the notion of unbelief to attack insufficiently committed Christians whose styles of belief were equated with atheism. Many writers also appear to have been seriously concerned about preventing the spread of outright denials of God's existence supported by classical philosophy. We need not go as far as Wootton in arguing that 'The crucial element of choice was provided […] not by the Reformation, but by the Renaissance discovery of the historical past'.[8] Rather, as I will argue in this chapter, we should view these factors as mutually reinforcing. In terms of precipitating unbelief, post-Reformation religious divisions could provoke doubt, while classical philosophy had the potential to substantiate it. As for the development of atheism as a concept, polemicists could accuse opposing confessional groups of atheism, but to render these accusations effective they often relied upon making analogies between the philosophy of classical unbelievers and the beliefs of their enemies.[9]

My argument, then, is that the relationship between anti-atheist discourse and the forms of unbelief present in early modern England went through several phases. Since the

[6] Wootton, 'Unbelief in Early Modern Europe', 88.
[7] Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*, 125, 122.
[8] Wootton, 'Unbelief in Early Modern Europe', 89.
[9] See 64–68, below.

medieval period, there had been a great deal of quotidian unbelief that existed in popular, unsubstantiated forms not referred to as atheism either by its exponents or by those who sought to confute it. Then, in the mid-sixteenth century, scholars began making passing references to classical *atheoi* whose unbelief was recorded in pagan works of anti-atheism such as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum.* At the same time, Protestant theologians like Calvin and Bullinger began borrowing this terminology to discuss contemporary unreformed Christians. These technical/historicising and creative/polemical discourses developed in parallel without having an immediate impact upon the way recorded instances of unbelief were described. Accusations of atheism directed at named contemporaries did not begin to proliferate until the 1570s, when they were primarily applied to political leaders and their advisers, such as Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. In this context, atheism was often used to indicate someone who manipulated religion for political gain. This association became particularly prominent following the publication of Innocent Gentillet's *Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner* (1576), better known as the *Antimachiavel*, which provided a template for both anti-Machiavellianism and anti-atheism. By the 1580s some early moderns were accusing their political enemies of being atheists because they hypocritically used religion for personal gain, while others were criticising forms of Christianity they disagreed with as atheistical. Meanwhile, some classical scholars like Thomas North in his translation of Plutarch's *Lives* continued to refer neutrally to atheism and unbelief as phenomena of the ancient world.

The anti-atheist tradition widely recognised as beginning in the 1580s formed when these discourses began to overlap, allowing an increasingly coherent conception of the causes and nature of early modern atheism to emerge. I contend that most writers sought to retain the meaningfulness of atheist as a polemical insult while at the same time denying the intellectual possibility of unbelief. To achieve this, they combined classical anti-atheism with contemporary anti-Machiavellianism and a style influenced by contemporary religious

polemic to form a hybrid discourse that facilitated ambivalence about the intellectual seriousness of unbelief. As the potentially baseless accusation of atheism became commonplace, increasing numbers of writers took it upon themselves to explain how and why atheists justified their unbelief. To do so, they drew on historical and polemical discourses to create an increasingly coherent set of ideas about atheism that accounted for and pre-emptively discredited the possibility of sustained unbelief.

Early modern unbelief

This thesis argues that atheism was a sixteenth-century literary invention and that the forms of atheism typically discussed by anti-atheist writers do not align very closely with the kinds of unbelief that appear to have existed in sixteenth-century England. There is surviving evidence to suggest the presence of blasphemy and heterodoxy as well as outright unbelief, and we also may reasonably infer the widespread existence of passive indifference toward religion. But principled atheism of the kind attributed to Marlowe and Ralegh seems to have been rare. Whereas no one ever seems to have self-identified as an atheist during this period, some people did occasionally admit unbelief, though usually only in limited ways. Robert Greene, for example, is famous for confessing that alongside Marlowe, he once said '(like the fool in his heart) There is no God'.[10] However, the apparent boldness of this claim is diminished when we consider that it was made retrospectively after Greene's 'repentance' from his immoral way of life, and that the pamphlet may actually have been ghost-written by Henry Chettle.[11] Since admitting unbelief was an inherently dangerous thing to do in this period, and since accusing someone else of unbelief was a useful way of bringing them into

[10] Robert Greene, *Greenes, Groats-Worth of Witte, Bought with a Million of Repentance [...]* (London, 1592), sig. E4v.
[11] For Chettle's authorship, see John Jowett, 'Johannes Factotum: Henry Chettle and *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 87, no. 4 (1993): 453–86.

disrepute, we must treat contemporary accounts of its expression critically. Just because someone was reported to have uttered a particularly forthright disavowal of religion does not necessarily mean they were a committed unbeliever. But even a conservative reading of the available evidence shows there was strong capacity for doubt and denial among the people of early modern England, even when they had no formal means through which to substantiate or articulate it.

This section of the chapter examines instances where people appear to have expressed unbelief openly or whose alleged unbelief was recorded incidentally during official investigations into other phenomena. The beliefs and practices uncovered by these means are markedly different from the forms of unbelief that individuals who accused each other of atheism typically ascribed to one another. I examine such accusations in the final section of this chapter, where I demonstrate the influence of anti-atheist writing on their content and increasing prevalence. The cases described here have primarily been drawn from existing surveys of atheism and unbelief by Aylmer, Buckley, Haigh, Hill, Hunter, and Wootton, who in turn primarily rely upon accounts of trials and investigations compiled by early modern historians, modern transcriptions of sixteenth-century legal records, and local studies of archival history written in the twentieth-century. In other words, no one has, to my knowledge, ever conducted systematic and widespread archival research in order to uncover historical traces of unbelief in early modern Britain, though Christopher Haigh has made some promising discoveries in this area.[12] Since my primary intention here is to compare anti-atheist writing to the forms of unbelief known to have been present in the sixteenth century, I have chosen to work primarily with evidence of unbelief that is already available in printed sources. More research into the prevalence of unbelief using untranscribed archival

[12] See Christopher Haigh, *The Plain Man's Pathways to Heaven: Kinds of Christianity in Post-Reformation England, 1570–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 167–71.

sources is undoubtedly warranted, though doing so in a comprehensive way is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The shortage of strong evidence affirming the presence of unbelief in early modern England is likely a product of the severe consequences its subjects could face for expressing hostility toward religion. The excommunication of a Norfolk man during the reign of Edward VI for saying 'We live like dogs and it is better not to come to church' and the execution of Thomas Aikenhead for blasphemy in the late seventeenth century demonstrate the serious risk of being cut off from mainstream society or even killed for espousing unbelief.[13] Given the powerful social stigma against unbelief and the inherent lack of a spiritual incentive for unbelievers to advertise their doubts, it is likely that most would have kept their unbelief to themselves. We will therefore never know how extensive private doubts about the existence of God, providence, and the immortality of the soul really were. There may have been many who were privately hostile to religion or even publicly ambivalent, but few were willing to criticise it openly. For this reason, a great deal of unbelief may have been invisible to religious authorities, remaining unprosecuted and unrecorded.[14]

Without access to strong first-hand evidence for unbelief, many historians have speculated that the existence of a great deal of unbelief and indifference may be inferred from milder forms of irreverence. Haigh has shown that 'men and women who seemed to have turned their back on God and religion' were common, citing several instances of scoffing, mockery, and blasphemy as evidence of widespread religious indifference.[15] For example, Richard Barker said in 1583 that he never read the Bible and 'that it made no matter whether

---

[13] See, respectively, Hill, 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution', 193; Michael Hunter, '"Aikenhead the Atheist": The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century', in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 221–54.

[14] Cf. Nicholas Davidson, 'Christopher Marlowe and Atheism', in *Christopher Marlowe and English Renaissance Culture*, ed. Darryll Grantley and Peter Roberts (Aldershot: Scolar, 1996), 173.

[15] Haigh, *Plain Man's Pathways*, 170; cf. idem. *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 285–86.

he were a Jew or Christian, seeing that he do well'. In 1584 Ambrose Digby said, 'When I am dead set my soul on a stake and he that runneth fasteth of God or the devil take it'. John Somerset claimed in 1587 'that christendom is nothing worth'; and in 1591 Richard Cowper admitted 'that he cared not for the word of God'.[16] These do not appear to be the words of committed unbelievers who on principle denied the divinity of scripture, the immortality of the soul, or the moral value of Christianity. But they do indicate a degree of hostility and indifference toward religion that, if articulated using a more comprehensive framework, would become threatening forms of atheism. As Wootton suggests, 'irreverence could be a most effective way of communicating ideas' because it allowed the blasphemer to remain safely within the intellectual limits of a religion while subjecting it to criticism.[17] In light of Haigh's archival research, Laurence Stone's claim that the Elizabethan period was 'the age of greatest religious indifference before the twentieth century' and Hill's speculation that in the seventeenth century 'incredulity may in fact have been quite common' do not seem unreasonable.[18]

Stronger, less ambiguous attacks on fundamental tenets of Christianity that were made on principle, rather than in anger or in jest, tended to come from religious heretics. Whereas people with no belief at all had little incentive to articulate their doubts, heretics who believed strongly in promoting their own versions of religious truth were more likely to advertise their objections to established religion. The most common variety of such claims was anti-trinitarianism, a heresy that became closely associated with atheism and unbelief, but which was technically compatible with a theistic position. Anti-trinitarianism was confuted but perhaps also popularised by John Proctor's *The Fal of the Late Arian* (1549), a work that

---

[16] Qtd. in Haigh, *Plain Man's Pathways*, 168–70.
[17] Wootton, 'New Histories of Atheism', 29.
[18] Haigh, *Plain Man's Pathways*, 169; Lawrence Stone, 'Review of *The Charities of London, 1480–1660* by W. K. Jordan', *The English Historical Review* 77, no. 303 (1962): 328; Hill, 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution', 210.

likely provided the basis for the alleged unbelief of Kyd and Oxford.[19] In the late 1570s and early 1580s, several anti-trinitarians including Francis Kett, Matthew Hamont, and John Lewes were executed in Norwich for 'denying the Godhead of Christ, and holding divers other detestable heresies'.[20] Even though their attacks on Christ seem to be denials of a fundamental premise of Christianity, contemporary accounts of these heretics typically identify them as heterodox theists rather than unbelievers. William Burton remarked on the strangeness of this fact when describing the execution of Francis Kett: 'as monstrous as hee was in opinion, see how holy hee would seeme to bee in his outward conversation, The sacred Bible almost never out of his hands, himself always in prayer, his tongue never ceased praising of God, when he went to the fire he was clothed in sackecloth, hee went leaping and dauncing'.[21] The case of Kett reminds us that intention is an important factor in evaluating whether denials of fundamental Christian tenets ought to be counted as unbelief. Kett's attacks on the divinity of Christ, which he framed as expressions of his piety, were clearly of a different order to the mocking remarks attributed to Marlowe.[22]

Though the anti-trinitarians executed in Norwich appear to have been heretics rather than unbelievers, the intentions behind other expressions of unbelief are less clear cut. In 1518, Elizabeth Sculthorp confessed to the episcopal court in Lincoln that 'she hath not hald perfight nor stedfaste bileve in god […] for the moste part she hath not comme to the churche and she hath not bileved […] she hath betaken hir self and all hir children to the devill and clerely forsaken god and the churche'.[23] Sculthorp endured no greater punishment than being ordered to appear in penance at a local church the following month, indicating the court

---

[19] On the influence of Proctor's tract and the association of anti-trinitarianism with atheism, see Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 56–60; Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 209–13.
[20] John Stow and Edmond Howes, *The Annales, or a Generall Chronicle of England [...]* (London, 1615), 697.
[21] William Burton, *Davids Evidence, or, The Assurance of Gods Love [...]* (London, 1592), 126.
[22] For the accusations against Marlowe, see 81–82, below.
[23] Margaret Bowker, ed., *An Episcopal Court Book for the Diocese of Lincoln: 1514–1520* (Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society, 1967), 84–85.

viewed her unbelief as a lapse in faith rather than an attack on the church. Wootton suggests that 'by blaming the devil she ensured she would receive sympathetic consideration from the court', though to me it seems more likely that Sculthorp experienced a genuine crisis of faith than that she deliberately framed her unbelief in Christian terms to avoid punishment.[24] In either case Sculthorp appears to have been an early exponent of unbelief based on religious anxiety, indicating this phenomenon extends beyond the seventeenth-century puritans discussed by Ryrie.[25] Her trial, which took place prior to the Reformation, also points to how the manner in which authorities responded to expressions of unbelief can help us gauge the intentions behind them. Since confessions of unbelief framed in the past tense and accompanied by expressions of regret may always be interpreted as dark nights of the soul, expressions of unbelief explicitly intended to cause offence or disruption were usually considered more threatening. This distinction may be illustrated by comparing the fate of Sculthorp to that of Matthew Hamont. Hamont was a theist with unorthodox views: although he allegedly claimed 'That the newe Testament and Gospell of Christe are but mere foolishnesse, a storie of menne', he also argued that 'Baptisme is not necessarie in the Churche of God'. Tellingly, Stow reports that Hamont was sentenced to be mutilated and burned alive because during his trial 'he spake wordes of blasphemie against the Queenes Majestie, and others of hir Counsell'.[26] Hamont was executed not just because he articulated a certain degree of unbelief, but because he was unrepentant about doing so and supplemented his heterodoxy with treason: Hamont threatened the English state in a way that Sculthorp did not.

In addition to these cases of blasphemy, heresy, and religious despair, there do appear to have been at least some people who denied fundamental tenets of Christianity, such as the

---

[24] Wootton, 'Unbelief in Early Modern Europe', 83.
[25] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, chap. 4.
[26] John Stow, *The Chronicles of England from Brute unto This Present Yeare of Christ 1580* (London, 1580), 1195.

immortality of the soul, the divinity of scripture, and the creation of the world *ex nihilo*. These direct forms of unbelief are marked by their apparent persistence and by their capacity to negate the value of Christianity completely; as Wootton puts it, they are 'beliefs which made God's existence irrelevant'.[27] For example, in 1573, during Archbishop Parker's investigation into church discipline in Kent, Robert Master was reported 'for that he denyeth that god made the Sune, the Mone, the earth, the water, and that he denyeth the Resurreccon of the deade'.[28] Davidson lists Master as an example of someone who believed 'with the Aristotelians, that the world had no beginning or end', which would justify the fear of many anti-atheist writers that unbelief might be provoked by reading Aristotle.[29] For example, the 1571 State Papers contain a short essay confuting 'the atheists opynyon as Aristotle etc: who foleshely doeth affyrme the world to be wythout begynnyng', which cites the first and second books of Aristotle's *On the Heavens*.[30] Yet, there is no evidence to suggest an Aristotelian source for Master's denial of divine creation. He did not claim that the world was eternal; he simply denied the first book of Genesis to be true.

A similar observation may be made about the case of Augustine Draper who in 1587 was brought before the court of the archdeaconry of Essex because 'he doth not acknowledge the immortalitie of the sowle; and by his owne speeches he hath affirmed the same'.[31] The assurance that the allegations against Draper are affirmed 'by his owne speeches' not only conveys the sense that he expressed his views openly, but that he used his own words to justify his unbelief rather than invoking, say, an Epicurean framework. As Aylmer points out, Draper also appears to have believed in transubstantiation and to have denied that 'God hath

---

[27] Wootton, 'New Histories of Atheism', 25–26.
[28] Claude Jenkins, ed., 'An Unpublished Record of Archbishop Parker's Visitation in 1573', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 29 (1911): 314.
[29] Davidson, 'Marlowe and Atheism', 171.
[30] The National Archives, SP 12/83 f.115; qtd. in Hunter, 'Problem of "Atheism"', 140.
[31] Qtd. in William Hale Hale, ed., *A Series of Precedents and Proceedings in Criminal Causes Extending from the Year 1475 to 1640 [...]* (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1847), 193–94.

his lawfull ministers'.[32] This suggests that his unbelief originated in hostility toward the Church of England rather than an awareness of philosophical arguments against the immortality of the soul. We need not conclude with Aylmer that Draper's mutually contradictory opinions show that he 'had simply got muddled and entangled in the conflicts and controversies of his time'; it may be that the existence of these conflicts prompted him toward unbelief in the first place.[33]

The evidence therefore suggests that several kinds of unbeliever were present in sixteenth-century England but that these people bore little resemblance to the anti-atheist caricatures epitomised by Tourneur's D'Amville. The prevalence of passive hostility and indifferent compliance are by their very nature impossible to gauge, though we can assume there was a great deal more of it than has been recorded. Most people who denied fundamental tenets of Christianity—such as the divinity of Christ, scripture, or the immortality of the soul—appear to have been unorthodox theists who did not espouse a substantiated alternative to established religion. Anti-trinitarians like John Lewes and Francis Kett are better understood as heretics committed to their own religious truth rather than unbelievers or atheists. Though anti-trinitarianism would later become closely associated with atheism, the only people willing to die for this belief were heterodox theists. Of those who denied God outright, it seems that few were principled atheists seeking to undermine religious orthodoxy: Sculthorp seems to have suffered an extended dark night of soul, while Augustine Draper's apparent belief in transubstantiation indicates a tentative unbelief rooted in ambivalence toward the Reformation. Only Robert Master seems to have espoused unbelief for its own sake, though we know nothing about the context in which he expressed his doubts and his own words are not recorded.

---

[32] Aylmer, 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England', 31.
[33] Aylmer, 31.

Based on the evidence gathered here, it seems reasonable to conclude that unbelief was possible in early modern England and that it was not uncommon for doubts about various tenets of established religion to be questioned openly. But in each of the cases listed above, from Sculthorp in 1518 to Draper in 1587, 'atheist' is never used in the primary sources to describe the person accused of expressing unbelief. For the most part, these cases were treated as instances of heretical blasphemy, treason, ignorance, or indiscretion. The unbelievers described in them had not modelled their views or behaviour on a preconceived notion of atheism, nor had they relied on classical philosophy to substantiate their positions. Yet, their irreverence, scepticism, and occasional loss of faith make the emergence in early modern England of more comprehensive forms of unbelief—the kind sixteenth-century polemicists disparaged as atheism—a realistic possibility. If people with such sceptical predispositions were to encounter powerful arguments to substantiate their doubts, then it is conceivable that an empowered and educated class of unbelievers might have emerged. It was this prospect anti-atheist writers were afraid of.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRE-MODERN ATHEISM

Perhaps the most striking quality of early modern anti-atheist discourse is the relationship it posits between the atheism of the ancient world and that of contemporary Europe. Sixteenth-century unbelievers were frequently described as disciples of pagan writers like Epicurus, Diagoras, and Lucian, who each came to signify specific kinds of unbelief. Furthermore, early modern treatises on atheism usually took most of their examples from the ancient world. As Hunter points out, 'there is a disquieting shortage of instances of native "atheists", and instead a reliance on examples from classical antiquity'.[34] So, in order to understand the

[34] Hunter, 'Problem of "Atheism"', 144.

atheism invented in early modern England, we must first examine the nature of the concept they inherited from the classical past and trace how the relationship between atheism and unbelief developed over time. As we shall see, the epithet *atheos* was originally used to attack and censure individuals for their lack of religious belief and was consistently used in the ancient world as a means of creating an 'in' group from which unbelievers branded as atheists could be excluded. The origin of the term as a hostile designation for individuals whose unbelief was considered detrimental to society made it incredibly useful for post-Reformation polemicists and established the negative connotations that atheism has retained into the twenty-first century.

Western conceptions of atheism can be traced back to classical Athens where the term was used both to describe and censure unbelief. The Greek term *ἄθεος* (in Latin, *atheos*), meaning the 'absence (*a*-) of a god (*theos*)', originally indicated one who was 'godless' in the sense of having 'lost support of the gods' but the term increasingly became used as a derogatory epithet for individuals who espoused unbelief.[35] In contrast to *asebia* (impiety), a legal term for the violation of religious decorum (a crime for which one could be impeached and put to death), the term *atheos* developed out of a 'politically influenced desire to stigmatize certain individuals'.[36] Anaxagoras, Diagoras of Melos, Socrates, and Theodorus of Cyrene were all put on trial for impiety but they were also described or perhaps even self-identified as *atheoi,* a term which marked their unorthodox beliefs or flat out denials of the gods as socially 'other', making them legitimate targets of persecution.[37] Unbelief was not explicitly outlawed in Athens, so *atheos* was more an indication of abjection than criminality,

---

[35] Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, 116.
[36] Whitmarsh, 124.
[37] Whitmarsh, 117.

though Plato went to great length in his *Laws* to argue that atheists should be punished.[38] The inception of the term *atheos* went hand-in-hand with the invention of anti-atheist prejudice.

The use of *atheos* as a pejorative label for unbelievers whose heterodoxy threatened socio-political cohesion continued in the Hellenistic era. This period saw the development of philosophical schools such as Epicureanism and Scepticism that provided an intellectual basis for unbelief, but which did not necessarily promote dissent from religious orthodoxy. The atomistic theory of the universe proposed by Epicurus presented the gods either as intangible simulacra made from fine streams of atoms or as mental projections produced from within human consciousness.[39] In both cases the thrust of Epicurus' argument is toward the view that gods have no influence over human experience and should therefore not be feared, though this did not lead him to challenge contemporary religious practices. Epicurus himself censured atheists for the way their disruptive claims disturbed the serenity of mind to which he encouraged his followers to aspire. According to the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus, 'those who eliminate the divine from existing things Epicurus reproached for their complete madness, […] admonishing them not to trouble or disturb us'.[40] Even though Epicurus' anti-providentialism and materialism mean that he is often described as an atheist—particularly in the early modern period—Greek conceptions of atheism were predicated less on the (a-) theological content of a particular individual's understanding of the world and more on the extent to which his views disrupted collective religious worship and social cohesion.

The tendency of Epicureanism toward unbelief is described most articulately by Cicero in Book 1 of *De Natura Deorum* in a dialogue between Gaius Velleius (a speaker who

---

[38] David Sedley, 'From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142–44.
[39] Arguments in favour of each position are made respectively by David Konstan, 'Epicurus on the Gods', in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, ed. Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53–71; and David Sedley, 'Epicurus' Theological Innatism', in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, ed. Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29–52.
[40] Philodemus, *On piety. Part 1: critical text with commentary*, ed. and trans. Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 143.

espouses Epicureanism), and Gaius Cotta (who advocates the academic Scepticism Cicero himself approved of.) Responding to the Epicurean Velleius, Cotta the Sceptic states that although his interlocutor claims to believe in the gods, 'I doubt the adequacy of the argument which you adduce to prove it'. Against Velleuis' argument from universal consent, Cotta points out that 'Diagoras, called the Atheist, and later Theodorus openly deny the divine existence'.[41] Not only did Diagoras and Theodorus provide Epicureans with an available precedent for atheism, but, Cotta argues, their unbelief is aligned with the Epicurean argument that belief in the power of the gods to influence human affairs leads to undesirable fear and superstition. Cotta points out that this position 'is easy to attain when you have deprived the gods of all power; unless perchance you think that it was possible for Diagoras or Theodorus to be superstitious, who denied the existence of the gods altogether'. Cotta doesn't stop there, but goes on to compare Velleuis' Epicurean anti-providentialism to Prodicus' proto-agnosticism, Euhemerus' anthropological explanation for the gods, and the proto-Machiavellian argument of 'those who have asserted that the entire notion of the immortal gods is a fiction invented by wise men in the interest of the state'.[42] By aligning Epicurean philosophy with the ideas of earlier thinkers who could be dismissed as atheists, Cicero demonstrates the extent to which, by the time of the late Roman Republic, unbelievers of a wide variety of opinions could be categorised as atheists. Whitmarsh argues that Cicero's doxography of atheists in the above passage, probably derived from Clitomachus' non-extant *On Atheism*, demonstrates the existence of a 'virtual network' of ancient atheists, comprising the views of individuals from different periods and backgrounds. These various conceptions of unbelief were brought together by doxographers like Sextus Empiricus, who recorded

---

[41] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 1.62–63.

[42] Cicero, 1.117–9. A similar comparison between atheism and superstition is made by Plutarch, who argues that superstitious fear of the gods is worse than denying their existence altogether, see 'Superstition', in *Moralia, Volume II*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 451–96.

arguments in favour of unbelief. Therefore, by the time of the early Roman Empire atheism had become more than just a term of abuse levelled at unorthodox thinkers; now it also signified an increasingly coherent set of ideas.[43]

Discussions of atheism by Christian apologists began the process of transforming the term from its ancient use as a term of contempt for unorthodox religious views and practices into a more specific critique of those who lacked faith in the 'true' deity. Christians were initially unpopular in the first and second centuries because of how they separated themselves from the rest of society and created divisions among families that had only partially converted to the new religion. But as more became known about this burgeoning sect, particularly about their antipathy toward the pagan gods and their desire to disrupt traditional forms of worship, Christians were increasingly disparaged as atheists.[44] One of the earliest and most well-known attempts to turn this accusation on its head by reinventing atheism as a category of people who rejected Christianity occurs in Justin Martyr's second-century *First Apology*.[45] Justin complains that 'Thus are we even called atheists. We do proclaim ourselves atheists as regards those whom you call gods, but not with respect to the Most True God, who is alien to all evil and is the Father of justice, temperance, and the other virtues'.[46] By admitting to the charge of atheism as conceived by his pagan accusers, Justin makes it clear that Christians ought to prioritise their own faith over conforming to socially established beliefs and practices. The incredulity implied by the statement that Christians are 'even called atheists' is concomitant with Justin's implicit belief that the real atheists are those who reject the 'Most True God'.

---

[43] Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, 211–14.
[44] Joseph J. Walsh, 'On Christian Atheism', *Vigiliae Christianae* 45, no. 3 (1991): 255–77.
[45] D. W. Palmer, 'Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century', *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, no. 3 (1983): 241.
[46] Saint Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), chap. 6.

When Nicene Christianity was made the official church of the Roman Empire by Theodosius in 380, the Christian conception of atheism established by Justin Martyr quickly overwrote the term's earlier meaning. Since Theodosius precipitated the replacement of the Greco-Roman conception of religion as a 'normative *practice*' with a Christian conception of religion as a 'defined set of *beliefs*', a means of labelling unorthodox or socially disruptive beliefs about the gods became unnecessary.[47] Anyone who did not adhere to the Nicene creed was considered guilty of sacrilege. For many patristic writers, atheist lost its earlier connotations, both of subversive irregularity in religious practice and of philosophical unbelief. Instead it became a term of abuse for non-Christians: the literal sense in which *atheos* means 'without God' was co-opted to mean specifically 'without the Christian God'. Whitmarsh argues this shift toward considering religion as either true or false 'meant the end of ancient atheism in the west', since 'the paradigm of true versus false religion was the only one that mattered'. There was no need in this environment for a category that encompassed both unbelief and socially challenging religious practices. But as we shall see, unbelievers were not as Whitmarsh puts it, 'invisible to dominant society', and the category of atheism re-emerged well before the Enlightenment.[48] Renaissance encounters with texts like *De Natura Deorum* reintroduced both the term and its values to Western societies.

The word atheist may have largely disappeared from use between late antiquity and the Renaissance but unbelief itself likely remained prevalent in medieval Europe. As with the above discussion of instances of blasphemy and unbelief preserved by sixteenth-century legal records, the presence of widespread quotidian unbelief may be inferred from recorded instances of anti-religious talk. Few medieval unbelievers appear to have substantiated their doubts using sophisticated philosophical frameworks but as Ryrie notes, 'Independent-

---

[47] David Hunt, 'Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code', in *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity*, ed. Jill Harries and I. N. Wood, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010), 147.
[48] *Battling the Gods*, 240.

minded, suspicious and uneducated people were in plentiful supply'.[49] In 1273 a French merchant 'confessed to telling a friend that profit was better than virtue', claiming there was no soul in the body but blood. Seventeen years later, a Bologna moneylender 'was accused of dismissing the Bible as a mere fiction' and denying transubstantiation.[50] Others uttered shocking blasphemies, calling the Virgin Mary a whore, or ridiculing the power of God to control the weather. While such instances do not necessarily demonstrate sustained and committed unbelief, they do indicate the possibility of scepticism toward religion and perhaps even encourage it.[51] In the context of such blasphemies, attributions of sinful behaviour and low church attendance in thirteenth-century Italy to 'half-belief' (an internal tendency to unbelief in sinners who had not fully relinquished their faith) must be taken seriously.[52] As John Arnold argues, it would be complacent to assume that accounts of blasphemy, sinful behaviour, and indifference indicate only 'minor infraction[s] by weak-willed believers': some medieval Europeans evidently had serious doubts about the validity of Christianity.[53] The strongest examples of this are denials of the immortality of the soul:

> Alpert of Metz, in the early eleventh century, tells of a tavern conversation wherein a man claimed that 'the soul of man is nothing, and in his last breath it is utterly dispersed on the breeze'. Thomas of Cantimpré, some two centuries later, related a similar scene. Two men, drinking wine, talk of the afterlife. One says 'we are shamelessly fooled by the bad clerics who say that the soul can live separately after the destruction of the body', and his companions laugh in agreement.[54]

What seems clear from these anecdotes is that we should not regard the Renaissance rediscovery of Epicurean philosophy as a 'swerve' that suddenly made annihilationism,

---

[49] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 16.
[50] Ryrie, 17.
[51] Cf. John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 221.
[52] Alexander Murray, 'Piety and Impiety in Thirteenth-Century Italy', *Studies in Church History* 8 (1972): 83–106.
[53] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 219.
[54] Arnold, 225. For the original texts, see Alpert of Metz, *De Diversitate Temporum*, ed. Roel Vander Plaetse, *The Electronic Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Brepols Publishers, accessed December 2017, fo. 4, 1.17.709; Thomas of Cantimpré, *Bonum Universale de Apibus*, ed. Georges Colvener (Duacum, 1627) 2.56.2.

materialism, and unbelief thinkable.[55] Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, there were plenty of people who were hostile to religious authority and sceptical about Christian truth claims.

Nonetheless, it was only in the second half of the sixteenth century that an anti-atheist discourse emerged and repurposed a term that had not been widely used for over a thousand years. The long history of atheism as a term of opprobrium, applied first to those whose religious beliefs were condemned by Athenian society, then to unbelievers in the Roman Republic, then to Christians in the first century, and ultimately to non-Christians in late antiquity mean that the term's only universal meaning was its indication of exclusion. It was a means of attacking people whose beliefs were unacceptable to the moral core of society, however this was defined. The term's inherent flexibility and classical pedigree were undoubtedly part of its appeal to early modern Christians. Sixteenth-century anti-atheist writers often incorporated the views of ancient atheists like Diagoras and Epicurus as well as ancient anti-atheists like Plato and Cicero into their attacks on early modern unbelief, creating typologies of atheism that allowed contemporary forms of unbelief to be understood as reinventions of ancient ones. On the one hand, classical philosophy posed a threat to Christianity because writers like Aristotle and Lucretius provided elaborate alternatives to Christian understandings of how the universe operates. On the other, the term's longstanding use to circumscribe unbelief, alongside the hostile doxographies of atheists written in the ancient world, provided Renaissance Christians with ready-made tools for combatting unbelief. The aim of early modern anti-atheist writers was often to explain and discredit ancient atheism to prevent the rise of contemporary unbelief. If ancient atheism could be safely dismissed as a historical aberration, then it could pose no threat to Christianity.

---

[55] For this argument, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: Vintage, 2012).

The English word atheist was first used in classical scholarship where it supplemented the Latin *atheos* and the Greek ἄθεος. Both *atheos* and atheist were effectively neologisms, respectively recovered and invented by Renaissance humanists to describe the unbelief they encountered in classical works. Although, as we have seen, *atheos* was used until late antiquity, the term rarely appeared in medieval Latin and was unfamiliar to early sixteenth-century scholars. As Robichaud points out, the Vulgate translation of Ephesians 2:12 renders the Greek word *ἀθέοι* as *sine Deo,* 'without God', rather than transliterating it as *atheoi*.[56] Sixteenth-century translations of this verse into English also use 'without God' rather than 'atheist', meaning that early modern readers never encountered the term in the Bible (except in a marginal annotation in the unpopular and expensive Bishops' Bible).[57] Shagan notes that even as late as 1536, Philip Melanchthon used Greek letters to describe Epicureans as *ἀθέοι*, a term 'which he may not have imagined to be properly Latinate'.[58] The novelty of *atheos* in Latin and atheist in English gave the earliest uses of these words a degree of scholarly neutrality. Writers used the terms primarily to describe unbelief they perceived as being safely confined to the ancient world, which therefore did not require urgent confutation. Unlike late sixteenth-century conceptions of the atheist, *atheos* was not an all-encompassing identity but a denotative term for unbeliever.

The transition from the latter usage to the former can be seen through the changing definitions linguists offered for these terms. For example, Thomas Elyot, in his 1538 Latin-

[56] Robichaud, 'Renaissance and Reformation', 190.
[57] Glossing Peter's reference to 'scoffers, walking after their own lusts' the annotation clarifies that 'He meaneth them whiche had once professed christian religion, but became afterward contemners and mockers, as Epicurians and Atheistes', see 2 Pet. 3 (Bishop).
[58] Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*, 104.

English dictionary, glosses 'Atheos', as 'he that doth not beleve that god is'.[59] There are no qualifying personal or religious deficiencies here; an 'Atheos' is no more or less than someone who rejects the existence of God. It is also clear that for Elyot, *atheos* does not have a clear equivalent in English. His provision of an English gloss aids comprehension of classical authors rather than providing a vocabulary to describe unbelief in the contemporary world. This is also true of some later works produced to aid classical scholarship. Richard Huolet's 1552 English-Latin dictionary supplies '*atheos*' as an approximation of 'Infydele', rather than, say, atheist or unbeliever.[60] In the first edition of *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae Et Britannicae* (1565), Thomas Cooper combined the elements found in both Elyot's and Huolet's definitions, glossing *atheos* as 'He that beleveth no God: godlesse: a miscreant: an infidell'.[61] The addition of 'miscreant' to Cooper's definition indicates the extent to which, by the 1560s, *atheos* was beginning to take on the more negative connotations of the word atheist, which typically referred—with explicit hostility—to contemporary, rather than ancient, unbelief. When John Florio's Italian-English dictionary was published in 1598, the terms 'Atéo' (atheist), 'Atheo' (*atheos*), and 'Atheista' (atheistic) are grouped onto a single line and defined as 'an atheist, a miscreant, godles, one that thinks there is no god'.[62] Here the contemporary Italian term *Atéo* shares space with the Latin words *Atheo* and *Atheista* and the sense that an atheist is 'a miscreant' is prioritised over the sense that he is 'godless'. So, over the course of the sixteenth century distinctions between classical and contemporary unbelief

---

[59] *The Dictionary of Sir Thomas Eliot Knyght* (London, 1538), sig. Hhiir. The later expanded edition preserves the definition found in the 1538 text: see Thomas Elyot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae Eliotis Librarie* (London, 1542), sig. Eiiiiv.

[60] Richard Huloet, *Abcedarium Anglico Latinum, pro Tyrunculis Richardo Huloeto Exscriptore* (London, 1552), sig. K1r; See also John Higgins' later expanded edition, *Huloets Dictionarie Newelie Corrected, Amended, Set in Order and Enlarged [...]*, ed. John Higgins (London, 1572), sigs. Z6v and Ee2v.

[61] Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae Tam Accurate Congestus [...]* (London, 1565), sig. M2r.

[62] John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious, and Exact Dictionarie in Italian and English* (London, 1598), 31.

were eroded and the English term atheist increasingly became seen as a cultural category encompassing a range of moral deficiencies supplementary to unbelief itself.

The rapid pace of this change meant neutral discussions of pagan unbelief using the term *atheos* are generally confined to the first half of the sixteenth century, where the term was applied to writers such as Diagoras and Lucian of Samosata, the second-century satirist and rhetorician. As with Elyot's matter-of-fact definition, early uses of *atheos* were primarily descriptive rather than pejorative, indicating that for many mid-sixteenth-century writers, unbelief was inherently restricted to the ancient world. For example, in a work attempting to reconcile Christianity and astrology, the French physician Arnold Bogaert argued that diseases were cured by interactions between the body and the immortal soul, which was subject to celestial influence. He therefore attacks the way 'Lucianistes, Atheistes and Epicuriens […] maketh a confusion of the soule, and of the complexion of the body […] but let us relynquysh these foles which have no god'.[63] Bogaert's misleading equation of Lucian and Epicurus brackets off pagan materialism as a historical aside that his readers may 'relynquysh'. The knowledge that 'Atheistes' viewed the soul as corporeal is simply a matter of trivia. A similar approach is taken by William Alley in his perfunctory encyclopaedia entry for Lucian. Alley states that 'This Lucian by a surrename, was called a blasphemer an Atheos, that is without God, he wrote workes in Greeke to the nomber of 171'.[64] Perhaps surprisingly, Alley does not condemn Lucian. Yet, the way his explanation of the epithet 'Atheos' is juxtaposed to a description of Lucian's prolific corpus effectively puts the satirist's unbelief into a museum: it is a curious fact to be learned rather than an ideology to combat. Although scholarly matter-of-factness about pagan atheism was quickly eclipsed by a tendency toward confutation, examples of this attitude persist into the later sixteenth

[63] Arnould Bogaert, *A Pronostication for Divers Yeares Ryght Utyle and Profytable to al Sortes of People [...]*, trans. John Coke (London, 1553), sig. B5v–[B6r].
[64] William Alley, *Ptōchomuseion. The Poore Mans Librarie* (London, 1565), 17.

century. For example, in his translation of Plutarch's 'Life of Phocion' published in 1579, Thomas North writes about an interaction between Phocion's son and 'Theodorus the Atheist (to wit, that beleved not there were any goddes)'.[65] In Plutarch, no gloss of Theodorus' epithet is given, indicating that North believed the term would be unfamiliar to readers. From his definition, it seems North understood the term principally as denoting unbelief, rather than indicating negative *ethos*.

A more discursive example and one that demonstrates the capacity of early modern writers to completely separate classical from contemporary unbelief is Roger Hutchinson's *Image of God* (1550). Hutchinson was an evangelical Protestant theologian who has been described as a 'spokesman for the new ecclesiastical establishment' under Edward VI.[66] Hutchinson dedicated the *Image of God* to Thomas Cranmer, presenting the treatise as an attempt to reform the English Church more fully. His goal was 'to portray and paint our saviour Christ' to inspire the reform of men who 'are counted holy and discrete' but 'be in deede benefice mongers', more interested in financially enriching themselves through the Church than with the Christian religion.[67] The polemical agenda of Hutchinson's treatise would seem to lend itself well to the use of anti-atheist rhetoric against the 'hogs, filthy and covetous men' that Hutchinson implores God not to tolerate in the English Church.[68] Yet, when unbelief is introduced as a foil for the 'image of God' that Hutchinson establishes in the first part of the treatise, it is not contemporary greed that he discusses, but classical anti-providentialism. In a chapter arguing that 'God ruleth the world after his providence', Hutchinson describes the argument of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers that 'God after he

[65] Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes [...]*, trans. Thomas North (London, 1579), 814. Cf. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), Phocion, 38.
[66] John F. Jackson, 'Hutchinson, Roger (d. 1555), Religious Writer', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[67] Roger Hutchinson, *The Image of God, or Laie Mans Boke [...]* (London, 1560), sigs. [✠6v], [✠8v].
[68] Hutchinson, sig. ☛3v.

had formed all thinges, left al his creatures to their own governaunce'.[69] Hutchinson issues the standard counterarguments that without a divine ruler, there would be no governing agency to regulate weather cycles and crop growth and to ensure the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished. Any apparent imbalances in this system will, according to Hutchinson, be redressed at the final judgement. Concluding that God's tolerance of suffering is a response to humanity's inherent sinfulness, Hutchinson next turns to the anti-providentialism of Diagoras, who is described as 'Diagoras atheos' in a marginal note.[70]

As I pointed out above, Diagoras was known as an atheist by his contemporaries and appears among the atheists listed by Cotta in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*.[71] Hutchinson quotes Cotta's speech against the materialism of Epicurus earlier in the treatise and his discussion of Diagoras here also relies heavily on Cicero.[72] Given that Hutchinson had encountered Diagoras' anti-providentialism via Cicero's attack on it, he seems to have viewed Diagoras as a strawman whose position could be easily dismantled to strengthen the case for divine providence. Hutchinson therefore paraphrases the story of Diagoras freely, seeing no need to censor or attack a figure who had already been decisively confuted over 1500 years ago:

> It chaunsed an other time Diagoras sayling upon the sea, that a great slawe of wynd arose, the mariners thought that God had sent them a tempest bicause thei had taken him into the shyp […] But Diagoras desired them to loke about and shewing them other ships in no lesse daunger, he asked them whether Diagoras was in those other shippes also meaning that tempestes come not of gods providence, but by fortune and luck. How much wiser and more likely is the opinion of the noble clerk and most excellent Philosopher Cleanthes, who fortifieth Gods providence with four reasons […].[73]

[69] Hutchinson, fo. 53r.
[70] Hutchinson, fo. 59v.
[71] See 46–48, above.
[72] See Hutchinson, *Image of God*, fo. 2v.
[73] Hutchinson, fos. 59v–60r. Cf. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 3.37.

Hutchinson's willingness to recount fully the scepticism of this *atheos* is indicative of the extent to which he viewed Diagoras' arguments merely as academic source material. Hutchinson does not invent his own arguments against Diagoras and simply follows Cicero in reciting Cleanthes' four causes. Doing so confines the debate to the ancient world, rendering Diagoras' argument a useful example of anti-providentialism, but not a pressing issue. For Hutchinson in 1550, labelling Diagoras an *atheos* was simply a matter of reusing a term he inherited from Cicero and, as in Elyot's dictionary, the word functioned as a neutral descriptor of unbelief.

Hutchinson's dispassionate treatment of Diagoras is made all the more striking by the way he rails against 'many late Libertines and late Englishe Saduces'.[74] The Sadducees were a Jewish sect of the Second Temple period who denied the resurrection of Jesus: early modern writers often repurposed the term to deride anyone who denied the existence of spirits, angels, and other supernatural phenomena. 'Libertine', on the other hand, was a French neologism originally used by Calvin to attack Anabaptists in 1544. The term 'derives from the Latin *libertinus* meaning freedman, and its usage in early modern France suggests both emancipation and degradation', similar to how 'heretic' is 'derived from the Greek word meaning 'able to choose''.[75] Libertinism and Sadducceism were both closely associated with atheism and the terms often appeared in juxtaposition to one another. Hutchinson writes that 'there be many late Libertines and late English Saduces, which wold teach out of scripture, that there is nether place of rest, ne paine after this life, that hel is nothing els, but a tormenting and desperat conscience, and that a joyful, quiet and merry conscience is heaven'.[76] It is significant that Hutchinson suggests these groups justify their unbelief 'out of

[74] Hutchinson, *Image of God*, sig. Q1v.
[75] Thomas Wynn, 'Libertinage', in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, ed. Emma Wilson, Nicholas Hammond, and William Burgwinkle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 412; Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*, 112.
[76] Hutchinson, *Image of God*, fo. 115.

scripture' rather than using classical philosophy. Claiming that 'a joyful, quiet and merry conscience is heaven' and denying the immortality of the soul are quintessentially Epicurean beliefs. Yet, Hutchinson does not connect these claims to the arguments of the 'Stoiks, Epicures, and divers astrologers' whose anti-providentialism he confuted earlier in the treatise. Hutchinson had evidently read *De Natura Deorum*—which begins with a summary of Epicurean views of the gods—yet he never connects this classical form of unbelief to the opinions of the Libertines and Sadducees that allegedly exist in contemporary England.

Hutchinson's disinclination to connect the Stoics and Epicures to the Libertines and Sadducees is not necessarily predicated upon a distinction between classical unbelief and early modern heresy. He goes so far as to claim that 'ther be many late borne Saduces […] such have either already said in their harts: ther is no God, or that they may as easely be brought therunto'.[77] Hutchinson is therefore aware of unbelievers in the contemporary Christian world, but by describing their doubts through a paraphrase of Psalm 14 and claiming that they source their unbelief 'out of scripture' he maintains a distinction between classical and contemporary unbelief.[78] Though Hutchinson does not give any named examples of English Libertines or Sadducees, the beliefs he charges these groups with were highly topical when the *Image of God* was published in 1550. In 1549, an Anabaptist preacher was sentenced to bear a faggot at Paul's Cross 'for denying that Christ descended into Hell' and in 1552, the Hebrew scholar Christopher Carlile made the same argument in a commencement debate against Sir John Cheke.[79] Buckley claims with derision that 'Hutchinson's Sadducees and libertines were nothing more than one of the radical religious sects closely related to the Anabaptists', but perhaps this is the point.[80] Hutchinson maintains

---

[77] Hutchinson, fo. 117.
[78] On Psalm 14, see 234, below.
[79] B. L. Beer, 'London and the Rebellions of 1548–1549', *Journal of British Studies* 12, no. 1 (1972): 18; Stephen Wright, 'Carlile, Christopher, D.D. (d. 1588?)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). On Carlile, see further chap.3, 172.
[80] Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 67.

an epistemological distinction between ancient *atheoi* like Diagoras and the unbelief that some Christians had apparently developed through distorted readings of scripture. For Hutchinson, the label *atheos* is reserved for pagan unbelievers like Diagoras. Early moderns who doubted the immortality of the soul or Christ's descent into hell were instead described as libertines and Sadducees, terms more associated with unbelief that originated within Christianity. Such unbelief was usually considered more severe than ancient atheism, given that pagans did not have access to the truths revealed by Christianity.

It is conceivable that *atheos* and its vernacular equivalents could have remained confined to the realm of classical scholarship, operating as specialized terms to describe the unbelief of figures like Diagoras, Lucian, and Epicurus. However, just as these words were increasingly being used to describe living groups and individuals, so too did the philosophies of ancient unbelievers seem increasingly relevant to the early modern world. Unlike *atheos,* which had primarily historical applications, the English word atheist placed less distance between classical and contemporary unbelief. Use of the term was often accompanied by expressions of concern that ancient writers would provide a model for contemporary blasphemers who under pagan influence might develop into atheists. This fear is expressed by Goddred Gilby who in the preface to his translation of Cicero's letters to Quintus justifies the work as providing moral instruction for 'politike men as wil vochsafe to read heathen writters, though they regard not the scriptures'. Gilby's publication is therefore intended to prevent the transformation of men who 'are now a days here in England glutted as it wer with gods word' into 'Epicures' and 'Atheistes'.[81] In an early Elizabethan society where well-educated Protestant ministers were in short supply, the appeal of atheistic pagan philosophy was seen as a temptation to those 'glutted' with lacklustre Christian preaching. In Gilby's

[81] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *An Epistle or Letter of Exhortation Written in Latyne [...]*, trans. Goddred Gilby (London, 1561), sig. A2r-A3v.

opinion, the solution to this problem lay in disseminating the work of ancient writers like Cicero who could be co-opted to support a Christian view of providence and morality, as figures like Hutchinson recognised. A similar view is taken by the preacher, Richard Porder, who pitched his English translation of the church father Athenagoras as a necessary step toward combatting the 'swarmes of atheistes and epicures, whose pestilent infection' he believed were prevalent in this, 'our laste ruinous age of the worlde'.[82]

Numerous pagan writers including Socrates, Theodorus of Cyrene, and Diogenes the Cynic were condemned as atheists or credited with inspiring atheists in the early modern world.[83] As the sixteenth century progressed, ancient unbelievers were no longer described primarily as remote *atheoi,* but as atheists who influenced and typified their early modern successors. Yet, we need not always take the claims of writers like Gilby at face value: anyone in sixteenth-century England educated enough to read about ancient philosophy would also have been well-schooled in Protestant theology. Anti-atheists often appear more concerned with the abstract possibility that the philosophy of writers like Socrates and Theodorus could encourage unbelief than they were about the circulation of particular texts or ideas. This is demonstrated by the way ancient writers perceived as fomenting atheism were often artificially conflated, as we saw earlier with Bogaert's juxtaposition of Lucian and Epicurus.[84] In a similar way, George Gascoigne's Gnomaticus—a dramatic character whose opinions closely resemble those of Ascham's schoolmaster—refers to Anaxagoras, Pherecydes of Syros, and Protagoras as foundations whereupon 'hath sprong the damnable opinion of Atheysts'.[85] Gnomaticus lists anecdotes about these philosophers, such as

---

[82] Athenagoras, *The Most Notable and Excellent Discourse of the Christian Philosopher Athenagoras [...]*, trans. Richard Porder (London, 1573), frontispiece.

[83] See, respectively, Aelian, *A Registre of Hystories Conteining Martiall Exploites of Worthy Warriours [...]*, trans. Abraham Fleming (London, 1576), 16; Plutarch, *Lives* (North), 814; Martin Luther, *A Commentarie upon the Fiftene Psalmes [...]*, trans. Henry Bull (London, 1577), 201.

[84] See 54–54, above.

[85] George Gascoigne, *The Glasse of Governement* (London, 1575), sig. K1r. Cf. Asham's schoolmaster, chap. 2, 107–109. On accusations of atheism made against Gascoigne himself, see 70, below.

Pherecydes' prognostication of an earthquake using hydromancy, that reveal them to be 'estranged from reason' and therefore inappropriate objects of study for young scholars. He argues that if students indulge 'over deepely in philosophicall opinions', their minds will 'run on hedlong, only led by natural considerations of causes,' and thus implicitly to atheism. Yet, no works by the writers Gnomaticus refers to were extant in early modern England and their arguments did not provide strong frameworks for unbelief. Anaxagoras' suggestion that the universe was ordered by a cosmic 'mind' is compatible with both theism and unbelief, while Protagoras' lack of a clear view on the gods made him an unlikely icon for atheists.[86] Meanwhile Pherecydes was dubbed 'the devine' by Plutarch, and was said to have been the first 'that wrote among the Greeks, concerning Nature and the Gods'.[87] Perhaps, like John Lyly, Gascoigne was subtly satirising the limited capacity of Renaissance humanists to read classical texts accurately, or maybe he was simply replicating names often thrown around by anti-atheist writers who had not read the authors they objected to.[88] Whether or not we read Gnomaticus' argument at face value, Gascoigne's interlude reveals the extent to which fears that classical philosophy might be used to support unbelief could be as potent as the arguments of pagan writers themselves. As we saw earlier, Aristotle's *On the Heavens* was probably not widely read by unbelievers, but Aristotle still became a potent figurehead for the idea the world was eternal and not divinely created.[89] For Gascoigne's Gnomaticus, Pherecydes did not even need to provide justifications for unbelief in order to provoke it. The fear Gnomaticus articulates is that merely reading about the world from a non-Christian perspective would encourage a freedom of thought that might lead to atheism.

---

[86] On Anaxagoras, see Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, 64–66. On Protagoras see chap. 2, 112–113.
[87] Plutarch, *Lives* (North), 524; Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives, Opinions, and Remarkable Sayings of the Most Famous Ancient Philosophers*, trans. T. Fetherstone et al. (London, 1688), fo. 89r.
[88] On Lyly, see chap. 2, 105–118.
[89] See 41–42, above and Davidson, 'Marlowe and Atheism', 171.

Nonetheless, the ideas of some classical philosophers do appear to have had a meaningful impact upon the ability of early moderns to conceptualise atheism and unbelief. The most influential by far was the Greek philosopher Epicurus, whose name gained a foothold outside the neutral realm of classical scholarship and became an important term in anti-atheist discourse. Scholars like Ada Palmer have pointed out that Epicurus was actually a theist and that '"Epicurean" remained less an intellectual label than a term of abuse, synonymous in public discourse with heresy, atheism, and often, sodomy'.[90] However like the term atheist itself, accusations of Epicureanism were deployed with varying degrees of exactitude. Although Palmer is correct that 'Epicure' carried a range of connotations peculiar to early modern stereotypes about him, his philosophy did provide genuine inducements to unbelief and his ideas were often viewed in this way. As I have already shown, Epicurus' understanding of divinity encouraged a strongly anti-providential view of the world which in combination with Epicurus' materialist theory of the universe and denial of the soul's immortality made him a de facto atheist in Cicero's view.[91] The point at which the early modern image of Epicurus diverges from what may be understood about the reality of his philosophy is the Epicurean emphasis upon the pursuit of happiness in life. Epicurus defined happiness in negative terms, that is, a state in which physical pain, emotional longing, and other impediments to one's serenity of mind were absent. A good life for Epicureans meant living simply, free from desires for social status or material wealth. But this is not the stereotype that prevailed in early modern England. Anti-atheist writers correctly identified Epicurus' anti-providentialism, materialism, and annihilationism as inducements to seek temporal happiness without worrying about the gods or the fate of one's soul. But Christians considered this outlook a justification for sinful behaviour: without fear of final judgement or

---

[90] Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 3–5.
[91] See 46–47, above.

divine providence, the early modern Epicure would pursue sexual pleasure and bodily indulgence.

The utility of 'Epicure' as shorthand for someone who professed unbelief to justify divergence from Christian morality meant the term was used widely, often with an emphasis upon irreligious pursuit of earthly pleasure. As one clergyman wrote, 'I have heard men speake much against Atheistes, and Epicures, which thinking that there is no other life after this, imbrace and give themselves over to the delights of this present world'.[92] The rejection of the immortality of the soul—which was seen as a uniquely human attribute—meant that Epicurean atheists were often associated with beasts, who lacked a rational soul and were thus ruled by their vegetative and sensory impulses.[93] There are frequent references to 'a sort of Atheistes and swinyshe Epicures, whose gruntinge, we oughte not to regarde, or to care for', that describe expressions of unbelief as the barking of dogs or howling of pigs.[94]

Accusations of Epicureanism also occurred frequently in religious polemic. For example, Miles Coverdale, in the preface to his English translation of Heinrich Bullinger's *The Hope of the Faithful* (1555), laments the widespread elevation of temporal pleasure above adherence to Christian teaching:

> In this case the Ethnikes being saide: live merely while ye be in the world: and eat we and drink we lustely, to morowe we shall die, which all the Epicures protest openly, and the Italian atheoi in life practise, and no worse man, then a Pope, in oure dayes hathe geven the like definitive sentence, among his Courte devines, of the soules immortality: the story is knowen.[95]

---

[92] Samuel Bird, *A Friendlie Communcication or Dialogue Betweene Paule and Damas [...]* (London, 1580), fo. 26v.

[93] On Renaissance understandings of the Aristotelian tripartite soul, see Katharine Park, 'Psychology: The Organic Soul', in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C. B. Schmitt et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 464–84. On the dehumanisation of unbelievers, see Tiffany Jo Werth, 'A Heart of Stone: The Ungodly in Early Modern England', in *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Jean E. Feerick and Vincent Joseph Nardizzi (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 181–203.

[94] John Véron, *The Overthrow of the Justification of Workes [...]* (London, 1561), fo. 2v.

[95] Miles Coverdale, 'Preface', in *The Hope of the Faithful [...]*, by Heinrich Bullinger, ([Wesel], 1555), sigs. ☞3v–☞4r. See also Augustin Malorat, 'An Excellent Exposition of the Two Last Epistles of S. John', in *The Lectures or Daily Sermons, of That Reverend Divine, D. John Calvine [...]*, by Jean Calvin, trans. Nathaniel Baxter (London, 1578), fo. 10r.

Coverdale's assertion that 'Italian atheoi' put Epicurean philosophy into practice, living sinfully because they believe their souls will dissolve into scattered atoms upon their death transposes the Latin term *atheoi* from a classical context to a modern one. Through his translations of leading theologians like Bullinger, Coverdale supported England's Reformation by providing key intellectual material in the vernacular. His initiative to use classical anti-atheism as a rhetorical weapon against the Catholics—including the Pope—would often be repeated by later polemicists. It is unclear whether Coverdale genuinely believed the Pope espoused Epicurean beliefs; his assertion that 'the story is knowen' feels distinctly libellous. But the accuracy of the accusation does not determine its potency: as many other writers found, aligning the beliefs of their religious enemies with classical forms of unbelief was a powerful polemical weapon.

As I argue in Chapter 3, the accusations of atheism that religious controversialists made against one another were not necessarily meaningless insults but were often intended to highlight the tendencies toward unbelief inherent in the versions of Christianity to which they were opposed. This is particularly true for polemical use of the term 'Epicure'. For Protestants like Coverdale, the prioritisation of works over faith, the embrace of physical objects and ceremonies, and the lavishly decorated churches of Catholicism made its priorities seem suspiciously Epicurean. The apparent elevation of the carnal over the spiritual in Catholicism gave rise to the commonplace conflation of anti-atheist and anti-Catholic rhetoric: 'For who knoweth not that Rome is fraught wyth ungodlinesse, Idolatrie, deceite, false teachers, yea and with Libertines, Epicures, Atheistes, and all kinde of abhomination and horrible wyckednesse?'[96] Conversely, the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and justification by faith alone led some Catholic polemicists to note that the fatalism of

[96] Augustin Marlorat, *A Catholike Exposition upon the Revelation of Sainct John.*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1574), fo. 237v.

Protestants toward their salvation had the potential to encourage Epicureanism. Just as Epicurus taught his followers to enjoy life because the Gods were distant and could not be influenced, Catholics argued that Calvinists who saw no value in good works had no incentive to remain good Christians. As the scholar and translator Gregory Martin put it, 'To preache against merite of Christian workes, is it not the meane to neglect al goodnes, by a foolishe securitie of faith? […] and the redy way to riotous libertie, to Epicures brutishnes, to Atheisme'.[97]

The utility of 'Epicure' as a term of abuse in religious controversy had a major impact upon the proliferation of anti-atheist discourse in the sixteenth century. The ease with which anti-atheist rhetoric of the kind Cicero directed at followers of Epicurus could be applied to aspects of both Catholicism and Protestantism meant that atheism and unbelief no longer felt confined to the ancient world, but were perceived as growing contemporary phenomena. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, Christians of all confessions seem to have believed the world was reverting to an immoral, atheistic state, 'which is Heathenish Gentilitie, which raigneth in the hartes of godlesse persons, Atheistes, and Epicures, which passe neither for heaven, nor hell, nor for God nor the Divell'.[98] The unbelief of the ancient world that writers like Hutchinson and Elyot perceived as historically distant was being brought forcefully into the present by the perceived ubiquity of contemporary Epicures and atheists attested to by alarmed authors of confutations.

In England, anti-atheist rhetoric was central not only to controversies between Catholics and Protestants, but to debates about the governance of the Church of England. During the *Admonition* controversy, future archbishop John Whitgift used the alleged prevalence of atheism in the Church to argue against the demands of the puritans. The authors

[97] Gregory Martin, *A Treatise of Schisme Shewing, That al Catholikes Ought in Any Wise to Abstaine Altogether from Heretical Conventicles, to Witt, Their Prayers, Sermons. Etc* (London, 1578), sig L7v–L8r. On Martin's use of anti-atheist rhetoric in this work, see chap. 3, 163–164.

[98] Thomas Cooper, *Certaine Sermons Wherin Is Contained the Defense of the Gospell [...]* (London, 1580), 189.

of the *Admonition to the Parliament* (1572), John Field and Thomas Wilcox, sought the implementation of a presbyterian system of governance, whereby locally elected elders in individual churches would arbitrate on matters of ecclesiastical discipline rather than the state.[99] Whitgift responded with *An Answere* (1572) arguing that although presbyterianism had worked for the primitive Church, it would be ineffective now that the Church of England was 'full of hypocrites, Papists, Atheists, and other wicked persons'.[100] Whitgift also claimed that the *Admonition* was only supported by 'foure sortes of men, Atheistes, Papists, Anabaptists, and (as you woulde be compted) Puritanes'.[101] By deploying 'Atheistes' alongside other contemporary terms of opprobrium, Whitgift used the word as an insult, indicating the extent to which, by the 1570s, the term had moved well beyond the confines of classical scholarship while retaining the combined sense of negative *ethos* and unbelief that had governed pagan use of the term. Thomas Cartwright, Whitgift's frequent opponent, responded to the *Answere* by repurposing its author's arguments. Whitgift's claim that the English Church is full of papists, atheists and hypocrites is thus presented as evidence that its current system of governance isn't working: 'there is greater cause now why there should be senyors in every churche'.[102] The controversy continued until 1575, with controversialists on both sides accusing one another of atheism or using the term as signifier of the moral and political chaos that would result from adopting an ineffective system of Church governance.[103]

Expressions of concern about the apparent prevalence of atheism in England and the increasingly frequent use of atheist as a term of abuse were not only responses to fears about

---

[99] See Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), esp. 118–121.
[100] John Whitgift, *An Answere to a Certen Libel Intituled, An Admonition to the Parliament* (London, 1572), 115; cf. 45.
[101] Whitgift, 234–35.
[102] Thomas Cartwright, *A Replye to an Answere Made of M. Doctor Whitgifte Against the Admonition to the Parliament.* ([Hemel Hempstead], 1573), 179–80.
[103] Fulke, *Examination of M. Doctor Whytgiftes Censures*, 24; Cartwright, *Second Replie Agaynst Whitgifte*, sig. xxxx1r; p.LXXXI; p. CCXLV; p.CCLXII; Whitgift, *Defense of the Aunswere*, 178–79; 297; 575; 643.

the rise of unbelief but also perhaps causes of it. As I argue in Chapter 3, religious divisions were seen alongside classical philosophy as potential inducements to unbelief among early modern Christians.[104] Catholics exploited this possibility for polemical effect, blaming the Reformation and the confessional divisions it introduced for the rise of atheism. For example, in Thomas Harding's response to Bishop John Jewel's 1559 'Challenge' sermon, the Catholic convert blamed Protestantism for creating 'such confusion of opinions and infinite varietie of doctrines, as breedeth in the people a mere paganisme, hethenish loosnes, and a very Epicurian atheisme'.[105] Many Protestants themselves believed that the Reformation had precipitated an increase in unbelief. Calvin, in *Concerning Scandals* (1550), explained this inconvenient development by claiming that the Reformation merely exposed the unbelief that had always been present in society. By giving unbelievers a vocabulary for attacking Catholicism, Protestants enabled unbelievers to articulate existing hostilities toward religion. Calvin therefore argued that by enforcing conformity to Reformed doctrines, the rise of unbelief could be curtailed.[106] In the preface to his English translation of *Concerning Scandals*, Arthur Golding reiterated Calvin's argument, claiming it was important to provide an English version of the text because without effective preaching and evangelisation, 'the people goe to havocke', adopting 'either no Religion at all, wherof proceedeth Atheisme and Epicuresme', or dividing into an infinite number of competing sects, with each person accepting only their own personal understanding of Christianity.[107] Golding's claims were somewhat prescient: by the mid-seventeenth century, radical dissenting groups like the Ranters and Diggers had adopted highly personalised attitudes to religion that approached

[104] See chap. 3, 180–184.
[105] Thomas Harding, *A Confutation of a Booke Intituled An Apologie of the Church of England* (Antwerp, 1565), sig. *5v.
[106] See Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 48–49.
[107] Arthur Golding, 'Dediction to Francis Russell', in *A Little Booke of John Calvines Concerninge Offences [...]*, by Jean Calvin (London, 1567), sig. *5v.

'the verge of denying Christianity altogether'.[108] Furthermore, the assertion of a classicist like Golding that 'Atheisme and Epicuresme' would be the result of ineffective preaching should caution us against trying to evaluate the Renaissance and Reformation as separate causes contributing to the rise either of unbelief or anti-atheist discourse. The anti-atheist frameworks and philosophies of unbelief that early moderns first encountered in the works of Cicero, Plato, and Plutarch were soon recognised as relevant to post-Reformation religious conflict by writers who, more often than not, were both classicists and theologians.

MACHIAVELLI AND POLITIC RELIGION

So far in this chapter we have seen that there is evidence for some popular inclination toward scepticism, blasphemy, and unbelief in early modern England; that atheism was a category first developed in classical Athens to stigmatise unbelief; and that sixteenth-century writers increasingly used this ancient category to describe contemporary people and events. Pagan philosophers branded as atheists thus became synonymous with different forms of unbelief. Epicurus was known for denying the immortality of the soul, Lucian for mocking and blaspheming, Diagoras for denying providence. In post-Reformation religious polemic, these names became useful shorthand expressions through which writers could accuse their opponents of various atheistic tendencies. Though most anti-atheist writers imitated the classical tradition in terms of the arguments they deployed and the ideas they attacked, many were also greatly preoccupied with the ideology of a more recent figure: Niccolò Machiavelli. Scholars have justifiably described Machiavelli as the quintessential early modern atheist.[109] As Hunter points out, early modern writers who compiled lists of atheists included

---

[108] Hill, 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution', 206.
[109] E.g. Wootton, 'Unbelief in Early Modern Europe', 86; Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism', 65–67; Werth, 'Atheist, Adulterer, Sodomite, Thief', 178.

Machiavelli in them more frequently than any other non-classical figure.[110] Given Machiavelli's silence on the issue of God's existence, this reputation may seem unwarranted, though in fact it is not without foundation. Just as Epicurus was branded an atheist because his atomism and anti-providentialism implied unbelief, so too did Machiavelli's politic attitude toward religion earn him a reputation as an atheist. Neither writer claimed that deities did not exist but their ambivalence about religion was interpreted as veiled unbelief.

It was Machiavelli's advocacy of rulers deceiving subjects about their religious beliefs that many early moderns found disturbing, rather than his direct antipathy toward religion. Not only did Machiavelli never espouse outright unbelief or scepticism toward religion, but as Buckley notes, his treatises on government are much less hostile toward religion than readers familiar only with stereotypes about him would likely expect.[111] According to Machiavelli's theory of statecraft, it did not matter what rulers believed provided they were *perceived* as being religious:

> Therefore is there no necessity for a Prince to bee endued with all these above written qualities, but it behooves well that he seeme to be so […] to seeme pitifull, faithfull, mild, religious, and of integrity, and indeed to be so; provided withall thou beest of such a composition, that if need require thee to use the contrary, thou canst, and know'st how to apply thy selfe thereto.[112]

In this passage from *The Prince* (1513), Machiavelli actually suggests it is good for a prince to be religious, provided he is willing to compromise these principles in the name of political expediency. Even though Machiavelli espoused indifference rather than unbelief, his name became virtually synonymous with early modern atheism because of the way he unashamedly argued that rulers should simulate religious piety as a facet of their statecraft.[113] As I suggested earlier, early modern anti-atheist discourse was strongly preoccupied with the

[110] Hunter, 'Problem of "Atheism"', 144.
[111] Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 31–32.
[112] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Nicholas Machiavel's Prince*, trans. Edward Dacres (London, 1640), 139.
[113] For the equivalence of 'atheist' and 'Machiavel', see chap. 4, 224–225.

concern that outward religiosity could be a deceptive performance intended to mask inward unbelief.[114] Machiavelli's argument that the intrinsic value of pious behaviour was less important than its function as a tool of statecraft was a direct manifestation of this fear, allowing him to symbolise the threat of religious hypocrisy in general.

Machiavelli's ideas were not new: as we saw earlier, Cicero's Cotta had attacked 'those who have asserted that the entire notion of the immortal gods is a fiction invented by wise men in the interest of the state'.[115] Nor was it the case that Machiavelli was the only early modern writer who advocated a politic attitude toward religion. As Alexandra Gajda notes, Justus Lipsius and Giovanni Botero 'both deliberately shunned the irreligion associated with Machiavelli's name, [but] they consciously adopted and adapted insights that justified divergence from conventional ethical conduct', in particular the idea that dissimulation 'was an essential weapon in the armoury of the prudent prince'.[116] It was therefore not primarily through his ideas that Machiavelli became an enabler of unbelief and the archetypal early modern atheist but through his *ethos*. As Ryrie puts it, 'Machiavelli's contribution was to say out loud what others had long whispered, breathing new confidence in the long-standing suspicion that religion was all a giant trick'.[117] There were other sixteenth-century Italians like Girolamo Cardano who also argued that religion was invented by rulers to trick their subjects into obedience, but none captured the English imagination in the same way as Machiavelli.[118] The argument that religion was a politic fabrication was not even a particularly sophisticated or difficult claim for an educated person to make. As we saw earlier, the anti-trinitarian heretic Matthew Hamont claimed on his own terms that the Bible

---

[114] See intro., 10–17.
[115] See 47, above
[116] Alexandra Gajda, 'The Gordian Knot of Policy: Statecraft and the Prudent Prince', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. R. Malcolm Smuts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 290.
[117] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 39.
[118] On Cardano, see Davidson, 'Atheism in Italy'.

was ‘a storie of menne’.[119] Machiavelli’s value to anti-atheist discourse was his existing notoriety. His name not only signified unbelief but also deceitfulness, arrogance, and immorality, qualities closely associated with emerging conceptions of atheism. Just as the names of classical philosophers like Epicurus were used as shorthand for particular arguments by people who had never read them, Machiavelli was known for his politic attitude to religion even by those unfamiliar with his writing.

Scholars of Machiavelli’s reception in England have long debated the extent to which English writers knew his political theory primarily from his writings themselves or from confutations like Innocent Gentillet’s influential *Antimachiavel* (1576).[120] The two works in which Machiavelli advocates politic religion most strongly—*The Prince* and *The Discourses*—were not readily available in sixteenth-century England. Although English translations of these texts circulated in manuscript and many readers sought out imported French and Latin versions, texts printed in England were not available legally until the mid-seventeenth century. Innocent Gentillet’s *Antimachiavel*, on the other hand, was published in Latin and English translations in 1577 and 1602. As early as 1578, the preacher John Stockwood drew upon Gentillet’s confutation in his attack upon ‘the unpure Atheiste Machiavel’.[121] N.W. Bawcutt has demonstrated that writers like Richard Harvey and John Case responded to Machiavelli based on their knowledge of both Gentillet’s confutation and Machiavelli’s works. Bawcutt therefore argues that there was ‘a whole spectrum of responses to Machiavelli’, both positive and negative, based on varying degrees of familiarity with his work.[122] This would also be a good assessment of the development of Machiavelli’s

[119] See 39–41, above.
[120] See Edward Stockton Meyer, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama* (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1897); Irving Ribner, ‘The Significance of Gentillet’s *Contre-Machiavel*’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1949): 153–57; Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).
[121] John Stockwood, *A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse on Barthelmew Day [...]* (London, 1578), 59; See N. W. Bawcutt, ‘The “Myth of Gentillet” Reconsidered: An Aspect of Elizabethan Machiavellianism’, *The Modern Language Review* 99, no. 4 (2004): 865–66.
[122] Bawcutt, ‘“Myth of Gentillet” Reconsidered’, 874.

reputation as an atheist. Though many earlier writers reached the same conclusion as Gentillet, it was the *Antimachiavel* that cemented Machiavelli's reputation as an atheist in England and established a precedent for confuting atheists by systematically condemning their unbelief in a way that also advertised it.

Assertions that Machiavelli was an atheist began to appear from the mid-sixteenth century onward. Writing in Latin in 1557, the Italian physician Paolo Giovio branded Machiavelli an 'atheos' and Roger Ascham described him in *The Scholemaster* (1570) as one of the 'Patriarches' of Italian atheism.[123] By the 1570s, Machiavelli had become a byword for religious hypocrisy and atheism. In the preface to his translation of Athenagoras' *Resurrection of the Dead*, Richard Porder asserts the value of the text in confuting 'All godlesse Atheists, beastly Epicures, scoffing Lucianists, mocking Machiavelists […]', which explicitly equates Machiavelli with classical sources of unbelief.[124] The ongoing Wars of Religion in neighbouring France provided an example of the kind of Machiavellianism that many English writers feared. The *politique* movement that sought to achieve coexistence between Catholics and Huguenots threatened not only religious compromise but also unexpected violence, as in the case of the ostensibly *politique* Catherine de' Medici's complicity in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. Thus, when John Stubbes inveighed against Elizabeth I's courtship of the Duke of Anjou, he claimed that in the French court, 'Macciavel is theyr new Testament, and Atheisme is theyr religion'.[125] It is in this context of changing political allegiances and spontaneous religious violence that Gentillet, a Huguenot, wrote his confutation of Machiavelli. In an earlier work attributed to him, Gentillet had

---

[123] Meyer, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama*, 6, 17. On Ascham's view of Italian atheism, see chap. 2, 107–109.
[124] Richard Porder, 'Dedication to William Fleetewood', in *The Most Notable and Excellent Discourse of the Christian Philosopher Athenagoras [...]*, by Athenagoras, trans. Richard Porder (London, 1573), sig. A4.
[125] John Stubbes, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf Whereinto England Is like to Be Swallowed by Another French Mariage [...]* (London, 1579), sig. E4v.

described Machiavelli as ‘the greatest Atheist that ever the worlde bred’.[126] Here, as in all of examples I have discussed so far, Machiavelli’s atheism is stated as a fact without unpacking the relationship between the nature of his pronouncements and the atheism imputed to him. For example, Porder’s reference to ‘mocking Machiavelists’ misleadingly implies that Machiavelli’s threat to religion lies in his scoffing blasphemy. It is taken for granted that Machiavelli is an irreligious writer, but the exact nature of his unbelief is never explored in any detail.

The *Antimachiavel* is innovative because it demonstrates Machiavelli’s unbelief systematically. The treatise presents fifty maxims drawn from Machiavelli’s works each followed by an extended confutation by Gentillet. This structure allows Gentillet to justify branding Machiavelli an atheist by arguing that inward unbelief motivates Machiavelli’s pronouncements on religion. Gentillet concludes that Machiavelli cannot possibly believe in God based on his reading of the maxim ‘A Prince above all things ought to wish and desire to be esteemed devout, though he be not so indeed’, which is Gentillet’s paraphrase of the passage from *The Prince* quoted above.[127] Gentillet contends that

> This Maxime is a precept, whereby this Atheist Machiavell teacheth the Prince to be a true contemner of God and of Religion, and onely to make a shew and a faire countenance outwardly before the world, to be esteemed religious and devout, although he be not. For divine punishment, for such hypocrisie and dissimulation, Machiavell feares not, because he beleeves not there is a God.[128]

Unlike the reactionary attacks of commentators like Ascham and Porder, Gentillet’s *Antimachiavel* articulates how Machiavelli’s advocacy of religious hypocrisy made his doctrines so disturbing. This detailed confutation ensured that Machiavelli became a consistent point of reference for developing conceptions of atheism and influenced the ways

---

[126] Innocent Gentillet, *A Declaration Concerning the Needfulnesse of Peace to Be Made in Fraunce [...]*, trans. George Harte (London, 1575), sig. K4r.
[127] See 69–70, above.
[128] Innocent Gentillet, *A Discourse upon the Meanes of Wel Governing [...] Against Nicholas Machiavell the Florentine*, trans. Simon Patericke (London, 1602), 92.

later anti-atheist writers viewed outward religious conformity sceptically. In a post-Reformation world where individual princes determined the allegiance of a state's church and individuals were often required to conceal or modify their true beliefs, Machiavelli's endorsement of religious dissimulation was both threatening and compelling. Whereas classical philosophy could provide models for articulating philosophical unbelief (Epicurus, Aristotle) and scabrous blasphemy (Diagoras, Lucian), Gentillet's reading of Machiavelli is paradigmatic of the other major strand of atheism constructed and confuted by early modern writers: concealed inward unbelief. The practice of inferring inward unbelief from outward ambivalence was a key feature of texts like Gifford's *Countrie Divinitie* and, I contend, a useful way of reading Marlowe's plays.[129]

Just as religious polemicists used the epithet 'Epicure' to attack the tendency of their opponents toward worldliness and unbelief, so too was 'Machiavel' a useful term for writers engaged in political controversy. The figure of the Machiavellian Prince who made decisions about the state church purely for political reasons was an effective means of attacking governments and their policies. For example, the anonymous *Treatise of Treasons* (1572) describes Queen Elizabeth's councillors William Cecil and Nicholas Bacon as Machiavels because of their religious hypocrisy and use of dissimulation for political gain. The author claims that in their campaign against the marriage of Mary, Queen of Scots to the Duke of Norfolk, it is evident that 'that matche strongly impugned the secret and finall purpose of those two English Machiavelles, who for their owne advancement, intende to wreste the succession of the Crowne to a wrong family'.[130] Here, 'Machiavelles' functions as a broad term of opprobrium that conveys the unprincipled pragmatism of Cecil and Bacon rather than explicitly suggesting they were unbelievers who viewed religion as a tool of statecraft.

---

[129] See chaps. 2 and 4.
[130] *A Treatise of Treasons Against Q. Elizabeth, and the Croune of England Divided into Two Partes [...]* (Louvain, 1572), fo. 43r.

Conversely, the preface to the *Treatise* identifies Machiavellianism much more closely with atheism. Here, the entire Reformation is described as a plot by Machiavellian Protestants that has led to the proliferation of unbelief:

> For who remembreth not, that to set up a lawlesse Faction of Machiavellian Libertines, that should not (by conscience or feare of synne) be restrayned from any maner mischiefe, a new Religion was pretended, that with helpe of Authority, shouldred out the olde: of purpose chiefely, to leave none at all in the hartes of the people.[131]

Two footnotes appear in this passage, the first glossing 'new Religion' as 'Heresie', the second glossing 'none at all' as 'Atheisme'. The polemical tone of the treatise prevents us taking this claim entirely at face value but does not render it meaningless: the recognisable vocabulary of anti-Machiavellianism provided the author with an effective way of attacking the religious integrity of England's ruling Protestant elite.[132] In fact, the tactic was so useful that Catholic propagandists used it again twelve years later in the libel known as *Leicester's Commonwealth* (1584).[133] Once again, Elizabeth is presented as having been led astray by a Machiavellian councillor, in this case the Earl of Leicester, who in his capacity as Chancellor of Oxford University is described as 'an Atheist himself, and useth the place onlie for gayne and spoile'.[134]

Even when the term Machiavel was not used directly, writers who deployed anti-atheist rhetoric to comment upon political or religious issues often connected atheism with Machiavellian dissimulation. For example, a Church of England clergyman opined that nowadays, 'In steade of true religion, nothing is to be found but either meere Atheisme, or

---

[131] *Treatise of Treasons*, sig. A4r.
[132] Cf. chap. 3, esp. 163–167.
[133] For comparisons of the technique across the two works, see Peter Lake, *Bad Queen Bess?: Libels, Secret Histories, and the Politics of Publicity in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chaps. 3 and 5.
[134] *The Copie of a Leter, Wryten by a Master of Arte of Cambrige, to His Friend in London [...]*, 1584, 78–79. The letter also claims that Leicester is hated for 'his beastlie lyfe, nigardye, and Atheisme, (beyng never sene Yet to say one private prayer wythin his chamber in his lyfe)', ibid., 198.

flat dissimulation'.[135] This was a useful formulation for preachers invested in decrying the state of religion in England: outward irreligion could be condemned as atheism while ostensible conformity could be interpreted as hypocrisy. The generally suspicious attitude of religious commentators in late sixteenth-century England was often fuelled by an assumption that challenges to orthodoxy were the work of crypto-papists, inward atheists, or other malefactors who concealed their unbelief under the guise of piety. William Wilkinson, a commentator who confuted the doctrines of the Family of Love, argued that Henry Nicholas' rejection of preaching was indicative of his politic understanding of organised worship. According to Wilkinson, Nicholas believed that preaching 'is but an institute knowledge invented by mans wit, to the bredyng of discord and dissention, then the which I say not what Papist, what Atheist, or Machevile in the world could write or invent any thyng more ungodly'.[136] Wilkinson's interpretation of Familist doctrine as Machiavellian indicates the extent to which, by the late sixteenth century, Machiavelli's name had become closely associated with atheism, evocative of religious dissimulation, and a frequent shorthand for the idea that religion was a human invention. Above all, anti-Machiavellian rhetoric prompted early moderns to infer the existence of inward unbelief in challenges to religious orthodoxy or insufficient expressions of zeal. Nicholas did not exactly argue that preaching was nothing but a human invention, but Wilkinson read the Familist mistrust of human interpretations of scripture in this way. Wilkinson's capacity to infer that concealed unbelief motivates Nicholas' religious position is a quintessential example of how early moderns *invented* atheism to account for the beliefs of their religious opponents. The literary processes that motivate and enable this practice are central concerns in the later chapters of this thesis.

---

[135] Christopher Shutte, *A Verie Godlie and Necessary Sermon [...]* (London, 1578), sig. C4r.

[136] William Wilkinson, *A Confutation of Certaine Articles Delivered unto the Familye of Love [...]* (London, 1579), fo. 52.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ACCUSATION

Almost all primary sources quoted from in this chapter so far were written before 1580. During this period between the publication of Elyot's 1538 dictionary entry to the surge in anti-atheist writing later in the sixteenth century, few contemporary atheists are referred to by name. Notable exceptions include the above remarks made in the *Treatise of Treasons* against Cecil and Bacon, as well as similar claims made against Mary, Queen of Scots by Thomas Norton. In his attack on Mary's alleged match with the duke of Norfolk, Norton claims that 'In Religion she is either a Papist, whilke is evill, or els an Atheist, whilke is werse,'.[137] Norton does not explain exactly what he means when he calls Mary an atheist but the sense is that she is either a committed Catholic, or worse a Machiavellian unbeliever who disingenuously feigns papistry to gain support from Catholic powers. For many defenders of the Church of England, atheism and Catholicism existed on the same spectrum of irreligion. Norton's neglect to anchor his claim that Mary is an atheist to any substantive demonstration of her unbelief is indicative of how for many sixteenth century writers, atheism was predominantly a signifier of negative *ethos*. But in the final decades of the sixteenth century, accusations of atheism and unbelief became increasingly specific, often describing the exact form of unbelief the accused was alleged to have expressed. Furthermore, as the category became increasingly well-known and coherent, accusing someone of atheism became a powerful way of damaging their reputation.

Accusations of atheism against named contemporaries appeared most frequently in legal cases, where they were often appended to other charges. As Hunter suggests, such accusations 'represented an attempt at character assassination by projecting conventional

[137] Thomas Norton, *A Discourse Touching the Pretended Match Betwene the Duke of Norfolke and the Queene of Scottes* (London, 1569), sig. A2v.

expectations onto those suspected of irreligion'.[138] Given that a witness' moral reputation greatly influenced the perceived reliability of his testimony, providing circumstantial evidence of poor character through association with atheism could substantially weaken the position of an opponent.[139] One of the earliest examples of this occurs in a 1572 letter from George Gascoigne's creditors to the Privy Council, which petitions against the poet's election to parliament. The letter does seem invested in drawing attention to Gascoigne's unbelief. The authors claim that Gascogine is 'an Atheist and godlesse personne', 'noted as well for Manslaughter' to demonstrate that 'he is not meete to be of the counsaile of the highe courte of Parliament'.[140] Given the absence of strong evidence to suggest that Gascoigne actually sat in parliament it is possible his creditors succeeded, aided in part by the accusation of atheism. The tactic became more common from the 1580s onward and complainants increasingly specified the forms of unbelief they accused their opponents of expressing. For example, when John Stepkine charged William Gardiner with fraud in 1582, he also accused him of saying 'that God hath nothing to do with the world since he created it'.[141] In a 1596 Star Chamber case, Robert Fisher was accused of asserting 'that Christe was no savioure & the gospell a fable', but also of forgery, mistreating his father, and intimidating witnesses with charged pistols. Fisher's alleged blasphemy was thus seen as coextensive with his evil life: 'by his outrage and impudence he was condemned […] [this man's] previous acts and subsequent life declare his impiety'.[142] Likewise in a 1595 case, a witness 'who questioned whether there were a god; if there were, howe he showld be knowne […] & such like most

---

[138] Hunter, 'Problem of "Atheism"', 148–49.

[139] On the relationship between morality, honour, and credibility in witness testimony, see Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 14–15.

[140] Qtd. in Charles Tyler Prouty, *George Gascoigne: Elizabethan Courtier, Soldier, and Poet* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1942), 61.

[141] The National Archives, STAC 5/S40/30; qtd. in Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1931), 198.

[142] John Hawarde, *Les Reportes Del Cases in Camera Stellata, 1593 to 1609*, ed. W. Paley Baildon (London, 1894), 41–42.

damnable doubtes' was called 'to disccredite the defendante for his religion' because the man targeted by the prosecution had apparently defended the views of the atheistic witness.[143]

Accusing someone of atheism or unbelief was not necessarily a direct route to a guilty verdict. When John Mynet was investigated by the High Commission in 1590 for allegedly having 'openly and manifestly reported that there is no god, no devil, no heaven, no hell, no life after this life, no judgement to come', he was ultimately released without punishment.[144] Mynet's blasphemy appears to have originated in a dispute over an unpaid debt: 'a shouting match between two laymen, rather than a fundamental reconsideration of theology'.[145] Mynet was never prosecuted because he 'bowed to the power of the Church, and confessed to his "false and erronious doctrine"'.[146] Though it emerged during the investigation that Mynet held many unorthodox beliefs, he was not a committed or principled unbeliever and had even read sermons at his parish church. Given the rhetorical power of accusing a debtor, business rival, or fraudster of unbelief, it is possible that many of these accusations were made up or exaggerated. The case of Mynet is a useful demonstration of how a personal enemy's unorthodox beliefs could be weaponised by transforming them into charges of unbelief.

The three men most notorious for being accused of unbelief in sixteenth-century England—Oxford, Ralegh, and Marlowe—were each targeted in this way. Some of the allegations against these figures may well have been true. Oxford was accused by Henry Howard of taking the 'Scriptures for pollicye' and calling 'The Trinity a fable'; by Francis Southwell of dismissing the Bible as 'only to be to hold men in obedience'; by Charles Arundel of claiming 'the glorious Trinitie was an old wives tale and voyde of reason'.[147] The accusers all knew Oxford personally and their allegations are strikingly consistent. Each

[143] Hawarde, 17.
[144] Qtd. in David Cressy, 'The Atheist's Sermon: Belief, Unbelief, and Traditionalism in the Elizabethan North', in *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 162.
[145] Cressy, 164.
[146] Cressy, 170.
[147] Qtd. in Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary*, 209.

accuse him of anti-Trinitarianism and of espousing a politic understanding of scripture, ideas he likely absorbed from Proctor's *The Fal of the Late Arian.* Alan Nelson points out that although the beliefs attributed to Oxford are remarkably similar to those of the aforementioned anti-Trinitarian heretic Matthew Hamont, 'Hamont was ready to give his life for his beliefs, whereas Oxford was not'.[148] Oxford's reputation as a scoffer, epitomised by his apparent claims that 'Iosephe was a wittold, and the Blessid Virgin a [w]hore' differentiate his alleged anti-Trinitarianism from that of a principled heretic like Hamont, suggesting that Oxford's blasphemy was a tentative step toward more thoroughgoing unbelief.[149] When Arundel made his accusations against Oxford in 1583—in conjunction with the charge of attempted murder—Burghley asked Ralegh to intercede with the Queen on Oxford's behalf.[150]

Ralegh's encounter with Oxford was the first of many times the courtier was associated with atheism, a pattern that intensified after Robert Persons accused him of operating a 'school of Atheisme' in 1592.[151] A formal investigation into Ralegh's alleged atheism was launched at Cerne Abbas in 1594 after Ralegh apparently denied the existence of God and the immortality of the soul at a dinner party. However, no formal charges were issued and it seems that Ralegh's denials are better understood as examples of the disputatiousness of early modern learned culture than as committed unbelief.[152] Even though the accusations against Ralegh seem less likely to be true than those levelled at Oxford, they still had a negative impact on Ralegh's reputation for the rest of his life and may even have influenced his conviction for treason in 1603. Pronouncing sentence, Chief Justice Popham noted that Ralegh had been taxed 'with holding heathenish, blasphemous, atheistical, and

---

[148] Nelson, 210–11.
[149] On Hamont, see 39–41, above.
[150] Strathmann, *Sir Walter Ralegh*, 19.
[151] See intro., 23 and chap. 4, 237.
[152] See chap. 2, 98–100.

profane opinions' and implored him to repent before his death.[153] After he was beheaded in 1618, a ballad depicting his final words included the lines: 'A Christian true I die: / Papistrie I defie, / Nor never Atheist I / as is reported'.[154]

A year before the investigation at Cerne Abbas, it was alleged in a communication to the Privy Council that Ralegh had been read an 'Atheist lecture' by Marlowe. In 1593, the playwright was arrested and brought before the Privy Council after they had received various reports of his atheism, sedition, and sodomy. His chamber-fellow Thomas Kyd admitted under torture that papers found in their shared room containing 'vile hereticall Conceiptes denyinge the deity of Jhesu' (probably extracts from *The Fal of the Late Arian*) had belonged to Marlowe.[155] Then, an anonymous informant sent to the Privy Council a report denouncing the spy Richard Cholmely, which claimed that Cholmely 'saieth & verely beleveth that one Marlowe is able to shewe more sounde reasons for Atheisme then any devine in Englande is able to geve to prove devinitie & that Marloe tolde him that hee hath read the Atheist lecture to S[i]r Walter Raliegh & others'.[156] Finally, a note sent to the Privy Council by the spy Richard Baines accused Marlowe of saying 'That Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest'; 'That the first beginning of Religionn was only to keep men in awe'; that Cholmely 'was perswaded by Marloe's Reasons to become an Atheist'; and various other indications of Marlowe's inclination toward blasphemy, anti-Trinitarianism, sodomy, and sedition.[157] Marlowe's probable role in Walsingham's secret service makes it difficult to gauge the veracity of the accusations made against him. As David Riggs suggests, Marlowe may have said these things only to try and entrap others suspected of atheism. This

---

[153] Qtd. in Strathmann, *Sir Walter Ralegh*, 58.
[154] 'Sir Walter Rauleigh His Lamentation [...]' (London, 1618).
[155] Qtd. in 'Accusations against Christopher Marlowe by Richard Baines and Others', The British Library, accessed August 2020, www.bl.uk/collection-items/accusations-against-christopher-marlowe-by-richard-baines-and-others.
[156] Qtd. in 'Accusations against Christopher Marlowe'.
[157] Qtd. in 'Accusations against Christopher Marlowe'.

interpretation is supported by the fact the Privy Council took no immediate action against Marlowe and released him on bail without formal charge while requiring him to make daily reports to them.[158] Another possibility is that the charges were fabricated for reasons of personal rivalry or financial gain. As Park Honan points out, Cholmely, Baines, and Marlowe 'belonged to a competing underworld of liars and inventive informers, including those who manufactured threats and incriminating data in order to be paid for reporting on what they brought to light'.[159] In denouncing Marlowe and Cholmely as atheists to the Privy Council, Baines and the other men behind these accusations sought to damage Marlowe's moral credibility, making other charges like sedition and forgery more likely to stick.

We may never know how much truth there is in the accusations made against Oxford, Ralegh, and Marlowe. But viewed collectively, these cases are significant indications of how by the mid-1580s, atheism had become a recognisable concept associated with negative *ethos* and specific forms of unbelief, and that being accused of atheism could seriously damage one's reputation. In each of these cases, allegations of atheism were appended to other charges: for Oxford, murder; for Ralegh, treason; for Marlowe, forgery and sedition. The opportunism involved in the accusations against Oxford and Marlowe in particular shows how the negative *ethos* associated with atheism could be used to compound or verify the other crimes these writers were accused of. It is also striking how similar the accusations made against these men are: each is accused of blasphemy, anti-Trinitarianism, and dismissing the Bible as a human fiction written to establish social control. The recurring influence of *The Fal of the Late Arian,* personal connections between these men, and rumours of a 'school' of atheism where a 'lecture' was read are tantalising hints that an organised atheist underground really did exist in Elizabethan London. But even if the repetition of these

[158] David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Faber, 2004), 328.
[159] Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 333.

details occurs simply because the authors of these accusations were repeating words and ideas that were readily available to them, this indicates the growing coherence of early modern conceptions of atheism and its association with a particular kind of individual.

In this chapter, I have argued that because atheism originated as a confutational category used to attack the *character* of unbelievers as much as unbelief itself, the term was naturally suited to use in early modern politico-religious controversies. As polemicists recognised the compatibility of ancient philosophies of unbelief with certain aspects of both Protestantism and Catholicism, the category of atheism and the forms of unbelief included within it began to seem increasingly relevant to the early modern world. But throughout this period, the relationship between the abstract concept of atheism and the forms of unbelief identifiable in contemporary society was given little consideration. Instances of blasphemy, scepticism, and heterodoxy were rarely described as atheism, while academic and polemical references to atheism rarely mention contemporary unbelievers.[160] Even when discussing ancient atheists like Diagoras, Lucian, and Epicurus, early moderns tended not to interrogate too closely the ways these writers may have experienced unbelief, focussing instead on disproving their arguments and attacking their immorality. The category epitomised by Tourneur's D'Amville was still developing: some attributes like Machiavellianism, Epicureanism, and blasphemy were already equated with the emerging category of atheism. Yet, other recurring aspects of anti-atheist discourse such as distinctions between inward and outward atheism and allegations that atheists were overly disputatious had not yet become commonplace. By the late sixteenth century, most writers took it for granted that the meaning of the term atheist was well-known, but as late as 1579 Thomas North provided a gloss for the word in his translation of Plutarch.[161]

---

[160] Cf. 36–44 and 52–68, above.
[161] See p.55, above.

My argument, then, is that all the intellectual materials required for the development of atheism were present in classical scholarship, responses to Machiavelli, and post-Reformation religious polemic. I contend that the transformation of the raw arguments and value judgements contained in these discourses into a recognisable atheist *ethos* was a literary process. Writers who invented fictive atheist subjectivities were invested in interrogating the circumstances under which unbelief could be possible, the moral character of potential unbelievers, and the relationship between outward behaviour and inward (un)belief. The remaining chapters in this thesis examine the contribution of individual writers to the formation of these ideas between the late 1570s and the early 1600s, with a focus on *prosopopoeiae* of atheists in humanist fiction, debates about the validity and meaning of accusations of atheism in religious polemic, and representations of atheism and unbelief in the plays of Christopher Marlowe. In each of these literary environments, the relationship between atheism and unbelief is scrutinised by writers pursuing their own politico-religious and rhetorical agendas. The increasing prevalence of atheism in sermons, drama, prose fiction, and works of religious polemic had far-reaching consequences. Atheism had once been an abstract term of opprobrium and unbelief reserved for classical philosophers. But by the end of the sixteenth century—as the accusations made against figures like Oxford, Ralegh, and Marlowe show—atheism was considered a dangerous contemporary phenomenon and being charged with atheism or unbelief could have serious consequences.

Chapter 2

Disputing unbelief: humanism and the atheist *ethos*

As I showed in Chapter 1, the concept of atheism became increasingly coherent and recognisable in England over the course of the sixteenth century. By 1580, it was widely understood that an atheist was someone who rejected fundamental tenets of Christianity and suffered from concomitant moral deficiencies that made such unbelief plausible. The widely accepted association of atheism with hypocrisy and unnatural immorality gave rise to accusations of atheism being deployed as circumstantial evidence in lawsuits and smear campaigns. As the denotative meanings of the term atheist became more consolidated, the historical boundary that separated the unbelief of pagan philosophers from the contemporary world was largely eroded. The ideas of Diagoras and Epicurus were no longer consigned to the realm of classical scholarship but were increasingly considered possible influences on contemporary socio-political malefactors, as were the doctrines of Machiavelli. Hypocrisy, immorality, and religious ambivalence could therefore be interpreted as symptomatic of inward denials of providence, the immortality of the soul, or the divinity of scripture.

Accompanying these semantic and epistemological transformations, characters expressing unbelief, often explicitly described as atheists, began to make regular appearances in plays, sermons, and dialogues. The increasing prevalence of such characters did not take place in a period when unbelievers were substantially more visible to society. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, instances of blasphemy and unbelief had been recorded since the medieval period and there were no significant unambiguous cases of atheism uncovered in the 1580s, only hearsay and accusation. Furthermore, no records indicate that anyone in England self-identified as an atheist during this period and anti-atheist writers rarely refer to

contemporary individuals by name. The transformation of anxieties about classical philosophy, Machiavellianism, and religious ambivalence into discussions of atheism therefore did not take place in response to the emergence of 'real' unbelievers but was a product of literary invention. This chapter explores the origins and rhetorical functions of three characters epitomising the atheist *ethos* who appear in works of imaginative prose published around 1580. Each is an interlocutor in a fictional debate: John Lyly's Atheos challenges Euphues in *The Anatomy of Wit* (1578); George Gifford's Atheos disputes with Zelotes in *Countrie Divinitie* (1582); and Philip Sidney's Cecropia clashes with Pamela in the revised *Arcadia* (written between 1580 and 1584, first printed in 1590).[1] In *Anatomy* and the *Arcadia,* the debates are short episodes inset within larger narrative frames, while *Countrie Divinitie* is a shorter text that consists entirely of the combative dialogue between atheist and preacher. The works do not appear to have influenced one another directly (though it is certainly possible that Sidney and Gifford had read the texts printed before their own) but they do bear evidence of having emerged from a similar cultural milieu.

The most striking point of comparison is the style in which the dialogues are written: each is strongly influenced by the format of university disputations *in utramque partem* and involve the atheists' arguments being subjected to logical tests that aim to prove their invalidity, with varying degrees of success. This stylistic parallel is explained by the most significant commonality shared by the authors: each attended university in the early 1570s where they participated in degree programmes that contained elements of medieval scholasticism and renaissance humanism.[2] On the one hand, the arts curriculum itself remained largely scholastic in its continued emphasis on the subjects of the trivium,

---

[1] On the dates of the revised *Arcadia'*s composition, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991), 256–57.

[2] On changing nature of English universities during this period, see Mark H. Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition, 1558–1642: An Essay on Changing Relations between the English Universities and English Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

particularly dialectic, which encouraged independent and equivocal habits of thought.[3] However, the influence of humanist pedagogues such as Sir John Cheke and Roger Ascham meant that students were increasingly being furnished with a technical knowledge of classical languages and texts intended to fashion orthodox Protestant servants of the state.[4] The tension between these competing imperatives is evident in the three dialogues that are the subject of this chapter. Dialectical habits of thought allowed these writers to imagine and articulate the perspectives of notional unbelievers, even though these arguments are never presented as anything other than moral aberrations that threaten society.

Gifford proceeded MA from Cambridge in 1573 and Lyly was awarded an MA from Oxford in 1575.[5] Sidney also attended Oxford in the late 1560s where he may have crossed paths with Lyly, though by 1572 he had left without taking a degree.[6] Sidney was described by one contemporary assigned to dispute with him *ex tempore* as 'matchles' in his argumentative skill, but anyone who had completed the university arts curriculum or even attended grammar school would have been required to develop some proficiency in formal disputation.[7] Gifford, Lyly, and Sidney were also connected through a shared network of patrons, mentors, and fellow writers, many of whom also had links to the burgeoning anti-atheist movement. A major influence on Lyly, for example, was Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570), the influential education manual that warned against sending young men to Italy, where they risked being exposed to 'άθεοι'.[8] Ascham dedicated his treatise to William Cecil,

[3] Lisa Jardine, 'The Place of Dialectic Teaching in Sixteenth-Century Cambridge', *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1 January 1974): 31–62; William T. Costello, *The Scholastic Curriculum at Early Seventeenth-Century Cambridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).
[4] Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London: Duckworth, 1986), xiv, 143–44. Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice*, 5, chap. 6.
[5] Brett Usher, 'Gifford, George (1547/8–1600)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); G. K. Hunter, 'Lyly, John (1554–1606)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[6] Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*, 40–42.
[7] Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall.* (London, 1602), fo. 102v. For further discussion of disputations and their influence on these texts, see 91–105, below.
[8] See 107–109, below.

first Baron Burghley, who was also a patron of the translator, Arthur Golding, whom he employed as his personal secretary. Golding was responsible for publishing an English translation of Philippe Du-Plessis-Mornay's *The Trewnesse of the Christian Religion* (1587), the first major work of anti-atheist confutation written in the sixteenth century. Though the surviving text appears to be the work of Golding alone, he presents it as a continuation of an earlier translation begun by Philip Sidney and left incomplete upon his death in 1586.[9] Golding dedicated the work to the most active literary patron of the era, the first Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley. As a youth, Leicester had been tutored by Roger Ascham, and he was also an uncle to Philip Sidney, who defended Leicester against the charges of atheism that were brought against him in the anonymous libel, *Leicester's Commonwealth*.[10] Sidney had the dubious honour of being the dedicatee of two Empedoclean dialogues written by Giordano Bruno, the infamous Italian philosopher burned at the stake by the Inquisition for his heretical denial of several foundational Christian doctrines.[11] In these dialogues, Bruno presents a 'cabbalistic interpretation of the Endymion story' that Lyly later drew on in his play, *Endymion* (1588).[12] For some time, Lyly was retained as a 'servant' in the household of Burghley's nephew, Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, to whom he dedicated *Euphues and his England* (1580). Incidentally, another writer who dedicated works to Oxford

---

[9] See p.137, below.

[10] On the charges of atheism against Leicester, see chap. 1, 66. For Sidney's response, see *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 131. On Leicester's education, see Simon Adams, 'Dudley, Robert, Earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). On Ascham's later repudiation of Leicester for neglecting to improve his Latin, see Eleanor Rosenberg, *Leicester, Patron of Letters* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1955), 142–43.

[11] Giordano Bruno, *Spaccio de La Bestia Trionfante* (London, 1584); and idem. *De Gl'heroici Furori.* (London, 1585). For Bruno's influence on Sidney, see Angelo M. Pellegrini, 'Bruno, Sidney, and Spenser', *Studies in Philology* 40, no. 2 (1943): 128–44; on the circumstances of Bruno's execution and his subsequent reputation as an atheist, see Dorothea Waley Singer, *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought* (New York, NY: Schuman, 1950), 158–80, 192–93.

[12] Jonathan P. A. Sell, '"Warts and all": John Lyly's atheist aesthetics', *SEDERI: yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*, no. 24 (2014): 104; David M. Bevington, 'Introduction', in *Endymion*, by John Lyly, ed. David M. Bevington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 12.

was his uncle, Arthur Golding.[13] Excepting the claim that he secretly wrote Shakespeare's plays, Oxford is most notorious for becoming embroiled in a quarrel with his rival, Philip Sidney, and for the accusations of atheism made against him by former friends.[14]

George Gifford may appear conspicuously absent from this group of more well-known figures who were connected to one another through relationships based on patronage, mentorship, and intellectual admiration, as well as their shared links to the University of Oxford and the same aristocratic families. Though undoubtedly peripheral to this world, Gifford—a puritan preacher based in rural Essex—had more connections to it than one might expect. Somewhat inexplicably, Philip Sidney summoned Gifford to his bedside in 1586, when he lay dying from wounds sustained at the Battle of Zutphen and it appears that Gifford subsequently penned *The Manner of Sir Philip Sidney's Death*.[15] Sidney was not Gifford's only high-profile acquaintance. When he was suspended from preaching in 1584 after refusing to subscribe to Whitgift's Three Articles, Burghley intervened with the archbishop on Gifford's behalf, and was perhaps responsible for helping him regain his license to preach at Maldon.[16] Furthermore, Gifford's anti-atheist dialogue, *Countrie Divinitie,* was dedicated to Leicester's elder brother, Ambrose Dudley, third Earl of Warwick, who held the office of Master-General of the Ordnance, a position that he briefly shared with his nephew, Philip Sidney.[17] In addition to their mutual connections to the Rich family, the Earl of Warwick was another intermediary through which Sidney and Gifford may have been introduced to one another.

[13] G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 68–71; on Oxford's patronage of Golding, see Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary*, 236–39.
[14] Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary*, 195–203; see also chap. 1, 79–80.
[15] See *Miscellaneous Prose*, 161–72. It is possible that Sidney's connection to Gifford came via their mutual links to the Rich family: see Usher, 'Gifford, George (1547/8–1600)'.
[16] Timothy Scott McGinnis, *George Gifford and the Reformation of the Common Sort: Puritan Priorities in Elizabethan Religious Life* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2004), 40–44.
[17] Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*, 225.

Why present such a long list of the various coincidental ways these men's lives overlapped? This chapter will not advance a theory about an inverse School of Night, though it is tempting to imagine that Leicester and Burghley actively encouraged writers to include elements of anti-atheism in their works as part of a clandestine campaign to protect the nation from a perceived onslaught of atheism. Rather, I intend to demonstrate that English conceptions of atheism developed as they did because the literary-cultural environment in which late sixteenth-century writers found themselves enabled and encouraged them to imagine and depict atheist characters. The atheists that appear in late Tudor literature were not drawn from observations of historical unbelievers, nor was the rise of anti-atheist writing an acute response to an immediate political or religious crisis. Symptomatic readings of anti-atheist writing, which treat discussions of atheism as metaphors through which authors could explore broader concerns about their personal or national religion are particularly useful for understanding why figures in the 1590s as diverse as William Perkins and Thomas Nashe chose to include references to atheism in their writing.[18] However, they do not explain how the figure of the atheist became available to these writers in the first place: how the abstract concept of unbelief had become embodied in the all-encompassing persona of the atheist.

The dialogues of Lyly, Gifford, and Sidney do not make explicit reference to any particular controversies, events, or people, but they can reveal much about the politico-religious concerns of their authors and the literary processes used to account for and confute unbelief. If we read Cecropia and the two Atheos characters as products of rhetorical invention, then the educational backgrounds their authors shared and the literary influences they were exposed to can provide useful routes toward explaining how and why they wrote their atheists in the ways they did. In each of these texts, the author achieves a narratological or polemical goal by encouraging readers to believe that a character does not believe in God.

---

[18] See Dixon, 'William Perkins'; Caldwell, *Reformation of Moral Value*, chap. 4.

The ability to make the arguments of these characters plausible and coherent in a world where real unbelievers were scarce and existing anti-atheist writing was usually depersonalised came from the rhetorical training undertaken by these writers at grammar school and university. Writing speeches in character at school and participating in disputations at university developed students' abilities to articulate any given point of view, and to do so while maintaining stylistic decorum. When Lyly, Sidney, and Gifford set out to imagine how unbelievers might speak, the stylized personas they created were among the first recognisable early modern atheists: characters who not only lacked a belief in God, but were personally defined by their unbelief. The distinguishing quality of Lyly's Atheos is the transience and insincerity of his unbelief, while Gifford emphasises the inscrutability of his character's thoughts, and Sidney focusses on making Cecropia's *ethos* proportionate to her unbelief.

Disputing unbelief

In his study of atheism in early modern France, Kors challenges the idea that unbelief was inconceivable during this period by pointing out that at universities, students were taught to produce 'objections' to any given argument, even arguments in favour of cherished or widely held beliefs. Kors therefore speculates that graduates must have 'rehearsed the arguments of atheism, entertained them, so to speak, and became familiar with them, all for purposes of triumphant refutation'.[19] Debora Shuger has argued that atheistical arguments were not articulated in English Universities because questions directly addressing the existence of God do not appear the *Oxford Register's* list of Vespers and Comita disputations held between

[19] Kors, *Atheism in France*, 53. On challenges to the conceivability of early modern unbelief, see chap. 3, 152–153.

1576 and 1622.[20] The qualifications often made by anti-atheist writers who expounded arguments in favour of God's existence indicate that defending a truth widely held to be self-evident was indeed relatively unusual.[21] John Ley goes so far as to argue that 'it is no way lawful to enter the Lists of publick Disputation with an Atheist, as if it were a problematical point whether there were a God or no'.[22] But even if English universities did not hold formal disputations in which the existence of God was directly questioned, they did address forms of unbelief that were central to early modern conceptions of atheism, such as the immortality of the soul and the divinity of scripture. Furthermore, the dialectical mode of thinking that disputation was predicated upon may itself have facilitated the spread of unbelief among student populations while helping to establish the atheist as a recognisable character or type.

The dialectical and disputatious nature of English higher education in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries affected contemporary conceptions of atheism in four main ways. Firstly, it made it essential for educated people to consider how far rational arguments could be applied to questions of faith and thus to develop contingencies for situations in which such arguments appeared to undermine faith. Secondly, the fact that one would sometimes need to espouse a position *pro forma,* rather than from conviction, allowed disputants to argue heterodox positions from behind the 'mask' of their role in the debate, rather than in their own persons. This contributed to the idea of the outward or hypocritical atheist who was frequently described as a student insincerely espousing atheism to demonstrate his wit. Thirdly, the exposure of most aspects of Christian doctrine to rigorous cross-examination and the public exposition of heterodox positions encouraged students to

[20] Shuger, 'St. Mary the Virgin', 318, 335; Clark, *Register of Oxford*, 2.1:170–217.
[21] See, e.g., William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience Distinguished into Three Bookes [...]* (Cambridge, 1606), 202; Dove, *Confutation of Atheisme*, 17–19.
[22] John Ley, *A Discourse of Disputations Chiefly Concerning Matters of Religion, with Animadversions on Two Printed Books [...]* (London, 1658), 52. Cf. Thomas Jackson: 'To dispute with such as deny manifest and received *Principles*, were to violate a fundamentall law of the Schooles', *A Treatise Containing the Originall of Unbeliefe, Misbeliefe, or Misperswasions Concerning the Veritie, Unitie, and Attributes of the Deitie [...]* (London, 1625), 8.

consider both sides of all doctrinal questions and emphasised the inherently contingent nature of religious truth. This brings us to a final point about form. The early examples of fictional atheists discussed in this chapter—Lyly's Atheos, Sidney's Cecropia, and Gifford's Atheos—all appear as interlocutors in polemical dialogues, a form closely related to the formal disputation. As discussed above, each of these writers attended university at a similar time and the influence of the disputation is clear in their work, both as a way of thinking and as a way of presenting content. Gifford's catechetical dialogues often involve a degree of argument between pupil and instructor; Lyly's *Euphues* contains several debates between its characters; and both the old and new versions of Sidney's *Arcadia* are highly disputatious in nature, centring around *quaestiones* of the ideal form of government, the limits and requirements of virtue, and the operation of divine providence.

Reason, faith, and the university disputation

The scholastic curriculum at Oxford and Cambridge taught students to devise and articulate logical objections to any given proposition. In their first two years of study, undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge were almost exclusively taught the subjects of the trivium: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic (or logic).[23] But given that students were typically expected already to have acquired a working knowledge of Latin grammar before beginning the course and that training in rhetoric was often seen as means of embellishing the more fundamental skill of argumentation, dialectic took precedence as the mode of thinking to be developed in early modern universities.[24] Training in dialectic aimed to foster the skill of formal syllogistic reasoning, in which the ability to argue for or against any statement on the basis of logically

[23] Craig R Thompson, *Universities in Tudor England* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1959), 9.
[24] Jardine, 'The Place of Dialectic Teaching in Sixteenth-Century Cambridge', 43–50.

combined precepts took precedence over any attempt to develop practical or theoretical knowledge of a particular subject. For this reason, scholasticism was severely criticised by 'modern' seventeenth-century thinkers such as Bacon, who objected to how the scholastic method 'rests not so much vpon euidence of truth prooued by arguments, authorities, similitudes, examples; as vpon particular confutations and solutions of euerie scruple, cauillation & obiection: breeding for the most part one question as fast as it solueth another'.[25] For Bacon, the scholastic practice of interrogating every claim made in an argument was problematic largely because it was inefficient: it ignored other kinds of compelling evidence and constantly generated new questions rather than decisively identifying the truth of a given matter. However, this argument was rarely used to undermine the validity of dialectical disputation as a route to religious truth. Instead, such objections focussed on flaws in the participants who were consistently presumed either to have subverted the process or made inadvertent logical errors.[26]

The convoluted and unnecessarily contentious aspects of disputation that Bacon objects to were in fact seen by religious controversialists as one of the method's primary strengths. Disputation allowed proponents of different ideologies to test their arguments on an equal footing and determine who was right through a formal logical process that suggested impartiality and objectivity. As Joshua Rodda points out, clergymen and divines from opposing confessional backgrounds were willing to debate one another in public because they were confident that the rational process of formal disputation would inevitably vindicate their respective religious positions.[27] The disputation process was therefore immensely useful because one of the biggest potential challenges to defenders of early modern Christian churches was that fundamental aspects of their belief systems were vulnerable to logical

---

[25] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. Michael Kiernan, *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, vol. 4, 2000, 24.
[26] Joshua Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation in England, 1558–1626* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 186.
[27] Rodda, 5.

objections. On the one hand, counterintuitive beliefs such as transubstantiation could be embraced as matters of faith to be celebrated for their opacity to 'carnal' reason.[28] Alternatively, by adopting the language and method of rational enquiry, writers could shore up the logic behind questionable aspects of Christian teaching, such as biblical chronology or the logistics of Noah's Ark.[29] Reason and faith were therefore not consistently opposed concepts, but their co-existence often required careful management and explanation.

Because of their firm precepts, rigid categories, and logical procedures, disputations were seen as capable of mitigating the extent to which religious debates could be corrupted by errors of human nature, especially through tendency to credulous idolatry on the one hand and atheistic scepticism on the other.[30] If the outcome of a disputation was perceived to be 'wrong', commentators often claimed that error had been made by the disputants rather than attacking the validity of the system or changing their beliefs. For instance, in a response to Tertullian's famous attack on the use of logic to develop religious understanding, Archbishop William Laud reportedly said that 'It was not to denie, that Disputation is an opening of the Understanding […] No sure: it was some abuse in the Disputants, that frustrated the good of the Disputation'.[31] In a similar way, John Ley's retrospective study of disputation asserts that 'The causes of so little good success of Debates, Disputes, Conferences, or Controversies of Religion' are the prevalence of imagination over judgement; blind adherence to custom; 'corrupt cupidity of glory'; 'withstand[ing] the truth in unrighteousness, principally out of hatred and disdain of their Adversaries'; or sheer obstinacy.[32] For Matthew Pattenson, public religious disputations that failed 'wear fruitles, bicause formeles: they ded not produce the

[28] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 49–60.
[29] See e.g., defences of the Ark by Dove, *Confutation of Atheisme*, 76–81; Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World* (London, 1614), 98–128.
[30] Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation*, 18.
[31] Richard Baylie, 'A Briefe Relation of What Passed in a Third Private Conference, Betweene a Certaine B. and Me, Before Etc.', in *A Replie to Jesuit Fishers Answere to Certain Questions Propounded by His Most Gratious Ma[jes]tie: King James*, by Francis White (London, 1624), 37.
[32] Ley, *Discourse of Disputations*, 52–54.

effects expected, bicause they erred in ther course of proceeding'.[33] In short, these writers claim that only a combination of mental incompetence or moral deficiency could result in a disputant or audience member not being persuaded by the arguments of mainstream Protestant Christianity. The arguments themselves and the dialectical method of presenting them were perceived to be sound.

The common practice of blaming the conduct of the participants whenever a disputation arrived at the 'wrong' conclusion contributed to the development of the atheist as a character. This paradigm allowed sixteenth-century fiction writers trying to imagine what interactions between Christians and unbelievers might be like to invent situations where fundamental aspects of religious belief usually left unquestioned became topics of debate. Since early modern writers repeatedly warned against disputing fundamental questions and argued that disputations could fail if one or more of the participants neglected to ground themselves in secure precepts, unbelief needed to be articulated by a suitably characterised individual. In order to represent a conversation in which one participant denied the existence of God, writers needed to create characters with moral and intellectual flaws severe enough to make their unbelief plausible in terms of how contemporary audiences conceptualised the boundaries of legitimate religious debate. Since these boundaries were largely conceived in terms of the personal morality and intellectual competency of disputants, the qualities ascribed to imagined unbelievers are also the qualities that make them atheists: duplicitousness, moral bankruptcy, and logical deficiency.

---

[33] Matthew Pattenson, *The Image of Bothe Churches [...]* (Tornay, 1623), 326.

Pro forma disputation and atheist hypocrisy

Disputation could only be considered a valid method for dealing with controversial questions when both sides of an issue were given equal consideration. If only orthodox arguments were permitted the entire process would have risked becoming transparently farcical.[34] This bilateral quality was built into the format of the disputation itself, which involved two or more questioners putting forward objections to whatever proposition was argued by the respondent.[35] The dialectical basis of these disputations meant that the objective of the questioners was to 'trap the answerer into a position where he may be logically forced, step by step, into admitting the exact opposite of his thesis'.[36] Because of the contentious nature of many disputations held at early modern universities, questioners were required to articulate potentially seditious answers to questions such as 'whether election is preferable to hereditary succession [of monarchs]', 'whether it were permissible for a private person to take up arms against a bad prince', and '*An licet in Christiana Republica dissimulare in Causa Religionis*' ('Whether it is lawful in a Christian republic to dissemble in the cause of religion').[37] Each of these questions was disputed before Elizabeth I when she visited Oxford, the former two in 1566 and the latter in 1592. Shuger argues that the apparent tolerance extended toward the articulation of heterodox or seditious opinions was due partly to the non-specific, hypothetical wording of the questions; partly to the 'closed' status of most controversial issues, which meant the officially sanctioned view would always emerge victorious; and most of all to the 'systematic ambiguity' that made it impossible to tell 'whether a speaker was arguing *pro forma* or from conviction'.[38] Because disputations *required* the presentation of

[34] Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition*, 169.
[35] Costello, *Scholastic Curriculum*, 14–31; Clark, *Register of Oxford*, 2.1:21–24.
[36] Costello, *Scholastic Curriculum*, 20.
[37] Shuger, 'St. Mary the Virgin', 338, 341; Charles Plummer, *Elizabethan Oxford: Reprints of Rare Tracts* (Oxford: Oxford Historical Society, 1887), 260.
[38] Shuger, 'St. Mary the Virgin', 321; 322; 334.

both sides of the question, one could potentially argue a controversial or illegal point from conviction while maintaining that one did so only to fulfil the formal requirements of the debate.[39] Articulating arguments that supported the 'wrong' answer to a perilous question could even be seen as useful by those who sought to uphold officially sanctioned truths because allowing these arguments to be publicly dismantled could 'inoculate' auditors against them.[40] For Shuger, this final point was the most important element in allowing disputations to act as a nascent 'public sphere' in which controversial issues could be debated on neutral ground without fear that one would suffer reprisal for making a politically dangerous argument. Although Shuger suggests that 'no one seems *ever* to have gotten in trouble for words spoken in a disputation', this is not strictly true.[41] Paulina Kewes has shown that during Elizabeth's visit to Cambridge in 1564, the Master of Peterhouse and former Catholic, Andrew Perne, argued somewhat too thoroughly against the state in a disputation of whether 'Civil magistrates have authority in ecclesiastical matters', which resulted in him being subjected to intense criticism and limited his prospects for promotion.[42] Disputations did not, therefore, provide environments in which one could articulate controversial arguments with impunity, but given that Perne was not severely punished for his oration, and that he was allowed to deliver it in full, it appears that Shuger's argument holds some weight.

Since disputations allowed respondents to express contentious arguments from behind the relative safety of a formally dictated 'mask', and because they provided an ideologically useful way to expose such arguments to criticism, the form was an ideal way of presenting fictional disputes between atheists and godly interlocutors. Suggesting that unbelief was a feigned position adopted by speakers seeking only to demonstrate rhetorical skill served as a

---

[39] Shuger, 334.
[40] Shuger, 327.
[41] Shuger, 320.
[42] Paulina Kewes, '"Plesures in Lernyng" and the Politics of Counsel in Early Elizabethan England: Royal Visits to Cambridge and Oxford', *English Literary Renaissance* 46, no. 3 (2017): 349–51.

useful alternative or complement to the assertion that individuals who expressed such ideas must be morally or intellectually flawed. An example of this strategy can be seen in Ralegh's ostensible denial of the soul's immortality at Cerne Abbas in 1594, where he rejected all attempts to define either God or the soul, 'for neither could I hitherto learn what God is'. Apparently bored by the conversation, Ralegh motioned for Grace to be said, 'for that, quoth he, is better than this disputation'.[43] The likelihood that Ralegh made these claims merely to demonstrate his skill at disputation and amuse himself is articulated by John Aubrey's 'Life' of the courtier. Aubrey states that '[Ralegh] was scandalised with Atheisme; he was a bold man, and would venture at discourse which was unpleasant to the Church-men […] he was an a-christ, not an a-theist'.[44] Aubrey downgrades Ralegh's outright unbelief to anti-Trinitarianism by suggesting that it was his boldness and love of controversial 'discourse' that led to him being perceived as an atheist, rather than an actual conviction that God did not exist.

Richard Hooker similarly describes atheists in terms of their argumentative skill. For Hooker, there are two kinds of atheist: the small few who are genuinely 'unapprehended' of God, and the majority who 'study how to persuade themselves that there is no such thing to be known' in order to justify their godless lifestyles. Rather than facing up to the consequences of their immorality, they 'frame to themselves a way more pleasant, a new method they have of turning things that are serious into mockery, an art of contradiction by way of scorn […] This they study, this they practise, this they grace with a wanton superfluity of wit'.[45] As with Aubrey's description of Ralegh, there is an assumption here that atheists are not secure in their unbelief and must constantly find new arguments to assuage their

[43] Qtd. in Strathmann, *Sir Walter Ralegh*, 48.
[44] John Aubrey, *Brief Lives: With, An Apparatus for the Lives of Our English Mathematical Writers*, ed. Kate Bennett, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 238.
[45] Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2:15. Cf. Thomas Nashe: 'it is the superaboundance of witte that makes Atheists', *Christs Teares*, 124.

afflicted consciences. This inward act of self-delusion is masked by an external performance of argumentative skill. As such, Hooker concludes that ‘disputation about the knowledge of God with such kind of persons commonly prevails little’ because they have confined themselves to the position they have chosen to adopt.[46] Hooker therefore contends that like a respondent who has no choice but to argue according to his appointed role in a disputation, atheists are restricted to the limited arguments they have made available to themselves. Writers who invented fictional atheists therefore adapted the aspect of the disputation that made it safe to articulate controversial opinions—the defence that one was arguing *pro forma*—and imposed it upon atheists as a condition of their existence.

Irreverent disputations and the presence of atheism at universities

The model of formal disputation allowed authors of fictional dialogues with atheists to present unbelievers either as suffering from moral and intellectual flaws or as hypocrites who denied God merely for the sake of argument, rendering the prospect of sustained unbelief plausible without making it credible. In addition to offering pragmatic strategies for diminishing the threat posed by the articulation of unbelief, the intellectual environment of the early modern university may also have influenced concerns about atheism in more general ways. Some of the topics included in these debates present clear challenges to fundamental tenets of the Christian faith and, if argued from conviction in particular ways, would be considered indicative of unbelief. Shuger describes how at Oxford in 1566, John Mericke argued for ‘a thoroughgoing materialist determinism’ when he ‘sought to prove that the soul’s disposition results from bodily states’, which Shuger cites as an example of how a relatively ‘safe’ question could provoke radical discussions, in this case whether ‘higher

[46] Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2:14.

bodies govern lower ones'.[47] Often, the questions themselves focussed on fundamental aspects of religious belief, and thus necessitated a set of heterodox responses. Riggs, for example, observes that in Cambridge, a 'manuscript list of theses dating from around 1580 reveals that students disputed such propositions as "The style of sacred Scripture is not barbarous"; "There is a place of hell"; "The reprobate do not truly call on God"', leading Riggs to conclude that Marlowe's sceptical outlook was fostered during his time at the University.[48] The manuscript notebook of Lawrence Bretterton (1605) records a disputation of the statement 'That men are nothing else than their souls', which, as with Mericke's argument in 1566, indicates that materialist understandings of the soul were openly discussed in universities.[49] From the perspective of an early modern Christian, anyone who denied the existence of hell or believed that the soul was an exclusively corporeal entity would be considered an atheist. So, although there is no evidence to suggest that the existence of God was discussed directly, disputants may, at times, have questioned core tenets of Christianity.

From the limited records that survive of the content of early modern university disputations, it is hard to make any substantive claim about how the topics covered by these debates might have affected contemporary attitudes to belief or unbelief. It is likely that different groups responded differently: students with strong commitments to particular religious movements such as puritans, Catholics, or committed defenders of the Church of England derived a large part of their identity from doctrinal conflict and controversy and the practice of disputation may have worked to encourage their existing beliefs.[50] The puritan academic, John Rainolds, in a passage describing his own disputations given at Oxford, argued that in universities, scriptural truth 'should be not expounded onely by publike

---

[47] Shuger, 'St. Mary the Virgin', 320, 340.
[48] Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, 90.
[49] Costello, *Scholastic Curriculum*, 30.
[50] Michael C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13–14; Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation*, 25–28.

lectures, but also proved by disputations […] For what can there be more pretious then the truth[?]'.[51] For Rainolds and men like him, the chance to defend their beliefs against competing positions not only helped to strengthen their own religious convictions but provided an opportunity for them to feel vindicated against their doctrinal enemies. Given that Calvinism was 'the *de facto* religion of the Church of England under Queen Elizabeth', this was a situation that puritans like Rainolds were increasingly unlikely to encounter outside the academy.[52]

For students who may have been more ambivalent toward religion or even inclined toward unbelief, it is possible the equivocal nature of religious disputation would have encouraged doubt. As Bacon puts it, 'when Atheists, and prophane Persons, do heare of so many Discordant, and Contrary Opinions in *Religion*; It doth avert them from the Church, and maketh them, *To sit downe in the chaire of the Scorners*'.[53] It is impossible to generalise about the impact disputations had on the religious climate at early modern universities but some clearly believed they could be subversive. The Calvinist minister, Henry Jacob, defended his proposal for a public disputation following the Hampton Court Conference by pointing out that 'It is ordinary in our Universities to admit of argumentation against any point of Religion and Faith; and that in such a maner, as is more dangerous to the truth, and lesse indifferent, then this forme that is heere offered'.[54] While Jacob's point is that university disputations are not widely held to be problematic, he contends that their permission of "argumentation against any point of Religion and Faith" makes them more threatening than

[51] John Rainolds, *The Summe of the Conference Betwene John Rainoldes and John Hart Touching the Head and the Faith of the Church* (London, 1584), 706.
[52] Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c.1590–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 7. The idea of a 'Calvinist consensus' is, of course, controversial: for a discussion, see Peter Lake, 'Calvinism and the English Church 1570–1635', *Past & Present*, no. 114 (1987): 32–76.
[53] Francis Bacon, 'Of Unity in Religion', in *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan, *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, vol. 15 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 12.
[54] Henry Jacob, *A Christian and Modest Offer of a Most Indifferent Conference, or Disputation [...]* (London, 1606), 26.

the limited disputation he is proposing, thus highlighting the dangerous potential of this familiar academic exercise.

References to universities, schools, lectures, and other educational motifs featured prominently in contemporary works of anti-atheism. Robert Persons' description of 'Sir Walter Rauleys schoole of Atheisme', in which the 'schollers' are 'taught amonge other thinges, to spell God backwarde', was used by early twentieth century academics to support idea of a School of Night.[55] Though this imagined coterie has now been consigned to the realm of historical fiction, Persons' association of atheism with gatherings of blasphemous scholars remains a useful aid to understanding how early moderns conceptualised unbelief. In part, this educational terminology is inherited from the ancient philosophical 'schools' associated with unbelief, leading early modern writers to refer to 'the professed Atheist, who […] from *Aristotle* his schoole he sucked his noisome error', or to observe that '*Diagoras* the Atheist hath within his Schoole manie shrewd Schollers'.[56] But there was also a sense that atheism was being actively propagated in grammar schools and universities, a fear expressed by the idea of the 'atheist lecture', in which inveterate atheists were thought to read out arguments against God to convert younger scholars. This idea was made famous by the statement attributed to Richard Cholmeley, probably by Richard Drury, 'that Marloe tolde him that hee hath read the Atheist lecture to S[i]r Walter Raliegh & others', but it also featured as a term in anti-atheist invective more broadly.[57] Most early modern critics of unbelief viewed atheism as a learned trait and references to 'schools of atheism' or 'atheist lectures', whether ancient, literal, or metaphorical, emphasise the role of educational

---

[55] See intro., 23–23.
[56] Henry Cuffe, *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life Together with the Originall Causes, Progresse, and End Thereof.* (London, 1607), 24; John Carpenter, *A Preparative to Contentation Conteining a Display of the Wonderfull Distractions of Men in Opinions and Straunge Conceit [...]* (London, 1597), 232; see also Plutarch, *Lives* (North), 814; Cipriano de Valera, *An Answere or Admonition to Those of the Church of Rome, Touching the Jubile, Proclaimed by the Bull [...]* (London, 1600), sig. C2r.
[57] See chap. 1, 81–82. Cf. Abraham Jackson, *Gods Call, for Mans Heart in 1 Knowledge, 2 Love, 3 Feare [...]* (London, 1618), 49; Fotherby, *Atheomastix*, 114.

institutions in providing environments in which atheism could flourish.[58] Often, the use of such terms was purely coincidental—there is no evidence to suggest a widespread consensus that unbelievers were literally reading out lectures at Oxford and Cambridge—but universities were nonetheless strongly associated with atheism.[59] Lyly's Euphues, in his discourse on the education of youth, says that 'It was openly reported of an old man in Naples that there was more lightness in Athens, then in all Italy, more wanton youths of scholars, than in all Europe besides, more papists, more atheists, more sects, more schisms, than in all the monarchies of the world'. Athens, which represents the academy and is specifically modelled on Oxford, encourages atheism because it fails to discipline its population of 'wanton youths', who in the permissive and disputatious world of the university become spotted with 'dishonesty' and 'ungodliness'.[60] This is not necessarily hyperbole on Lyly's part. The politician and diarist, Simonds D'Ewes, reflecting on his time as a student at Cambridge in the early seventeenth century, complained that even though University doctrine and liturgy were then in line with his puritan beliefs, '"the power of godlines in respect of the practice of it" had been "in a most atheisticall & unchristian manner contemned & scoffed at"'.[61]

As is the case with any early modern person, place, or institution accused of expounding or harbouring atheism, the charges made against universities tend to be vague, conjectural, and expressed either anonymously or by characters in works of fiction. Despite

---

[58] Thomas Bowes, 'Dedication to Sir John Puckering', in *The Second Part of the French Academie [...]*, by Pierre de La Primaudaye (London, 1594), 2–3; George Downame, *Two Sermons the One Commending the Ministerie in Generall: The Other Defending the Office of Bishops in Particular [...]* (London, 1608), 101; William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine: Or The Description of Theologie [...]* (Cambridge, 1600), 477; William Cowper, *Three Heavenly Treatises, Concerning Christ [...]* (London, 1612), 170.

[59] This association extended to, or perhaps emerged from, a commonplace assumption that doctors—professionals usually required to have taken degrees—were predisposed to unbelief. See Kocher, 'The Physician as Atheist in Elizabethan England'.

[60] John Lyly, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit and Euphues and His England*, ed. Leah Scragg (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 119–20.

[61] Qtd. in J. Sears McGee, *An Industrious Mind: The Worlds of Sir Simonds D'Ewes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 42.

the lack of detail in most individual accounts, frequent references to a recurring group of underlying factors contribute to a compelling picture of how and why universities may have contributed to the spread of unbelief and the emergence of anxieties about atheism. Most importantly, universities were permissive environments in which normally unacceptable views could be articulated for the sake of argument. Although God's existence was probably not openly questioned, foundational aspects of Christian doctrine were held up to public scrutiny and students were taught to prioritise skill in argumentation above all else. The intellectual tools necessary for individuals to build their own cases against God were therefore readily available. Furthermore, the conception of the atheist as an arrogant student more concerned with constructing clever arguments than knowing the truth can be seen to have emerged from broader critiques of the kinds of knowledge acquired at early modern universities. The aspects of universities that made unbelief intellectually conceivable and morally explicable were incorporated by Lyly, Sidney, and Gifford into the fictional atheists they invented. The argumentative logic and dialogic format of the university disputation not only provided a formal model through which unbelief could be represented, but a way of circumscribing and undermining and the characters written to voice it.

LYLY'S EUPHUES AND ATHEOS

The dialogue between Euphues and Atheos occurs in the second half of Lyly's *Anatomy,* which presents an apparent resolution to the opening narrative: Euphues has matured from his youthful prodigality and commenced using his wit to dish out sententious moral advice. Alongside 'A Cooling Card' addressing the follies of 'All Fond Lovers', a Platonic discourse on education, and advice letters sent to various characters from the first half of the narrative, the dialogue between Euphues and Atheos is presented as a further example of the newly

reformed Euphues imparting moral guidance to a less enlightened individual. However, Euphues' transformation should not be taken at face value. The documents presented as evidence for his newly acquired morality satirise humanist mores as strongly as his direct attacks upon them in the first half of the book. The dialogue with Atheos is no exception. Though it has been read as an example of Christian theology triumphing over pagan philosophy, too many elements of the dialogue are out of place to make such a straightforward interpretation compelling.[62] The ease with which Atheos is converted, alongside Euphues' unexplained transition from his characteristically ornamental style into a parodic interpretation of a preacher's idiom are immediately noticeable aspects of the exchange that may prompt readers to question its sincerity as a model of anti-atheist confutation.[63]

Other peculiarities about the way Lyly constructed this scene become apparent on closer inspection. Atheos' speeches are based on stories and arguments taken from *De Natura Deorum* (*D.N.D.*)*,* but his paraphrases of Cicero are highly selective and omit key information that would strengthen his position. When Anatomy is read alongside *D.N.D.,* the gaps in Atheos' arguments become apparent. This discrepancy not only satirises the logical incompetence of a character who chooses to question the existence of God openly but also tacitly acknowledges that in the hands of a wiser speaker, some arguments presented in *D.N.D.* have the potential to undermine Christianity. Lyly departs from the model offered by Ascham in *The Scholemaster* by choosing to present atheism as emerging not from the consumption of immoral romances by students who travelled to Catholic Italy, but from their consumption of a text by humanism's most celebrated author. Furthermore, the debate takes

[62] For an example of the former reading, see Richard A. McCabe, 'Wit, Eloquence, and Wisdom in *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*', *Studies in Philology* 81, no. 3 (1984): 323f.
[63] As G. K. Hunter puts it, Euphues 'vanishes in a cloud of biblical references', *John Lyly*, 62. For the view that this scene is a parody of contemporary religious discourse, see Theodore L. Steinberg, 'The Anatomy of Euphues', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 17, no. 1 (1977): 36–38.

place in ‘Athens’, which in Lyly’s text represents Oxford, locating the threat of atheism much closer to his readers’ homes. Lyly further reframes atheism as a threat from within the humanist academy by emphasising the failure of rational argument to deal adequately with the issues raised in *D.N.D.* Atheos is defeated not because his premises are weak, but because he is a poor orator who does not recognise that the counterarguments Euphues presents are invalid. Lyly’s dialogue is therefore significant because it foregrounds the inducements to unbelief offered by the study of humanist literature and introduces the idea that outward expressions of unbelief did not necessarily reflect genuine inward atheism.

Lyly, Ascham, and atheism from Italy

The close relationship between Lyly’s *Anatomy* (1578) and Ascham’s *Scholemaster* (1570) has been the subject of much critical attention, though their contrasting representations of atheism have not yet featured prominently in this discussion. Traditionally, Lyly’s Euphues—whose name is taken from ‘*Ευφυές*’, the first of seven types of wit outlined in *Scholemaster*—has been read as anatomising the problems with the educational system advocated by Ascham, which prioritised philological knowledge and rhetorical skill ahead of practical learning and experience.[64] ‘Experience’, for Ascham, signified knowledge gained from travel—especially to Italy—and is presented in *Scholemaster* as a significant threat to an individual’s moral development, a perspective from which Lyly departs in *Anatomy*.[65] Ascham found several aspects of Italian culture troubling: ‘the Religion, the learning, the

[64] See, e.g. Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976); R. W. Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-Espionage and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); Mike Pincombe, *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the Later Sixteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 2001). For Ascham’s description of ‘*Ευφυές*’, see *The Scholemaster or Plaine and Perfite Way of Teachyng Children, to Understand, Write, and Speake, the Latin Tong [...]* (London, 1570), fo. 7v.
[65] Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chap. 2.

policie, the experience, the maners of Italie': all these elements merge into a general view of Italy as a place of politico-religious disorder and moral degeneracy.[66] Ascham's objections are differentiated from standard anti-Catholicism by his ultimate belief that Italians not only followed a false church, but had abandoned religious belief altogether, partly because of the influence of classical and contemporary literature:

> They make more accounte of Tullies offices, than S. Paules epistles: of a tale in Bocace, than a storie of the Bible. Than they counte as Fables, the holie misteries of Christian Religion. They make Christ and his Gospell, onelie serve Civill pollicie: Than neyther Religion cummeth a misse to them: In tyme they be Promoters of both openlie: in place againe mockers of both privilie.[67]

Ascham's contention is that Italians view biblical and secular narratives as equivalent 'Fables' and thus have no qualms about following Machiavelli by employing religion for politic ends, shifting between 'new' and 'old' religious identities whenever it is beneficial. The direct progression that Ascham posits—from literature to atheism—does not appear to be based on moral objections such as those raised by polemicists like Stephen Gosson.[68] Rather, Ascham sees literature as replacing or invalidating religion because it functions in a comparable way.[69] By modelling Atheos' arguments on *D.N.D.* and placing his encounter with Euphues in the Athenian academy, Lyly reframes Ascham's concern about Italian culture taking literature more seriously than religion as a problem inherent in humanism itself.

Another way Lyly achieves this is by presenting Atheos as a figure defined more by his inherent immorality and deficient reasoning than by extrinsic factors such as nationality. In *Scholemaster,* Ascham suggests it was the Italians who first discarded religion in favour of Epicurean atheism:

---

[66] Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, fo. 26v.
[67] Ascham, fo. 28r.
[68] See Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse Conteining a Plesaunt Invectiue against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters, and Such like Caterpillers of a Commonwelth [...]* (London, 1579).
[69] Ascham therefore anticipates, to some extent, Victoria Kahn's argument in *The Trouble with Literature*.

> they plainlie declare, of whose schole, of what Religion they be: that is, Epicures in living, and άθεοι in doctrine: this last worde is no more unknowne now to plaine Englishemen, than the Person was unknown somtyme in England, until som Englisheman tooke peines, to fetch that develish opinion out of Italie.[70]

Ascham's contention that atheism has been 'fetch[ed]' from Italy by English travellers presents atheism as having a single geographical origin, to which it could have been restricted had educators heeded his advice and prevented students from travelling there. Ascham's description of Italians as 'άθεοι in doctrine' applies the Greek term for an atheist to contemporary unbelievers, thus making explicit the fear that exposure to classical literature could result in the adoption of pagan philosophy. Although Ascham claims that neither the word 'άθεοι' nor the associated 'Person' remain 'unknowne' in England, he does not list any named examples of individual *atheoi* or provide references to other sources that do. Furthermore, the reader is given no information about what this 'Person' is like, beyond the suggestion that he may have travelled to Italy or encountered someone else who had been there. The dialogue between Euphues and Atheos in *Anatomy* can be seen as Lyly's attempt to flesh out and rationalize the figure alluded to by Ascham, which he does by focussing not upon national identity, but the arguments made by the two speakers.

Misreading Cicero in 'Euphues and Atheos'

In his foundational study of early modern atheism, Buckley concluded that 'Lyly was rather poorly informed about the unbelief against which he was reacting' because most of the arguments made by Atheos are reproduced almost verbatim from passages in *D.N.D.*[71] Yet, when the ways Atheos distorts and misunderstands the arguments in Cicero's text are examined, it seems that Lyly was not 'reacting' to atheism but shaping how the concept

---

[70] Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, fo. 28v.
[71] Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 73–75. Cf. R. Warwick Bond, ed., *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 364–65.

would be understood for the next decade and beyond. Atheos begins his conversation with Euphues in the collegial spirit of enquiry that is characteristic of the Ciceronian source his arguments are drawn from.[72] An existing degree of intimacy between the two characters is implied by Atheos' hope that 'we might be merry' and although he claims that he is not credulous enough to believe the teachings of Christianity, his wish that he 'might be persuaded in a thing that much troubled my conscience' suggests a potential receptiveness to conversion.[73] This encourages us to view Atheos as a misguided Christian looking for pastoral support rather than an irredeemably abject figure, like one of the Italian *atheoi* described by Ascham.

Though *D.N.D.* contains powerful arguments against divine providence, Atheos appears unable to marshal them effectively. In support of his unbelief, Atheos first calls the tenets of Christianity 'incomprehensible'. He then challenges the idea of divine providence by claiming that more people would believe in God if he 'would revenge the oppression of the widows and fatherless, that would reward the zeal of the merciful, pity the poor and pardon the penitent'.[74] Atheos substantiates this point by referring to Cicero but does so by saying 'I remember Tully disputing of the nature of gods'. The term 'remember' is noticeably subjective: Atheos is not citing Cicero as an authority but offering a version of Cicero's text filtered through his own recollection. The first anecdotes recounted by Atheos involve Dionysius, the despotic ruler of Syracuse, mocking the gods and triumphantly stealing from their temples: 'Dost thou not see, Euphues, what small account he made of their gods, for at the last, sailing into his country with a prosperous wind, he laughing said, "Lo, see you not

[72] Technically, Lyly's text is a Lucianic dialogue because the speakers are fictional characters rather than historical persons and it is intended as satire. However, the apparently reasonable openness to inquiry expressed by Atheos is distinctly Ciceronian: see Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in Its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12–21.
[73] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 123.
[74] Lyly, 123–24.

my masters, how well the gods reward our sacrilege?"'.[75] The emphasis here is upon Dionysius' scoffing nature rather than its philosophical implications. In *D.N.D.* the story of Dionysius is one of many examples introduced by Cotta to undermine Balbus' conception of divine providence. Cotta explicitly states that 'Dionysius was not struck dead with a thunderbolt […] He died on his bed and was laid upon a royal pyre'.[76] This detail emphasises Cotta's argument that irreligious and immoral people like Dionysius can prosper because the world is not guided by divine moral agency. However, Atheos does not finish the story and the taunting speech made by Dionysius is Lyly's invention. The way Atheos focuses on inane details, such as how Dionysius 'played the barber' and 'shaved' a gold beard from a statue of Apollo gives his speech a carnivalesque rather than avowedly irreligious quality, emphasising 'the small account' Dionysius made of the gods, rather than explicitly challenging their existence or power.[77]

Atheos' account of what he *remembers* from reading Cicero is striking not only because of how he dilutes the subversive impact of the story about Dionysius but also because he refers to this particular story. The peculiarity of Atheos' choice of evidence can be demonstrated by way of comparison. Roger Hutchinson, whose exposition and refutation of anti-providentialism I discussed in Chapter 1, also draws on *D.N.D.,* though he only mentions Dionysius in passing and does so with very a different emphasis. Hutchinson refutes the argument that providence cannot exist because despots like 'Dionisius, Pisistratus and Phalaris, put so many to death' by arguing that these figures are examples of the 'rods and scourges' sent by God to punish the heathen for their 'Idolatry, shameful lusts and unthankefulnesse'.[78] The focus here is on the part of Cotta's speech that discusses Dionysius

---

[75] Lyly, 124.
[76] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 3.84.
[77] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 124.
[78] Hutchinson, *Image of God*, fo. 57v–59r; cf. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 3.81–82. On tyrants as agents of divine providence, see chap. 4, 216–218.

as a tyrant, rather than when he mocks the gods and steals from their temples. This is a more effective way of drawing attention to the broader challenges of theodicy, of which the non-punishment of blasphemers is a sub-issue. Hutchinson also spends a lot of time refuting the arguments of Diagoras, which present an even more powerful challenge to the idea of providence. In Cotta's account, Diagoras sails in a ship that is beset by a storm, leading the other passengers to believe that they have brought the storm upon themselves by choosing to take Diagoras onboard. In response, Diagoras demonstrates the flaw in their logic by pointing out that the many other vessels on the same stretch of water cannot also be subject to the same providential judgement. Using this logic, any putatively providential interpretation of events can be dismissed by pointing to collateral damage and observing that correlation does not always mean causation. This is the part of *D.N.D.* that most concerns, fascinates, and exercises Hutchinson but it is not mentioned by Lyly's Atheos at all.

Atheos proceeds by claiming that 'I could rehearse infinite opinions of excellent men who in this point hold on my side, but especially Protagoras. And in my judgement if there be any god it is the world wherein we live, that is the only god'.[79] These peculiar sentences are made stranger by their juxtaposition. If readers take at face value the statement that Atheos 'could rehearse infinite opinions of excellent men', they must ask why Atheos chooses not to deploy the opinions he claims to have access to. Does he wish to reserve them for later? Or is he so confident of his position that he does not feel the need to state them? Or is he hesitant about making a more powerful argument because he was a true Protestant all along? If he has read Cicero as he claims to have done, there are numerous other writers whom Atheos could cite. At various points in *D.N.D.,* the speakers refer to lists of atheistic philosophers either as foils to their own positions or as a means of challenging their opponents' arguments,

---

[79] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 124.

including Epicurus, Empedocles, Democritus, and Theodorus.[80] Yet, Atheos only mentions Protagoras, who 'declares that he has no clear views whatever about the gods, whether they exist or do not exist'.[81] This is appropriate, given that it is increasingly clear from Atheos' speeches that he also has no clear views about the gods. By inventing such weak arguments for Atheos, Lyly helps to establish the anti-atheist paradigm that outward expressions of unbelief do not reflect carefully considered inward convictions.

Atheos' position becomes even more ambiguous when he follows up his reference to Protagoras by claiming that 'if there be any god it is the world wherein we live'. This pantheistic conception of God is expounded in *D.N.D.* by the Stoic Balbus, who follows Zeno and Cleanthes by assigning intelligence, reason, and divinity, to the natural world. For Balbus, 'the habit of arguing in support of atheism, whether it be done from conviction or in pretence, is a wicked and an impious practice'.[82] Atheos' expression of support for the theistic view of a character actively opposed to atheism makes his attitude to religious belief even more unclear, especially considering he is now volunteering an opinion about the gods immediately after having aligned himself with Protagoras, who denies knowing anything about them. While worship of the earth and heavens is not compatible with Protestant Christianity and was often listed by early modern writers as a form of atheism, it was not the most immediately threatening form of unbelief.[83] In fact, Stoic advocacy of submission to divine providence made aspects of this belief system attractive to many Christians. Hutchinson and Euphues, for example, use the pantheistic providentialism of Cleanthes to confute the anti-providentialism of Diagoras and Atheos. Atheos ends his opening speech by

[80] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.29; 1.63; 2.76; 3.3.
[81] Cicero, 1.29. Gascoigne's Gnomaticus makes a similar error: see chap. 1, 60–61.
[82] Cicero, 2.13–42; 2.168.
[83] E.g. John Dove points out that 'Sometimes under the name of Atheists are comprehended Pagans, Infidels and Idolaters, all such as are ignorant of the true God, albeit in their kinde they be very devout, religious and godly.' Dove acknowledges that before the Christian God was revealed to man, people 'did service unto them which by nature are not Gods. That is, they worship the Sunne and Moone, and carved idols, the creature in steede of the Creator'. These pantheistic and idolatrous theisms, which are 'godly' in their own way, are of little concern to Dove: 'These be not the Atheists which we are to treate of.' *Confutation of Atheisme*, 1.

asserting that 'I have greater and more forcible arguments to confirm my opinion and to confute the errors of those that imagine there is a God', but these are never disclosed.[84] Lyly does not present Atheos as a convinced unbeliever but one ready to be converted who 'would gladly hear [Euphues] shape an answer to that which I have said'.[85]

Atheos' ambiguous tone and ineffective misappropriations of Cicero are too consistent to be unintentional mistakes on Lyly's part. They suggest a deliberate intention to present Atheos as a character with limited ability to read a text and form convincing arguments based on its content, contributing to the emerging conception of atheists as ignorant and in need of confutation. Unlike Euphues when he first arrived in Naples, Atheos is not a sophistic chancer who constructs rhetorically compelling but morally dubious arguments to demonstrate his wit; his arguments are conspicuously flimsy. Yet, Atheos also cannot be read as a straightforward exposition of the limitations of unbelief itself. Even though his own arguments are somewhat lukewarm, Atheos' frame of reference indicates that Lyly was aware of much more powerful ways of challenging the existence of God and the workings of divine providence. The irony of Lyly's dialogue is that its two participants are not binary opposites. Euphues does not demonstrate the merits of a humanist education because his response is just as incompetent as Atheos' case itself.

Converting Atheos

The most immediately striking aspect of Euphues' response to Atheos is the way he changes the tone of the dialogue: the disputatious frame invoked by Atheos is replaced by one of moral criticism. Euphues' conspicuously underwhelming performance indicates that Lyly

[84] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 124.
[85] Steinberg, 'The Anatomy of Euphues', 126.

deliberately under-powered the character to further his critique of Ascham's brand of Renaissance humanism. Euphues sees it as his duty to 'convert' Atheos, a process associated with personal spiritual transformation and induction into a new community, in contrast to the more rational, argumentative process of confutation.[86] Atheos' propositions are therefore not met head-on with a systematic series of counterarguments; instead he is positioned as an abject figure who must be saved from damnation. Euphues initially does this by trying to frighten Atheos with the prospect of providential retribution by warning that the atheist could at any moment be swallowed up by the ground or struck by a thunderbolt from heaven.[87] The idea that Atheos first needs to be persuaded providence even exists is never acknowledged. The argument from universal consent is implicit in Euphues' claim that the 'seed of religion' is a 'common principle [that has] possessed all men's minds', but read alongside his other comments, this statement operates not as the opening of a logical proof for the existence of God but as a way of dehumanising Atheos.[88] Atheos is criticised for his 'monstrous opinion', compared unfavourably to 'senseless' barbarians and 'barbarous' miscreants, and placed in the same category as 'brute beasts'.[89] This incredibly hostile reaction frames Atheos' unbelief as abject and inhuman, which limits the extent to which Euphues is required to engage with his arguments at an intellectual level. Although Euphues does begin to explain Cleanthes' 'four causes' for belief in God he soon breaks off this tactic:

> But why go I about in a thing so manifest to use proofs so manifold. If you deny the truth, who can prove it? […] Thou knowest that manifest truths are not to be proved but believed, and that he that denieth the principles of any art is not to be confuted by arguments, but to be left to his own folly.[90]

---

[86] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 124.On conversion and confutation, see, respectively, Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5–7; and Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism*, 42–88.
[87] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 125.
[88] Lyly, 125.
[89] Lyly, 124–25; cf. intro., 63 and 145–46, below.
[90] Lyly, *Anatomy of Wit*, 126.

This perspective is consistent with the widely held view that fundamental aspects of religious belief should not be matters for disputation, but it means completely sidestepping the rhetorical gauntlet that Atheos has thrown down, suggesting to readers that Euphues cannot defeat even the weakest arguments for unbelief put forward in *D.N.D.*. Instead, Euphues seeks to persuade Atheos 'by the touchstone of the Scriptures'.[91]

The remainder of Euphues' speech consists of quotations from the Old and New Testaments presented as exhortations for Atheos to listen to his conscience and acknowledge the threat of divine punishment.[92] Atheos is quick to draw attention to the logical failure of this argument, explicitly criticising Euphues' ability to dispute properly:

> you go about contrary to the customs of schools […] For when I demand by what reason men are induced to acknowledge a God, you confirm it by course of Scripture […] Whosoever, therefore, denieth a Godhead denieth also the scripture which testify of Him. This is in my opinion *absurdum per absurdius,* to prove one absurdity by another'.[93]

Given that Euphues is supposed to have been reformed by his humanist education, Atheos' objection that Euphues argues 'contrary to the customs of schools' is entirely legitimate. Euphues fails to move beyond the tautology that underpins his initial argument, revealing the vulnerability of Christianity to unbelievers trained in dialectic. Now tasked with proving that scripture is the authoritative word of God, Euphues continues to prove the divinity of the scriptures through their intrinsic attributes. That the scriptures are old, contain accounts of prophesy, are written compellingly, and have been accepted by many different nations are the only reasons Euphues gives for assenting to them; he does not provide any conclusive proof that the scriptures must be the word of God. Instead, Euphues returns to his earlier strategy of trying to frighten Atheos into belief, stating that unbelievers are 'rather to be confounded by torments than reasons' and that Atheos' 'opinions are so monstrous' it is a waste of time

---

[91] Lyly, 126.
[92] Lyly, 126–27.
[93] Lyly, 127–28.

trying to persuade him otherwise.[94] Readers may expect that by reverting to a tactic that has already been dismissed as invalid, Euphues will once again be rebuffed by Atheos, but this is not the case.

As the debate draws to a conclusion, Atheos reveals evidence of a troubled conscience, stating that Euphues' exhortations have brought him into 'a double and doubtful distress', since 'If I believe not the Scriptures then I shall be damned for unbelief, if I believe them then I shall be confounded for my wicked life'.[95] This highly ambivalent statement presents Atheos as someone who, in Hooker's words, 'frame[s] to themselves a way more pleasant'. He would prefer to believe that God does not exist because it provides an excuse for his sinful lifestyle but is concerned this expression of denial will result in even greater punishment. In some ways, this outcome was predictable and inevitable. Atheos' opening speech frames the debate as a means for him to settle a matter that has 'much troubled my conscience', suggesting that he harbours an underlying faith. Furthermore, suggesting that Atheos is not truly convinced of his opinions but an immoral disputant voicing an unpopular opinion for the sake of argument aligns him with the emerging figure of the hypocritical outward atheist.[96] Euphues only wins the debate because he rouses in Atheos a fear of God that had been present from the outset. Had Euphues been arguing against a more committed opponent, his defective logic and campaign of fearmongering would likely have lost him the argument.

Lyly's outlook, then, is decidedly pessimistic. His familiarity with *D.N.D.* suggests an awareness that studying classical philosophy could potentially furnish students with compelling arguments against the existence of God. Furthermore, Lyly's use of dialectical language throughout the dialogue links the act of questioning religious authority to the

[94] Lyly, 130–31.
[95] Lyly, 131.
[96] On inward and outward atheism, see intro., 10–17.

disputatious world of the academy. Yet, this threat is tempered by the fact that Atheos, a Christian character who questions his faith after reading Cicero, is shown to have a poor understanding of the text that has inspired his doubt. Euphues, his supposedly educated spiritual guide, is equally incapable of forming a coherent argument to prove the existence of God. Lyly's rejection of the educational system set out by Ascham is therefore double-edged. He warns that a humanist education risks exposing students to arguments against God but is not confident they would be able to articulate or confute these arguments convincingly. Atheos therefore exists on condition of his ignorance. The quiet subversion of *Anatomy* is its suggestion that Atheos may have triumphed over Euphues if he were a little more persuasive.

GIFFORD'S ATHEOS AND ZELOTES

If Lyly's Atheos outwardly declares himself to be an atheist but is soon persuaded to acknowledge a suppressed inner faith in God, then Gifford's Atheos does the exact opposite. At no point in *Countrie Divinitie* (1582) does Atheos admit that he does not believe in God, yet readers are encouraged to suspect that his unenthusiastic avowal of Protestantism conceals inward unbelief. Gifford's decision to write an inward atheist rather than an outward one reflects his purpose as a puritan polemicist. Unlike the dialogue in *Anatomy,* which satirizes humanist values without endorsing an alternative educational vision, *Countrie Divinitie* was written to support Gifford's own views about how Protestantism should be taught and observed. Zelotes advocates the godly style of Reformed preaching that Gifford sought more of in England. Meanwhile, Gifford's Atheos represents the 'common sort': he is an uneducated member of a rural parish with no personal appetite for reform. He has little understanding of Calvinist soteriology and only values religious practices that are traditional and community oriented. By suggesting that Atheos' recalcitrance is evidence of a more

serious and deep-rooted unbelief, Gifford attacks the complacency of the established Church. Critics usually view Atheos as a 'deluded country parishioner', but I contend that Gifford encourages us to view this character as an inward atheist who conceals his unbelief.[97] *Countrie Divinitie* therefore argues that because the Church of England is insufficiently reformed, unbelief may grow unchallenged in the minds of outwardly conforming parishioners who have limited enthusiasm for Reformed Christianity. In this way, Gifford's atheist presents an even greater threat to the Protestant establishment than Lyly's, since *Countrie Divinitie* locates the possibility of unbelief not in a hypothetical debate taking place in a fictional version of Oxford, but in the day-to-day ambivalence of the common sort.

Rhetoric or Realism?

Critics are divided over how best to read *Countrie Divinitie.* Did Gifford write a verisimilar account of a real conversation between a godly preacher and a member of his parish, or is the text a rhetorical exercise in which the speakers merely represent conflicting argumentative positions? *Countrie Divinitie* combines elements of both textual strategies, but scholars are conflicted about which paradigm should govern interpretations of the text. On one hand, Timothy McGinnis cautions against 'emphasizing the rhetorical and polemical contexts of Gifford's work' to the extent that it appears 'totally disconnected from reality'. Conversely, Antoinina Zlatar argues that by '"flattening" the rhetorical features of the text', historians risk reading *Countrie Divinitie* as 'documentary evidence' rather than a literary exercise.[98] My interpretation of Gifford's Atheos is that details of his characterisation such as where he lives, how he speaks, and the views he expresses are all modelled on real people, while his unbelief

---

[97] Antoinina Bevan Zlatar, *Reformation Fictions: Polemical Protestant Dialogues in Elizabethan England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 181.
[98] McGinnis, *George Gifford*, 161; Zlatar, *Reformation Fictions*, 181.

is conveyed by layers of rhetorical implication added by Gifford. I argue that Gifford invites readers to infer that this verisimilar representation of the common sort is an inward atheist in order to criticise the complacency of the established Church. Because Atheos' unbelief is located within an imagined interiority that is conveyed by his arguments, the text is as much a literary exercise as it is a religious polemic.

This balance between naturalistic and rhetorical elements in *Countrie Divinitie* is established by the way the text is framed. In the dedication to Lord Ambrose, Gifford states that his goal is to 'shew unto those which are of highe calling, the hurtful and dangerous weedes' growing in the neglected parishes of rural England.[99] Rather than articulating his grievances against the stagnation of England's Reformation in his own voice, Gifford sets out the problems he wants to highlight 'after the order of a dialogue'. In so doing, Gifford attempts to approximate the language of normal country people: 'There is no pompe in the manner of speech, for it is rude and country like: the matter it selfe is not handled as a disputation betweene deepe divines, but after the manner of plough men and cartars'.[100] Unlike the debate in *Anatomy,* which has no specific setting other than the notionally Oxonian Athens, the speakers in *Countrie Divinitie* meet on a country road twenty miles from the town of G. B., 'not farre from Chelmeforde'.[101] In addition to the authentic setting, the speeches of the two characters contain analogies firmly rooted in the language of rural life. Atheos is said to have no more knowledge of true faith than a goose and he wishes that the Pope 'and his Dung, were buried in the Dunghill'.[102] Meanwhile, Zelotes suggests that claiming to love God while distrusting preachers is like trying to build a house without a carpenter.[103]

---

[99] George Gifford, *A Briefe Discourse of Certaine Points of the Religion Which Is among the Common Sort of Christians, Which May Bee Termed the Countrie Divinitie [...]* (London, 1582), sigs. ☞3r–☞4r.
[100] Gifford, sig. ☞3v.
[101] Gifford, fo. 1r. G. B. likely refers to Great Baddow or Great Burstead; see McGinnis, *George Gifford*, 4.
[102] Gifford, *Countrie Divinitie*, fos. 20r, 22r.
[103] Gifford, fo. 8.

Competing with these attempts at verisimilitude are several rhetorical and allusive elements in the text. Though Gifford claims his subject is ‘not handled as a disputation’, the arguments of Atheos and Zelotes are undoubtedly influenced by the format of the disputations Gifford would have participated in at Cambridge. The suggestiveness of the names Zelotes and Atheos introduces the idea that these figures are artificial composites, created by Gifford to signify the highest peak of godliness and the lowest ebb of religious ambivalence. Zlatar suggests that the godly interlocutor is named after the Apostle Simon Zelotes, who first brought the Bible to Britain, while as we have seen, *atheos* was a term primarily applied to classical unbelievers and which had recently been used by Lyly.[104] As the dialogue progresses, the conversational opening gives way to increasingly lengthy set-piece speeches on topics such as the validity of deathbed repentance, the doctrine of predestination, and the nature of idolatry, furthering the sense that these speakers are not realistic characters, but mouthpieces for opposing doctrines. Furthermore, the structure of the arguments between the two speakers is highly patterned, conforming to the syllogistic logic of the disputation format that Gifford claims to have eschewed. The interrogative quality of *Countrie Divinitie*—in which Atheos fulfils a role analogous to Zelotes’ catechumen—is modelled partly on printed catechisms, a genre to which Gifford would himself contribute in 1583.[105] But even though Zelotes responds to Atheos like a teacher, instructing him in aspects of Reformed doctrine that Atheos ignores or rejects, he does so as if he were engaged in a disputation, constructing step-by-step syllogistic arguments to prove that Atheos cannot be a true Christian unless he accepts Zelotes’ views on preaching, scripture, and soteriology. Zlatar points out that in Gifford’s *Catechisme,* the catechumen is somewhat unusual in that he ‘sometimes raises objections in a tone reminiscent of Atheos’.[106] The recurrence of

---

[104] Zlatar, *Reformation Fictions*, 184.
[105] Zlatar, 185–89. See George Gifford, *A Catechisme Conteining the Summe of Christian Religion [...]* (London, 1583).
[106] Zlatar, *Reformation Fictions*, 186.

disputatious elements in Gifford's later work indicates that the logic and structure of formal religious argument was fundamental to his polemical thought process and that *Countrie Divinitie* is best understood as a catechetical disputation in which the teacher must not only inform his catechumen of the truth but prove it to him logically. The two sets of abstract ideas that Zelotes and Atheos represent become connected to the fictional personas that Gifford creates for them, giving readers the opportunity to extrapolate from the logical steps taken by each character to infer their implied inward thoughts.

Imagining Unbelief in Countrie Divinitie

Even though Atheos is ostensibly no more than a convenient audience for Zelotes' evangelism, readers must imagine what is going on in Atheos' mind to follow the logic of the debate. Frequently, we are encouraged to suspect that Atheos is lying to Zelotes: that his expressions of faith are hypocritical dissimulations and that his lax attitude to religion indicates unbelief. This extra layer of psychological interpretation invited by the text blurs the lines between its polemical and literary qualities. Zelotes' exposition of 'true' religion is vindicated because we suspect that Atheos' objections to it are motivated by unbelief, making the success of Gifford's argument dependent on presenting Atheos as a compelling and believable character. Zelotes' opinions and frustrations are laid out clearly in lengthy speeches, making it possible to read him as a neutral mouthpiece for Gifford's views on desirable religious observance. Atheos, on the other hand, has fewer lines and is afforded a much greater degree of implied interiority. This discrepancy stems from the way Zelotes openly telegraphs the logical steps through which he tries to prove Atheos guilty of various religious infractions, while Atheos' reasons for disagreeing with Zelotes or prevaricating until he is forced to agree with him are often unstated, leaving his thought process more open to

interpretation. Though his speeches are shorter and often make use of less clearly developed logic, Zelotes admits that Atheos speaks and argues well, having 'skill in outwarde things'.[107] Atheos' mastery of dialectical argument and his recalcitrance toward Zelotes encourage readers to infer that he is concealing more forceful arguments against God. His expressions of belief may therefore be read as *pro forma* concessions to the superiority of Zelotes' logic that do not reflect his inward convictions.

Unlike Lyly's Atheos and Sidney's Cecropia, Gifford's character never openly rejects the existence of God, the operation of providence, or the immortality of the soul, so his name primes readers to assume that Atheos must be an inward atheist. This is suggested further by Atheos' attitude to his preacher, Sir Robert, whom we learn is a popular figure at the local alehouse who goes no further in homiletic exertion than reading services aloud. Atheos praises Sir Robert's good character and likeability: he is particularly glad that Sir Robert is 'none of these busie Controulers', a term Atheos idiosyncratically uses to refer to prescriptive and committed Reformers like Zelotes.[108] This is when Zelotes becomes hostile and suspicious toward Atheos. He does not state his objections explicitly but we learn that he has marked Atheos and Sir Robert as belonging to a particular class of miscreants: 'I perceive nowe what manner of man your Curat is'; 'I smell how unmeete hee is, and also how ignorant you are'; 'all your speech doeth beewraye that you are a carnall man'.[109] It is therefore possible—before either character has engaged in an extended exposition of his own religious views—to infer their respective beliefs from their divergent reactions to Sir Robert. Zelotes disapproves of Atheos and Sir Robert because of their 'carnality': that is, their elevation of worldly and bodily concerns over spiritual ones. Atheos' carnality is suggested by his emphasis on the importance of good interpersonal relationships, his approval of recreational

[107] Gifford, *A Catechisme*, fo. 8r.
[108] Gifford, *Countrie Divinitie*, fo. 2r.
[109] Gifford, fos. 2v–3r.

drinking and gambling, and his distaste for preachers that ‘meddle’ in their parishioners’ affairs. Zelotes therefore concludes that Sir Robert ‘be more meete for too keepe swine, then too bee a Sheaphearde over the flocke of Christe’, since his attention is directed toward temporal, rather than spiritual, welfare.[110] The Epicurean connotations of this language, present in the suggestion that Sir Robert is best suited to ‘keepe swine’ and is ‘a carnall man’ are at this stage fairly subtle. As the debate unfolds, their atheistic implications become increasingly apparent.

As the dialogue progresses, Zelotes attempts to prove syllogistically that Atheos’ worldliness and lax attitude to faith are tantamount to unbelief. The reader is encouraged to share Zelotes’ suspicions because Atheos’ responses suggest inward resistance to the sentiment of Zelotes’ arguments, even when he seems to endorse their logic. For example, Zelotes points out that among Atheos’ forefathers were thieves, murderers, and adulterers. On this basis, Zelotes claims that Atheos’ invocation of tradition to justify his lack of engagement with Reformed theology is invalid. Pressing this advantage, Zelotes questions whether Atheos believes it is possible to be good without following the ‘worde’ of God. The implicit suggestion here is that Atheos cannot be a true believer if the extent of his religious observance is mindlessly following rural traditions that have no scriptural basis. Atheos responds, apparently in agreement, that ‘There is nothing good but of GOD, and suche as doe as hee commaundeth’.[111] Since God’s ‘worde’ falls into the category of things that are ‘of GOD’, Atheos is technically concurring with Zelotes here, but readers will be inclined to feel suspicious that his apparent acquiescence is nothing more than outward dissimulation. For one thing, Atheos’ answer contains no explicit reference to scripture as a source of morality and instead vaguely identifies that which is ‘good’ with the actions of those who follow

---

[110] Gifford, fo. 2r.
[111] Gifford, fo. 4v.

God's commands. This could easily be read as a justification of Atheos' present life, in the tautological sense that because Atheos perceives his ambivalent pastor to be 'good', Sir Robert must therefore be godly.

Readers are encouraged to take a sceptical view of these statements by Zelotes, who often points out the potentially ambivalent sentiments lurking behind Atheos' outward conformity. When Atheos claims that the traditional religion he espouses is superior because 'nowe there is no love, then they lived in friendshippe', Zelotes retorts 'you call none love, but that carnall love, whiche is in eating and drinking, and other foolishe delightes'.[112] By suggesting that Atheos uses words like 'love' and 'good' to praise temporal virtues rather than Christian ones, Zelotes sets a precedent for assuming that Atheos subverts religious language for his own irreligious purposes. Thus, he is not merely an ignorant rustic with an inappropriate name, but a genuine inward atheist who conceals his Epicurean values. If Atheos were merely a lazy and recalcitrant believer uninterested in Zelotes' evangelism, it is unlikely he would go to such great lengths to outmanoeuvre the puritan character. Gifford therefore structures the opening of the dialogue so that the main question being debated is not about whether the Church of England needs further reform, but whether or not Atheos' 'countrie divintie' may be read as evidence of unbelief. This is polemically powerful because it positions Zelotes' godly religion as the standard from which Atheos deviates. It is also significant because it encourages readers to imagine a naturalistic character to be an unbeliever.

The sense in the early stage of the debate that Atheos and Zelotes are talking at cross-purposes—that Atheos' vague expressions of theistic belief are fundamentally different to Zelotes' convictions—is made apparent in their discussion of the effect Sir Robert's preaching has upon the souls of his parishioners. Zelotes argues that Sir Robert's virtue

[112] Gifford, fo. 5r.

cannot be proved by his good deeds because this demonstrates only that he lives more virtuously than a thief or murderer, and that if his underlying character is debased, it makes no difference how well he serves his community. This leads Zelotes to ask whether it is worse to murder the soul or the body. Atheos gives the 'correct' answer: 'Hee whiche doeth murther the soule' is guilty of the greater offence. However, he rejects the completed syllogism that Zelotes forms from this response: that compared to someone who allows those in his care to physically starve, 'hee which should feede mens soules and doth sterve them, is a greater murtherer'.[113] Atheos disagrees, stating 'I will not beleeve that hee doth kill any'. Like his earlier claim that 'There is nothing good but of GOD', this reply circumvents the point Zelotes is trying to make without explicitly challenging his logic. If Atheos refuses to believe that Sir Robert is killing his parishioners' souls, then the orthodox basis for this would be that Atheos believes in the soteriological merits of his pastor's preaching style. The absence of such a defence indicates another possibility: that Atheos cares little for the fate of his soul, perhaps even to the extent that he denies its immortality or does not believe that its fate is correlated to piety. His ambiguous answer, that he does not believe Sir Robert kills 'any', is a sentence with no subject. It may therefore be understood as a reiteration of his earlier point, that Sir Robert has never physically killed anyone, which avoids the matter of the soul altogether. Zelotes immediately retorts that Atheos' recalcitrance stems from the fact that he 'will not beleeve the saying of Christe' and that his adherence to Sir Robert is an instance of the blind leading the blind. Rather than assertively defending his position, Atheos merely says 'I hope wee bee not blinde, I trust we beleeve all well'.[114] Once again these are passive statements that fail to engage with Zelotes on a theological level. Atheos 'hope[s]' and 'trust[s]' that he will not be damned but has little interest in arguing why that might be,

[113] Gifford, fo. 6.
[114] Gifford, fo. 6v.

provoking the suspicion thar this character is at best ambivalent to religion and at worst an atheistic dissembler.

After this initial exchange, in which Zelotes is unable to make Atheos renounce Sir Robert or admit that he does not believe in God, Zelotes is forced to acknowledge that Atheos has 'skill in outward things'.[115] This admission draws attention to the disputatious quality of the dialogue and further encourages readers to interpret Atheos as an inward atheist who carefully manages his appearance of outward conformity, rather than just a half-Reformed Christian who needs a better education. At this point, fifteen pages into the dialogue, he has made no convincing confession of faith. His most pious moment is a passive but noncommittal desire for adequacy: 'I hope I have as good a faith and as good a soule to Godwarde as the best learned of them all'.[116] As the debate moves away from the initial disagreement over Sir Robert's preaching style, Zelotes begins to make increasingly lengthy speeches expounding different aspects of Reformed doctrine and as he does so, Atheos still manages to avoid being trapped into saying anything that feels like a genuine expression of belief or unbelief. Instead, Atheos continues to make vague statements that imply atheistic qualities. Asked whether he keeps the first commandment (to worship only the Christian God), Atheos states that 'It were pitie of my life if I shoulde not bee of that beliefe'.[117] There is a knowing quality to this answer, as if Atheos is deliberately saying what he expects Zelotes wants to hear, while at the same time avoiding a firm position on the matter. Zelotes syllogistically argues that God must be what one loves most, that one spends most time seeking that which he loves most, that Atheos seeks earthly pleasure more than God, and that consequently he has made the world his God and is an idolater. When Atheos responds with another characteristic evasion, Zelotes observes 'How slilie you wind out of the matter, I aske

[115] Gifford, fo. 8r.
[116] Gifford, fo. 6v.
[117] Gifford, fo. 13r.

one thing which yee doe not aunsweare'. Even under this direct pressure Atheos refuses to reveal his true (un)belief, claiming that as a layperson it is not for him to 'meddle with so high matters'.[118] By drawing attention to the scale of Atheos' dissimulation through Zelotes' comments, Gifford ensures not only that readers doubt the sincerity of Atheos' professed Christianity, but that they suspect he is concealing the extent of his unbelief.

Having primed readers to imagine that Atheos cannot truly believe in God, Gifford's introduction of the word atheist when the initial part of the debate reaches its conclusion means that it functions less as a term of generic opprobrium and more as a reasoned way of describing a character who has been revealed to harbour few, if any, religious convictions. Building on the evidence he has gathered from the debate so far, Zelotes concludes that Atheos must be considered an atheist who loves the world more than God:

> there are a number of yee which are in deede verie Atheistes, and set not a strawe by the knowledge of Gods will: for let a man tell ye of any dutie which ye should be taught out of the holy scriptures, by and by, this is your aunsweare, those thinges are not for us to meddle withall: it is not for us to talke of suche pointes. But we are gone a great way from the beginning of this matter, whiche is, that where yee did affirme that yee love God with all your hearte, and that yee have none other Gods besides him: Now the conclusion is proved, that yee love him as much as an old shoe, and that in deede yee make the worlde your God, because ye seeke most after that.[119]

Gifford's use of dialectical language—'Now the conclusion is proved'—lends Zelotes' accusation some weight, indicating that those considered 'Atheistes' are not simply Christians who fall outside Zelotes' narrow conception of godliness but people whose religious ambivalence can be thoroughly demonstrated. Zelotes turns Atheos' words against him, suggesting the atheist's claim that divine matters are 'not for us to meddle withal' indicates a fundamental ambivalence toward religion. A similar strategy is used by William Perkins, who also argued that lukewarm Protestantism was a form of atheism.[120] It is

[118] Gifford, fo. 14r.
[119] Gifford, fo. 15r.
[120] See Dixon, 'William Perkins', 808.

significant that Gifford applies an evidential test to this term that is sometimes considered a meaningless insult: before accusing Atheos of atheism, Zelotes waits until he believes he can demonstrate that Atheos does not believe in God.[121] By arguing that unreformed rural traditions of religious observance often conceal inward ambivalence and unbelief, Gifford ensures that his godly ideal is upheld as the proper corrective to parochial irreligion.

Despite Gifford's evangelical agenda, which results in Zelotes speaking three quarters of the dialogue and vindicating his puritan views with arguments Atheos cannot fully refute, the challenge Atheos poses to Protestant hegemony is significant. While some later dialogues like G. G.'s *Dispute Betwixt a Christian and an Atheist* (1646) were deliberately written to show that the atheist is right, Gifford's text is unable to present unbelief as a plausible threat to the Church of England without making Atheos' ambivalence seem somewhat attractive.[122] For example, Atheos' relaxed attitude toward the question of his own salvation potentially makes his Epicurean outlook more appealing than the soteriological anxieties experienced by many puritans. After accusing him of atheism and outright unbelief, Zelotes forces Atheos to admit that he loves God 'as wel as the best of yee all, though indeede I cannot say so much'.[123] Atheos' refusal to renounce gambling and drinking along with his failure to endorse preaching and scripture leads Zelotes to question whether Atheos believes he will go to heaven. Rather than defending his lax approach to religious observance as one might expect, Atheos rejects the premise of Zelotes' question:

> Zelot. Yee bragge very boldly, I pray ye tell me this, are yee sure ye shalbe saved?
>
> Ath. No, nor you neither, nor the best of yee all, wee muste commit that too God.[124]

---

[121] Cf. Whitaker's response to Rainolds, chap. 3, 174–176.
[122] G. G., *A Dispute Betwixt an Atheist and a Christian the Atheist Being a Flemming, the Christian an Englishman.* (London, 1646); see Dixon, 'England's "Atheisticall Generation"', 154.
[123] Gifford, *Countrie Divinitie*, fo. 15r.
[124] Gifford, fo. 20r.

This is a powerful rejection of Calvinism, which diverged from Catholicism by arguing that it was possible to gain assurance of one's salvation. Conversely, Atheos hopes that he shall be saved because of his personal code of morality while making peace with the idea that he may not be saved at all.[125] One inference we are obliged to entertain is that Atheos is ambivalent about his salvation because he believes that heaven and hell do not exist. In any case, his scepticism about personal assurance allows him to reverse the speakers' roles, so that it is Atheos who instructs Zelotes that 'Wee must not doubt, for hee that doubteth is in a wrong beleefe, we must put all our trust in God'. One way of reading this is that Atheos models a lukewarm variety of Protestantism that embraces the existence of God while imagining him as totally forgiving and permissive. But given that Zelotes has already identified Atheos as an atheist, another interpretation is that, here, the character is mockingly appropriating the doctrine of *sola fide* to deny the doctrine of assurance. The difficulty of choosing between these readings highlights the difficulty of differentiating concealed inward atheism from outward ambivalence and ignorance; part of Gifford's point is that these two positions may be coextensive.

Zlatar states that Atheos' 'ignorance stems from his wilful resistence to God's Word and his preachers'.[126] She does not expand upon this claim but if one agrees with this reading, it is significant that resistance precedes ignorance: Atheos has already rejected God and adopts a position of ignorance because it is easier to pretend he does not understand Reformed doctrine than to reject it openly. As Zlatar points out, Zelotes demonstrates acute rhetorical skill in forcing Atheos to admit to belief in God but here, the disputatious format of the text casts doubt upon the outcome. By presenting Atheos as a disputant trapped into abandoning his argument because of the rhetorical superiority of his opponent, Gifford

[125] This prospect drove many puritans to contemplate unbelief: see Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, chap. 4.
[126] Zlatar, *Reformation Fictions*, 191.

proves the validity of the doctrine he wishes to support while leaving open the possibility that Atheos doesn't actually agree with the proposition being argued. The logic of the disputation is shown to be valid, while Atheos' moral character is called into question by his failure to endorse the outcome wholeheartedly. The irreconcilability of the positions adopted by the two speakers encourages us to read them as disputants arguing on either side of a question, rather than as learned preacher and ignorant rustic.

The irresolvable nature of their conflict is further emphasised by the political arguments that are introduced as the dialogue draws to a close. Here, Atheos accuses Zelotes of being a poor subject to the Queen because he prioritizes his personal religious preferences over the laws of the land. Gifford surely intended this passage as a critique of the state's unwillingness to pursue further reform of the Church of England. By placing Atheos on the side of the crown, Gifford implies that the country's current religious settlement makes true religion inimical to conformity, and inward atheism a condition of loyalty to the state. Nonetheless, it is striking that Atheos is the speaker who ends the conversation in moral indignation: 'Well I must leave yee nowe: yee have dealt verie hardly with mee: it were good that you Puritans should consider your selves and become better subjects to the Prince'.[127] Zelotes retorts that 'you which are rebels against God' are greater enemies of the Monarch but seems resigned to the fact that he will be unable to change Atheos' views or character. Gifford appears confident that by characterising Atheos as an inward atheist with a concomitantly negative *ethos,* his expression of loyalty to the state will be read as an indictment of the country's current religious settlement rather than of Zelotes' objection to it. In either case, Atheos' use of a powerful political argument to counter Zelotes' evangelism further suggests that he is better interpreted as an inward atheist actively skilled in disputation, rather than as a simple country bumpkin. The dialogue ends with Atheos

[127] Gifford, *Countrie Divinitie*, fo. 83.

unrepentant. His faith in God has been subjected to serious questioning but Zelotes is unable to trap him into admitting unbelief, leaving readers to reach this conclusion themselves.

SIDNEY'S PAMELA AND CECROPIA

The Atheos characters in Lyly's *Anatomy* and Gifford's *Countrie Divinitie* exemplify the outward and inward forms of atheism condemned by early modern writers. Both dialogues employ disputatious rhetoric to make arguments about the place of unbelief in society. The disputation between Pamela and Cecropia in Sidney's *Arcadia* works in a similar way but unlike Lyly's Atheos, Cecropia never repents. However, she does also draw her arguments from *D.N.D.* and is threatened with divine retribution by a pious interlocutor who attacks and dehumanises her. Pamela's arguments rouse in Cecropia 'the guilty amazement of her self-accusing conscience', but the afflicted voice of Cecropia's 'person within' is not enough to persuade her to change her beliefs or behave in a more moral way: she 'found a trueth, but could not love it'.[128] Cecropia is therefore similar to Gifford's Atheos, who also remains unchanged by his encounter with an evangelical theist. Yet rather than implying that Cecropia is concealing an intellectual objection to Pamela's arguments, Sidney suggests instead that Cecropia is morally incapable of assenting to them. The narrator observes that 'great persons are woont to make the wrong they have done, to be a cause to doo the more wrong', inviting readers to associate Cecropia's refusal to accept the outcome of the disputation with her broader role in the text as a symbol of tyranny.[129] Rather than revisiting the arguments deployed by Pamela and Cecropia in detail, as I did in the above discussions of *Anatomy* and *Countrie Divinitie*, this section will explore how Sidney's theories about poetic voice and

[128] Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, ed. Fulke Greville (London, 1590), fo. 284. For the view of conscience as '"another person within"', see Zackariah C. Long, 'Toward an Early Modern Theory of Trauma: Conscience in *Richard III*', *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 50–55.
[129] Sidney, *Revised Arcadia* (1590), fo. 284v.

characterisation apply to his construction of Cecropia, and consider why he decided to embed a confutation of atheism in the revised *Arcadia.*

'The Auntes Atheism refuted by the neeces Divinitie'

When Sidney completed the 'Old' *Arcadia* sometime around 1580, the manuscript contained no extended discussion of unbelief and no characters who might be identified as atheists.[130] In the revised version printed in 1590, Sidney introduced the character Cecropia, who attempts to persuade Pamela to marry her son, Amphialus. Cecropia argues that Pamela should renounce her pious chastity and embrace the pleasure of marriage because religion is merely a tool invented by politicians to control the masses. Cecropia's argument relies on a materialist understanding of the universe and a cynical view of religion: she rejects the existence of God, encourages Pamela to 'be contented [in this life], and that is thy heaven', and urges Pamela to disregard the 'bugbeares of opinions brought by great Clearkes into the world' in the name of religion.[131] Cecropia's materialism, anti-providentialism, and dismissive attitude to God—'(if there be any such)'—has led the text's readers and editors to identify her as an atheist.[132] A precedent for this interpretation was established by Fulke Greville's 1590 edition of the revised *Arcadia*, which divides Sidney's text into chapters with

[130] On dating the *Old Arcadia* see Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (the Old Arcadia)*, ed. Jean Robertson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), xv–xix. Whether the 'Old' and 'New' *Arcadias* should be read as two distinct works or as representative of different stages in the ongoing revision of a single *Arcadia* is a matter of contention. For a summary of the debate, see Gavin Alexander, *Writing after Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney 1586–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxiii–xxviii. For a more in-depth exploration of how Sidney developed and adapted the *Arcadia* over an extended period time, see Regina Schneider, *Sidney's (Re)Writing of the Arcadia* (New York, NY: AMS Press, 2008).
[131] Sidney, *Revised Arcadia* (1590), fos. 280v–281r. Cf. Robert Greene's *Selimus:* 'And these religious observations / Only bugbears to keep the world in fear' in *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England: Selimus, A Christian Turned Turk, and The Renegado,* ed. Daniel J. Vitkus (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 71.
[132] For references to Cecropia within histories of atheism, see Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 75–77; Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism', 66. Werth, 'Atheist, Adulterer, Sodomite, Thief', 183. For identifications of atheism by editors and anthologisers, see, e.g., *Aphorisms of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Jane Porter, vol. II (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 159–68; *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 15.

descriptive summaries. In Greville's edition, the exchange between Pamela and Cecropia is described as '*The Auntes Atheism refuted by the neeces divinitie'*.[133] Since the words atheist, atheism, and their cognates do not appear anywhere in the body of the text, the label was probably not authorial. The 1593 composite *Arcadia*, prepared by Mary Sidney Herbert and Philip Sidney's secretary Hugh Sanford, removed these chapter subheadings and many modern editions follow suit. Anyone reading these versions of the *Arcadia* receives no explicit prompt from the text that Cecropia should be understood as an atheist.[134] This presents a number of questions about how and why Sidney developed Cecropia as a character in the revised *Arcadia* and how he understood the concept of atheism. Sidney's Cecropia is not addressed as an atheist by her pious interlocutor and serves a much broader role in the *Arcadia's* overall narrative and thematic structure than Lyly and Sidney's Atheos characters.

Another factor that distinguishes *Arcadia* from *Anatomy* and *Countrie Divinitie* is that Cecropia does not dispute with an evangelical Christian, but a pious pagan. In keeping with *Arcadia*'s setting in a fictive version of the ancient Mediterranean, Pamela is not explicitly described as a Christian, though her views are undoubtedly compatible with Sidney's Protestantism. Pamela's Stoic conception of divine providence is perhaps a version of the *prisca theologia,* but it is more likely that Sidney was drawing upon his Calvinist understanding of humanity's innate knowledge of divine providence to argue that unbelief should be universally rejected.[135] The debate around which of these strategies underpins the disputation between Pamela and Cecropia initially centred on whether Sidney drew the Stoic and Epicurean arguments deployed in the debate from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* or

---

[133] Sidney, *Revised Arcadia* (1590), fo. 277v; See Victor Skretkowiz, 'Building Sidney's Reputation: Texts and Editors of the *Arcadia*', in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend*, ed. J. A. van Dorsten, Arthur F. Kinney, and Dominic Baker-Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 111–13.
[134] E.g., *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (the New Arcadia)*, ed. Victor Skretkowicz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
[135] For the influential *prisca theologia* reading, see D. P. Walker, 'Ways of Dealing With Atheists: A Background to Pamela's Refutation of Cecropia', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 17, no. 2 (1955): 252–77; for a dissenting opinion that draws attention to the Calvinist basis for Pamela's characterisation, see Alan Sinfield, 'Sidney, Du Plessis-Mornay and the Pagans', *Philological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1979): 26.

Cicero's *D.N.D.*[136] Ronald Levinson, for example, has convincingly argued that Sidney's close borrowings from Cicero indicate that he wrote the *Arcadia* with a copy of *D.N.D.* readily to hand. The content of this passage has therefore already been dealt with by other scholars in some detail, as has the role of Cecropia in the *Arcadia* more generally.[137] I have argued that Lyly and Gifford created their Atheos characters using disputatious rhetoric to represent how an imagined unbeliever might think and speak. Here, I contend that Sidney's understanding of *decorum* and *prosopopoeia* can provide another useful vocabulary to explain how early modern writers 'invented' atheism. If the disputatious habits of thought encouraged by training in dialectic made it possible to invent arguments against the existence of God, then humanist literary techniques for developing voice and character made it possible to invent personas 'proportionate' to the perceived wickedness of unbelief.

Sources for Sidney's conception of atheism

When Sidney revised the 'Old' *Arcadia* sometime during the early 1580s, he was aware of at least three substantial discussions of atheism and unbelief. His use of arguments from *D.N.D.* is well known, but two other sources merit consideration as possible influences on the dialogue between Pamela and Cecropia. The first, Plutarch's moral essay on 'Superstition', presents a view of atheism that Sidney rejected. Plutarch describes atheism and superstition as two undesirable extremes on the spectrum of true religion: one rejects the power of the

---

[136] See Edwin Greenlaw, 'The Captivity Episode in Sidney's *Arcadia*', in *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature*, ed. John Matthews Manly (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1923), 54–63; Lois Whitney, 'Concerning Nature in *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*', *Studies in Philology* 24, no. 2 (1927): 207–22; Ronald B. Levinson, 'The "Godlesse Minde" in Sidney's *Arcadia*', *Modern Philology* 29, no. 1 (1931): 21–26. Though the passage is not drawn directly from *De Rerum Natura,* Sidney was familiar with Lucretius, whom he judged as belonging to an inferior category of philosophical writers. See *An Apology for Poetry, or, The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd and R. W. Maslen, Third Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[137] On Cecropia, see Ronald Levao, *Renaissance Minds and Their Fictions: Cusanus, Sidney, Shakespeare* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 235–42; On Sidney's use of Cicero, see Levinson, 'The "Godlesse Minde" in Sidney's *Arcadia*'.

gods entirely while the other encourages excessive fear of divine punishment. Plutarch's argument is that although both superstition and atheism are bad, it is preferable to deny the gods' existence altogether than to ascribe to them a capricious and vindictive providence. The gods should instead be considered benevolent and largely non-interventionist; it is a mistake to view human misfortune as the result of divine punishment.[138] From a Calvinist perspective, this argument is objectionable enough on its own terms, but Sidney found one aspect particularly troubling. For Plutarch, 'superstition provides the seed from which atheism springs', so anyone who promotes a view of the gods as 'rash, faithless, fickle, vengeful, cruel, and easily offended' is tacitly endorsing atheism. The reason this was problematic for Sidney is that many of the people whom Plutarch placed within this category were poets, including the songwriters Timotheus and Cinesias.

In his *Defence of Poesie,* completed around 1580, Sidney makes a point of rejecting Plutarch's contention that poets who wrote about the capriciousness of the gods were responsible for promoting atheism:

> Who list may read in Plutarch the discourses of Isis and Osiris, of the cause why oracles ceased, of the divine providence, and see whether the theology of that nation stood not upon such dreams, which the Poets indeed superstitiously observed. And truly (since they had not the light of Christ) did much better in it, than the Philosophers, who, shaking off superstition, brought in atheism.[139]

Sidney's contention is that because poetry is mimetic and aims to imitate the world as it exists, pagan poets should not be blamed for including representations of capricious gods in their art because they merely represent the theology upon which their nation is built. Sidney's positive comparison of poets to philosophers 'who, shaking off superstition, brought in atheism' inverts Plutarch's argument and implicitly attacks the philosopher himself. Even

---

[138] Plutarch, 'Superstition', 485–89. On Sidney's response to the relationship between history and moral philosophy posited by *Moralia*, see Anthony Miller, 'Sidney's Apology for Poetry and Plutarch's *Moralia*', *English Literary Renaissance* 17, no. 3 (1987): 259–76.
[139] Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 107.

though 'Superstition' is the only moral essay that Sidney directly paraphrases here, he avoids mentioning its title, perhaps to discourage readers from seeking out its subversive preference for atheism over superstition. If deliberate, Sidney's tactic seems to have worked because editions of the *Defence* by Shepherd, Vickers, and Alexander identify only Sidney's explicit references to 'Isis and Osiris', 'The Obsolescence of Oracles', and 'On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance'; his engagement with 'Superstition' seems to have gone unnoticed.[140] Sidney does not return to 'Superstition' in the *Arcadia* after having dismissed Plutarch's suggestion that atheism and poetry are connected in the *Defence,* though the character of Pamela may be read as a repudiation of Plutarch's thesis. As a pious pagan who argues that divine providence is calculated to reward virtue and punish vice, Pamela's reasoned endorsement of providentialism circumvents the binary established by Plutarch.

Sidney found a treatment of atheism more conducive to his Protestant faith in Philippe Du-Plessis-Mornay's *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrestienne contre les athées, épicuriens, payens, juifs, mahométans et autres infidels* (1581). In the last years of his life, Sidney began to translate this work into English and when Arthur Golding published a 'finished' version in 1587, it was one of the earliest and most influential works of anti-atheism printed in sixteenth-century England.[141] Although the published text was entirely reworked by Golding and bears little evidence of Sidney's authorship, he does seem to have spent time working on the translation. In a letter to Francis Walsingham, Fulke Greville states that Sidney 'hath most excellently translated among divers other notable works Monsieur du Plessis' book against atheism'.[142] Sidney's desire to translate *De la vérité* was an extension

---

[140] Sidney, 218; Brian Vickers, ed., *English Renaissance Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 376; Gavin Alexander, ed., *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 2004), 346. Duncan-Jones and Van Dorsten gloss the *Moralia* as a whole, rather than referring to specific essays; see *Miscellaneous Prose*, 108.

[141] The frontispiece states that Mornay's text was 'Begunne to be translated into English by Sir *Philip Sidney* Knight, and at his request finished by *Arthur Golding*'. On the place of *De la vérité* in the tradition of anti-atheism, see Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism*, 53.

[142] Qtd. in Sidney, *Miscellaneous Prose*, 155.

of his already close intellectual friendship with de Mornay, whom he met in 1577. Both men witnessed the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 and were mentored by Hubert Languet, who in turn was heavily influenced by Philip Melanchthon.[143] These experiences likely contributed to a shared religious outlook that Robert Stillman has described as an irenic 'anti-confessional' piety based on Melanchthonian reformed doctrines. The anti-confessionalism of Sidney and de Mornay sought to promote unity among reformed Christians against political tyranny and Roman Catholicism by establishing learned correspondence networks.[144] Both writers believed that Protestant polemicists should direct their attention away from controversies between different Reformed confessions and toward more universal concerns.

De Mornay's *De la vérité* pursued this aim by attacking atheists. The polemical tone of the treatise is indicated by the titular claim that it was written '*contre* [...] *infidels*'. Yet, as Stillman points out, the text contains no references to specific Christian confessional groups and no discussion of the Eucharist, the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, or contentious matters of soteriology like predestination.[145] De Mornay gave himself license to cover only the most fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, therefore avoiding unnecessary controversy by writing a treatise that purports to engage with people who rejected belief in Christianity altogether, whether atheists, insincere Christians, or members of other religions. De Mornay creates an impression of urgency and topicality by directing the main force of his argument against 'atheists, despisers of religion' whom Christians supposedly 'meeteth with at every step'.[146] Given that unbelief was universally reviled during this period, de Mornay's attack on atheism was an expedient way of emphasizing a fundamental point of agreement

---

143 Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*, 81.
144 Robert E. Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), esp. chap. 3.
145 Stillman, 132.
146 Du-Plessis-Mornay, *Trewnesse of the Christian Religion,* sig. **iiii^r.

among early modern Christians. This tactic is effective in *De la vérité* because de Mornay's discussion of atheism adheres to two important principles. Firstly, the forms of unbelief that de Mornay includes within the category of atheism are limited: he uses the term only to describe people who deny the existence of God and does not use the term to attack the beliefs of doctrinal enemies.[147] Secondly, de Mornay is vague about where atheists are to be found in the contemporary world. Although he provides readers with some historical examples, such as Caligula, Diagoras, and Theodorus, each of these figures is firmly rooted in the pre-Christian world and the information de Mornay gives about their views is entirely derived from classical sources.[148]

Since de Mornay does not specify who the atheists Christians allegedly 'meeteth with at every step' really are, the preface shifts the imaginative labour of identifying atheists away from the author and onto the reader, who is invited to 'call to remembrance how manie blasphemies he heareth howerly against God and his word'.[149] This vagueness is part of the text's design: by giving a clear definition of atheism, suggesting it is highly prevalent, and then neglecting to provide concrete examples, de Mornay united his Christian readers in imagining a notional enemy against whom they could unite. Sidney was particularly well equipped to do this because he was strongly invested in the idea that abstract concepts could best be understood when articulated by fictional voices proportionate to the idea they described. Sidney's introduction of Cecropia to the revised *Arcadia* may therefore be read as an attempt to reify the conceptual figures he encountered in de Mornay, Plutarch, and Cicero by voicing atheistic ideas through a fictional character who could plausibly espouse unbelief.

---

[147] See the careful distinction between atheists, epicures, and non-Christian theists established in the 'Preface to the Reader': *Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, sig. **iiii.

[148] Du-Plessis-Mornay, 11. Mornay's story of Caligula openly cursing the gods before hiding under his bed in terror of divine punishment is taken from Suetonius' 'Life of Caligula'; the list of Diagoras, Theodorus, and Euhemerus is taken from one of Velleius' speeches in *D.N.D.;* the story of Diagoras burning a statue of Hercules is taken from Athenagoras' *A Plea for the Christians*. See Suetonius, *The Historie of Twelve Caesars Emperours of Rome*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1606), 147; Cicero, *D.N.D.,* 1.1–2, 42–43; Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis*, chap. 4.

[149] Du-Plessis-Mornay, *Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, sig. **iiii^{r}.

Voicing atheists: Sidney's poetics and early modern 'characters'

Early modern understandings of 'character' were deeply rooted in the rhetorical training students received at grammar schools and universities. Pedagogical exercises that taught the use of figures like *prosopopoeia, prosopographia,* and *ethopoeia* required students to imagine the individual qualities of the voices they imitated. These terms were defined with varying degrees of precision, but early modern rhetoricians consistently emphasised the utility of such figures for conveying the characteristics not only of people, but also inarticulate objects and abstract concepts. George Puttenham, for example, uses *prosopographia* to describe impersonations of historical or mythical people and *prosopopoeia* for the attribution of a human voice to an abstract concept or inarticulate object.[150] The prevalence of these figures in the early modern education system and on conceptions of personhood generally was extensive. Gavin Alexander notes that curriculums in schools and universities were largely based upon manuals of classical rhetoric that taught orators to convey *ethos* (moral character) by incorporating personas into their speeches. Renaissance understandings of personhood are therefore 'built on the rhetorical idea that a self is the words it speaks'.[151] Concurrently, Arthur F. Kinney observes that the rhetorical skills taught in early modern schools and universities were also conducive to 'a developing poetic for fiction' because exercises involving prosopographic impersonations of historical individuals required students 'again and again, to play opposing roles, to simulate varying personalities, to *create characters*'.[152] If Cecropia is to be understood as a character who

[150] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie Contrived into Three Bookes: The First of Poets and Poesie, the Second of Proportion, the Third of Ornament.* (London, 1589), 200. Cf. Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes Very Profytable for the Better Understanding of Good Authors [...]* (London, 1550), sig. E1v–E2r; Richard Rainolde, *A Booke Called the Foundacion of Rhetorike Because All Other Partes of Rhetorike Are Grounded Thereupon [...]* (London, 1563), fos. xlix–l.
[151] Gavin Alexander, 'Prosopopoeia: The Speaking Figure', in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Katrin Ettenhuber, and Gavin Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 102.
[152] Kinney, *Humanist Poetics*, 22–23, emphasis original.

plausibly articulates the idea of atheism that Sidney encountered in de Mornay, Plutarch, and Cicero, then examining the rhetorical and poetic basis for Sidney's understanding of character may illustrate his approach to reifying an abstract concept.

Creating a successful *prosopopoeia* was not dependent upon slavishly mimicking the voice of a 'real' speaker, but upon crafting a speaking voice (and its associated selfhood) that felt plausible for whatever one was writing. This skill was first developed by the preliminary exercises (*progymnasmata*) that dominated the Elizabethan grammar school curriculum.[153] The imperative to imagine the personal qualities of the characters one created through impersonation continued at university, where students were generally set an entire textbook of classical rhetoric, such as Cicero's *Orations* or Quintilian's *The Orator's Education*.[154] The greater emphasis in these works upon personation as a tool of persuasion indicate the potential utility of *prosopopoeia* as a means for early modern writers to develop polemical attacks on unbelief. Quintilian asserts that

> We use them (1) to display the inner thoughts of our opponents as though they were talking to themselves (but they are credible only if we imagine them saying what it is not absurd for them to have thought!), (2) to introduce conversations between ourselves and others, or of others among themselves, in a credible manner, and (3) to provide appropriate characters for words of advice, reproach, complaint, praise, or pity.[155]

The forms of personation that Quintilian describes both emphasise a sense of proportion between the character of the person speaking and the words attributed to them: the first ascribes a reasonably conceivable speech to a known person, the third imagines 'appropriate characters' to voice particular arguments. According to Quintilian's directions, if one wanted to create a *prosopopoeia* of unbelief, it would be necessary first to imagine an appropriate

---

[153] Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 48–52.
[154] Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice*, 51–54.
[155] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 9.2.30–31; cf. 3.8.49–54, 11.1.40–41.

character in whose voice a rejection of God would sound plausible. This is what Sidney does with Cecropia.

For Sidney, the value of *prosopopoeia* was its ability to bring to bring abstract concepts to life, making it an important tool for the poet. Thus, David's use of the figure makes the Psalms 'poetical', even though they do not conform to established metrical rules:

> For what else is the awaking his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable *prosopopoeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts' joyfulness and hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy[…]?[156]

Sidney argues that the psalms are to be praised as poetry because of how the Psalmist uses vivid language to enable fallen readers to engage with divine beauty. Beasts and hills cannot speak their own joyfulness but by animating the hills and ascribing human expressivity to the animals, the Psalmist makes the reader see the majesty of God's creation. *Prosopopoeia* was not only a defining feature of what Sidney understood poetry to be, but also a figure he had a reputation for having mastered. Alexander notes that in Sidney's writing, 'the orderly or disorderly language or verse of a character is proportioned to their moral or emotional order or disorder', making Sidney the model author of prosopographic fiction.[157] For example, the early modern theorist of poetics, John Hoskins, praises the way that Sidney successfully conveys the sense of 'a mischievous seditious stomacke in *Cecropia*'.[158] Cecropia's seditiousness is inextricably bound up with her atheism. Cecropia tries to dissuade Pamela from belief in God and providence because she wants to convince Pamela to rebel against the authority of her father and marry Amphialus without parental consent. In this respect, Sidney has made Cecropia morally consistent: her unbelief is proportionate to the other aspects of her character.

---

[156] Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 84.

[157] Gavin Alexander, 'Sidney, Scott, and the Proportions of Poetics.', *Sidney Journal* 33, no. 1 (2015): 18–20.

[158] John Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style*, ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1935), 155–56, emphasis original.

Cecropia and the moral character of atheism

In contrast to the Atheos characters created by Lyly and Gifford, who were written as rhetorical vehicles for exploring the intellectual and social consequences of unbelief, Cecropia's atheism is incidental to her role in the plot of *Arcadia* and its broader themes. Sidney did not respond to the concept of atheism he encountered in de Mornay, Plutarch, and Cicero by embedding arguments against the existence of God in a fictional dialogue to test them. Rather, his goal was to create a character who could plausibly have held such views. Gifford effectively did the same thing in *Countrie Divinitie* since the dialogue suggests Atheos' religious ambivalence and sinful lifestyle are consistent with his implied unbelief. Sidney does this more explicitly by giving readers mediated access to Cecropia's thoughts and motivations through a third-person narrator and providing details of Cecropia's actions through reports given by other characters. Information supplied to the reader at various earlier points in the narrative indicate that Cecropia's arguments against the existence of God are genuine and coextensive with other aspects of her character. From an early modern Christian's perspective, some of Cecropia's behaviours actually become more plausible when it is revealed that she does not believe in God.

The first time Cecropia is referred to in the *Arcadia*, Basilius describes how she took the young Artesia into her household and 'taught her to thinke that there is no wisdome but in including heaven and earth in ones self: and that love, courtesie, gratefulnesse, friendship, and all other vertues are rather to be taken on, then taken in ones selfe'.[159] A messenger also reports that Cecropia was responsible for 'accidentally' releasing the bear and lion that attack the main characters at the end of Book One. Alongside the obvious malignance of the act itself, this episode establishes an association between Cecropia and non-human animals that

[159] Sidney, *Revised Arcadia* (1590), fo. 66r.

persists throughout the text.[160] Another strategy Cecropia uses in her campaign against Basilius is sending her agent Clinias to foment rebellion among his people.[161] Given the close association between atheism and politic statesmanship, this is another indication that unbelief is a natural part of her character. The events surrounding the disputation contribute further to this impression. Cecropia has imprisoned Pamela, Philoclea, and the disguised Zelmane in her castle: when her efforts at rhetorical persuasion fail, she attempts to break the women's spirts by starving them, exposing them to terrifying noises, and leading them each to believe the others have been executed.[162] It is distinctly plausible that these are the actions of a character who has no religious faith from which she might derive a sense of moral responsibility; Cecropia cares only about fulfilling her own goals and desires.

During the disputation itself, the narrator gives an even deeper insight into the motivations behind Cecropia's attempt to dissuade Pamela of her religious beliefs. We are told that after failing to persuade Philoclea to marry Amphialus, Cecropia resolves 'in herselfe to runne a more ragged race' in which no tactic, including arguing against 'heavenly conceits', will be off limits.[163] Cecropia aims to limit the extent to which Pamela's conscience inhibits her from accepting the marriage, hoping to 'winde her to her crooked bias', a phrase that reveals she is not arguing *pro forma*, but has a deep-rooted moral deformity.[164] This is confirmed when Cecropia launches into her attack on religious belief and the narrator states that she began 'speaking the more earnestly because she spake as she thought', which reinforces the idea that Cecropia genuinely does not believe in God.[165] The main objection Cecropia articulates to Pamela's beliefs in a deity, divine providence, and the afterlife is that these ideas place limitations on human power and control, a grievance that

[160] Sidney, fo. 85.
[161] Sidney, fo. 220v.
[162] Sidney, Book Three, chaps. 20–23.
[163] Sidney, fo. 280v.
[164] Sidney, fo. 280v.
[165] Sidney, fo. 280v.

aligns perfectly with Cecropia's persona as a tyrannical ruler who aims to subdue the people of Arcadia herself.[166] On this basis, Cecropia echoes Machiavelli in arguing that religious mores have been 'brought by great Clearkes into the world' only to frighten people into conformity, and that great leaders like Pamela and herself, 'neede not to be helde up by the staffe of vulgar opinions'.[167] She therefore aims to rouse in Pamela a triumphant rejection of religious values based on assertive self-realisation, for 'foolish feare, and fearefull ignorance, was the first inventer of those conceates'.[168] According to the alternative world-view Cecropia espouses, the psychological functions that religion once performed in Pamela's life will be replaced by the development of her personal intellect and temporal happiness: 'Be wise, and that wisedome shalbe a God unto thee; be contented, and that is thy heaven'.[169]

We are told that Cecropia 'would have spoken further to have enlarged and confirmed her discourse' and in contrast to Lyly's Atheos, Sidney gives the impression this is probably true.[170] But Cecropia is interrupted by a furious Pamela, 'with eies which glistered forth beames of disdaine', who proceeds not only to confute Cecropia's arguments, but also to attack her personally.[171] The strategy of Pamela's confutation, which is based on arguments from *D.N.D.,* has been discussed at length elsewhere, but it is worth noting here the slurs she makes against Cecropia's character and how these insults contribute to the idea that a person who articulates arguments against God must have sub-human moral deformities. Pamela addresses Cecropia as a 'wicked woman' who is 'unworthy to breathe', fauns like a 'bemired dog', and is 'miserably foolish'; Pamela thus confutes her arguments 'without any hope of fruite in so rotten a harte'.[172] Even though Pamela's arguments are convincing, the narrator

---

[166] On atheism and tyranny, see chap. 4, 216–218.
[167] Sidney, *Revised Arcadia* (1590), fo. 280v. For Machiavelli's view of religion as trick, see chap. 1, 68–76.
[168] Sidney, fo. 280v.
[169] Sidney, fo. 281r.
[170] Sidney, fo. 281r; cf. 113, above.
[171] Sidney, fo. 281r.
[172] Sidney, fo. 281r.

explains that Cecropia is unable to accept them by comparing her to an animal associated with witchcraft: 'like a Batte (which though it have eyes to discerne that there is a Sunne, yet hath so evill eyes, that it cannot delight in the Sunne) found a trueth, but could not love it'.[173] Sidney therefore makes use of the same strategy as those who claimed that when a public religious disputation failed to arrive at a desired conclusion, it was due to error on the part of the participants.[174] As well as comparing her to a 'Batte', the narrator further dehumanises Cecropia by stating that during Pamela's reply, her eyes were cast 'like a horse that woulde strike at the stirrup', highlighting the fact that she is unable to provide a substantive response to the arguments made against her position.[175]

The narrator summarises the debate as having concluded in such a way 'that captivitie might seeme to have authoritie over tyrannie', invoking the *Arcadia*'s broader thematic concern with defining legitimate monarchical authority.[176] The disputation between Pamela and Cecropia is intended to show not only that a substantial logical argument can be made against unbelief, but that by holding this opinion, Cecropia demonstrates herself to be devoid of the qualities necessary to make her a just ruler. In this sense, her tyranny and her atheism are mutually reinforcing, which demonstrates how successful Sidney was at writing an 'appropriate person' to voice arguments against the existence of God. Atheism and tyranny were closely related in this period: as I show in Chapter 4, Marlowe drew on this association to encourage audiences to interpret Tamburlaine as an atheist.[177] The characterisation of Cecropia as an inhuman tyrant is appropriate given the main source for Sidney's conception of atheism was de Mornay's *De la vérité* . De Mornay attacked atheism because it enabled him to defend fundamental Christian principles in a way that was not overly polemical or

---

[173] Sidney, fo. 284v.
[174] See 95–96, above.
[175] Sidney, *Revised Arcadia* (1590), fo. 284v; cf. intro., 63 and 115, above.
[176] Sidney, fo. 284r.
[177] See chap. 4, 216-218.

partisan. As Stillman has shown, the Phillippist 'anti-confessional' piety of Mornay and Sidney was predicated upon a desire to free Europe from tyrannical monarchs who encouraged religious war.[178] It is therefore fitting that when Sidney used *prosopopoeia* to voice the silent targets of de Mornay's anti-atheist confutation, the character he created was herself a tyrant.

Like Lyly and Gifford, Sidney wrote an anti-atheist dialogue into his text to make a polemical argument. The consensus that atheism was both logically questionable and morally reprehensible was common ground not only among Christian confessions, but also between Christians and most pagans. The broad appeal of anti-atheist rhetoric allows Pamela's confutation of Cecropia to contribute to the *Arcadia*'s broader critique of tyranny while further establishing these characters as epitomising pious virtue and tyrannical vice. It is striking that Lyly, Gifford, and Sidney all use similar disputatious formats, anti-atheist tropes, and arguments drawn from classical sources to address very different contemporary issues. Lyly's text attacks the complacency of Renaissance humanism by revealing Euphues and Atheos to be equally poor disputants who both fail to use Cicero effectively. Gifford, meanwhile, attacks the Church of England by suggesting that its insufficient evangelical rigour allows inward atheists to pass unnoticed as ambivalent but conforming members of the Church. Each of these arguments relies upon audiences using the moral character of these speakers as a guide to constructing a narrative about how the things these characters say relate to their implied interior thoughts and beliefs. Sidney does this straightforwardly by having the narrator tell readers that Cecropia's outward unbelief is a genuine manifestation of her tyrannical character and the debate ends with Pamela's undisputed victory. However, in the debates of *Anatomy* and *Countrie Divinitie,* which take place in settings that more closely approximate contemporary England, the beliefs of the characters and the outcomes of the

---

[178] See Stillman, *Renaissance Cosmopolitanism*, chap. 4.

debates are less certain. Lyly's Atheos is easily converted, which reflects the assumption that the unbelief of outward atheists is merely superficial, while casting doubt upon the ability of Renaissance humanists to confute more stubborn opponents. The fear that inward atheists lurk behind masks of outward conformity is addressed directly in *Countrie Divinitie,* in which Gifford prompts readers to infer that Atheos is an unbeliever. These textual effects are achieved by using *prosopopoeiae* to create characters who might plausibly deny the existence of God, either inwardly or outwardly. The disputatious and prosopographic qualities of these texts indicate the extent to which the literary techniques of Renaissance humanism enabled the invention of early modern conceptions of atheism.

Chapter 3

From insult to accusation: atheism and post-Reformation polemic

In Chapter 2, we saw how Renaissance humanism provided rhetorical tools that enabled early modern writers to invent arguments for unbelief and develop atheist personas to account for the possibility of its expression. In this chapter, I will argue that the politico-religious conflicts of post-Reformation Europe made the potential emergence of unbelief a particularly pressing issue. Most writers who engaged in anti-atheist discourse during this period had been taught to think in similar ways to Lyly, Gifford, and Sidney. They saw outward atheism primarily as a *pro forma* position adopted by speakers with immoral *ethe* but did not discount the possibility that outwardly heterodox attitudes to religion might conceal more substantial forms of inward unbelief. However, most discussions of atheism in this period did not occur within fictive dialogues between theists and unbelievers, but in polemical works written to address religious controversies. As Michael Buckley points out, pre-modern atheism was almost always a hostile 'designation of another person' based on an 'unsympathetic reading of their theism'.[1] Because the term's use as a pejorative could be predicated on objections to a wide range of theological positions, intellectual historians have often dismissed pre-Enlightenment accusations of atheism as meaningless insults exchanged between religious controversialists.

This chapter challenges these claims firstly by showing that post-Reformation religious conflict could itself be an inducement to unbelief. Secondly, I explore how polemical accusations of atheism could be used to suggest an opponent's contentious position was indicative of the rise of unbelief or even responsible for it. Accusations of this kind posit

[1] Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 5–9.

that the doctrines espoused by one's opponent are either demonstrably false or tantamount to unbelief. For example, Catholics often claimed that Protestant objections to 'superstition' were indicative of their broader tendencies toward unbelief. They also argued that the inability of different Reformed Churches to agree on key doctrines weakened Christianity's overall authority, potentially inducing unbelievers to reject it altogether.[2] The case studies explored in this chapter examine two contexts in which post-Reformation religious conflict was perceived as having the potential to provoke unbelief. The first section examines disputes among learned authors about how best to translate the Bible into vernacular languages; the second examines attacks upon the proliferation of disparate confessional groups. These sub-chapters are not presented as representative of all anti-atheist discourse in this period, but rather as demonstrations of how what is 'meant' when accusations of atheism are deployed vary depending on the contexts in which they occur. The term was undoubtedly flexible and could be used by anyone, as this chapter's heterogenous cast of elite theologians, lay preachers, Catholics, and Protestants shows. Even so, these accusations were not meaningless, and like other vexed terms such as 'puritan', 'sect', or 'moderate', the unwritten rules governing their use can reveal much to historians and literary critics.

I turn first to how anti-atheist rhetoric was employed in the paratextual apparatus of the Rheims New Testament (1582) and in subsequent attacks and defences of the translation by William Whitaker and William Rainolds.[3] These controversialists use accusations of atheism to make polemical arguments. Their accusations are not meaningless insults; instead, they argue that different approaches to translation could function as inducements to unbelief. The second case study centres on Henry Smith's *Gods Arrowe Against Atheists* (1593), a treatise ostensibly written to confute atheism that, in fact, spends more time attacking non-

[2] Cf. chap.1, 66–68.
[3] Gregory Martin, trans., *The New Testament of Jesus Christ, Translated Faithfully into English, out of the Authentical Latin* (Rheims, 1582), hereafter cited as Rheims New Testament.

Christian monotheisms, Catholics, and Protestant separatists.[4] Because of its eclectic focus, scholars have often dismissed Smith's treatise as imprecise and ill-informed, but even in this apparently unfocussed work, atheism is used in a very deliberate way. By attending to Smith's citation of classical confutations of atheism, his use of an accessible homiletic style, and his career as a moderate puritan lecturer, I show how Smith's use of anti-atheist rhetoric to attack Protestant separatists is a conscious polemical strategy that assumes religious division could inadvertently induce unbelief.

ATHEISM AS 'SUPREME INSULT'

This chapter argues that to be effective, early modern accusations of atheism relied upon a consensus about what atheism meant and an awareness of how post-Reformation religious conflict could induce unbelief. However, accusations of atheism were not always deployed for sophisticated rhetorical purposes, nor did they always imply their targets were unbelievers. Often, the goal was simply to attack one's opponent by drawing a parallel between his poor character and the assumed ignorance and immorality of atheists. There are many examples of such accusations. When Matthew Sutcliffe intervened in the *Watch-Word* controversy in 1604, the Church of England polemicist accused the Jesuit, Robert Persons, of being an atheist and an alcoholic: '*Robert Parsons* certes, himselfe abusing this place to sport, as the Pope abuseth scriptures to profite, sheweth himselfe to be an Atheist: and talking of his Clergie, he proveth himself a sot'.[5] When Sutcliffe calls Persons an 'atheist', we intuitively recognise that the term is used because it encompasses what Sutcliffe sees as Persons' negative *ethos*: his Catholicism; his conceitedness; his disingenuous rhetorical

---

[4] Henry Smith, *Gods Arrowe against Atheists* (London, 1593).
[5] Matthew Sutcliffe, *A Ful and Round Answer to N.D. Alias Robert Parsons the Noddie His Foolish and Rude Warne-Word [...]* (London, 1604), 53. Amusingly, Sutcliffe next accuses the clergy of being indigent sodomites because of their excessive singing and consumption of cabbage soup.

positioning; his seditiousness. 'Atheist', with its connotations of immorality, baseness, and hostility to religion, reads as an insult that amplifies the concrete objections to Persons that Sutcliffe articulates elsewhere. In the same way, when Sutcliffe calls Persons a 'sot', we do not assume that he literally believes Persons is a drunk, but that the qualities of Persons' argumentation—muddle-headedness, compulsiveness, excessiveness—approximate drunkenness. Unlike 'sot', however, 'atheist' is a term of abuse that does not have a readily identifiable real-world correlative. Whereas 'sot' is analogical, conjuring an image of a drunken scholar to which Persons is compared, 'atheist' is associative, bringing with it a range of negative connotations without directly comparing Persons' Catholicism to unbelief.

Problems arise only with the assumption that all polemical applications of the term work in the same way. Accusations like Sutcliffe's, in which atheist does not explicitly denote unbeliever and serves as a broad term of abuse, have not only been taken as representative but have been used to suggest that unbelief itself was inconceivable prior to the Enlightenment. This view originates with the work of Lucian Febvre, who, in an influential study of François Rabelais, argued that '[atheist] did not have a strictly defined meaning. It was used in whatever sense one wanted to give it'. The most common 'sense' that Febvre identified was as a term of opprobrium. Since the volume of these insults far outweighed the historical evidence for unbelief 'we cannot explain the really comical way they shamelessly used the supreme insult "Atheist" against each other'. Febvre's position was nuanced: he acknowledged that 'At the very least [atheist] signified unbeliever' and his main contention was that prior to the Enlightenment, 'unbeliever' was an imprecise and expansive category that bore little relation to the modern concept of atheism, not that the notion of unbelief was impossible.[6] The key distinction for Febvre is that modern atheism is based on the rejection

[6] Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 132–38.

of precise theological concepts, whereas the scoffing remarks of a writer like Rabelais 'could at best have been no more than opinions—paradoxical ways of thinking and feeling that nothing from outside came to the support of or propped up in any real or substantial way'.[7] In Febvre's view, early modern accusations of atheism implied the target had a scandalously callous attitude to religion, not that he espoused any specific form of unbelief.

Febvre's idea that atheist functioned as a completely meaningless insult has been hugely influential, though some of the nuance of Febvre's position has been lost. Aylmer, for example, asserts that '"atheism" and "atheist" were constantly used as terms of abuse', while Werth notes that 'To brand someone an "atheist" was a rhetorical trump card that discredited any deviant theological—or cultural—position'.[8] Though writing thirty-five years apart, both scholars make the same assumption: that the power of atheist as a term of disparagement was derived from it being flexible to the point of meaninglessness. This assumption does not preclude a productive analysis of how the term functions in the work of specific writers. In their studies of Raleigh and Perkins, both Dixon and Strathmann note that the term often functioned as a 'snarl word' used to express hatred of particular people or beliefs, while Caldwell has recently argued that Nashe's use of the term encapsulates his derision toward England's inability to read signs from God.[9] Other writers, however, are more dismissive of the term's usefulness, with Pooley suggesting that because the term had no fixed meaning, it functioned merely as one of many 'vague, accusatory terms lobbed over the walls of orthodox Christianity in the direction of its opponents'.[10]

This prevailing wariness about the risk of anachronistically misinterpreting late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century use of the term atheist is reflected in—or is perhaps

---

[7] Febvre, 461.
[8] Aylmer, 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England', 24; Werth, 'Atheist, Adulterer, Sodomite, Thief', 178.
[9] Dixon, 'William Perkins', 806; Strathmann, *Sir Walter Ralegh*, 61; Caldwell, *Reformation of Moral Value*, chap. 4.
[10] Pooley, 'Unbelief and the Bible', 614.

even an influence upon—the ways scholars have typically approached the history of atheism. Because most studies have emerged from within the discipline of intellectual history, which usually identifies the emergence of atheism with Enlightenment philosophy and the Scientific Revolution, historians typically take the writing of Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, or Denis Diderot as their starting points.[11] Accusations of atheism in the sixteenth century are usually overlooked because the term was generally not applied to individuals who espoused systems of natural, moral, or political philosophy from which God was excluded. Kenneth Sheppard's *Anti-Atheism* is a good example of this approach. Though Sheppard begins his study in 1580 and acknowledges that the tradition of English anti-atheism began in the sixteenth century, his chapters are primarily devoted to studies of learned authors who rehabilitated strands of Epicurean and Platonic thought in order to confute atheism in the second half of the seventeenth century.[12] The anti-atheist treatises of writers like Ralph Cudworth, Pierre Gassendi, and Robert Boyle are typically privileged for analysis because they fit easily into narratives about how unbelief came to be confuted using rational arguments that treated the atheist's position ever more seriously, ultimately leading to eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Pierre Bayle's argument that atheists were capable of acting morally.[13]

Some recent studies of atheism, however, have eschewed this tendency to focus on the development of philosophical unbelief, and have instead located the origins of unbelief within Christianity itself. For Kors, the emphasis is upon the 'fratricide' between Catholics and Protestants: by tearing holes in one another's religions, theists invented arguments that unbelievers would later use to attack Christianity as a whole.[14] Ryrie, meanwhile, contends

[11] See, e.g. Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*; Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*.
[12] Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism*.
[13] See also Boyle, *Boyle on Atheism*; Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750*.
[14] Kors, *Atheism in France*.

that unbelief first emerged as emotions that were subsequently rationalised: the outrage of Christians angered by the immorality of established religion and the anxiety of Calvinists who doubted their election led some of the most invested believers to question their faith.[15] It has long been claimed that the Protestant Reformation precipitated a move toward a modern, secularised attitude to religious belief, a condition that Ethan Shagan persuasively argues is predicated upon the ability of individual liberal subjects to form identities by choosing particular beliefs from among many.[16]

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to evaluate if and how the Reformation led to secular modernity, whether this was in conjunction with the emergence of newly individualistic subjectivities during the Renaissance (Burckhardt and Greenblatt); by making it necessary to tolerate confessional diversity (Skinner and Gregory); by changing the way concepts like belief and certainty were understood (Schreiner and Shagan); or by accelerating a late-medieval tendency to reject the notion that spirits and supernatural powers operated directly upon humans in this world, leading to a condition of Weberian disenchantment (Taylor).[17] However, I do want to consider the ways in which anti-atheist writers related their concerns about the rise of unbelief to post-Reformation religious disagreement. One of the least controversial aspects of Brad Gregory's work in this area is his adherence to the idea that if the Reformation led to a more secular society, this outcome was 'unintentional'. Early modern theologians did not set out to banish religion to a nascent private sphere. Rather, this

---

[15] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*.

[16] Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*. Although cf. Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), which locates the origins of the liberal secularised subject in medieval Christianity, explicitly seeking to 'dispense' with the roles of the Renaissance and Reformation.

[17] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), esp. part II; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), esp. chap. 2; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), chap. 8; Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); Susan Elizabeth Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?: The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (New York, NY: Oxford university Press, 2011); Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 1.

took place because it became easier to conduct public discourse along other less contentious lines, such as natural philosophy and mathematics.[18] Yet, many sixteenth-century writers were undoubtedly aware that severe inter-confessional conflict could weaken Christianity's overall authority of as a source of truth about the world. Francis Bacon, for example, argued that 'Divisions in Religion [...] introduce Atheisme': if religion were no longer 'true' or 'false', but a series of incompatible partisan claims, they might all be rejected collectively.[19]

If we accept that the Reformation was responsible for causing some degree of secularisation and that many early moderns were aware that religious conflict could encourage unbelief, then the scholarly claim that polemical accusations of atheism among religious controversialists were meaningless seems doubtful. Not only did the confessional divisions proliferating within Christianity constitute a potential inducement to unbelief, but the very act of confuting a doctrinal enemy could itself highlight how fractured the Christian world was becoming. The more one argued for a particular Biblical translation, or for one reading of scripture over another, the more the Christian doctrines could seem inherently subject to individual interpretation, rather than a body of universal truths. In this context, an accusation of atheism can take on a deliberately charged resonance. This is what happens with the Rheims New Testament and in *God's Arrow.*

ATHEISM AND THE BIBLE: THE RHEIMS NEW TESTAMENT

The Rheims New Testament was the first English translation of the Bible officially sanctioned by the Catholic Church. The team behind its production, including the lead translator Gregory Martin, was comprised of English Catholic scholars who lived and worked

[18] Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*.
[19] Francis Bacon, 'Of Atheisme', in *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan, *The Oxford Francis Bacon,* vol. 15 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 53.

in exile at the English College at Douai, which had been relocated to Rheims between 1578 and 1593 for financial reasons.[20] The translators intended the volume primarily as an evangelical aid to Catholic priests operating clandestinely within England and to prevent lay Catholics who wanted to read vernacular scripture being led astray by Protestant versions.[21] Catholics who resisted the Elizabethan regime had long recognised that Protestant access to vernacular scripture that endorsed Reformed theology gave their opponents substantial pastoral, evangelical, and polemical advantages. Protestant polemicists could quickly reel off scriptural evidence confuting Catholicism with minimal effort, while their Catholic counterparts had to resort to spot-translations from the Latin Vulgate, which was not only slower and less convenient, but also less accessible to readers unfamiliar with Latin.[22] The Rheims translation was therefore printed with an extensive array of paratexts designed to establish the authority of its translation and discredit the popular Geneva Version.[23] A long preface by William Allen justifies the publication of a Catholic Bible in English while post-chapter annotations, perhaps written by Allen and Richard Bristow, expound the scriptures in accordance with Catholic theology and attack numerous aspects of Protestantism.[24]

Throughout these annotations and in the defence of the translation issued by William Rainolds in 1583, anti-atheist rhetoric is used to attack Protestant Bibles for how they interpret specific textual cruxes. According to the Catholic scholars at Rheims, proponents of the Geneva translation consistently choose readings that are less metaphysical, such as their insistence upon reading scriptural evidence for transubstantiation as metaphorical. Another

---

[20] Thomas M. McCoog, 'Douai College', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[21] Alexandra Walsham, 'Unclasping the Book? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Vernacular Bible', *Journal of British Studies* 42, no. 2 (2003): 152–55.

[22] Cameron A. MacKenzie, *The Battle for the Bible in England, 1557–1582* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2002), 164–76.

[23] See Katrin Ettenhuber, '"A Comely Gate to so Rich and Glorious a Citie": The Paratextual Architecture of the Rheims New Testament and the King James Bible', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530–1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 54–69.

[24] On the division of labour among the Rheims scholars, see MacKenzie, *Battle for the Bible*, 173–74.

Catholic objection was that Protestants sought needlessly to strip away traditional beliefs and doctrines, such as fasting and the veneration of saints. Catholic polemicists argued that the attrition of these traditional beliefs following the Reformation indicated that Protestants were unbelieving atheists who sought to undermine Christianity from within. This sub-chapter begins by surveying the religious and literary contexts in which the Rheims New Testament emerged, outlining the ways in which historians have identified the availability of multiple vernacular translations of scripture as a potential inducement to unbelief. I then examine uses of anti-atheist rhetoric in the preface, annotations, and chapter summaries of the Rheims New Testament, showing how the claims of the Rheims scholars corroborate some scholarly narratives about how Protestantism led to a more disenchanted approach to religion. The final part of the sub-chapter examines polemical exchanges between William Whitaker and William Rainolds, who respectively attacked and defended the Rheims New Testament between 1582 and 1585. Whitaker's response to Rainolds' use of anti-atheist rhetoric strongly rejects the accusation that Protestant interpretations of the Bible were inherently atheistical. To defend himself from Rainolds' ad hominem accusations, Whitaker called for religious writers to adopt stricter definitions of atheism. Whitaker's response shows how early modern religious polemicists were often much more attuned to the meanings of atheism than historians typically give them credit for. Whether or not one agrees with the Rheims scholars that Protestant approaches to biblical translation are inherently atheistic, these debates show that by the late sixteenth century, the Bible's meaning had become fiercely contested and that participants on both sides were conscious that unresolved debates about biblical hermeneutics could encourage unbelief.

Vernacular scripture and theories of secularisation

The rapid dissemination of multiple vernacular translations of the Bible enabled by the invention of the printing press has long been considered an accelerator to the process of confessionalisation in sixteenth-century Europe.[25] More recently, Ryrie has argued that conflicts over the authority of the biblical text, exacerbated by scriptural errors and inconsistences that new translations exposed, resulted in the Bible itself becoming an incitement to religious scepticism in the post-Reformation world.[26] Yet, there is nothing inherent in the availability of vernacular Bibles that satisfactorily accounts for the demystifying qualities of Protestant scripture that the Rheims scholars complain about, or for the process of post-Reformation secularisation identified by historians. Vernacular translations of the Bible had existed long before the publication of Luther's New Testament in 1522, the best-known being John Wycliffe's fourteenth-century English translation. As the basis of the heretical Lollard movement—which opposed the Roman Catholic Church and posited that religious doctrine should be based on scripture alone—Wycliffe's Bible has been considered a forerunner to the Protestant Reformation.[27] Yet, in over one hundred years of manuscript circulation, it never became more than an underground concern, a challenge to hegemonic Catholic orthodoxy rather than one of many competing orthodoxies. Furthermore, translations of the Bible beyond the officially sanctioned Latin Vulgate were neither inherently subversive, nor the exclusive preserve of Catholicism's opponents. Catholic scholars had produced vernacular translations in several European languages throughout the fifteenth-century.[28] Some historians also contend that by Mary's reign, English Catholics who

[25] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 358–60.
[26] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 84.
[27] Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*.
[28] Walsham, 'Unclasping the Book?', 147–52.

published vernacular religious works in print had adopted a humanist brand of reformed Catholicism. Even if the country had remained Catholic after Mary's death in 1558, use of a vernacular Bible may still have become an acceptable religious practice.[29]

The publication of the Rheims New Testament in 1582 therefore did not constitute a radical departure in Catholic attitudes to vernacular scripture, the inherent value of which the translators remained ambivalent about.[30] Rather, it is significant because the perceived necessity of its publication—expressed by the translators in their petitions to have the work sponsored and in their Preface to the volume—demonstrates that by the late sixteenth century, the Bible had become a locus of inter-confessional conflict.[31] The debate was no longer about whether the Bible should be translated into the vernacular, but about how it should be translated, how particular passages should be interpreted, and the role of ecclesiastical authorities in delimiting the range of possible meanings.[32] Although the Rheims translators placed greater emphasis upon the role of institutional tradition as a guide to interpretation, Protestants also expressed concern about unchecked interpretation by lay readers, a possibility guarded against by the extensive paratextual architecture of the Geneva version and the guides written for lay readers by the clergy.[33] MacKenzie's description of the Rheims translators as having adopted a 'Protestant-like confidence in the bare text of a vernacular translation' is therefore misleading, since neither Catholic nor Protestant Bibles were 'bare' in the sixteenth century and because the Rheims scholars saw their publication as

---

[29] Lucy E. C. Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 176–80; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 79–80.

[30] As Walsham points out, the deliberately arcane style meant that priestly guides remained essential to its interpretation: 'Unclasping the Book?', 146.

[31] For a description of the petitions by Harding and Sanders persuading Cardinal Morone to sponsor a vernacular translation and of the arguments made in the Preface to the RNT, see MacKenzie, *Battle for the Bible*, chap. 7.

[32] Patrick Collinson, 'The Coherence of the Text: How It Hangeth Together: The Bible in Reformation England', in *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, ed. W. P. Stephens and James Atkinson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 98–99.

[33] Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 27–33.

an emergency measure rather than a religious necessity.[34] Yet, MacKenzie is surely right to draw a parallel between the two groups on the basis that both the Rheims translators and their Protestant opponents understood the Bible as a text that could be explicated using humanist methods.[35] It was not the case that Catholics were adopting a Protestant attitude but rather that by the 1580s, English theologians and biblical scholars of both religions were all strongly influenced by humanism.

Arguably, it was this consensus that the text of the Bible could be dissected and interpreted just like any other text that had the greatest secularising impact. The key personnel involved in producing and defending the Rheims New Testament (Martin Gregory, Richard Bristow, William Allen, William Rainolds) had very similar educational backgrounds to those who took it upon themselves to attack it (William Fulke, William Whitaker, Thomas Bilson, Thomas Cartwright).[36] All completed the Arts curriculum at Oxford or Cambridge in the mid sixteenth century and all engaged in religious controversy from within institutions that were primarily academic in nature. This is not to posit a discontinuity between academia and religion, but rather to point out that these men pursued their religious convictions via their talents as humanist scholars and were as likely to specialise in languages as theology. Allen established daily classes in Hebrew and Greek at Douai, with Martin becoming Professor of Greek, and Rainolds of Hebrew under his direction.[37] Meanwhile, Fulke lectured in Hebrew at Cambridge and Whitaker published

---

[34] MacKenzie, *Battle for the Bible*, 183.
[35] MacKenzie, 187–88.
[36] For a survey of controversial works published in response to the Rheims New Testament, see Peter Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age: A Survey of Printed Sources* (London: Scolar Press, 1977), 46–50.
[37] Eamon Duffy, 'Allen, William (1532–1594), Cardinal', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Thomas M. McCoog, 'Martin, Gregory (1542?–1582), Roman Catholic Priest and Biblical Translator', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); J. Blom and F. Blom, 'Rainolds [Reynolds], William (1544?–1594), Roman Catholic Priest and Author', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

poetry and translations in Greek.[38] These men may have had different religious views, but they had absorbed similar understandings of translation principles as set out in humanist pedagogy.

Shuger has argued that there was nothing inherently secularising about the ways Renaissance exegetes interpreted scriptures by considering the cultural contexts in which they were written. Yet, I contend that conflicts *between* these readings may inadvertently have had a secularising impact.[39] The ability of individual scholars to present their own readings of individual passages to support divergent theological perspectives posed an inherent challenge to the principle of 'the coherence of the text' (the idea that the Bible was not self-contradictory and presented a single theological perspective).[40] For Hill, the political and social unrest following the Civil War, fuelled by divergent interpretations of scripture, contributed to the Bible's loss of authority by the end of the seventeenth century: '*Because* the Bible could be all things to all men, a book for all seasons, it ultimately lost its usefulness as a guide to political action'.[41] In this context, the anti-atheist rhetoric employed in the preface and annotations to the Rheims New Testament appears prescient. Their attacks on the atheism of the Protestant translations are not meaningless insults: they highlight the potential that divergent interpretations of scripture had to minimize biblical authority and thus to encourage unbelief.

---

[38] Richard Bauckham, 'Fulke, William (1536/7–1589), Theologian and College Head', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); C. S. Knighton, 'Whitaker, William (1547/8–1595), Theologian and College Head', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[39] Debora K. Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 47.
[40] Collinson, 'Coherence of the Text', 101.
[41] Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1994), 415, emphasis original.

Anti-atheism in the Rheims New Testament

The scholars at Rheims were already familiar with the value of anti-atheist rhetoric when they set about producing their translation and its annotations. In polemical works published in the late 1570s, Allen, Martin, and Bristow had blamed religious disunity for rise of atheism, a term they use to denote unbelief. Their use of anti-atheist rhetoric in the annotations of the Rheims New Testament is therefore a continuation of an existing rhetorical strategy that posited a causal relationship between the rise of unbelief and the Reformation. Allen, for example, had identified an increasing lack of Catholic unity as a cause of 'Atheisme, that is, to no God nor faith at all' and he went on to deploy similar anti-atheist tropes in future controversial works.[42] Bristow also equated atheism with post-Reformation confessionalisation, identifying atheists as a Protestant sect that had become so irreligious they 'knoweth not, that first they were Protestants'. According to Bristow, the opinions of the two groups stand 'all in maner so well togeather'.[43]

One of the most clearly explained uses of anti-atheist confutation prior to the publication of the Rheims New Testament occurs in Martin's *A Treatise of Schisme* (1578). Here, Martin argues that English Catholics should not attend services of the established church because a Catholic attending Protestant services would seem 'suche a one as is not affected to eyther religion, and consequently of no religion: atheon, *sine deo in hoc mundo*: an Atheiste, one that acknowledgeth no God in this worlde'.[44] The Latin, meaning 'without God in this world', is a quotation from St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, which describes the

---

[42] William Allen, *An Apologie and True Declaration of the Institution and Endevours of the Two English Colleges [...]* (Rheims, 1581), sig. H2r; Allen uses anti-atheism most extensively in *A True, Sincere and Modest Defence, of English Catholiques [...]* (Rouen, 1584), 7, 26, 71, 73, 147–48, 151, 176, 179, 217.
[43] Richard Bristow, *A Briefe Treatise of Diverse Plaine and Sure Wayes to Finde out the Truthe in This Doubtful and Dangerous Time of Heresie [...]* (Antwerp, 1574), fo. 166.
[44] Martin, *Treatise of Schisme*, sig. A5v–A6r.

state of the gentiles prior to their conversion.[45] The contentious aspect of Martin's confutation lies in his argument that a church papist is 'not affected to eyther religion'. If readers accept this claim, it is entirely logical to see church papists as atheists according to the given definition. Martin therefore does not deploy 'Atheiste' as an empty term of abuse to disparage Catholic conformity. Rather, the term has a fixed meaning: someone who, like the gentiles addressed by Paul, 'acknowledgeth no God'. Martin argues, fairly or unfairly, that church papists meet this definition. The term is certainly being used polemically, but this is due to its usefulness for describing the consequences of insincere forms of belief, not because it is a 'supreme insult'. Perhaps, then, the question we ought to ask of the anti-atheism in the Rheims New Testament (and of accusations of atheism in early modern religious polemic generally) is not whether a writer uses the term atheist 'correctly', but whether he truly believes his opponent's policies and beliefs could lead to unbelief.

The Rheims scholars use anti-atheism to attack what they see as secularising tendencies in the way Protestants translate scripture. In the annotations to Hebrews 5, Martin argues the first verse is evidence that priesthood should be a sacrament and he contends that Protestant failure to recognise this is a wilful misreading that encourages atheism.[46] According to Martin, Paul's assertion in Hebrews 5:1 that 'every high Priest' acts 'as a mediator betwixt God and the people' explicitly counters the Reformed insistence upon a more personal relationship with scripture. Conversely, the chapter summary in the Geneva version points out that Paul only 'compareth Jesus Christ with the Leviticall Priests'. The Geneva version is very careful about contextualising the appearance of the word 'Priest', firstly by clarifying that the term is merely a way of explaining the role of Christ, and secondly by connecting the need for mediation to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity.

---

[45] Eph. 2:12.

[46] 'For every high Priest taken from among men, is appointed for men in those things that pertaine to God: that he may offer giftes and sacrifices for sinnes', Heb. 5:1 (DRB).

For the Rheims translators, this Protestant reading disingenuously fails to acknowledge scriptural evidence in favour of priesthood. In contrast to the Geneva version, the Rheims chapter summary states that Christ 'was therein but as al Priests', a claim backed up by several arguments in Martin's annotations. For the Rheimists, the assertion that Paul's words apply to 'Christes person alone' is an indication of Protestant ignorance, the consequence of which is the proliferation of atheism: 'whereas the Protestants wil have no Priest, Priesthod, nor sacrifice, but Christ and his death […] therein they shew themselves to be ignorant of the scriptures, and of the state of the new Testament, and induce a plaine Atheisme and Godlesnesse into the world'.[47]

Unlike Sutcliffe, who uses the term atheist merely to encapsulate Persons' negative *ethos,* Martin is asserting that deficient Protestant interpretations of the Bible cause or allow Reformers to dispense with important traditional aspects of Christianity. The sense that Protestantism hollows out religion by rejecting the possibility of human agents mediating between the temporal and the divine is fundamental to the process of secularising disenchantment that Taylor identifies as beginning with the Lollards.[48] Martin insists that the ultimate consequence of Protestant rejections of sacraments like priesthood is the total rejection of belief in Christ's death and resurrection: 'Why standeth not his death as wel with Sacrifice, as with Sacraments: as wel with Priesthod, as with other Ecclesiastical functions? There is no other cause in the world, but that […] the Divel by these his ministers, under pretence of deferring or attributing the more to Christes death, would abolish it'.[49] Martin is not merely attempting to insult Protestants when he says they bring 'Atheisme and Godlesnesse' into the world. Rather, he is pointing out that it is unclear where the Reformed process of doctrinal consolidation will stop.

---

[47] Martin, Rheims New Testament, 609.
[48] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 72–75.
[49] Martin, Rheims New Testament, 609.

Many other instances of anti-atheism in Rheims New Testament are also underpinned by the argument that the Reformation had a demystifying effect. Commenting on St Paul's denunciation of Athenian idol-worship on the Areopagus as 'superstitious', Martin rejects Protestant attempts to use this verse to attack Catholic idolatry.[50] He asserts that Paul castigates the Athenians because they worship the wrong God, not because worshipping images of God is itself superstitious. Martin suggests that Protestants are 'voide' of superstition 'because they have in maner taken away al religion, and are become Epicureians and Atheists: who are never troubled with superstition, because it is a vice consisting in excesse of worship or religion'.[51] The Protestant stripping away of traditional aspects of religion, such as the sacrament of priesthood discussed above, is again associated with an ongoing process of demystification that is branded as atheism. Martin's binary opposition between superstition and atheism recalls Plutarch's view that true religion occupies a mean between atheistic scepticism and superstitious credulity, suggesting the annotator's conception of atheism may have been informed by a classical source.[52]

Beyond their comments on Protestant interpretations of scripture, the Rheims translators deploy anti-atheist rhetoric to attack other inducements to unbelief precipitated or exacerbated by the Reformation. For example, Martin describes the rise in Nicodemism caused by confessionalisation as having produced a class of apostates who, because of their constant dissimulation, now 'tend to plaine Atheisme and Antichristianisme'.[53] Martin also draws on the belief that religious conflict encourages unbelief. He suggests that 'contentious and curious questionings and disputes in religion […] edifie to Atheisme and no otherwise', anticipating Bacon's argument about religious division.[54] Martin's focus on the secularising

---

[50] Acts 17:22.
[51] Martin, Rheims New Testament, 344.
[52] See chap. 2, 135–137.
[53] Martin, 558. On the association of atheism with hypocrisy, see intro., 10–17 and chap. 1, 68–76.
[54] Martin, 566. Cf. 156, above

tendencies of Protestantism therefore demonstrate that accusations of atheism could serve a polemical function without being completely meaningless. Furthermore, his objections demonstrate that early moderns themselves considered disenchanting readings of scriptures and the ensuing conflicts over their meanings to be possible causes of unbelief—this argument is not exclusively a post hoc theory devised by historians.

The 'supreme insult' and the controversy between William Whitaker and William Rainolds

The exchange of controversial literature following the publication of the Rheims New Testament is exactly the kind of literary environment in which accusations of atheism functioning as insults are likely to appear. Such accusations operate in particularly interesting ways in the polemical exchange between William Whitaker and William Rainolds, who each justify their use of the term within their strategies of polemical confutation.[55] Like his colleague Richard Bristow, Rainolds viewed Protestant scripture as having a secularising tendency, which is why he brands supporters of the Reformed theologian Theodore Beza atheists. Whitaker objects to this accusation because he does not believe that Rainolds' use of the term is strict enough. He also downplays the Catholic argument that post-Reformation conflict is to blame for the rise of unbelief by refusing to call Rainolds an atheist in retaliation. By emphasising his own irenic qualities, Whitaker implicitly turns the argument that unbelief is caused through unnecessary conflict and controversy back upon the Catholics.

Whitaker was a theologian skilled in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, who became a fellow at Cambridge and eventually the Regius Professor of Divinity. As the head of St John's College, he trod a careful line between advocating conformity to the Church of England

---

[55] Fulke also comes close to accusing Martin of atheism for using the Septuagint as his copy text rather than the original Hebrew, 'which like an Atheist you deride'. See William Fulke, *A Defense of the Sincere and True Translations of the Holie Scriptures into the English Tong [...]* (London, 1583), 49.

while also turning a blind eye to the radical presbyterian cells that flourished there. Whitaker published a steady stream of anti-Catholic confutations throughout the 1570s and 80s, working to establish his reputation as one of the most learned Protestant scholars in the country.[56] Rainolds was also a skilled linguist, who after ten years as a fellow at Oxford converted to Catholicism and moved to the English College at Douai, where he was appointed professor of scriptures and Hebrew. Rainolds likely had a marginal role in producing the Rheims translation and is best known as a counter-Reformation polemicist who engaged in controversies concerning the Elizabethan succession, Catholic attendance of Church of England services, and of course the Rheims New Testament.[57] This is all to say that Whitaker and Rainolds were well-matched opponents: two humanist-educated theologians who found their primary intellectual outlet producing controversial works of literature intended to confute their religious adversaries and, in this case, each other.

The controversy under discussion here is comprised of three works: Whitaker's initial attack upon the Rheims New Testament, Rainolds' *Refutation* of Whitaker's attack, and Whitaker's *Answere* to Rainolds. The controversy began in 1583 when Whitaker added a confutation of Martin's translation to the preface of a newly reissued Latin treatise attacking Nicholas Sanders, who was a key figure in the early counter-Reformation and an advocate for a Catholic vernacular translation of the Bible since the 1560s.[58] When Rainolds responded to Whitaker the same year this preface was printed, he changed the terms of engagement in two ways.[59] Firstly, he chose to confute Whitaker's Latin attack on the Rheims translation in English. Secondly, he massively expanded the scope of his reply to cover broader issues about the state of Christianity following the Reformation and how best to approach

[56] C. S. Knighton, 'Whitaker, William (1547/8–1595), Theologian and College Head'.
[57] J. Blom and F. Blom, 'Rainolds [Reynolds], William (1544?–1594), Roman Catholic Priest and Author'.
[58] William Whitaker, *Ad Nicolai Sanderi Demonstrationes Quadraginta [...]* (London, 1583). On Sanders' petitions to Morone calling for a translation, see MacKenzie, *Battle for the Bible*, 163–65.
[59] William Rainolds, *A Refutation of Sundry Reprehensions, Cavils, and False Sleightes [...]* (Paris, 1583).

translating scripture. Rainolds' *Refutation* of Whitaker's short preface, which he produced in less than a year, spanned almost six hundred pages. Like Martin in his annotations of the Rheims New Testament, Rainolds argues in his *Refutation* that the Protestant Reformation led to the rise of atheism by creating religious division and promoting demystifying interpretations of scripture. Whitaker does not use the term *atheos* at all in his preface, but atheist and its cognates appear around thirty times in Rainolds' *Refutation,* which accuses Whitaker of being an atheist himself. It took two years for Whitaker to issue a response and this time he also wrote in English.[60] Whitaker's objection to the way Rainolds accuses him of atheism is a masterpiece of rhetorical manoeuvring that treats atheism as a term signifying unbelief. I contend that the debate between these polemicists may therefore serve as a useful illustration of how, even when atheist was used as an insult, it was not always a meaningless insult.

Let us turn firstly to how Rainolds uses the term atheist in his *Refutation* of Whitaker's preface. Here, the term is often used imprecisely, as in Rainolds' throwaway denunciation of the 'wickednes and iniquitie in lyfe, confusion and Atheisme in faith' that has emerged in England following the Reformation.[61] This charge is predicated upon a number of assertions, including the idea that because Protestants are loyal first and foremost to a monarch, they are atheists who 'maketh no account of Christ'.[62] However, Rainolds' most consistent use of anti-atheist rhetoric centres on the failure of Protestant translators to provide doctrinal certainty by identifying a single authoritative source for vernacular scripture, leading to a situation where 'every day more and more misdoubt the ruine of their Atheistical gospel'.[63] Rainolds was particularly troubled by Protestant arguments about which

---

[60] William Whitaker, *An Answere to a Certeine Booke, Written by Maister William Rainolds [...]* (London, 1585).
[61] Rainolds, *Refutation*, 483.
[62] Rainolds, 515. Gifford's Atheos makes a similar accusation against the puritan Zelotes: see chap. 2, 131–132.
[63] Rainolds, 461.

biblical texts should be considered canonical. For example, he critiques Whitaker's defence of Luther's rejection of the gospel of St James because, Rainolds argues, removing some scriptures will initiate a progressive erosion of biblical truth 'untill you fall to open profession of Atheisme, in the broade way whereof, you are farre and wel gone already'.[64] Rainolds' argument that replacing one Church unified around a single authoritative Biblical canon with multiple competing confessions expands further upon Martin's association of atheism with the consistent 'questioning' of Christianity that followed the Reformation.

Rainolds was particularly interested in how some choices in biblical translation could be indicative of atheism. A good example is the contested meaning of the verse 'This is the chalice, the new testament in my bloud, which shall be shed for you'.[65] In the annotation to this verse in the Rheims New Testament, Martin strongly rejects Beza's assertion that the blood should be read metaphorically. For Martin, 'it is no bare figure, but his bloud in deede' and therefore scriptural evidence for transubstantiation.[66] Beza's argument rests on the assertion that Luke was using the figure of *solœcaphones,* rendered as 'metonymy' by the Geneva translators. Beza contends that the scribe had accidentally moved 'which shall be shed for you' out of the text's margin (where it had been set for Matthew and Mark) and into the main body, an error noticeable because of an incorrect change of case in the Greek.[67] Around the central issue of transubstantiation arose a secondary conflict about the validity of ascribing error to the Bible's compositors. Martin states that to do so is 'indeede to give the lie to the blessed Evangelist, or to deny this to be Scripture' and he upholds the literal meaning of the text in order to 'taketh away al cavillations and shifts from the Protestants,

---

[64] Rainolds, 31.
[65] Luke 22:20 (DRB).
[66] Martin, Rheims New Testament, 205.
[67] Luke 22:20, note a. (GNV); Theodore Beza, *Jesu Christi D. N. Novum Testamentum, Sive Novum Foedus* (Geneva, 1565), 337–38. For a contemporary explanation of Beza's interpretation of this passage, see William Fulke, *A Retentive, to Stay Good Christians, in True Faith and Religion, against the Motives of Richard Bristow [...]* (London, 1580), 308–10.

both against the real presence and the true Sacrificing'.[68] In his initial attack upon the Rheims New Testament, Whitaker had criticised Martin's grammatical pedantry and recounted Martin's literal reading in meticulous detail, making this interpretation seem absurd in comparison to Beza's theory that Luke was using *solœcaphones.*[69] For Rainolds, Whitaker's attempt 'to excuse [Beza's] Atheisme and impietie' makes him 'a playne Atheist worse then Beza'.[70]

As well as attacking the attitude to scripture that Whitaker expresses in his criticisms of the Rheims New Testament, Rainolds confutes Whitaker by attacking him personally. The *Refutation* sets out to demonstrate four aspects of Whitaker's poor character: that he is 'voide of wit, learning and common sense'; 'void of shame and modestie'; 'litle differeth from an Atheist or Sadducee'; 'more hard-faced then the most reprobate heretikes'.[71] Rainolds' claim that as well as being almost an 'Atheist or Sadducee', Whitaker is also ignorant, brazen, and stubborn suggests that Rainolds uses the term primarily as a signifier of negative *ethos*. Yet, Rainolds also attacks Whitaker's preference for Protestant translations in ways that suggest he specifically sought to accuse Whitaker of unbelief. For example, in another of Martin's works attacked in Whitaker's preface, Martin denounces Beza for translating the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin word *infernus* as 'grave' rather than 'hell', even though *sepulcrum* would more appropriately signify 'grave'.[72] Thus, the Geneva and Rheims renderings of Psalm 6:5 read respectively as:

> For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall praise thee?
>
> For there is no one in death, that is mindful of thee: and who shall confess to thee in hell?

[68] Martin, Rheims New Testament, 205.
[69] Whitaker, *Ad Nicolai Sanderi Demonstrationes Quadraginta [...]*, sig. **5v–6r.
[70] Rainolds, *Refutation*, 240, 256.
[71] Rainolds, 264.
[72] Gregory Martin, *A Discoverie of the Manifold Corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the Heretikes of Our Daies [...]* (Rheims, 1582), 115–27.

For Rainolds, Whitaker's preference of 'grave' over 'hell' shows that 'he is a very Atheist and Sadducee, bringing in doubt the immortalitie of the sowle and resurrection of the body'.[73] Here, Rainolds draws on Christopher Carlile's argument that Christ never descended into hell, which, as I noted in Chapter 1, was closely connected to early modern concerns about Sadducceism and Anabaptism. Rainolds extrapolates from Carlile's argument to surmise that all Protestants intend 'to make men thinke that the sowle of Christ was inclosed in the grave and so buried with his body […] to take away the beleefe of hel, and consequently of heaven'.[74] This passage marks a shift in the way Rainolds uses anti-atheist polemic to confute Whitaker. Whereas Rainolds initially suggests that Whitaker is an atheist because of how he undermines the textual integrity of the Bible, here Rainolds identifies a broader tendency within Protestantism to favour physical over metaphysical readings of scripture. In Rainolds' view, the Geneva version of Psalm 6 chooses inherently carnal language: the grave being a temporal place associated with biological decay and hell being a theological concept associated with the immortal soul.

A similar combination of scholarly concerns about the interpretation of scripture, anti-Protestant polemic, and ad hominem accusations of atheism are present in Rainolds' attacks upon the Calvinist doctrine of *sola fide.* Rainolds points out that the Geneva Bible selectively omits scriptural evidence for the value of good works, arguing that Protestants are unable to see their own doctrinal errors because, having discarded the interpretative frameworks established by the Church Fathers, their vernacular translations of scripture are based on inaccurate readings. To illustrate this issue, Rainolds asks if Whitaker 'thinke it flat Atheisme and Turkerie to denie that Christ was borne of a virgin?'.[75] Rainolds therefore sets up his ensuing argument in what seems like good faith, bringing Whitaker alongside him in his

[73] Rainolds, *Refutation*, 271.
[74] Rainolds, 279.
[75] Rainolds, 437.

argument that atheists who deny the doctrine of Incarnation threaten the 'abnegation of al Christianitie'.[76] This is where Rainolds attempts to trap Whitaker, asking him 'what scripture he hath to prove that veritie?' and pointing out that the evidence for this doctrine is contained only in the traditions established by the Church Fathers and a single book of Matthew. Rainolds argues that according to Beza's method of translating Hebrew, the term 'virgin' 'must signifie a yonge wenche […] as well virgin, as not virgin', making the doctrine of Incarnation uncertain.[77] Without the traditional interpretations of the Church Fathers—which Whitaker rejects—the Protestant translation of the text lacks doctrinal certainty, implicitly exposing Whitaker to the charge of atheism.

Rainolds' polemical use of the term atheist is therefore flexible but not divorced from the concept of unbelief. He accuses Whitaker of atheism because Whitaker's denunciation of the Rheims New Testament is based on an approach to translation that points the way to unbelief. This is partly because Whitaker is willing to entertain the idea that there may be errors in scripture and partly because of his preference for physical, rather than metaphysical, readings of ambiguous textual cruxes. Rainolds' confutation of Whitaker was so effective that the Preface alone immediately converted William Alabaster, who 'fownde my minde wholie and perfectly Catholique in an Instante'.[78] Alabaster makes no specific comments about Rainolds' use of anti-atheist rhetoric, though references to atheism do appear in the *Refutation*'s preface. We may conclude from the examples discussed here that the polemical power of Rainolds' use of the term 'atheist' emanates not from the word's status as a 'supreme insult', but from Rainolds' willingness to allege that certain aspects of Protestantism truly are the same as denying the existence of God.

---

[76] Rainolds, 438.
[77] Rainolds, 438–39.
[78] Qtd. in Helen Smith, '"Wilt Thou Not Read Me, Atheist?" The Bible and Conversion', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530–1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 356.

Whitaker's *Answere* to Rainolds was printed two years later, with Whitaker explaining in a dedication to Cecil that he did not reply immediately because Rainolds seemed impossible to reason with.[79] Whitaker therefore presents the volume not as an attempt to change the mind of Rainolds himself, 'of whom I have no hope', 'but in regard of others', whose adherence to Reformed religion may need to be reinforced.[80] Whitaker identifies Rainolds' main strategy as being to present 'earnest contension' that arises in 'the heat of disputation' between 'zealous' Protestant theologians as being so fundamental and bitter that there is no consensus at all within Reformed religion. Not wishing readers of Rainolds' text to become 'further withdrawn in alienation of minde from the love and liking' of scripture on this basis, Whitaker adopts a conspicuously ameliorative tone to downplay the divisiveness that Rainolds accuses him of.[81] This is particularly noticeable when Whitaker declares that he has followed Rainolds' lead and written in English rather than Latin, a choice that Whitaker generously suggests his adversary made not 'for want of skil therin, as that his writings might commonlie be read and understoode of englishmen.'.[82] Although he despairs of ever converting Rainolds from his 'pernitious and deceitful error', Whitaker also refuses to adopt what he sees as Rainolds' disingenuous style of argumentation that relies on taking examples out of context and presenting a biased view of the issues at hand. This measured attitude governs how Whitaker responds to Rainolds' accusations that he is an atheist, as well as the way he uses the term himself. Rather than throwing the accusation back at Rainolds, Whitaker takes the accusation at face value: 'As for *Atheisme*, I doubte not but your owne conscience doth tell you, our doctrine is farre from it: which when you forsooke, I wil not saie, how neere you approched to Atheisme, in yealding to the strawne opinions at Rome'.[83]

---

[79] Whitaker, *Answere*, sig. A3v–A4r.
[80] Whitaker, sig. A4v.
[81] Whitaker, sig. A6r.
[82] Whitaker, sig. A7v.
[83] Whitaker, 37.

By exhorting Rainolds to use his 'conscience' to recognise that Reformed Christianity is not the same as atheism, Whitaker exposes his opponent's argument as a rhetorical gambit that makes sense only in the contrived circumstances in which Rainolds presents it.

Whitaker follows up this refutation by referring to Rainolds' conversion from Protestantism as having 'approached' atheism without actually reaching it. Whitaker states he 'wil not saie how neere' Rainolds' conversion to Catholicism brought him toward atheism, a use of *occupatio* that is effective on multiple levels. On the one hand, it allows Whitaker to present himself as the more reasonable, ameliorative voice in the discussion, who is unwilling to level such an obviously slanderous accusation at a fellow Christian. At the same time, he makes it clear that he considers papistry and atheism to be equivalent in sinfulness. The same is true of his subsequent assertion that 'like an Atheist your pen is a readie instrument to publish anie untrueth'. Whitaker won't say that Rainolds is an atheist, but he is certainly 'like' one.[84] By rejecting the use of 'atheist' as a polemical insult, Whitaker is able to outmanoeuvre Rainolds while implicitly turning his accusation back on him.

Throughout his *Answer,* Whitaker adopts a patronising tone, affecting concern for Rainolds' spiritual welfare by warning him of his dangerous proximity to atheism. For example, Whitaker goads: 'Of Atheisme and infidelitie take heede your selfe, *M. R* you have alreadie made a dangerous step'.[85] As well as claiming to be worried about Rainolds' soul, Whitaker positions himself as unwilling to sink to Rainolds' depths of polemical vitriol and consistently highlights his desire to receive and distribute criticism in a more measured way. In Chapter 11, for example, Whitaker concedes that in every Protestant translation of the Bible 'some fault or other may be found, worthy reproofe and correction', but he objects to what he sees as Rainolds' hyperbolic exaggeration that the texts are filled with errors on

[84] Whitaker, 39.
[85] Whitaker, 178.

every page.[86] In particular, Whitaker is outraged by Rainolds' assertion that Protestant translations encourage atheism:

> Where have I said or allowed any thing tending to such Atheisme, as you charge us withall? Atheist I will not call you, *Master Rainolds*, but I may trulie say of you, as you have continually given undoubted proofe, that you have no feare of God before your eies. Speake or write of us your pleasure falslie, foolishlie, boldelie: your judgement shall be as deepe as anie Atheist, unles you leave your lying and railing against Gods truth. Other confutation or condemnation shal not neede, then your owne conscience, which can tell you these reproches are untrue, proceeding onlie from wilfulnes and malice.[87]

Once again, Whitaker distinguishes himself from Rainolds on the basis that he will not 'falslie' accuse his opponent of being an 'Atheist', even as he strongly implies that Rainolds is one. Whitaker conspicuously positions himself as the more reasonable voice in the discussion, stating that Rainolds 'shall' have an atheist's judgement if he continues in his current vein, not that he currently is one: a subtle distinction that stops of short of outright vitriol. In telling Rainolds that the confutation required will come from 'your owne conscience', Whitaker takes the position of a parent telling a naughty child to think about the consequences of their actions. The stricter limitations Whitaker adopts when using the word atheist therefore forms a crucial part of his confutation of Rainolds.

Throughout the controversy between Whitaker and Rainolds, the meaning of atheism is always in flux and the issue of determining whether anti-atheist rhetoric could legitimately be used against other Christians emerges as a serious concern. Atheist is not a meaningless insult but a term with a fixed reference point that reflects the anxieties of post-Reformation Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. The real question at stake in these debates is not how atheism is defined, but whether a form of Christianity to which one is opposed may legitimately be considered unbelief and whether the process of confessionalisation itself was leading to the proliferation of unbelief. For Rainolds, the answer is an unreserved yes, and he

[86] Whitaker, 218.
[87] Whitaker, 224.

had no qualms about blaming Whitaker for this directly. Whitaker is more willing to accept that no translation of scripture could be perfect and to tolerate a degree of variation among Protestant theologians, between whom productive disputation and informed disagreement could lead to a more perfect faith. His response to Rainolds was not to throw the accusation of atheism straight back at him, but to sidestep the issue, focussing on how the ongoing refinement of Reformed Christianity was superior to the rigidity of the Roman Church. As in de Mornay's *De la vérité*, the Christian solidarity that Whitaker's anti-atheist rhetoric aspired to was predicated upon the overthrow of Roman Catholicism.[88] The conflict between these writers demonstrates that dismissing all accusations of atheism in early modern polemic as meaningless insults is a mistake. A great deal may be learned about the fears, values, and rhetorical skills of a particular writer by attending to how the implications of the term changes each time he deploys it. When this approach is applied to the controversy surrounding the Rheims New Testament, the perception that Protestant translations of the Bible had a secularizing impact is revealed to be a pressing contemporary concern.

ATHEISM AND RELIGIOUS DIVISION: HENRY SMITH'S *GODS ARROWE*

Gods Arrowe Against Atheists (1593) by the puritan preacher, Henry Smith, was Elizabethan England's most popular anti-atheist treatise. If one sought to attribute the increasing frequency of references to atheism in books printed from the mid-1590s onward to the influence of a single text, this would be it. *Gods Arrowe* is one of only two works with atheist in the title that qualifies for Ian Green's list of 'steady sellers': it was reprinted in over thirteen separate editions across the next sixty years and also appeared in collections of

[88] Cf. chap. 2, 137–139.

Smith's sermons printed after 1604.[89] As the first anti-atheist treatise originally written in English, it was unprecedented in offering an extended discussion of unbelief to general readers.[90] The treatise consists of six chapters of varying length, each confuting a different belief system that Smith considered inimical to true religion: atheism, paganism, Judaism, Mahometism, Catholicism, and Protestant separatism. The apparent digressiveness of Smith's treatise, which dedicates less than ten percent of its length to explicit discussion of its ostensible topic, has largely been regarded as a failure on Smith's part and as evidence that atheism was a meaningless concept in the 1590s. Green writes that Smith 'soon slid from attacking atheists', while Dixon describes *Gods Arrowe* as a text that begins 'with a flurry of anxiety about the spectre of atheism before seeming to become confused and then going on to talk about something else instead'.[91] For Buckley, the work is 'a very negligible performance' that is 'really no more than an elongated sermon', indicating that 'Smith had evidently heard that there was much atheism in England, but he knew almost nothing about it'.[92]

Yet, upon closer inspection, it is clear Smith was aware of the same classical discussions of atheism used by Hutchinson, Lyly, de Mornay, and Sidney, and that he may even have read more widely than some of these writers. Smith paraphrases Cicero's *De Natura Deorum,* Seneca's *De Ira,* Suetonius' 'Life of Caligula', and Plutarch's *Moralia,* as well as making frequent recourse to scriptural arguments against unbelief and discussing the

---

[89] Ian M. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 657.

[90] In preceding years, translations of Mornay, Athenagoras, and prayers by the Lutheran theologian, Johann Habermann, had been described by their translators as works suitable for combatting the spread of atheism, though among these, Mornay's text is the only one that contains discussion of atheism and unbelief. See Du-Plessis-Mornay, *Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*; Athenagoras, *Discourse of the Christian Philosopher Athenagoras*; Johann Habermann, *The Enemie to Atheisme: Or, Christian Godly Prayers for All Degrees of Persons*, trans. Thomas Rogers (London, 1580).

[91] Green, *Print and Protestantism*, 236; Dixon, 'William Perkins', 795–96.

[92] Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 86–87. Buckley suggests Nashe may have had Smith in mind when he blames weak preaching for the rise of atheism, but given Nashe's praise for Smith (see 185, below), this is unlikely to be the case.

'fool' of Psalm 14.[93] It seems that Smith did not lack knowledge or material, but deliberately chose to compress the anti-atheist component of his treatise and combine it with confutations of other groups. From this perspective, the telescopic structure of *Gods Arrowe*, which progressively narrows in scope from confuting entire monotheisms (Judaism, Mahometism), to non-Protestant Western Christianity (Catholicism), to English Protestant separatism (Brownism, Barrowism), indicates that the movements led by Robert Browne and Henry Barrow were Smith's real target. If one considers the stark divisions between the various Protestant groups that had emerged following the Reformation as a potential inducement to unbelief, then the indirectness of Smith's treatise—which does not attack separatism from the outset and does not equate separatism with atheism—may have been key to its effectiveness. *Gods Arrowe* is therefore a good example of how anti-atheist arguments could be invented to serve broader rhetorical purposes, in this case the confutation of Protestant separatism.

As this sub-chapter demonstrates, counter-Reformation polemicists claimed that because each Reformed confession used the same scriptural evidence to present radically different claims about the nature of true religion, Protestants would be tempted to conclude that all these claims must be wrong.[94] Writing as a puritan apologist for the Church of England, Smith risked exacerbating intra-Protestant tensions by attacking separatism too violently and thus lending weight to the argument that Protestant disunity could lead to the rise of atheism. *Gods Arrowe* may therefore be understood as an attempt to use anti-atheist rhetoric to foster consensus between otherwise disparate Protestant groups. Rather than denouncing his separatist opponents as atheists, Smith presents atheism as the first of several theological positions that Reformed Christians, including separatists, can agree are fundamentally wrong. In comparison, the presbyterian Discipline and other aspects of the

[93] On Psalm 14, see chap. 4, 234.
[94] See 180–184, below.

more far reaching Reformation desired by separatist groups are framed by Smith as minor disagreements that can be easily dismissed in the face of shared Protestant opposition to atheism, Catholicism, and non-Christian monotheisms. *Gods Arrowe* therefore inverts the principles upon which early modern anti-atheist discourse is usually understood to operate. Not only does Smith choose not to accuse his opponents of being atheists, but he also avoids direct controversy with them by situating his core anti-separatist argument within a broader defence of Christianity against the perceived threat of atheism.

Religious division as inducement to unbelief

Historians of the Reformation rarely make explicit connections between the increasing fragmentation of Western Christianity in the sixteenth century and the emergence of anti-atheist discourse in the same period. Most would agree with Hans Hillerbrand's assessment that 'as the division of Western Christendom continued and increased the Christian truth claims lessened', but few surveys of the Reformation explore the possibility that religious division was an inducement to unbelief.[95] Scholars of early modern atheism have generally taken this connection more seriously. Ryrie, for example, argues that the proliferation of Protestant sects during the Civil War occurred because the government's inability to impose conformity, combined with the scepticism inherent in Reformed Protestantism, created an environment in which religious doubt could become endemic.[96] Early expressions of anxious unbelief tended to come from committed Calvinists whose doubts about their own salvation came to be directed at the established Church, their own godly communities, or organised

[95] Hans Joachim Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom: Christianity in the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 406. Cf. e.g. MacCulloch who discusses religious doubt in a sub-chapter on Judaism, where it is presented as a 'disadvantaged' 'cross-current' to the Christian Reformation, rather than a product of it: see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 693–96.
[96] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 153; cf. Caldwell, *Reformation of Moral Value*, 4–5 and chap. 3.

worship generally. Independent thinkers like William Chillingworth and founders of sects like Lodowick Muggleton and Clement Writer temporarily suspended their belief in fundamental tenets of Christianity after long periods of doubt and debate during which they sceptically assessed the veracity of different religious positions.[97] For Ryrie, post-Reformation religious division occurs principally *because* of Protestant scepticism and the emergence of anxious atheism is a further consequence of this tendency.

The question of how these divisions and uncertainties impacted those who were indifferent toward religion in the first place is much harder to answer. Indeed, Protestants committed to seeking truth in matters of doctrine and discipline were far more likely to risk expressing their religious doubts in recorded form than people who were ambivalent or hostile toward religion.[98] Aylmer points out that the state's desire for religious conformity was partly underpinned by the belief that 'toleration of a diversity of opinions and beliefs would, or might, lead to atheism', though he does not remark upon the fact that many diverse opinions and beliefs *were* present in early modern England.[99] Confronted with so many different versions of Reformed Christianity that each claimed mutual incompatibility, ambivalent constituents of the 'common sort' attacked by George Gifford may have concluded that all these variations were wrong.[100] This is what Bacon argues when he contends that 'Divisions in Religion […] introduce Atheisme', a comment that Dixon suggests 'may have been tacitly pointing to the proliferation of sectarian divisions within Protestantism'.[101] Contemporary Catholics were obviously less inhibited in making this connection explicit. As Shagan points out, Catholic writers in this period often emphasise that the word 'heretic' is 'derived from the Greek word meaning "able to choose"' and complain

---

[97] Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 66, 125, 165–68.
[98] Cf. chap. 1, 80.
[99] Aylmer, 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England', 25.
[100] See chap. 2, 118–132.
[101] Dixon, 'William Perkins', 806. For Bacon, see 156, above.

that new Protestant confessions always choose to reject tenets of the religions that preceded them. Thus, for Jesuits like Laurence Anderton, 'Protestantism "tended to atheism" in a literal sense: the farther reformation proceeded, the less religion was left, until finally nothing remained'.[102]

The most thorough analyses of how the Reformation made anti-atheist anxiety a valid concern therefore come neither from modern historians, nor seventeenth-century Protestants grappling with religious anxiety, but from counter-Reformation polemicists. I had intended to conclude this section by suggesting a model for how religious division could have functioned as an inducement to unbelief in post-Reformation England. But I found the Catholic priest and scholar, Matthew Kellison, had already articulated most of my speculations in *A Survey of the New Religion* (1603).[103] Kellison was a figure whose life intersected with many of the other writers discussed in this chapter. He joined the English College at Rheims in 1581, where he would have crossed paths with the translators of the Rheims New Testament, before eventually taking a doctorate from the University of Rheims and becoming chancellor there in 1606. Kellison's *Survey* was replied to twice by Matthew Sutcliffe, whose inflammatory assertion that Robert Persons was an atheist is discussed above. The preface to Kellison's *Survey* positions the text as a coronation gift to the newly crowned King James I from a loyal English subject seeking greater state leniency toward English Catholics. It is in this context that Kellison claimed post-Reformation religious divisions cause atheism.

The eighth book of Kellison's *Survey* attacks Reformed Christianity by arguing that it 'leadeth unto Atheisme and contempt of religion'.[104] The fifth chapter in this section presents the case that an atheist may be drawn toward unbelief by Protestant disunity:

---

[102] Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*, 112–15.
[103] Matthew Kellison, *A Survey of the New Religion Detecting Manie Grosse Absurdities Which It Implieth.* (Douai, 1603).
[104] Kellison, 639.

> An Atheist out of these their diversities of opinions, maye easilie draw this discourse. I see, sayeth hee (or at least hee maye saye) divers sects and opinions divers Synagogues, and religions, divers conventicles, and congregations, amongest you: which as they have divers names, so professe they divers doctrines, and followe divers Authors.[105]

It is immediately apparent that Kellison's polemic is predicated upon the same principles of humanist pedagogy that Lyly, Gifford, and Sidney used to invent the dialogues with atheists examined in Chapter 2. Kellison's argument is delivered as a *prosopopoeia* of a notional atheist whose unbelief is imagined as a response to the Reformation. Continuing in the atheist's voice, Kellison uses anaphora to highlight the multitude of 'other' Protestantisms:

> And some of them are called Lutheranes, some Calvinistes, which are by a subdivision parted into softe and rigorous Lutheranes, and into Protestantes, and Puritans, others are called Zvinglians, others Bezites, others Anabaptistes, others Libertines, others Brownistes, others Martinistes, others are of the familie of love, others of the damned crewe. And althoughe all these aggree against the Romaine, Catholike, and Apostolike Churche, yet they disagree amongest themselves, and althoughe they hold many, and those also contrarie opinions, yet they all use one argument to prove their opinions, to wit Scripture sensed by their private spirit.[106]

By beginning with the two main non-Catholic confessions in post-Reformation Europe and then dividing up English Calvinism into various factions competing for ascendency, Kellison emphasises the religious disunity in his home country. His references to 'Brownistes' and 'Martinistes', in particular, highlight controversies that had been incendiary when Smith was writing *Gods Arrowe.* Having listed these divisive groups, Kellison sets out a syllogistic argument in favour of unbelief:

> And so, will this Atheist saye, if I beleeve one of these sectes, I must beleeve all, bicause they alleage one proofe for their religion; but seing that I can not beleeve all, bicause they teache contrarieties, least I do any partial wronge in preferring one before another, all having the same reason; I will beleeve none of them all, nor none of their opinions.

[105] Kellison, 694.
[106] Kellison, 694–95.

The unbelief of Kellison's atheist follows a similar logic to Rainolds' claim that interpreting the Bible without an institutional framework might lead to atheism.[107] If all Protestant groups claim to derive authority from scripture but each reach different conclusions, why should one be preferred over another, or even over no religion at all? Here, Kellison inserts his defence of Catholicism, making its dismissal the last step that allows the atheist to justify his unbelief:

> And seing that they condemne the Catholike and Romain religion, for a fardell of superstitions (which notwithstanding was ever counted the true Christian religion even by the Paganes them selves, who therfore persequuted it) and have noe reason to bynde mee to any of their religions, unlesse I will be bound to an impossibilitie, that is to bee of all their religions, and nether can, nether will, with any reason persuade me to bee ether Turke, or Jewe; I may by authoritie bee of noe religion. And thus Atheisme must needs follow division in religion, and contempt of the Romaine Church.[108]

The argument of Kellison's atheist therefore has an inverse structure to Smith's *Gods Arrowe.* Kellison's atheist begins with Protestantism and concludes that it is too divided before moving to Catholicism, which he dismisses as superstitious. Discounting Mahometism and Judaism, he is forced to believe in nothing at all, cementing the idea that the religious divisions introduced by the Protestant Reformation could induce unbelief. Conversely, Smith's argument begins by disproving atheism, discounts the same alternative monotheisms, and concludes by confuting separatism. Whereas Kellison defends Catholicism by arguing that Protestant division causes atheism, Smith uses the threat of this argument to argue for Protestant conformity. Since the vulnerability of Reformed Christianity to an argument like Kellison's was surely apparent to Smith when he was writing around 1590, an accurate reading of *Gods Arrowe* must take seriously the idea that religious divisions among Protestants could be seen as an inducement unbelief in this period.

---

[107] See 172, above.
[108] Kellison, *Survey of the New Religion*, 695.

Henry Smith and Protestant separatism in 1590

'Silver-tongued' Henry Smith was one of the best-known and most popular preachers in Elizabethan England. His skill as an orator was acclaimed by contemporaries like Thomas Nashe and Thomas Fuller, and his substantial posthumous reputation fuelled an increasing demand for Smith's works after his death in 1591.[109] Smith's reputation was founded upon his ability to deliver sermons that were both spiritually edifying, rhetorically pleasing, and which appealed to auditors with a broad range of religious and educational backgrounds. In terms of doctrine, Smith fits well into the class of men R. T. Kendall describes as 'credal Calvinists', since his sermons typically emphasise personal edification without querying too deeply the question of his auditors' election or reprobation.[110] Meanwhile, Smith's attitude to Church discipline ultimately came to align with Peter Lake's concept of the 'moderate puritan', one who pursued further reformation from within the episcopal structure of the established Church and who proved his loyalty by publishing works of polemical anti-popery.[111] Smith experimented with radical puritanism in 1583, when he took up residence with Richard Greenham and refused to subscribe to Whitgift's Three Articles. But when Aylmer temporarily banned him from preaching five years later, Smith emphasised his support for the Church of England and protested that he 'adhered fully to the articles of religion'.[112] Smith expressed increasingly conformist sensibilities during the final years of his

[109] Lori Anne Ferrell, 'Sermons', in *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England*, ed. Andy Kesson and Emma Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 193–201.

[110] R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 8. Of the thirty-five sermons gathered in Smith's collected works, variations of the word 'elect' appear in seven, and 'reprobate' in six. Usually Smith's use of such terms is descriptive rather than 'experimental', e.g. 'true repentaunce […] falleth upon none but the elect, and therefore *Paule* calleth the heart of the reprobate, *A heart which cannot repent*': 'The Betraying of Christ', in *The Sermons of Maister Henrie Smith Gathered into One Volume [...]* (London, 1593), 892.

[111] Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 6–7.

[112] Gary W. Jenkins, 'Smith, Henry (c. 1560–1591), Church of England Clergyman', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

life while employed as a lecturer for the Westminster parish of St Clement Danes. As his health deteriorated, Smith continued to support conformity in printed sermons and in *Gods Arrowe*, which concludes with a strident and articulate attack on separatism. Here, Smith expresses support for moderate puritans of a 'godly and zealous minde', who 'do in good sort seeke for Reformation and for that Church goverment', while attacking outspoken presbyterians 'that seeke Reformation amisse, with venemous and slanderous tongues railing'.[113] Smith's greatest ire is reserved for separatists who 'runne from our Church, and make a schisme and separation from us, erecting Discipline by their owne authoritie, condemning our Church to bee no Church, that they may make their detestable Scisme the more allowable: these are the *Brownists* and *Barrowists*'.[114]

Smith's decision to include a confutation of Protestant separatism at the end of what is ostensibly an anti-atheist treatise may seem digressive. But as I argued above, this may really be an attempt to unite conformists and separatists against atheism by downplaying the extent to which intra-Protestant divisions could be considered an inducement to atheism, just as de Mornay had done in *De la vérité* (1581).[115] The latter reading can be corroborated by considering the state of English puritanism around the time Smith was writing and by comparing Smith's use of anti-atheist rhetoric to that of his separatist opponent, Henry Barrow. With the death of Leicester in 1589, the same year Smith retired from preaching and began to write up his sermons, puritanism had begun to collapse as a political movement.[116] The demands of the Elizabethan puritans, which chiefly consisted of adopting a presbyterian structure of government for the Church of England, had been gathered in a Book of Discipline and presented to the parliament of 1586–7. Collectively referred to as 'the Discipline', a version of these presbyterian demands had already been unsuccessfully pitched

[113] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. k1r.
[114] Smith, sig. k1v.
[115] See further 190, below.
[116] Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, 387.

to the parliament of 1584–85. When the 1586–7 bill also failed, it became clear that the Discipline was unlikely to be implemented during Elizabeth's lifetime.[117] This galvanised the cause of those who wished to separate from the established church and set up their own presbyterian ministries. English separatists were often referred to generically as 'Brownists' after Robert Browne, though Browne ultimately reconciled with the Church of England. By 1590, the key separatist leaders were John Greenwood and Henry Barrow, of whom the latter was responsible for most of the written justifications of the movement.[118] Barrow's separatism was founded upon his opposition to four aspects of the Church of England that he repeatedly attacked in works published during the 1580s and 90s. Alongside 'The fals maner of worshiping the true God' (its excessive ceremonialism), 'The false and antichristian government' (its episcopalian structure), and 'The false and antichristian ministrie' (its insufficiently reformed clergy), Barrow was particularly exercised by 'The profane and ungodlie people receved into and retayned in the bozom and bodie' of the Church of England.[119] Collinson argues that this latter point was foundational to Barrow's position: 'the visible scandal of the total inclusiveness of the Church was presented as the root of the matter, the essential and fundamental flaw'.[120] Without the presbyterian Discipline, ministers were unable to prevent disruptive or insufficiently engaged members of their parishes from participating in worship, which in Barrow's view dangerously stopped the elect from protecting themselves against the influence of the reprobate.

One reason Smith may have chosen to confute Barrow indirectly via an anti-atheist treatise was that Barrow frequently expressed his opposition to the inclusiveness of the

[117] Collinson, 291–329.
[118] See B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 67–90.
[119] Henry Barrow, *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1587–1590*, ed. Leland H. Carlson (London: Allen and Unwin for the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, 1962), 54.
[120] Patrick Collinson, 'Separation in and out of the Church: The Consistency of Barrow and Greenwood', *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 5, no. 5 (1994): 256.

Church of England by attacking the presence of atheists among its membership. Sometimes, Barrow listed atheists as one of several groups of malefactors he condemned the Church for receiving: 'even al the profane and wicked of the land, Atheistes, Papistes, Anabaptistes and heretikes of al sortes'. Here, 'Atheistes' seems like a generic term of opprobrium directed at reprobates within the church who neither secretly belonged to other confessions nor fit into more specific categories like 'thieves, whores, witches'.[121] Yet, Barrow's use of the term elsewhere suggests that he saw unbelievers as a distinct presence within the Church of England. A clear example occurs in Barrow's record of the meeting between Arch-Deacon William Hutchinson and the separatist leader John Greenwood that took place in Fleet Prison in 1590.[122] According to Barrow, Greenwood asserted that the true church must separate itself from the profane. When asked 'What meane you by profane?', Greenwood responded unequivocally: 'Atheists, men without the knowledg or feare of God, togeather with the papists, hereticks, and all other infidells'.[123] Here, unbelieving atheists who do not acknowledge God are distinguished from the papists and heretics they are aligned with. Elsewhere, Barrow asserted that atheism proliferated because of the permissiveness of conformists like George Gifford, whose evangelism through anti-atheism we encountered in the previous chapter. Responding to Gifford's assertion that separatism is akin to the heretical Donatist movement, Barrow suggests that figures like Gifford 'receive into the covenant and justifie all sortes of prophane, wicked, and ungodly persons: And so open the doores to all Atheisme and impietie'.[124] Here, atheism is not one of the many deficient qualities of the Church's membership, but an effect of allowing such people to participate in its worship:

---

[121] Barrow, *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1587–1590*, 281. Cf. Barrow's claim that Gifford is an atheist in *Refutation of M. G. Giffardes Reprochful Booke* (1591), 221.

[122] On the conference between Hutchinson and Greenwood, see Rodda, *Public Religious Disputation*, 119–23.

[123] John Greenwood and Henry Barrow, *The Writings of John Greenwood, 1587–1590: Together with the Joint Writings of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, 1587–1590*, ed. Leland H. Carlson (London: Allen and Unwin for the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, 1962), 130.

[124] Barrow, *Refutation of M. G. Giffardes Reprochful Booke*, 61. On Gifford's denunciation of Barrowe as a Donatist, see Jesse Hoover, '"They Bee Full Donatists" The Rhetoric of Donatism in Early Separatist Polemics', *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 15, no. 2 (2013): 154–76.

unless access was restricted to the most committed believers, standards would slip incrementally until unbelief was openly accepted.

The separatist movement in 1590 was therefore largely predicated upon the belief that the permissiveness of the Church of England made it a haven for atheists and that if the godly were not allowed to separate themselves from such reprobates, the spread of unbelief was inevitable. As we saw in Chapter 1, this is effectively the same argument that Cartwright used against Whitgift in 1573.[125] In the face of Barrow's elitist claim that all but the most committed members of the godly were unbelievers, the more historicised and limited anti-atheism offered by Smith in *Gods Arrowe* reads as an indirect confutation of Barrow's argument. By building up a Christian consensus against unbelief that he invites separatists to participate in, Smith repurposes anti-atheist rhetoric as an incitement to Protestant unity rather than division. As such, the treatise fulfils two functions: on the one hand, it serves to dismiss the Catholic notion that intra-Protestant schism had become so divisive it encouraged unbelief. On the other, it confuted separatist claims that Christians insufficiently committed to reform must be unbelievers. Smith's argument is therefore the opposite of that articulated by Gifford ten years earlier. His priority is not to argue for greater reform by suggesting that the common sort are unbelievers, but to uphold the status quo by denying separatist claims that this is the case. Smith therefore locates his discussion of atheism mainly in the classical past rather than the Christian present. By presenting atheism as a pre-Christian phenomenon, Smith circumvented claims from both separatists and Catholics that the Protestant Reformation, in its current state, was causing atheism to spread.

[125] See chap. 1, 66.

The polemical structure of Gods Arrowe

Smith's careful navigation of the competing claims made by counter-Reformation and separatist polemicists about the relationship between atheism and Protestant division has gone unnoticed because he never announces his intention to confute either argument. One of the many curiosities of *Gods Arrowe* is that unlike most early modern works of religious polemic, the text gives no indication of the circumstances that led its author to write it or the key points he wished readers to take away. De Mornay's *De la vérité* (1581) adopts a very similar strategy to the one I attribute to *Gods Arrow*, yet unlike Smith, de Mornay makes explicit his goal of uniting Reformed Christians against a rising tide of atheism.[126] *Gods Arrowe* may lack a clear interpretative framework because it was unfinished at the time of Smith's death, having been written between 1589 and 1591, when ill-health forced Smith to retire from public preaching.[127] When John Danter published it two years later, the printed volume contained no authorial preface, dedication, or introduction setting out Smith's objectives, only a short dedicatory epistle by Danter and a brief table of the book's chapters.

Whether or not the absence of a clear authorial statement about the purpose of *Gods Arrowe* was intentional, it seems Danter was aware of its core anti-separatist message and chose not to advertise this agenda beyond a few remarks in the prefatory materials. The dedicatory epistle emphasises the book's usefulness for 'the setting forth of Gods truth' and its ability to confute 'the vaine Heresies of sundry religions now used in England'. Even more explicitly, Danter asks the book's dedicatee, Katherine Hayward, to 'shadow it under the winges of your clemencie from the bitter stormes of al Hereticall Schismaticks', a phrase that undoubtedly alludes to the Brownists and Barrowists confuted in the final chapter.[128] The

[126] See chap. 2, 137–139. Other writers wrote anti-atheist treatises purely to demonstrate their scholarly talent. See e.g. Dove, *Confutation of Atheisme*, sig. A2r.
[127] Jenkins, 'Smith, Henry (c. 1560–1591), Church of England Clergyman'.
[128] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. A3.

only other textual apparatus present in the 1593 edition of *Gods Arrowe,* the 'Table of Chapters', also suggests that the treatise ostensibly written '*Against Atheists*' was primarily a defence of the Church of England against separatism. The description of the contents of each chapter functions almost syllogistically. In the first chapter 'Atheisme and Irreligion' are confuted, then in chapters two, three, and four, 'the Christian Religion is approoved to be the only true Religion', before 'the Church of Rome is disproved to be the true Church of God', and finally the 'detestable Schismes' of 'the *Brownists* and *Barrowists*' are confuted and 'our Church approoved to be the only true Church of God.'[129] The placement of this section at the end of *Gods Arrowe* makes it seem like the book's most significant conclusion. Each preceding chapter appears to progress toward and necessitate Smith's claim that separatism is inimical to the true English Church. At the same time, this teleology is apparent neither on the title page, nor in the first chapter. Danter was clearly aware of how Smith's argument functioned at a structural level but did little to make its implications overt.

The almost passive nature of Smith's anti-separatist polemic makes it effective at confuting the counter-Reformation argument that intra-Protestant divisions encourage atheism. Because there is no lengthy attack upon separatism at the beginning of the treatise or a provocative frontispiece decrying the rise of separatism, Smith avoids making his treatise vulnerable to the objection that the Protestant churches were dangerously at odds with one another. Given the topicality of separatism in the early 1590s, it is striking that Danter and Smith chose not to advertise the most relevant and original aspect of the work. Whereas anti-popery was a well-established literary tradition for both puritans and conformists, the publication of Barrow's separatist treatises began in earnest only after his imprisonment in 1587, making Smith's confutation of him the most immediately salient feature of *Gods Arrowe*. Why mask the most timely and polemical aspect of a religious treatise behind

---

[129] Smith, sig. A4r.

discussion of a more obscure topic unless deliberately to make the polemical content less confrontational? Unlike Barrow, Smith uses anti-atheist polemic as a vehicle for defusing rather than exacerbating politico-religious tension, firstly by using it to conceal the broader thrust of his argument at the outset of the treatise and, secondly, by presenting atheism more as a historical or theoretical concept than a pressing social issue.

This becomes clear in the opening chapter of *Gods Arrowe,* which is primarily a survey of pre-existing arguments against atheism rather than an exploration of what atheism is, why unbelievers reject God, or where they may be found in contemporary society. Many other writers did not begin their anti-atheist treatises with introductory definitions of the term, so this omission should not to be taken as a sign of Smith's ignorance.[130] What *is* striking about *Gods Arrowe* is that Smith does not make any attempt to highlight the importance of his discussion of atheism to the contemporary politico-religious environment. Unlike de Mornay, Smith never suggests that contemporary Christians 'meeteth with [atheists] at every step' and the chapter remains firmly rooted in the ancient world.[131] By presenting atheism primarily as a historical phenomenon that has never gained any serious traction since its first emergence in classical Athens, Smith implicitly challenges Barrow's argument that true Christians must separate from the Church of England because it permits atheists among its membership. According to Smith's account, this would be impossible because religious belief is a natural impulse and atheism merely hypocritical outward posturing.

Like Hutchinson, Lyly, de Mornay, and Sidney, Smith derives his understanding of atheism primarily from *D.N.D.*. Paraphrasing Cicero, Smith describes how contemporary hostility toward classical unbelievers like Protagoras and Diagoras indicates that atheism was 'odious even amonge the Heathen themselves'. Smith substantiates this point by noting that

---

[130] Cf. e.g. Thomas Bowes, 'To the Christian Reader Grace and Peace', in *The Second Part of the French Academie [...]*, by Pierre de La Primaudaye (London, 1594), sig. b1r; Bacon, 'Of Atheisme', 52.
[131] Du-Plessis-Mornay, *Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, sig. **iiiir.

even '*Cicero* the Heathen Philosopher doth condemne them all'.[132] The chapter progresses at a brisk pace, citing a range of classical and patristic sources including Tertullian, Seneca, and Plutarch to build up a sense that condemning unbelief is a universal feature of all societies, even pre-Christian ones. Smith then deploys the familiar argument that atheists convince themselves that god does not exist only in order to grant themselves 'more libertie of sinning', citing Suetonius' frequently recounted story of Caligula as evidence.[133] On this basis, Smith ends the first section of the chapter by concluding that 'Atheists of the world, who say what they list, and doe what they list, yet shall they never bee able to root out this impression: namely, that there is a God, whose feare is engraven in the hearts of all men'.[134] This is a perfect example of how early modern anti-atheism often operates as a 'Discourse without [a] Subject': Smith confutes atheism by denying that unbelief is truly possible even as he reifies the persona of the atheist in his writing.[135]

Moving on from his brief doxography of historical atheists, Smith attempts to confute unbelief by arguing for the necessity of a divine creator. He combines scriptural assurances that God is 'perfectly seene in the creation of the world' with the observation that even Aristotle ultimately rejected his belief that the world was eternal.[136] Smith also contends that daily acts of providence demonstrate that God exists as the active 'feeder, preserver, keeper, and upholder' of humanity.[137] To show the absurdity of the atheist's position, Smith asserts that 'the provident father of all is planted, and inseparably fixed in the harts of al men […] all have some one kinde of religion or other, though all finde not the right religion'.[138] Since, according to Smith, religion is a natural impulse, the atheist's belief that religion is 'a

---

[132] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. B1r.
[133] Smith, sig. B1v.
[134] Smith, sig. B2r, paraphrasing Rom. 1:20.
[135] See intro., 13–14.
[136] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. B2v.
[137] Smith, sig. B3v.
[138] Smith, sig. B4r.

politicke devise of humane Invention' makes no sense. [139] Smith amplifies this point using *enargeia,* presenting readers with the powerful image of terrified pagans looking up at the sky and raising their hands in fear: 'what made the heathen in any dangerous or sodaine distres to lift up their eies or hands to heaven, mightily to feare and to be astonished? None can say it is the law of men for no law of men doth enforce this attempt. But it is a naturall instinct of the Feare of God.'[140] By inviting readers to imagine these gestures, Smith shows as well as tells that a fear of God is naturally implanted in humans. In light of Smith's confutation of atheism, readers familiar with Barrow's claims that the Church of England has been overrun by atheists would be induced to reject his argument as impossible.

Satisfied that he has explained his subject in sufficient detail, Smith directs his reader to the next chapter: 'Let us therefore nowe seeke and serch out which is the true Religion, which is acceptable to God […] For all nations and people have a kinde of religion (as I said before) but all have not the true and right religion'.[141] As I note above, scholars often find this rapid transition disappointing or confusing, yet it is an effective means of deploying anti-atheist rhetoric not as a polemical insult but as the starting point upon which to build an intra-Protestant consensus. We see this in the way the first chapter is structured. Smith addresses three different kinds of atheist: wicked people who temporarily deny the existence of God before recanting; Machiavellians who view religion as a politic invention; and people who 'finde not out nor observe the right religion'.[142] Because Smith dismisses the former two kinds of atheism as blatant hypocrisy that cannot be sustained seriously for any length of time, it follows logically that the persons most in need of confutation are those who 'have not the true and right religion'.[143] The first chapter of *Gods Arrow* may therefore be read as an

---

[139] Smith, sig. B4r.
[140] Smith, sig. B4v.
[141] Smith, sig. B4v.
[142] Smith, sig. B4v.
[143] Smith, sig. C1r.

extended exercise in rhetorical misdirection whereby atheism is presented as a less pressing issue than misplaced theism. At the same time, Smith establishes the presence of an anti-atheist consensus among all human societies, allowing him to predicate the later, more confrontational parts of his treatise upon an unassailable pre-existing agreement. Smith's opening anti-atheist chapter is therefore essential to his confutation of the separatist argument that the Church of England is overrun with atheists and the Catholic argument that Protestant divisions are an inducement to unbelief.

Having established that atheists are universally reviled, Smith's task is now to prove that 'the Christian Religion, is the onely true Religion in the world'.[144] His confutation of Judaism is noticeably irenic and revolves around an attempt to prove Jesus' divinity using historical evidence found in the Bible. The hypothetical Jewish interlocutor that Smith attempts to convert is addressed not as an enemy, but as a would-be Christian convert who merely requires a careful explanation of how the New Testament fulfils the prophecies foretold in the Hebrew Bible.[145] Smith becomes more hostile and polemical when he turns to discussing Mahometism, the only religion that he directly parallels with both atheism and separatism. Smith's objection to Mahometism is primarily based upon the commonplace medieval and early modern view of Muhammed as a Machiavellian trickster.[146] Another problem for Smith is that 'the Religion of Mahomet is fleshly, consisting in natural delights and corporal pleasures […] his paradise and doctrine is such, as there seemeth smal difference between Epicurism, Atheisme, and Mahometisme'.[147] Smith also argues that Mahomet was a tyrant whose military successes were inflicted upon the seventh-century

---

[144] Smith, sig. C1r.
[145] Smith, sig. C1r.
[146] Smith, sig. k2r. For an analysis of this trope as manifested in Langland's *Piers Plowman,* see Matthew Dimmock, *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14–15.
[147] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. K1v.

Church by the Christian God as a providential punishment for their disunity.[148] Smith claims that Mahomet took advantage of 'division amongst those which called themselves Christians', placing particular emphasis upon the 'Nestorians, Jacobites, Monothelites' and other 'divers sectes and heresies' that plagued the Church during this period.[149] Although Smith never directly compares these groups to the Brownists and Barrowists, his description of them as 'sectes' makes the connection implicit.

Having first established that there is a God and that polytheism, Judaism, and Mahometism cannot be true Churches because they fail to 'acknowledge God and Christ his son, and all the sacred and canonicall books of the scriptures', it remains for Smith to deal with 'that great controversie betweene the Protestantes and the Papistes'.[150] Lake has observed that 'Moderate Puritans and conformists both use [anti-popery] to play down the significance of the internal divisions among English Protestants in the face of the "common adversary"'.[151] The juxtaposition of Smith's attack on Catholicism to his ensuing confutation of Barrow and Brown certainly has this effect. Smith's identification of the Roman Church with the Antichrist, his attacks on papal tyranny, idolatry, and indulgences, and his refutation of the non-scriptural doctrines of purgatory and transubstantiation are typical features of the anti-Catholic tradition described by Lake. Yet, Smith makes a concerted effort to integrate these commonplace objections with his attacks on atheism and polytheism that came earlier in the treatise. For example, Smith identifies a secularising tendency in the Catholic reliance upon institutional traditions to interpret scripture, 'For heereby they make both the scriptures imperfect, and not so content, doe further adde unto those Scriptures'.[152] Most strikingly, Smith quotes from and translates *D.N.D.* to confute the Catholic doctrine of

---

[148] For more on this anti-atheist trope, see chap. 4, 216–218.
[149] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. L4v.
[150] Smith, sig. K3.
[151] Peter Lake, 'Anti-Popery: The Structure of a Prejudice', in *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics, 1603–1642*, ed. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (London: Longman, 1989), 98.
[152] Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. N4r.

transubstantiation: '*Whome doe you thinke so mad as to beleeve that which he eateth to be God*. Insomuch therefore as the Church of Rome doth worship bread, as if it were God, It is manifest they be grosse Idollaters'.[153] Such comparisons give *Gods Arrowe* a cohesiveness through which each confutation seems to be a continuation of the last, with Protestantism emerging as the only rational scripture-based alternative to religions that are variously illogical, carnal, and idolatrous.

I have been arguing that Smith structured *Gods Arrowe* in a telescopic way, moving from the universal consensus that atheism is invalid toward a defence of Church of England Protestantism in a way that avoids excessive inter-confessional controversy. I have shown that even though Protestant separatism appears to be Smith's primary target, he avoids attacking Barrow and Browne directly to minimize the extent that Reformed Christendom appears dangerously divided. This reading is borne out by the way *Gods Arrowe* culminates in a confutation of anti-separatism, but only commits five pages to doing so. The disparity in length between this section and the preceding fifty-page attack on Catholicism indicates Smith's desire to emphasise a high degree of consensus between conformists and separatists. Rather than denouncing the presbyterian demands of Barrow and Browne, Smith simply argues that the structure of the church is an indifferent matter.[154] Smith even concedes that the Church of England and its ministry are not perfect and that further reformation is desirable.[155] He merely contends that these reforms should happen gradually from within rather than as an immediate external shock.[156] Smith's strongest objection is to the idea that the liturgy set out in the *Book of Common Prayer* is idolatrous: 'To say (as they say) that a set forme of prayer used in the Church […] is Idolatry: is detestable'.[157] It is of particular

[153] Smith, sig. P2v–P3r, emphasis added to indicate quotation. Cf. Cicero, *D.N.D.,* 3.41.
[154] Smith, sig. R2r.
[155] Smith, sig. R2r.
[156] Smith, sig. R2v.
[157] Smith, sig. R2v.

importance for Smith to deny this because his attacks on polytheism, Mahometism, and Catholicism rely upon him establishing a consensus that the idolatrous qualities of these religions disqualify them from being true Churches. Accordingly, Smith's counterargument involves suggesting that the use of set prayers is a matter of consensus among Reformed Churches.[158]

Smith ends the treatise by asking for Barrow and Browne 'to cease their slander against this Church, and to cease their damnable schisme, and to bee reconciled to that Church of ours'.[159] There is no formal conclusion nor any reference to the preceding confutations of atheism, non-Christian theisms, and Catholicism, perhaps because Smith died before he was able to write one. The effect of this omission, intentional or not, is that readers who began the treatise expecting a confutation of atheism finish the book thinking not about unbelief but about the inconsequentiality of separatist demands in comparison to the much more serious errors of Catholicism. The anti-atheist premise upon which the treatise was founded has fallen away almost completely. Yet, if the treatise did not contain this framework and instead began with a direct attack upon Protestant separatism, it would have had a much more controversial and divisive effect. By concealing his confutation of separatism behind the anti-atheist frontispiece of *Gods Arrowe* and establishing a historical consensus against unbelief in its opening chapter, Smith embarks upon a scholarly exercise that minimizes the appearance of divisions within Protestantism.

Smith's polemical strategy in *Gods Arrowe* not only shows that early modern anti-atheist discourse was far from meaningless, but also that anxieties about the rise of unbelief were key points of reference in post-Reformation religious controversy. Early modern polemicists identified secularising tendencies and other signs of atheism in the doctrines of

[158] Smith, sig. R2v.
[159] Smith, sig. R3v.

their adversaries because they believed that in the divided post-Reformation world, conditions were right for the rise of unbelief. Protestants objected to what they saw as the inherent irrationality of Catholic doctrine, which they feared would drive potential atheists further from Christianity. Conversely, Protestant translators were accused of dispensing with the more metaphysical elements of the Bible and creating religious divisions that would suggest religion was a human invention. Just as Lyly and Gifford invented atheist speakers to attack the complacency of Renaissance Humanism and the inadequacy of the Church of England, Catholic polemicists like Martin and Rainolds suggested the claims of their Protestant opponents were motivated by inward atheism. But not all polemicists considered it appropriate to accuse other Christians of atheism. Effective rhetorical invention involved finding ‘valid arguments to render one’s cause plausible’, and many writers did not consider it efficacious to accuse their religious enemies of atheism.[160] The hesitancy of figures like Whitaker and Smith to do this indicates that the term was not always thrown around as a meaningless insult, but was first evaluated for its usefulness as a polemical weapon. At a time of unprecedented religious upheaval, the accusation of atheism was valued as much for its specificity as its expansiveness.

[160] Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.7.9.

Chapter 4

Atheism on stage: the effects of implicit atheism in three Marlowe plays

In the introduction to this thesis, I proposed a distinction between the way unbelief is represented in Bullein's mid sixteenth-century *Dialogue both pleasant and pietifull* and Tourneur's early seventeenth-century revenge play, *The Atheist's Tragedy.* My claim was that whereas Bullein's Medicus belongs to a medieval tradition of attributing unbelief to doctors, Tourneur's D'Amville is based on anti-atheist tropes that emerged in the later sixteenth century. In the intervening years between the publication of these texts, conceptions of atheism were constantly being reformulated and renegotiated. Anti-atheist writers sought not only to confute unbelief but to incorporate their confutations into polemical arguments and social commentary. We have seen that post-Reformation religious division, Machiavellian statecraft, and classical philosophy were consistently viewed as inducements to unbelief. I have shown that although scarcely any instances of unbelief were officially recorded in sixteenth-century England, early modern writers were able to invent personas for fictive atheists using literary techniques like *prosopopoeia*. This process of imagining unbelief often involved distinguishing between inward and outward atheism. Though the possibility of openly and sincerely advocating unbelief was dismissed as hypocritical scoffing, outward religiosity was also scrutinised for evidence of concealed inward unbelief.

These early modern habits of thought explain why Tourneur's D'Amville justifies his unbelief with recourse to Machiavellian deceit, Epicurean annihilationism, and puritan hypocrisy. They also explain why D'Amville has a negative *ethos* and is subjected to providential retribution at the end of the play: the tropes Tourneur constructed him from were invented to confute unbelief. One important aspect of D'Amville's character I have not yet

considered is that he belongs to a tradition of dramatic representations of unbelief that was already well established when Tourneur was writing in 1610. Most unbelievers in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century drama conform to one of two archetypes. Either they are usurping Muslim tyrants, or they are Machiavellian Vice figures whose evil machinations are motivated by inward atheism. This chapter argues that these archetypes were popularised by the plays of Christopher Marlowe, which were frequently imitated by later Elizabethan playwrights. Unbelieving tyrants who denied providence like those found in George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588) and Robert Greene's *Selimus* (1591) imitate the eponymous protagonist of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine 1 & 2* (1587). The speeches of Machiavellian schemers who manipulate religion for politic ends, like Aaron and Richard in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1592) and *Richard III* (1593), are influenced by Barabas, the protagonist of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (1589). The influence of Marlowe's plays on the language, plot devices, and stage images used by later writers has been well documented by other scholars. But his responsibility for reifying the concerns of early modern anti-atheist writers in dramatic form and for popularising the inclusion of atheist characters in plays written for the public stage has largely gone unremarked upon.

This is likely because Marlowe's own reputation for atheism has overshadowed the veiled representations of unbelief in his plays. None of Marlowe's characters openly and consistently espouse unbelief and none are explicitly described as atheists. Yet, Marlowe's biography has encouraged scholars to speculate about why Marlowe's characters seem so much like atheists. Charles Lamb suggested that 'Marlowe is said to have been tainted with atheistical positions, to have denied God and the Trinity. To such a genius the history of Faustus must have been delectable food'.[1] Versions of Lamb's nineteenth-century argument are as likely to appear in comments made by Marlowe's contemporaries as they are in

[1] Qtd. in Millar MacLure, ed., *Christopher Marlowe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1995), 78.

modern literary scholarship, even though no reliable account of the writer's actual beliefs survives.[2] Marlowe was not directly accused of atheism until soon before his death in 1593 and his posthumous reputation for atheism was not established until the publication of Thomas Beard's *Theatre of God's Judgements* in 1598.[3] Yet, as we have seen, contemporary dramatists were including unbelievers in plays influenced by Marlowe's characters and plots as early as 1588. Robert Greene, who wrote many of these early imitations, famously attacked Marlowe for 'daring God out of heaven with that Atheist *Tamburlan*'.[4] Whatever Marlowe's actual degree of belief or unbelief, his plays undoubtedly possess qualities that consistently prompt readers and spectators to identify their protagonists as atheists and infer that Marlowe's sympathies lie with the implicit unbelief of his characters.

Infer is the operative term here. Marlowe's characters never straightforwardly articulate their true beliefs and nowhere in the plays or their paratexts are we given clear instructions on how to read them. Indeed, the prologue to *1 Tamburlaine* provocatively instructs the audience to 'applaud [Tamburlaine's] fortunes as you please'.[5] As Joel Altman points out, this is a novel departure from the 'moral directives of the prologues extant up to this time', which typically supplied audiences with unambiguous guides to interpreting the action.[6] Furthermore, the words atheist, atheism, and their cognates never appear in any of Marlowe's drama, poetry, or translations. The closest Marlowe comes to using one of these terms is in the *Faustus* B-Text. Robin consecutively spells out 'a', 'the', 'o', and 'deny' while trying to parse a word, perhaps 'Demogorgon', from his conjuring book. This obviously suggests *atheos*, but the term is neither spoken in its entirety nor applied to anyone in the

---

[2] For a particularly compelling exploration of the relationship between Marlowe's biography and the content of his plays, see Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*.
[3] For the allegations of atheism made against Marlowe, see chap. 1, 81–82.
[4] Robert Greene, *Perimedes the Blacke-Smith a Golden Methode, How to Use the Minde in Pleasant and Profitable Exercise [...]* (London, 1588), sig. A3r.
[5] Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts 1 and 2,* in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 5, ed. David Fuller and Edward J. Esche (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), *Part 1,* prol.8.
[6] Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 323.

play, so Robin's utterance remains a tantalising suggestion rather than a key to how the act of conjuring should be read.[7] Given that characters like Faustus, Barabas, and Tamburlaine are not described as atheists, claiming that these plays precipitated a tradition of dramatic representations of unbelief seems inherently debatable.

The 'debatable' quality of Marlowe's drama is central to the three main arguments I make in this chapter. Firstly, I contend that Marlowe conveys the atheism of his characters indirectly through their speech and behaviour, so that it is possible to read certain figures either as unorthodox theists or as misguided unbelievers. I argue that Marlowe does this by assigning to his protagonists—especially Faustus—characteristics associated with contemporary anti-atheist tropes. As with the modern concept of dog-whistle politics, contemporary readers and spectators who were acquainted with such tropes may have recognised these qualities in Marlowe's characters. However, for those unfamiliar with this emerging discourse, Marlowe's references could easily have gone unnoticed. Secondly, I contend that the anti-atheist discourse Marlowe drew upon was predicated upon a distinction between inward and outward atheism that dismissed outward expressions of atheism as hypocritical and deemphasised the extent to which inward 'speculative' atheism was taken seriously. Because atheism was often understood as a kind of rhetorical performance made by speakers with negative *ethe*, atheists were well-suited to becoming stock figures in popular drama. By making it possible to infer unbelief indirectly from the speech and behaviour of his characters, Marlowe enabled readers and viewers to detect inward atheism in a way that contemporary anti-atheist writing often lamented as impossible. Thirdly, I contend that the frequent imitation of Marlowe's plays by other dramatists resulted in fictional atheists becoming a common presence in popular drama by the early seventeenth century. By

[7] See *Dr Faustus: The A- and B-Texts (1604, 1616): A Parallel-Text Edition*, ed. David M. Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 2.2.7.

merging the confessional, anarchic, and subversive qualities of the morality vice with the characteristics of the contemporary atheist, Marlowe created an easily replicated and adaptable character type that Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists would later deploy in a variety of contexts.

This chapter begins by examining the novel ways in which Marlowe encourages audiences to infer (dis)continuities between his characters' outward behaviour and inward beliefs. An introductory section explores the anxieties about inward and outward atheism that pervaded anti-atheist discourse and compares these concerns to the fears expressed by contemporary antitheatrical writers. I further highlight the relationship between atheism and drama by pointing out that both anti-atheists and dramatists invented interiorities to accompany the forms of unbelief they described and the characters they created. This discussion informs subsequent readings of *Tamburlaine 1 & 2* (1587), *The Jew of Malta* (1589), and *Doctor Faustus* (1589), in which I argue that Marlowe drew upon contemporary anti-atheist paradigms to present characters whose unbelief must be inferred by audiences. To gauge Marlowe's impact upon how unbelief was represented by early modern dramatists, a concluding section traces the development of dramatic representations of unbelief between the late fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries. I note that although Vice figures in the morality tradition represent different forms of unbelief to those portrayed by Marlowe, the Vice established a structural precedent for Marlowe's charismatic atheists. Finally, I examine how imitations of Marlowe's protagonists led to the emergence of the usurping tyrant and the Machiavellian Vice as archetypal forms of dramatic atheism that informed the creation of characters like Tourneur's D'Amville.

Does Faustus truly 'thinke hell's a fable', or is this mere bravado after signing away his soul to the devil?[8] Confronted with the onstage presence of Mephistopheles—a character who asserts that he is damned 'In hell' and serves 'the prince of hell'—it seems impossible that Faustus could be so sure that hell does not exist.[9] Conversely, the only likely rationale that could explain Faustus' decision to give his soul to Lucifer in exchange for the freedom to 'live in al voluptuousnesse' for twenty-four years would be a belief that his soul is not immortal and that the afterlife is not real.[10] Audiences may speculate either that Faustus genuinely thinks hell is a fable and is behaving accordingly, or that his expressions of unbelief are insincere attempts to justify retroactively the voluptuous lifestyle and unholy contract he has already embraced.[11] Speculation is the only form of interpretation possible, since the play offers no extended scenes of personal introspection or philosophical disputation in which Faustus expounds, abandons, or otherwise explores beliefs about the soul.[12] Instead, we are presented with a series of pageants, shows, and other forms of elaborate visual spectacle that serve to distract Faustus—and the audience—from the more serious questions underpinning the play's narrative.

---

[8] Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 2, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.130.

[9] *Faustus*, 3.59, 3.54

[10] *Faustus,* 3.92. Cf. Tamburlaine's ambiguous assertion that upon death 'our bodies turne to Elements / And both our soules aspire celestiall thrones', which evokes both Lucretius and Ecclesiastes: *1 Tamburlaine,* 1.2.236–7.

[11] Cf. Tamburlaine's decision to burn the Quran only after 'My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell, / Slew all [Mahamet's] Priests, his kinsmen, and his friends', *2 Tamburlaine,* 5.1.180–81. Both characters may double down on their unbelief to justify temporal decisions they seem to have made already.

[12] This is reflected in the availability of starkly opposed critical responses to the play: 'heroic' readings argue that the play is 'essentially anti-Christian', whereas 'orthodox' interpretations contend that 'there is no more obvious Christian document in all Elizabethan drama': see, respectively, Irving Ribner, 'Marlowe's Tragicke Glasse', in *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Hardin Craig and Richard Hosley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 110; and Leo Kirschbaum, 'Marlowe's Faustus: A Reconsideration', *The Review of English Studies* 19, no. 75 (1943): 229. For an overview of this conflict, see Sara Munson Deats, *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide* (London: Continuum, 2010), 10–14; David M. Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, 'Introduction', in *Dr. Faustus: The A- and B- Texts (1604, 1616): A Parallel-Text Edition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 15–31.

The emphasis upon spectacle in *Faustus* is not merely an inheritance from the morality play tradition; it is an important way of suggesting that Faustus' heterodoxy is superficial. When he expresses doubt about signing Mephistopheles' contract, Faustus is presented with a group of devils that dance and bring him '*crownes and rich apparell*'.[13] When Faustus asks 'What means this show?', Mephistopheles openly tells him that it is 'Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind withal'.[14] The procession is thus explicitly presented as a distraction: something to take Faustus' mind off the soteriological perils of the deal he is about to make and return his attention to the temporal pleasures he has been offered in exchange for his soul. Consequently, the intellectual dimension to Faustus' transgression is de-emphasised: he makes decisions in pursuit of surface-level gratification and if any deeper meaning underpinning this behaviour is to be found, it must be inferred by the audience.

One inference the audience is obliged to entertain is that Faustus is an atheist. Viewed collectively, his characteristics, values, and implicit beliefs closely approximate those of the early modern atheist. Taking Nicholas Breton's Theophrastan portrait as an example, the typical atheist may be understood as 'a moste badde man' who inverts every conceivable orthodox value: 'a figure of desperation, who dare do any thing even to his soules damnation […] Hee makes Sinne a jest, Grace an humour, Truth a fable […] his belly is his God, a Whore is his Mistris, and the Divell is his Master'.[15] Faustus does all of these things and, like Breton, Marlowe presents his character in terms of inversion and antithesis. Similar inversions and mockeries are expressed in *Jew* and the *Tamburlaine* plays, the protagonists of

---

[13] *Faustus,* 5.82 SD. Cf. Tamburlaine's fixation with attaining 'The sweet fruition of an earthly crowne': *1 Tamburlaine,* 2.7.29; and Barabas' desire to amass 'Infinite riches in a little roome': *The Jew of Malta,* in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe,* vol. 4, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.1.37.
[14] *Faustus,* 5.84.
[15] Nicholas Breton, *The Good and the Badde, or Descriptions of the Worthies, and Unworthies of This Age* (London, 1616), 20–21.

which burn holy books, value temporal power over heavenly reward, and prize wealth above religious integrity.

My argument is that Marlowe's representations of unbelief involve characters who appear to have internalised arguments against religion rejecting faith in a self-conscious way, and that Marlowe invites audiences to identify these characters as atheists. To substantiate this claim, it is necessary to establish which aspects of the sixteenth-century anti-atheist discourse Marlowe was drawing on; and secondly, how the apparent interiority of dramatic characters was constructed in this period. I contend that the answers to these questions are connected in several important ways. As we have seen, anti-atheist writers frequently espoused a distinction between 'inward' and 'outward' atheism but were ambivalent about the possibility of detecting the concealed beliefs of the inward atheists who allegedly lurked in hidden corners of early modern Europe. Meanwhile, the detection of unstated beliefs and motivations was a central feature of the legally-inflected drama that emerged in the late sixteenth century, which used forensic rhetoric to create the illusion that dramatic characters were involved in real sequences of events that extended beyond what was represented onstage, with inner motivations that could be inferred from the circumstantial arguments of their actions and persons. By making characters like Faustus, Barabas, and Tamburlaine fit the circumstantial profile of the typical atheist, Marlowe encouraged audiences to infer inward unbelief even when it was not expressed explicitly.

The early modern habit of distinguishing between inward and outward atheism has been a recurring theme throughout this thesis.[16] Here, I want to revisit the way atheism was viewed as a societal problem rooted in the sinful outward behaviour of individuals, rather than as a serious theological issue underpinned by inward rational thought. As the *atheoi* of Elizabethan prose fiction demonstrate, unbelief was not literally inconceivable during this

[16] For an overview, see intro., 10–17.

period, yet clearly it was preferable for anti-atheists to maintain that no one could seriously deny the existence of God and that anyone who claimed to do so was engaged in an act of elaborate self-deception. If early modern atheists were understood to speak and behave hypocritically, then their expressions of unbelief may be understood as a kind of performance. Pfister notes that the growing popularity of the public theatre 'between say, 1585 and 1610 actually coincides with the crest of the alleged atheist menace and of the anti-atheist agitation' and he suggests that this is 'hardly a mere coincidence'.[17] A comparison of the grievances raised by anti-atheist and anti-theatrical writers suggests that Pfister is right, since the two genres are underpinned by shared concerns about the effects of outwardly performing immoral acts. Anti-atheist writers claimed that just as actors pretended to commit terrible crimes, outward atheists only pretended not to believe in God. Meanwhile, anti-theatricalists claimed that allowing actors perform heterodox and immoral acts with impunity could encourage spectators to imitate this behaviour, or even become atheists.[18]

For example, Stephen Gosson, paraphrasing Plutarch, warned that youths should not be exposed to theatrical performances because 'those wanton spectacles of lyght huswives, drawing gods from the heavens, and young men from them selves to shipwracke of honestie, will hurte them more, then if at the Epicures table, they had nigh burst their guts with over feeding'.[19] Gosson's polemic stands out because he draws a direct parallel between theatregoing and Epicureanism, which is predicated upon a fear that impressionable male auditors would imitate the lecherous behaviour of the gods in classical drama. Furthermore, his claim that plays were dangerous because they showed characters 'drawing gods from

---

[17] Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism', 81.
[18] E.g. Thomas Bowes blamed the rise of atheism on the popularity of plays and romances, echoing Ascham's concerns described in chap. 2, 107–109. See Bowes, 'Dedication to Sir John Puckering', 1594, sig. b5r.
[19] Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse*, fo. 12r. Cf. Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses Contayning a Discoverie, or Briefe Summarie of Such Notable Vices and Imperfections, as Now Raigne in Many Christian Countreyes of the Worlde [...]* (London, 1583), sigs. L8v–M1r.

heavens' closely anticipates Greene's later attack on Marlowe.[20] The relationship between atheism and drama proposed by antitheatrical writers, while ubiquitous, did not always express the same causative logic. For Gosson, the theatre was dangerous because it could teach immoral behaviour and heterodox beliefs, but for John Northbrooke, it was the prior existence of unbelief that had allowed theatre to become popular in the first place.[21] In Northbrooke's dialogue between Youth and Age, the older voice of reason argues that the popularity of plays and interludes in Elizabethan London indicates the extent to which Christian morality has already been debased.[22] A further concern of many anti-theatricalists was that attending plays would lead Christians to abandon their religious obligations.[23] The most common manifestation of this concern was in the numerous unsuccessful attempts made at local and national levels to prevent plays from being performed on Sundays.[24] The state also issued a proclamation in 1559 to censor any performance of material concerning the national religion and in 1606 legislated to fine performers who 'prophanely speake or use the holy Name of God or of Christ Jesus'.[25] These repeated government interventions indicate the extent to which the theatre was seen as a potential site of sedition and blasphemy. The multifaceted case against plays and entertainments made by those who sought to uphold religious orthodoxy and social order is itself indicative that the rise of anti-atheism and anti-theatricalism were linked.

Here, I want to propose that atheism and drama are connected in another way, and that rather than straightforwardly encouraging atheism, Marlowe and the dramatists who

---

[20] See 202, above.
[21] John Northbrooke, *Spiritus Est Vicarius Christi in Terra [...]* (London, 1577), sig. A4.
[22] Northbrooke, 72.
[23] E.g. John Field, *A Godly Exhortation, by Occasion of the Late Judgement of God, Shewed at Parris-Garden [...]* (London, 1583), fo. 2v; Northbrooke, *Spiritus Est Vicarius Christi in Terra*, 67; E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 292–95.
[24] See Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4:262, 268, 285, 288, 291, 302, 304–5, 307, 311, 331, 335. For an example of the way these decrees were not always strictly enforced, see William Ingram, *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 202, 208–9.
[25] Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4:263; 338–39.

followed him incorporated anti-atheist tropes into their plays in ways that achieved something anti-atheist writers never could. First, Marlowe presents some characters as fitting typical atheist profiles in terms of their *ethos,* motivation, speech, and behaviour. However, he either omits, delays, or otherwise makes ambiguous their expressions of explicit forms of unbelief. Marlowe then offers audiences insights into the fictive interior worlds of his characters via theatrical techniques like soliloquies and asides, which gives audiences the opportunity to detect inward atheism even when it was initially concealed or ambiguous. Because late-Elizabethan dramatists created interiority effects by encouraging audiences to infer characters' inward motivations from the circumstances of their outward actions, plays provided a context in which the inner unbelief of a fictional atheist could be reliably imagined. By writing characters whom audiences could infer were inward atheists and placing these characters in narratives that eventually confirm these suspicions, Marlowe mitigated one of the major vulnerabilities that anti-atheists who wished to downplay the threat of speculative unbelief exposed themselves to: how would one know if large sections of the population secretly did not believe in God? Audiences enabled to infer the inward unbelief of characters who were neither introduced as atheists nor given lines explicitly articulating unbelief may have been inclined to detect the same unspoken heterodoxies that suggest themselves to modern critics. In this way, plays about atheism had the potential to be more invigorating than other forms of anti-atheist writing, which told audiences that atheism was widespread and dangerous without enabling them to detect it effectively.

As I suggested above, anti-atheist writers primarily generated arguments about the causes of outward unbelief and how to confute it; they tended not to discuss how inward atheists might be identified, an issue they either avoided altogether or acknowledged as a difficulty. For example, Dove lists Pope Leo X as a known historical example of a Machiavellian atheist but concedes that, in practice, it is difficult to identify those who 'make

open profession of religion but for advantage', since '[e]very man can take notice of that which you seeme to be, but fewe men can sound the bottome of your heart, and dive into your secret thoughts'.[26] The need to 'discover' atheism in the way that domestic crimes such as murder were detected through close observation of one's neighbours was rarely expressed.[27] Although La Primaudaye complains about 'the misery of our age, wherein so many Epicures and Atheists live, as are dayly discovered amongst us in all estates and callings', he gives no sense of the manner in which such discoveries take place.[28] Ad hominem accusations of atheism made against public figures may, to some extent, be understood as occasions where inward unbelief has been inferred from outward behaviour but, as we have seen, such assertions often read as polemical devices rather than ingenuous deductions.[29]

The lawyer and Church of England apologist Richard Cosin proposed addressing the difficulty of determining whether signs of outward atheism extend to inward unbelief by summoning accused atheists to swear oaths affirming their belief in God: 'he that shall be detected to have spoken like an *Atheist*; or an *Heretike* against *God*, may be examined upon his oath touching his beleefe'. Yet, Cosin cautions that if an accused atheist swears he has repented and reaffirms his belief but then subsequently appears to have relapsed, 'he ought not to be examined by oath […] notwithstanding he shall then againe pretend revocation of his error and hearty repentance'.[30] Cosin's proposition demonstrates the double bind in which anti-atheist writers found themselves. On the one hand, outward atheism was usually dismissed as hypocrisy, so if one were 'detected to have spoken like an *Atheist'*, this could not be considered sufficient proof of sustained speculative unbelief. On the other hand, a true

---

[26] Dove, *Confutation of Atheisme*, 4–6.
[27] On neighbourly observation and the 'discovery' of domestic crimes, see Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 26–56.
[28] Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The Second Part of the French Academie [...]*, trans. Thomas Bowes (London, 1594), 1.
[29] See 68–75, above.
[30] Richard Cosin, *An Apologie for Sundrie Proceedings by Jurisdiction Ecclesiasticall [...]* (London, 1593), 220.

inward atheist would always affect outward conformity and would have no incentive to keep his oath, leaving anti-atheists with no other recourse than the imprecise and unsatisfactory option of monitoring individuals for signs of unbelief.[31] The increasing prevalence of interiority effects in drama written for the late-Elizabethan professional theatre, achieved through the layering of circumstantial evidence to allow the inference of unstated motivations therefore provided a model through which inward unbelief could be detected.

The extent to which there emerged in late sixteenth-century drama a new kind of fictional character written to give the impression of being a lifelike person with inward motivations extending beyond the level of diegesis is a matter of controversy. Critics like Francis Barker and Catherine Belsey have argued that the Renaissance marked the emergence of a new kind of interiority, epitomised by '[Shakespeare's] Hamlet's assertion of an authentic inner reality defined by its difference from an inauthentic exterior'. [32] However, such claims have been discredited by David Aers, who shows that distinctions between inner and outer permeate the entire medieval penitential tradition.[33] Yet, even if the binary between interior motivation and outward behaviour was not new in the sixteenth century, the neoclassical drama of this period was innovative in the way it encouraged audiences to imagine its characters as being involved in ongoing sequences of extramimetic events, whose motivations must be inferred in order to preserve narrative logic. As Lorna Hutson puts it, 'the allegorical morality play produces no sustained imagined dramatic world anterior to, beyond, and explanatory of the mimetic representations that we see', whereas in neoclassical Renaissance drama, audiences must project 'psychological, as well as logical, causality in

[31] Increasing scepticism about 'the capacity of oaths to constrain the consciences of those who took them' precipitated the new law of contract established by Slade's case in 1597: see David Harris Sacks, 'The Promise and the Contract in Early Modern England: Slade's Case in Perspective', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Victoria Ann Kahn and Lorna Hutson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 38.
[32] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), 40–41; Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984).
[33] David Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject"', in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 177–202.

order to make sense of what is seen on stage'.[34] Hutson attributes this development to the influence of an increasingly participatory legal culture on dramatists and audiences in the sixteenth century.[35] In the same way that lawyers tried to lead juries toward particular verdicts by using arguments drawn from the accidents of persons involved and the circumstances of things done to present vivid narratives about how disputed events unfolded, dramatists used forensic rhetoric to create the impression of dramatic continuity.[36]

This method of reading and writing plays was culturally dominant and can offer an important insight into how early moderns may have approached the issue of detecting inward atheism. Of particular relevance to this chapter is the way strategies for constructing artificial proofs drawn from legal rhetoric could be used to suggest a character's inward motivation, or *causa*. Roman manuals of rhetorical invention and oration by Cicero and Quintilian set out taxonomies of the 'accidents' of persons and the 'circumstances' of things from which coherent judicial narratives could be generated. Quintilian states that 'motive, time, place, opportunity, means, method, and the like are accidents of things' and that these places of argument are to be combined with what is known about the involved persons.[37] As Cicero puts it: 'All propositions are supported in argument by attributes of persons or of actions. We hold the following to be the attributes of persons: name, nature, manner of life, fortune, habit, feeling, interests, purposes, achievements, accidents, speeches made'.[38] Hutson argues that the importance classical rhetoricians ascribed to forming narratives in which arguments from persons and things aligned in a plausible way 'produced a dramatic language replete with arguments perpetually inviting the inference of *causae*—that is, motives, intentions, or

[34] Lorna Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 11.
[35] Lorna Hutson, 'Theatre', in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. James Simpson and Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227–46.
[36] Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion*, 104–45.
[37] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 5.10.23.
[38] Cicero, *De Inventione*, 1.34.

purposes' of characters based not only upon they do and say onstage, but from what is reported of them.[39]

These rhetorical strategies have an obvious bearing on the problem of detecting concealed inward atheism. Dove's concern that it is impossible to know for certain whether outward expressions of faith are genuine because 'fewe men can sound the bottome of your heart' can be mitigated by inferring from the circumstances of an individual's deeds and the accidents of his character whether his motives stem from true religious conviction. The Catholic priest William Clark suggests using arguments from circumstances to infer whether the *causa* of individual's behaviour was motivated by a desire to conceal inward atheism. Denouncing Robert Persons' support for the appointment of an archpriest in England, Clark points out that Persons' ostensible piety may conceal inward atheism, which leads him to compare Persons to Machiavelli:

> Did any man shew greater reverence in outward behaviour to Religion, and religious men, then *Nicholas Machiavell*, as all men report of him? And yet hee was, but an Atheist inwardly. Therefore not the bare actions of themselves, (which may be indifferent eyther good or bad,) but the manner, and intention, with all other necessary circumstances, must be considered.[40]

Clark is confident that Machiavelli was an inward atheist despite his outward reverence for religion because he knows that Machiavelli saw religion merely as a tool which could be used to foster support for one's broader political objectives. Early modern anti-atheist writing attributed several accidents of person to the typical atheist. Atheists were variously considered to be arrogant and prideful in nature; to live sinful lives motivated by a desire for temporal wealth and voluptuous pleasure; to be prone to alternate fits of fear and anger; to mock and scoff at the ideas of God and providence; to be Machiavellian statesmen, unjust tyrants, or witty scholars. As the following section will show, Marlowe drew on these

[39] Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare*, 20.
[40] William Clark, *A Replie unto a Certaine Libell, Latelie Set Foorth by Father Parsons [...]* (London, 1603), fo. 45r.

accidents of person when characterising the protagonists of *Tamburlaine, Jew,* and *Faustus.* By combining the accidents of his characters with actions that could plausibly be motivated by unbelief, Marlowe's plays allow audiences to infer that the characters represented are atheists.

When the two parts of *Tamburlaine* were first performed in 1587, they not only marked the beginning of Marlowe's career as a professional playwright for the Elizabethan public stage, but a new tradition of dramatic representations of atheism. Whereas dramatists of the late fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries had written plays in which characters commit blasphemy or abandon their religious commitments without criticising religion itself, Marlowe's atheists, beginning with Tamburlaine, may be read as unbelievers who value religion only as a route to temporal power. Because they adopt understandings of the world that facilitate their pursuit of such power, Tamburlaine, Barabas, and Faustus also seem to lack personal faith in certain key tenets of their religions. Tamburlaine rejects Islam because he seems to think divine providence is not real; Barabas exploits his Jewish identity because he seems to have a Machiavellian understanding of religion; Faustus rejects Christianity because he seems to deny the immortality of the soul. Because each character challenges a different religion, the plays have their own setting-specific connotations and additional layers of meaning. Yet, each character conforms in different ways to the same emerging set of tropes. In terms of their *ethe*, the beliefs they appear to reject, and the uncertain relationships between their outward behaviours and inward beliefs, Tamburlaine, Barabas, and Faustus each embody the concerns of an anti-atheist discourse that, by the late 1580s, was becoming increasingly consistent in the way it circumscribed unbelief. Marlowe's replication of many of the tropes of this discourse without explicitly labelling his characters as atheists or containing their actions within clear moral frameworks delegates the task of defining and identifying their atheism to readers and spectators. By leaving his plays open to more than

one possible interpretation, piquing the interest of those familiar with anti-atheist commonplaces through subtle references and circumstantial details, and then confirming these suspicions with more explicit acts of denial, Marlowe's representations of atheism allow some audience members to recognise representations of inward atheism that are ambiguous enough to go undetected by others.

ATHEISM, TYRANNY, AND ANTI-PROVIDENTIALISM IN *TAMBURLAINE*

In *Tamburlaine,* the set up and reveal of the protagonist's inward atheism is linear. In *Part 1*, Tamburlaine is presented as a proud, atheistic tyrant who appears to reject divine providence. In *Part 2,* his apparent rejection of both providence and the Prophet Muhammad is made more explicit, seemingly confirming the suspicions aroused in *Part 1,* though not to the extent that it becomes impossible to read Tamburlaine as a divine agent who believes in God. To identify Tamburlaine as an inward atheist, one must infer his beliefs from his speeches, acts, and characterisation as a prideful tyrant. Atheists and tyrants were often grouped together by writers listing the threats arrayed against Reformed Christianity. Bishop of Durham James Pilkington, for example, prayed that God 'graunt us strong walls and bulwarkes, to kepe out Turke, Pope, Tyrantes, Atheists, Anabaptists, and libertines, with al other hinderers of thy building'.[41] In lists of this kind, atheists and tyrants are not presented as synonymous, but rather as related enemies whom Protestants considered equivalent threats to their societies.[42] When Tamburlaine is cursed by Bajazeth as a 'glorious Tyrant' and by

[41] James Pilkington, *A Godlie Exposition upon Certeine Chapters of Nehemiah [...]*, ed. John Foxe and Robert Some (Cambridge, 1585), fo. 47v.
[42] See e.g. Richard Smith, trans., *The Trial of Trueth or a Treatise Wherein Is Declared Who Should Be Judge Betwene the Reformed Churches, and the Romish [...]* (London, 1591), fo. 15r; Richard Robinson, 'The Epistle Dedicatorie', in *Part of the Harmony of King Davids Harp Conteining the First XXI. Psalmes of King David [...]*, by Victorinus Strigel, trans. Richard Robinson (London, 1582), sig. a3r; Edward Topsell, *Times Lamentation: Or An Exposition on the Prophet Joel [...]* (London, 1599), 390.

Arabia as an 'infamous Tyrant', he is identified as a type of malefactor associated with atheism.[43] Tyranny was also related to atheism in a more substantive way, a relationship the frontispiece of the 1590 edition of *Tamburlaine* highlights. The plays are advertised as being about a Scythian Shepherd who '(for his tyranny, and terrour in the Warre) was tearmed, The Scourge of God'. The title alludes to the belief held by some early moderns that tyrants were sent to earth as a form of providential punishment. Battenhouse summarises this view of tyranny as serving to 'explain historical calamities by showing that they are chastisements of sin permitted by God': the existence of tyrants was not an argument against divine providence but a sign of it in action.[44] Battenhouse and others who read *Tamburlaine* in exclusively orthodox terms therefore argue that the play's protagonist is not an atheist, but a conscious agent of divine providence.

Yet, this was not the only way tyrants were understood during this period. Anthony Munday, in a pamphlet denouncing the Catholic League's attempts to depose Henri IV, critiques a saying that, according to Cicero, the tyrannical Julius Caesar 'used to have continually upon his lips': '"If wrong may e'er be right, for a throne's sake Were wrong most right:—be God in all else feared!"'.[45] Munday argues that 'Thys proverbe is of Tyrants and Atheists' because tyrants who come to power by overthrowing kings are not agents of divine providence, but rather are akin to atheists who deny God's ability to punish evil monarchs.[46] La Primaudaye, a strident anti-atheist, argued that both atheists and tyrants should be made to witness natural disasters in order to reaffirm their belief in providence and consequently to rectify their behaviours and beliefs: 'to such meteors the Epicures and Atheists should bee

---

[43] *1 Tamburlaine,* 4.2.7; 5.1.405.
[44] See Roy W. Battenhouse, 'Tamburlaine, the "Scourge of God"', *PMLA* 56, no. 2 (1941): 337–48; though cf. Andrew Hadfield, 'Tamburlaine as the Scourge of God and The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth', *Notes and Queries* 50, no. 4 (2003): 399–400.
[45] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 3.82.
[46] Anthony Munday, *The Masque of the League and the Spanyard Discovered* (London, 1592), sig. H1v.

sent, who mocke at the providence of God; as likewise the tyrants of this world, who treade all justice underfoot'.[47] It may be objected that in the case of *Tamburlaine,* the appearance of the phrase 'Scourge of God' on the play's frontispiece and throughout the text indicates that we should read Marlowe's protagonist in the terms set out by Battenhouse, rather than as an atheist tyrant who rejects providence. Yet, these two views of tyranny are not necessarily incompatible. The French historian, Jean de Serres, describes Emperor Mahomet II—a descendant of Tamburlaine's enemy Bajazeth who rejected all religion despite being raised a Christian—as a scourge sent by God to punish Christians whose faith had lapsed. De Serres writes that these Christians 'could not be ruined by a fitter instrument and more answerable to the crime whereof they were guilty, then a tyrant Atheist, who having tasted the true religion, had spued it out, having no religion, and mocking at all that caried the name of religion'.[48] De Serres' description of Mahomet as a 'tyrant Atheist' sent by God as a scourge to punish Christians could well be applied to Marlowe's Tamburlaine.

Tamburlaine's pride is another aspect of his character that aligns him with the typical early modern atheist without directly telling audiences that he is one. Tamburlaine's enemy, the Persian lord Meander, notes 'the spirit of his fearefull pride' and observes how 'by profession [he] be ambitious'; the Soldan of Egypt vows to 'tame the pride of this presumptuous Beast'; and Bajazeth warns: 'Great Tamburlaine, great in my overthrow, Ambitious pride shall make thee fall as low'.[49] During this period, atheists were often thought of as proud, arrogant, and ambitious. After all, what could be more presumptuous than to deny a God widely perceived as eternal and omnipotent? Just as atheists were listed alongside tyrants in lists of the groups threatening Protestant nations, atheism was listed alongside pride

---

[47] Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The Third Volume of the French Academie [...]*, trans. R. Dolman (London, 1601), 207.

[48] Jean de Serres, *A General Inventorie of the History of France from the Beginning of That Monarchie, unto the Treatie of Vervins [...]*, trans. Edward Grimestone (London, 1607), 209.

[49] *1 Tamburlaine,* 2.6.12, 14; 4.3.16; 4.2.75–76.

in lists of the sins corrupting men's hearts: 'Whoredome, covetousnesse, pride, ambition, atheisme and such like'.[50] The rise of atheism was often attributed to individuals 'swelling with pride' when arrogant satisfaction with their own lives led them to reject the promise of salvation.[51] For example, the Catholic theologian William Rainolds argued that atheism arose from 'contempt and self liking arrogancie'.[52] In a similar way, Thomas Lodge's *Wits Miserie, and the Worlds Madnesse* (1596), which satirizes Elizabethan society by personifying the seven deadly sins as devils and their offspring, states that the devil representing pride is the 'arrantest and subtillest Atheist of all these Devils'. According to Lodge, since 'Pride is the step to Appostasie, and being opposed against God, [it] is the greatest sinne in man'.[53] As a tyrant whose pride is frequently remarked upon, Tamburlaine's personal attributes are consistent with two recurring anti-atheist tropes but the nature of his inward beliefs remains ambiguous.

The major interpretative question posed by *Tamburlaine* is whether its protagonist believes he is acting piously as a scourge of God or is better understood as an atheist whose repeated assertion of his godlike ability to act with impunity reflects an inward belief that divine providence is not real. Unlike an outward atheist, Tamburlaine does not explicitly deny the existence of the gods or their power. Rather, he is consistently described by himself and others as having attained godlike status and he desacralizes deities by presenting them as entities with whom he can compete and potentially defeat. As such, Theridimas describes Tamburlaine as a threat to divine agency: 'His looks do menace heaven and dare the Gods',

[50] Anthony Anderson, *A Godlie Sermon, Preached on Newe Yeeres Day Last [...]* (London, 1576), 45; cf. Raphael Holinshed et al., *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles [...]* (London, 1587), 237; William Perkins, *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration Whether a Man Be in the Estate of Damnation or in the Estate of Grace [...]* (London, 1590), 240.
[51] Philip Jones, *Certaine Sermons Preached of Late at Ciceter, in the Countie of Glocester [...]* (London, 1588), sig. D6v.
[52] William Rainolds, *A Treatise Conteyning the True Catholike and Apostolike Faith of the Holy Sacrifice and Sacrament [...]* (Antwerp, 1593), 37.
[53] Thomas Lodge, *Wits Miserie, and the Worlds Madnesse Discovering the Devils Incarnat of This Age.* (London, 1596), 24. Cf. Nashe's personification of 'Atheisme' as 'the third sonne of Pride' in *Christs Teares*, 114.

as if he meant to ‘pull the triple headed dog from hell’.[54] This sense of Tamburlaine as being engaged in a kind of theomachy is emphasised when the betrayed Cosroe refers to him as he ‘That thus opposeth him against the Gods’.[55] Despite numerous references to classical mythology (which evoke the possibility of humans struggling against the caprices of the gods in a semi-literal way), it is made clear throughout the play that Tamburlaine is really in conflict with the idea of providence. He aspires to be a god only in the sense of having unfettered power and influence on earth; as Theridimas puts it: ‘A God is not so glorious as a King: / I thinke the pleasure they enjoy in heaven / Can not compare with kingly joyes in earth’.[56] Here, it is not that the existence of the gods is denied so much as that any plane of existence beyond the temporal world is considered irrelevant. This is where Tamburlaine’s attention is focussed and in his quest for world domination he acknowledges no divine limitations on his behaviour: ‘I hold the Fates bound fast in yron chaines, / And with my hand turne Fortunes wheel about’.[57] The power fantasy that Tamburlaine represents is one in which humans are not beholden unto the will of the gods but vice versa: Tamburlaine claims that if he is attacked, ‘Jove himselfe will stretch his hand from heaven, / To ward the blow, and shield me safe from harme’.[58] Tamburlaine’s dismissal of the power of the gods to stop him, his exclusive interest in ‘The sweet fruition of an earthly crowne’, and his disregard for any notion of heavenly reward are clear examples of anti-providential hubris that many Elizabethans would have considered tantamount to atheism. Viewing Tamburlaine in this way makes sense given that, as we have seen, pride and tyranny were closely associated with atheism.

---

[54] *1 Tamburlaine,* 1.2.157, 161.
[55] *1 Tamburlaine,* 2.6.39.
[56] *1 Tamburlaine,* 2.5.57–59.
[57] *1 Tamburlaine,* 1.2.174–75.
[58] *1 Tamburlaine,* 1.2.180–81; also cf. 2.7.65–55.

However, Tamburlaine's anti-providentialism is not consistent and at other points in the play he offers theistic interpretations of his martial successes. When contemplating extending his sphere of influence from Asia into the Mediterranean, Tamburlaine states 'I that am tearm'd the Scourge and Wrath of God, / The onely feare and terrour of the world, / Wil first subdue the Turke, and then inlarge / Those Christian Captives, which you keep as slaves'.[59] By proclaiming himself a 'Scourge', Tamburlaine implies that he is acting as an instrument of providence himself, punishing the wicked Turks and freeing Christian slaves. The reason for his desire to help Christians is never explained. Because Tamburlaine elsewhere calls upon Jove, Fortune, Muhammed, and other divine figures, his conception of 'God' is not consistently aligned with any one religion. Yet, his desire to free Christians here seems specifically intended to endear the character to a Protestant audience by presenting Tamburlaine as an agent of the Christian God's providence. Tamburlaine makes such an insinuation several times, declaring that his role is 'To scourge the pride of such as heaven abhors'; encouraging one of his sons to be 'the scourge and terrour of the world'; and declaring himself to be 'the Scourge of highest *Jove*'.[60] The Governor of Babylon also attributes supernatural significance to Tamburlaine's actions, accusing him of being a 'Vile monster, borne of some infernal hag, / And sent from hell to tyrannise on earth'.[61] The explicit description of Tamburlaine as a scourging tyrant sent to earth to inflict providential justice establishes the possibility that Tamburlaine's unchecked cruelty does not demonstrate the non-existence of divine providence but is itself an example of providence in action.

The scene toward the end of *Part 2* in which Tamburlaine burns copies of the Quran is the closest the plays come to confirming the possibility that Tamburlaine is either an inward atheist or a pious scourge of God.[62] Here, Tamburlaine's anti-providential rhetoric

---

[59] *1 Tamburlaine,* 3.3.44–47.
[60] *2 Tamburlaine,* 4.1.151; 1.3.60; 4.3.24.
[61] *2 Tamburlaine,* 5.1.110–11.
[62] *2 Tamburlaine*, 5.1.182–202.

culminates in a challenge to Muhammed to punish him for killing Turkish Muslims and Islamic priests. This scene is highly ambiguous. Tamburlaine claims to 'have thought [Muhammed] a God', which may lead us to view his burning of the Quran as an act of apostasy from Islam. But as Su Fang Ng points out, Muslims do not consider Muhammed a God but rather a 'friend of God'. Given that Orcanes uses this form of address correctly earlier in the same play, Tamburlaine's solecism may be taken as an indication that the character was never pious in the first place.[63] On the other hand, when he claims to be the Scourge of 'a God full of revenging wrath', Tamburlaine may be seen as aligning himself with the Christian God, who oversaw how he 'sent millions of Turks to hell, Slew all [Muhammed's] Priests, his kinsmen, and his friends'. Yet, the identity of the God Tamburlaine claims to believe in is unclear: he tells his followers to 'Seeke out another Godhead to adore / The God that sits in heaven, if any God / For he is God alone'. As Alison Shell notes, the only distinguishing feature of Tamburlaine's God is his autonomy as the sole occupier of a seat in heaven: 'Christians, Jews and, for that matter, Muslims worship a god of power, but power is not his only feature; the same could hardly be said of any god that Tamburlaine worships'.[64] Given Tamburlaine's persistent self-deification, we may also infer that he is inviting his followers to see himself—the mightiest king on earth—as a figure worthy of worship. Because the scene comes at the end of *Part 2* and includes the arresting spectacle of holy books being burned onstage, it feels inherently climactic. This combined with a high level of ambiguity means the scene can be viewed as a moment of revelation either of Tamburlaine's atheism, or of his pious belief that he is acting as the providential scourge of the Christian God.

---

[63] Su Fang Ng, *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 220.
[64] Alison Shell, 'Tragedy and Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47.

The absence of a clear moral framework to confirm, circumscribe, and sanction Tamburlaine's implicit unbelief is what sets Marlowe's representation of atheism apart from contemporary anti-atheist discourse. Whereas anti-atheist writers tend to dismiss the assertions of known outward atheists as insincere, *Tamburlaine* never affirms its protagonist's unbelief in the first place, leaving audiences to speculate that, actually, it may be his claims to be a pious scourge of God that are insincere. Tamburlaine's vague suggestion that his followers should worship 'The God that sits in heaven' may be seen as a hypocritical cloak behind which his inward atheism is obscured. Because the character seems to embrace both roles at different times, the only possible way of accessing his implied interiority is to make inferences from his *ethos*. Tamburlaine's characterisation as a prideful usurper, who rises above his position as a shepherd to become a tyrant, makes it plausible that he may be an inward atheist. His unbelief is not detected by other characters in the play but may be inferred by active readers and audiences familiar with anti-atheist tropes.

THE MACHIAVELLIAN VICE IN *THE JEW OF MALTA*

If *Tamburlaine* introduces the possibility of its protagonist's inward atheism early and then proceeds to make this seem more and more likely, culminating in the ambiguous book-burning scene, then *Jew* works in the opposite direction. The prologue spoken by 'Machevil' provides a strong indication that Barabas is a Machiavellian atheist who inwardly considers religion to be nothing 'but a childish Toy'.[65] Yet, during the play Barabas consistently identifies himself as Jewish and attacks the Maltese Christians not only because they persecute him but also because of their religious beliefs. *Jew* therefore invites audiences to consider how far Barabas' politic approach to religion extends. Is it the case that he is an

[65] *Jew,* prol.14.

inward atheist who performs Jewishness because doing so affords him autonomy and opportunities to make money; or is he a committed Jew whose outward Machiavellian ambivalence toward religion is merely hypocritical scoffing? Since pre-modern Judaism was a flexible faith that lacked 'anything resembling a formal theology or dogma' and was 'more focused on practice (ortho-praxy) than belief (ortho-doxy)', these two ways of reading the play are not necessary incompatible.[66] Anti-Semitic attacks on the temporality of Judaism, which was associated with the avarice of money-lending, characterized Jews as 'blind, stubborn, unbelieving, and wicked', and thus had much in common with contemporary confutations of Epicureanism and Machiavellianism.[67] Erasmus, for example, considered Judaism 'less an actual faith than the "flesh", the power of the law, the insidious predominance of ritual'.[68] Barabas' Jewishness may therefore be read as coextensive with his implicit inward atheism, to which the audience are given access via asides, soliloquies, and the framing prologue. Since these devices align Barabas with the morality Vice, whom earlier playwrights had often used to represent sins against religion, these metatheatrical elements may themselves be understood as indications of Barabas' inward atheism.

Jew opens by establishing that its protagonist espouses Machiavellianism, a form of unbelief frequently criticized by anti-atheist writers. The prologue is spoken by 'Machevil', a physical embodiment of the political theory of Niccolò Machiavelli, who tells the audience not to let the titular Jew 'be entertain'd the worse / Because he favours me'.[69] As I noted in Chapter 1, Machiavelli was a figure foundational to early modern conceptions of atheism. Those who subscribed to his theories of statecraft (often referred to as a 'Machiavellists' or

---

[66] Dean Phillip Bell, *Jews in the Early Modern World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 159.
[67] Stephen Burnett, 'Western Theologies and Judaism in the Early Modern World', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600–1800*, ed. Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A. G. Roeber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 469.
[68] Jonathan I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750*, Third Edition (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 12.
[69] *Jew,* prol.14.

'Machiavels') were generally considered fellow travellers with atheists.[70] Many who attacked Machiavelli as an atheist did so in ways that highlight how Machiavels would naturally seek 'to make an outwarde shewe' of piety, concealing the fact that 'in minde they abhorre' religion.[71] Thus, anti-Machiavellianism was dominated by the *topos* of inward/outward atheism, which foregrounded the impossibility of knowing another person's motivations. As William Clark argues above, the only reliable way of detecting a Machiavel's inward atheism is to pay attention to his actions: to ask not *whether* he professes piety, but *how* and *why* he professes it.[72] When *Jew*'s prologue reveals the play's protagonist is a Machiavel, audiences are given a form of knowledge that was difficult to attain in the real world. The framing device primes viewers to assess Barabas' outward speech and behaviour against their foreknowledge of his Machiavellianism, offering the possibility of successfully detecting inward atheism in a fictive environment.

In addition to the prologue's announcement of Barabas' Machiavellianism, audiences are given further access to his putative inward unbelief through asides, soliloquies, and other structural elements common to Vice figures in the morality tradition. The Vice became a fixture of the later morality plays that emerged during the mid-Henrician period and which persisted in popularity until the early years of the Elizabethan commercial theatres in London.[73] 'The Vice' may be distinguished from the stage-devils and 'minor vices' found in medieval drama by his expanded metatheatrical role as the leader of a play's evil forces, the scale of which meant the part was usually subject to minimal doubling and assigned to a

[70] See chap. 1, 68–76. Examples contemporary to the play include John Harvey, *A Discoursive Probleme Concerning Prophesies How Far They Are to Be Valued [...]* (London, 1588), fo. 127r; John Udall, *The True Remedie against Famine and Warres [...]* (London, 1588), fo. 65v; Antony Colynet, *The True History of the Civill Warres of France [...]* (London, 1591), 263.
[71] Stockwood, *Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse*, 59; cf. William Westerman, *The Sworde of Maintenance* (London, 1600), 13.
[72] See 214–215, above.
[73] John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 76–81; Charlotte Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 29–33.

touring company's most senior actor.[74] Rather than being a personification of pure evil, Barabas is a Vice based on the figure of the inward atheist, who outwardly feigns piety for personal gain. Whereas morality Vices often have allegorical names or introduce themselves as the sins they represent, as in 'Hypocrisy' in *The Conflict of Conscience* (1572) or 'Free Will' in *Hick Scorner* (*c*.1514), Barabas is aligned with Machiavellianism via the speech of the prologue, which helps to preserve the sense that the play is taking place in the historically specific setting of contemporary Malta. While Barabas is in some ways an abstraction of the concept of Machiavellianism, he is also a Jewish merchant with a backstory that precedes the events of the play, specific personal motivations, and implied interiority.

As well as personifying a form of evil that reflects the concerns of the society in which the play was written, Barabas also inherits the Vice's close connection to the audience. His soliloquies and asides not only provide additional clues about his motivations but also make him an engaging and to some extent sympathetic figure. But whereas the speeches that morality Vices make directly to audiences usually outline how they will deceive the protagonist and thus put audiences in the privileged position of knowing in advance how a play's events will unfold, Barabas' speeches often contradict both themselves and his characterisation as a Machiavel. In *Mankind* (1470), the Vice-like devil, Titivillus, tells the audience that he will turn himself invisible and ruin Mankind's corn by mixing it with poison darnel. When he does this as promised, audiences may feel a perverse complicity with Titivillus (who only appears on stage if the audience pay the acting company extra money) because his stratagem is transparent to them. Barabas' opening soliloquy on the other hand does not directly inform the audience that he views religion as a toy and is using his Jewish faith merely as a political tool to gain greater temporal power, as the prologue indicates

[74] David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 122–23; Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958), 135–47.

would be the case. The speech may easily be read against the grain to confirm this prior supposition, but such an interpretation necessarily affects the nature of Barabas' relationship with the audience. Although his asides inform viewers of how he plans to deceive other characters, audiences remain aware that Barabas may be concealing aspects of his motivations from them as well.

The prologue mentions Barabas' Jewishness only in passing, describing the play as 'the Tragedy of a Jew, / Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramb'd / Which mony was not got without my meanes'.[75] Here, the anti-Semitic stereotype of Barabas' greed is explicitly predicated upon his Machiavellianism. Yet, in his soliloquy following the prologue, Barabas talks only of his wealth, listing the gems that constitute his 'Infinite riches in a little roome' without referring either to Machiavelli or suggesting that he used 'policy' to acquire them.[76] Instead, Barabas' detailed discussions of Mediterranean shipping routes establish that he is a competent merchant and his acquisitive descriptions of 'Bags of fiery Opals, Saphires, Amatists,' characterise him according to the Christian stereotype of the greedy Jew.[77] The synergy between the anti-Semitic view of Jews as excessively acquisitive and the conception of atheists as motivated by a desire for temporal wealth is emphasised by the way Barabas talks about his religion:

> These are the Blessings promis'd to the Jewes,
> And herein was old Abrams happinesse:
> What more may Heaven doe for earthly men
> Then thus to powre out plenty in their laps?[78]

These assertions conflate a voluptuous fixation with temporal wealth and an affirmation of religious identity. Barabas believes that Heaven rewards 'earthly' Jews with 'plenty' but he does not seem to anticipate a greater reward after death. He also seems to have chosen to

---

[75] *Jew,* prol.30–2.
[76] *Jew,* 1.1.37.
[77] *Jew,* 1.1.25.
[78] *Jew,* 1.1.102–105.

remain committed to Judaism despite being persecuted for doing so because it allows him to pursue wealth more freely than if he were Christian: 'Rather had I a Jew be hated thus, / Then pittied in a Christian poverty: / For I can see no fruits in all their faith'.[79] This demonstrates a secular attitude to religion as something personal that may be selected at will, and that he chooses Judaism over Christianity not because it is more 'true', but because it is a religion that is more compatible with his Machiavellian atheism. If we recall Clark's proposition that Machiavels may be detected by paying attention not to their outward expressions of religion, 'but the manner, and intention' of their actions, it seems plausible that Barabas' outward Jewishness is a Machiavellian device used to conceal his inward atheism. *Jew's* first scene therefore confirms the argument of its prologue, but only to the extent that the audience are willing to infer Barabas' Machiavellianism from the circumstances of the speeches he makes. Unlike the morality Vice to which he is related, the extent of Barabas' deceptiveness is not transparent to the audience.

A further indication that Barabas' adherence to Judaism is a matter of Machiavellian policy rather than faith occurs when the Maltese Governor attempts to confiscate Barabas' wealth. Picking up on a Maltese Knight's use of the term 'policie', Barabas highlights the hypocrisy of the Christians: 'I, policie? that's their profession, / And not simplicity, as they suggest', pointing out that they appear to care more about geopolitical power than the vows of simplicity to which they are nominally bound.[80] As Gajda shows, the concept of 'policy' in this period was closely associated with Machiavellian statecraft and was often 'employed by partisan groups to condemn those of opposing religions as atheist "statesmen"'.[81] Barabas' belief that Christians deploy their religion for purely politic ends could therefore be read as an assertion of his own piety, but like the prologue it may also remind audiences that all

---

[79] *Jew,* 1.1.111–113.
[80] *Jew,* 1.2.159–61.
[81] Gajda, 'Gordian Knot of Policy', 293.

professions of religion, including Barabas' own, can be dissimulations made by inward atheists. The possibility that Barabas' view of the Christians' actions as 'policie' reflects his own Machiavellianism seems to be confirmed by the numerous times he advocates politic activity throughout the play.

After colluding with the Turks to become governor of Malta, Barabas tells himself in a soliloquy that he has attained this position 'by thy policie', and that he must 'Maintaine it bravely by firme policy'.[82] Most incriminatingly, he tells Abigail that 'We ought to make barre of no policie' when encouraging her to make a false conversion to Christianity in order to gain access to a nunnery and recover his gold.[83] When Abigail asks for a further explanation of this plan, Barabas explains that the stratagem will go undetected because 'Religion / Hides many mischiefes from suspition'.[84] These assertions that religions may be adopted and cast aside indiscriminately, and that they act primarily as ways of concealing one's mischievous activities, provide strong indications that Barabas is indeed a follower of Machiavelli and affect how audiences interpret Barabas' outward expressions of Jewishness later in the play.

In a monologue addressed to the audience following the recovery of his fortune, Barabas positively identifies as a Jew, stating that he has been able to maintain his financial independence

> In spite of these swine-eating Christians,
> (Unchosen Nation, never circumciz'd;
> Such as poore villaines were ne're thought upon
> Till Titus and Vespasian conquer'd us).[85]

Here, Barabas differentiates himself from the Christians not because of his greater Machiavellian *virtùs* but against their religious practices, which do not include circumcision,

---

[82] *Jew,* 5.2.27, 36.
[83] *Jew,* 1.2.271.
[84] *Jew,* 1.2.79–80.
[85] *Jew,* 2.3.7–10.

and their status as a rival 'Nation' not chosen by God. Furthermore, when he refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus and Vespasian, Barabas expresses solidarity with a Jewish 'us', in a way that suggests strong identification with other Jews. Because these lines are spoken in a soliloquy, we may expect them to be a transparent window into Barabas' interior world that confirms his inner piety. In the context of the morality tradition, in which the Vice reveals to the audience his plans to deceive other characters, Barabas' announcement toward the end of this speech that he has seen the Governor's son approaching and intends to feign ignorance about the reality of Abigail's conversion may prompt audiences to feel they have privileged access to Barabas' inward motivations in a way that would confer legitimacy on his earlier profession of Judaism in this speech.

Yet, later in the same scene we see Barabas performing his Jewishness to another character in a way that is obviously exaggerated and which serves a clear instrumental purpose. When Barabas buys Ithamore at a slave market, he intends to use the enslaved character in a plot to overthrow the Christian government and attempts to win Ithamore to his cause by emphasising that 'we are villaines both: / Both circumcized, we hate Christians both'.[86] This attempt at mutual identification is preceded by Barabas outlining an exaggerated catalogue of misdeeds that he has supposedly committed against Christians: 'I walke abroad a nights / And kill sicke people groaning under walls: / Sometimes I goe about and poyson wells'.[87] Barabas claims to have fulfilled so many anti-Semitic stereotypes that it is difficult to read this speech as anything other than a self-conscious performance. His claims to have been a doctor, engineer, and usurer who has travelled throughout Europe seem highly implausible as a fictional biography and instead come across as a hyperbolic parody of the 'monstrous Jew'.[88] When attempting to convince Ithamore to be his loyal subordinate in

[86] *Jew*, 2.3.215–16.
[87] *Jew,* 2.3.175–77.
[88] Sara Munson Deats and Lisa S. Starks, '"So Neatly Plotted, and so Well Perform'd": Villain as Playwright in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*', *Theatre Journal* 44, no. 3 (1992): 375–89.

villainy, Barabas recognizes the utility of outwardly performing a specific kind of Judaism, just as he considered it advantageous for Abigail to pretend to be a Christian nun. Considering this performance of Jewishness directed at Ithamore, Barabas' earlier monologue attacking the swine-eating Christians and expressing solidarity with the Jewish people may be reinterpreted as one of many insincere expressions of religion that occur throughout the play.

Ultimately, in *Jew,* Barabas' performance of his Jewish identity for politic advantage is bound up with his characterization as a Machiavellian atheist. The play strongly implies that Barabas views all religion, including his own, as a 'childish Toy' that may be manipulated to secure political advantage and temporal gain. The play begins by offering audiences the unrealizable fantasy of knowing for certain that Barabas is a Machiavellian inward atheist. But because the protagonist never makes an explicit assertion of unbelief in the play itself and restricts his commentary on religion to observing its function in social stratification, his inward beliefs about theological matters like providence, the afterlife, and the existence of God remain knowable only through inference. Barabas' consistently instrumental view of religion suggests that his outward performances of Jewishness are a cloak for his inward atheism. Yet, such an interpretation depends upon audiences inferring Machiavellian motivations for Barabas' outward behaviour by reading the character in the context of the circumstantial evidence provided by the prologue. Therefore, in *Jew,* as in contemporary English society, inward atheism always remains at one remove from being fully knowable to the external observer.

CONJURING, SCOFFING, AND EPICUREANISM IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

If *Tamburlaine* and *Jew* primarily address questions about how inward atheism may be inferred from the behaviour of an individual who does not express unbelief directly, then

Faustus addresses a parallel concern about how far outward expressions of unbelief truly reflect inward atheism. Though Faustus is never explicitly identified as an atheist, the accidental arguments that he is one are even stronger than for Tamburlaine or Barabas. Not only do Faustus' personal qualities and attitude toward religion fit the pattern, his social position and behaviours also closely resemble those of the typical early modern European atheist. The interpretative question posed by *Faustus* is not, therefore, whether its protagonist is an atheist—Faustus clearly fits the profile—but whether his outward performance of atheism reflects inward, speculative unbelief. Whereas *Tamburlaine* and *Jew* facilitate readings in which inward atheism is a notional possibility, *Faustus* provides numerous ways for audiences to discredit the intellectual seriousness of Faustus' outward atheism. In the crown-giving and contract-signing scenes discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Faustus' scoffing speeches and obsession with temporal luxury are used to highlight his comparative lack of engagement with the metaphysical arguments for and against signing away his soul to Lucifer. By presenting Faustus' outward confidence as facilitating inward self-deception, Marlowe's play reflects the commonplace argument of contemporary anti-atheist discourse that those who expressed unbelief were hypocrites who spoke and behaved as if they believed God did not exist without being internally committed to this position. Critics have long acknowledged that *Faustus* is a difficult play because it presents so many unresolved questions: is it possible for Faustus to be saved? Does he act with free will? Why does he ignore numerous internal and external exhortations to repent? Here, I want to suggest that these ambiguities arise because he is characterised as an atheist: the vagueness and inscrutability of what Faustus truly believes reflects the popular belief that an atheist's outward behaviour does not accurately reflect what he inwardly believes.

The early scenes of *Faustus* establish the protagonist as an arrogant, scoffing intellectual: characteristics closely associated with atheism. The prologue draws attention to

Faustus' keen intelligence by emphasising the notable speed with which he attains the title of doctor and his aptitude for the study of 'Divinitie'.[89] Significantly, we learn that his success at university is propelled by him 'Excelling all' in his ability to dispute theological matters which, as I argue in Chapter Two, was a key context in which atheistic subject-positions could be established. We later learn that Faustus 'was wont to make our schools ring with "*sic probo*"'.[90] His apparent propensity for stating 'I prove it thus' suggests a reputation for being able to argue any case convincingly. Faustus' superior skill at disputation leads to him becoming 'swolne with cunning of a selfe conceit' when he quickly masters the end of Aristotelian Logic, 'to dispute well'.[91]

The stereotype of the atheist as an idle, scoffing intellectual was one of the most frequently repeated tropes of the anti-atheist discourse. Both Pfister and Buckley highlight the prevalence of this figure by using the same quotation from Richard Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1597) which, as Buckley notes, describes atheists in an unusual level of detail.[92] Hooker states that 'these trencher-mates (for such the most of them be) frame to themselves a way more pleasant, a new method they have of turning things that are serious into mockery, an art of contradiction by way of scorn'.[93] The idiosyncratic reference to 'trencher-mates' immediately conjures up an image of men accustomed to drinking and dining with one another, justifying their overindulgence by 'fram[ing] to themselves a way more pleasant': a universe without a God. They achieve this primarily by using their argumentative 'art' to make a 'mockery' of established religious traditions, discarding conventional morality in favour of jesting and carousing. Hooker states that the 'trencher-mates' express their unbelief using 'all the shifts that wit can invent' and demonstrate 'a

[89] *Faustus,* prol.15–17.
[90] *Faustus,* 1.2.2.
[91] *Faustus,* prol.20; 1.5–10.
[92] Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, 88; Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism', 76.
[93] Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2:15.

wanton superfluity of wit'.[94] The sense of excessiveness and contrivance suggested by 'superfluity' and the explicitly rhetorical connotations of 'invent' make Hooker's comments easily applicable to Faustus, whose skill at disputation leads to his increasing arrogance and pride.

Anti-atheist writers often claimed that scoffing intellectual atheists did not inwardly believe their own arguments and that they expressed them only to demonstrate their skill at disputation. Foundational to this line of argument were references to Psalm 14 emphasising David's assertion that unbelief is a spoken, rather than cogitated, transgression.[95] One of the most skilful versions of this argument is made by Bacon in the 1612 version of his essay on atheism, when he observes that 'The Scripture saith; *The Foole hath said in his Heart, there is no God*: It is not said; *The Foole hath thought in his Heart'*.[96] Bacon's careful attention to Psalm 14's wording emphasises the biblical precedent for asserting that unbelief does not occur after a process of inward consideration and '*thought*'. Instead, the locus of unbelief is restricted to the performance of subversive speech acts, distancing the expression of atheistic ideas from their conception. The expanded version of this essay published in 1625 takes the argument further, with Bacon claiming that '*Atheisme* is rather in the *Lip*, then in the *Heart* of Man'.[97] The use of synecdoche here works to reinforce and interconnect the ideas that atheism originated in the body rather than the mind and that unbelief was spoken rather than internalised. Furthermore, by locating atheism in man's lip and contrasting this placement to the deeper, more integral site of the heart, Bacon emphasises the extremity and superficiality of atheism in a way that further discredits its ideological threat.

Faustus embodies the idea of the scoffing intellectual atheist who expresses superficial arguments that may exist only as *pro forma* elements of a disputatious pose when

[94] Hooker, 2:14–15. Cf. Nashe: 'it is the superaboundance of witte that makes Atheists', *Christs Teares*, 124.
[95] See, e.g. Dove, *Confutation of Atheisme*, 4; Nashe, *Christs Teares*, 114.
[96] Bacon, 'Of Atheisme', 51.
[97] Bacon, 52.

he dismisses the study of Divinity and turns instead to necromancy. Rejecting scripture as an authoritative source of knowledge was one of the most serious speculative forms of unbelief condemned by anti-atheists, but Faustus' reasoning in this scene demonstrates limited intellective consideration. When he translates passages from the Bible, he rejects them in simplistic moral terms. Reading that 'The reward of sinne is death', Faustus dismisses the teaching as unfair and limiting, immediately stating 'that's hard'.[98] This interpretation is, however, dependent on him ignoring the rest of the verse: 'but the gift of God *is* eternal life, through Jesus Christ our lord'.[99] A similar omission underpins Faustus' enthymemic argument that leads to his decision to abandon the study of divinity:

> If we say that we have no sin,
> We deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us.
> Why then belike we must sin,
> And so consequently die.
> Aye, we must die an everlasting death.
> What doctrine call you this? *Che serà, serà:*
> What will be, shall be. Divinity, adieu![100]

The unstated major premise here is that sin inevitably leads to hell. Combining this with the biblical minor premise that sin is inescapable, Faustus concludes that there is no point in studying divinity since 'What will be, shall be'. As with his reading of the passage from Romans, Faustus fails to mention the scriptural counterpoint to the two lines he quotes: 'If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'.[101] The enthymeme is therefore built on a false major premise and since this premise is unstated, we can only imagine why Faustus ignores the promise of redemption. His omission of references to salvation when quoting from Romans and 1 John have been read either as a sign of sinful sophistry, or as evidence of an orthodox understanding of

---

[98] *Faustus,* 1.39.
[99] Rom. 6:23 (GNV).
[100] *Faustus,* 1.41–48.
[101] 1 John. 1:8–9 (GNV).

predestination that is consistent with Calvin's interpretations of the same passages.[102] The viability of both readings arises from the fact that Faustus' reasons for dismissing scripture are never clearly articulated. It is impossible to tell whether he is taking a principled stand against Calvinist theology (especially because he is reading 'Jeromes Bible', the standard text of the *Catholic* Church) or if he is simply twisting the scriptures to justify an existing desire to pursue magic and its accompanying earthly pleasures.[103] In either case, the intellective underpinnings of Faustus' rejection of divinity are obscured, which presents another possibility: that he simply has not fully understood, or does not wish to understand, the verses he is reading. This last interpretation seems least likely, but the result is the same. Our attention is drawn to Faustus' outward expression of unbelief and we do not know how or why he arrives at this position inwardly (if he does so at all).

By introducing Faustus as an arrogant, disputatious young scholar with questionable attention to detail, Marlowe establishes that he fits the profile of the typical scoffing atheist. As per anti-atheist convention, Faustus' rejection of God is presented as performative and provisional, a form of behaviour not underpinned by serious thought. Marlowe achieves this effect by conveying Faustus' unbelief primarily through actions, rather than arguments. The structural similarity between the way he abandons law in favour of divinity, and then divinity in favour of conjuring, makes it clear that he rejects the scriptures as a valid source of truth without requiring him to explain why. Conjuring is itself a fitting act through which to manifest Faustus' unbelief. Since it is an aural-visual phenomenon that, as Andrew Sofer argues, 'models a performative speech-act', conjuring is an even more externalised way of

---

[102] For readings that emphasise Faustus' sinfulness, see Joseph T. McCullen, 'Dr Faustus and Renaissance Learning', *The Modern Language Review* 51, no. 1 (1956): 9; and Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962); for an anti-Calvinist reading, see Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 234.

[103] *Faustus,* 1.33. Cf. the way Barabas incorrectly appropriates Scripture to curse Abigail 'Like Cain by Adam, for his brother's death': *Jew,* 2.4.33. Cain was in fact cursed by God, but this matters little to Barabas, who takes the story out of context to attack Abigail for becoming a nun again.

expressing unbelief than direct scoffing or blasphemy.[104] *Faustus* derives much of its theatrical energy from the visual spectacle of conjuring, to which audiences reacted with a mixture of fear, superstition, and wonder. So, while Marlowe follows convention in presenting unbelief as an external phenomenon, he also binds unbelief to the most enjoyable aspect of the play.[105]

It is perhaps for this reason that *Faustus* developed a reputation for having the ability to summon real devils during performance and why conjuring was associated with atheism. Both in the play and in anti-atheist discourse, performativity and unbelief go hand-in-hand.[106] Roger Hutchinson, for example, accused English libertines and Sadducees of holding religious views that were devised 'more by a conjurer, then by the words of godlines'.[107] Robert Persons also accused Raleigh of operating a school of atheism run by a 'Conjurer' in which 'the schollers [are] taught amonge other thinges, to spell God backwarde'.[108] This echoes, perhaps deliberately, the method of conjuring that Faustus uses to summon Mephistopheles for the first time: 'Within this circle is Jehovah's name, / Forward and Backward anagrammatised'.[109] Marlowe himself was accused by the author of the Baines note of dismissing Paul and Moses as 'Juglers', a term which meant either 'One who works marvels by the aid of magic or witchcraft […] a conjuror' or 'One who deceives by

---

[104] Andrew Sofer, 'How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*', *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 1 (2009): 2. Cf. the way Barabas' blasphemy is performatively reinforced by having his store of gold and jewels hidden behind a board 'marked thus †', a sign likely conveyed in performance with a visual gesture: *Jew,* 1.2.344, n.
[105] Leah S. Marcus, 'Marlowe's Magic Books: The Material Text', in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 21; D. J. Palmer, 'Magic and Poetry in *Doctor Faustus*', *Critical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1964): 57.
[106] For accounts of supernatural activity during performances of *Doctor Faustus,* see Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4:423–24. Prynne, for example, describes '*the visible appearance of the Devill on the stage at the Belsavage Play-house*', in *Histrio-Mastix The Players Scourge, or, Actors Tragaedie [...]* (London, 1633), fo. 556, emphasis original.
[107] Hutchinson, *Image of God*, fo. 119v. See chap.1, 55–59.
[108] *Faustus,* 1.3.8–9. Robert Persons, *An Advertisement Written to a Secretarie of My L. Treasurers of England, by an Englishe Intelligencer as He Passed Throughe Germanie [...]* (Antwerp, 1592), 18.
[109] *Faustus,* 1.3.8–9.

trickery'.[110] Since, as Marlowe is alleged to have done, atheists could discredit religion by making analogies between religious leaders and those who use sleight of hand to perform deceptive magic tricks, conjuring was inherently problematic for those who sought to uphold an orthodox consensus. On the one hand, endorsing the efficaciousness of conjuring (or any non-Christian supernatural phenomena) would undoubtedly be blasphemous; yet being too dismissive about such matters could lead one into dangerously atheistic territory.[111]

The significance of conjuring in the play is highlighted by the Good Angel, who informs Faustus that the magic book will 'tempt thy soul' and that conjuring 'is blasphemy'.[112] Faustus embraces the blasphemy he is threatened with by ignoring the Good Angel's advice, turning to magic, and abandoning the other fields of learning: 'Divinity is basest of the three, / Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile / 'Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me'.[113] The B-text expurgates the two former lines, but even when they are included, this speech tells us no more about why Faustus rejects theology than his earlier dismissal of Romans 6:23 as 'harsh'. By having Faustus repeat this word again, Marlowe establishes that the character's opposition to religion is primarily based upon the kind of angry scoffing associated with blasphemous outward atheism, rather than an intellective denial of religious truth. The disjunction between what Faustus says and the implications of his words and actions continues once he has summoned Mephistopheles. The devil states that he has heard Faustus 'rack the name of God, / Abjure the scriptures and his saviour Christ […] abjure the Trinity' but of these, only the abjuration of the scriptures has been clearly expressed.[114] The only reference Faustus has so far made to God occurs during the conjuring,

---

[110] MacLure, *Christopher Marlowe: The Critical Heritage*, 37. 'Juggler, n.', in *Oxford English Dictionary,* accessed March 2019, oed.com.
[111] Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), for example, was so thoroughly sceptical about supernatural phenomena, including conjuring, that its author was viciously attacked for his '"erroneous opinions"'. See J. A. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 55.
[112] *Faustus,* 1.1.72.
[113] *Faustus,* 1.1.109–111.
[114] *Faustus,* 1.3.48–49, 54.

when he announces that he has spelled Jehovah's name backward.[115] Faustus' implicit rejection of God is therefore displaced onto the act of performing magic and Mephistopheles' response to this activity encourages audiences to read Faustus' behaviour as indicative of unbelief. Direct references to the Trinity and to Christ are largely absent from Faustus' speeches; Mephistopheles infers that they have been rejected and Faustus does not deny his assumption. Faustus comes closest to directly denying the existence of God when he admits to having 'desp'rate thoughts against Jove's deity'.[116] We can guess what these thoughts are and that Jove stands in for the Christian God, but the ambiguity of this claim leaves the character enough room to argue his way into a more orthodox position if the need were to arise. It is possible that Marlowe wrote the scene this way for the practical reason that having one's protagonist openly abjure key tenets of the Christian faith risked unwanted controversy. Whether the ambiguity was a pragmatic or artistic choice, the effect is identical: audiences are invited to infer from Faustus' rejection of the scriptures that he is an atheist who advocates other forms of unbelief. At the same time, the full extent of this unbelief is never articulated, making it easier to dismiss Faustus' position as insincere.

Another way Marlowe aligns Faustus with the figure of the atheist—and casts further doubt upon the sincerity of his unbelief—is by emphasising that he is motivated primarily by temporal desires. Anti-atheist writers used a variety of techniques to suggest that outward expressions of unbelief did not emanate from inward convictions. One of the most common strategies was to suggest that atheists denied the existence of God because it was a convenient way for them to justify their sinful lives. Just as Faustus gives away his soul so that he may 'live in all voluptuousness', it was often claimed that atheists were motivated primarily by an Epicurean desire to pursue temporal pleasure. For Hooker, 'a resolved

---

[115] *Faustus,* 1.3.8–9.
[116] *Faustus,* 1.3.91.

purpose of mind to reap in this world what sensual profit or pleasure soever the world yields' was 'the radical cause' of atheism.[117] This line of argument was effective at presenting atheism as nothing more than an outward performance because it established a plausible reason for someone to deny the existence of God without suggesting that they did so after a process of logical reasoning. Hooker does not deny that atheists possessed a kind of mental resolve, but he limits this commitment to the pursuit of a specific superficial goal, de-emphasizing the intellectual significance of the unbelief that allows them to pursue it.

The pleasures that were said to motivate expressions of unbelief were often described as bodily or sexual in nature. This meant that atheism was aligned with the 'sensitive' and 'vegetative' faculties of the human soul, rather than the 'intellective' faculty, which helped to discredit the idea that unbelief had a serious rational underpinning.[118] The 'voluptuousness' pursued by Faustus was a commonly used term by anti-atheist writers: Thomas Beard, for example, devotes a chapter to outlining the providential punishments inflicted upon 'voluptuous Epicures and cursed Atheists'.[119] The word conveys the sense of enjoying life's pleasures without guilt or fear due to having already denied the immortality of the soul. Coverdale, for example, claimed that because atheists believed there was no life after death, they encouraged Christians 'to staine ourselfes in voluptuousness' during earthly life.[120] The licentious behaviour and annihilationist beliefs that Coverdale alludes to are described with more even colour by the Protestant cleric, Thomas Becon, and the playwright, William Fulbecke, who cite pleasures as diverse as the taste of 'good wine', the smell of 'roses', and the sound of 'a musicall concordance' as being the fixations of voluptuousness. Both writers

---

[117] Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2:14.
[118] See chap. 1, n.93.
[119] Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements: Or, a Collection of Histories [...]* (London, 1597), 139. John Foxe also views the deaths of epicures and atheists in providential terms, see *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online*, (1570 edition) (Sheffield: HRI Online Publications, 2011), 2344, http//www.johnfoxe.org. Accessed July 2019.
[120] Coverdale, 'Preface' to *The Hope of the Faithful*, sig. ☛4v.

emphasise the sensual connotations of these pleasures by alluding to the sexual escapades pursued by Epicures in 'faire medowe[s]' and 'Ladies lappe[s]'.[121]

Faustus ostensibly turns to conjuring in order to satisfy his longing for greater knowledge but once a deal with Lucifer is on the table, it becomes clear that he is ruled by his sensitive, rather than intellective, faculties. He offers to exchange his eternal soul for 'four-and-twenty years, / Letting him live in all voluptuousness'.[122] The sense that Faustus is motivated by a desire for fleeting temporal pleasure is enhanced by his specific request for twenty-four years of freedom, a number which parallels the number of hours in a single day, making the period seem even more ephemeral and transitory.[123] When Faustus falters and considers the value of 'Contrition, prayer, repentance', it is the Evil Angel's promise of 'honour and wealth' that encourages him to meet with Mephistopheles a second time.[124] In this crucial scene, where Faustus appears uncertain about entering a contract with Lucifer, his doubts are represented in somatic terms through the ritual he is made to perform. Faustus must cut his arm and sign an agreement in his own blood; as it begins to congeal, he wonders if his body is 'unwilling I should write this bill?'.[125] This strongly implies that the doubts Faustus expressed earlier are deep-rooted and that his pretence of unbelief is superficial. Rather than providing intellective arguments to encourage Faustus toward unbelief, Mephistopheles dissolves his blood with fire, circumventing further introspection and maintaining the orthodox consensus that atheism runs no deeper than its outward expression.

As he continues to coax Faustus into making a deal with Lucifer, Mephistopheles demonstrates the spectacular potential of conjuring by bringing 'somewhat to delight his

[121] Thomas Becon, *The Sicke Mans Salve Wherin the Faithfull Christians May Learne Both How to Behave Them Selves Paciently and Thankefully [...]* (London, 1561), 57. William Fulbecke, *A Booke of Christian Ethicks or Moral Philosophie [...]* (London, 1587) sig. B1r. Fulbecke paraphrases the *Wisdom of Solomon,* a book of the Septuagint not considered canonical by Protestants.
[122] *Faustus,* 1.1.93–94.
[123] Paul Menzer, 'Introduction', in *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe (London: Methuen Drama, 2018), xxxiv.
[124] *Faustus,* 2.1.21.
[125] *Faustus,* 2.1.65.

mind' in the form of 'Devils, *giving crowns and rich apparel to Faustus, and dance'*.[126] Here we return to the moment discussed at the beginning of this chapter and see that the way Mephistopheles appeals to Faustus at a material and visual level is consistent with broader patterns in the play, and in contemporary anti-atheist writing generally. The scene is also consistent with Barabas' willingness to compromise his religious beliefs to secure his gold, and Tamburlaine's dismissal of religious mores to secure political power. By occupying Faustus' mind with a superficial desire for wealth and power, Mephistopheles successfully convinces the protagonist to give away his soul. The fact that it is necessary for him to do so demonstrates that Faustus has no ideological commitment to his blasphemous course of action. The agreement itself is, as I have already suggested, tantamount to a denial of the soul's immortality and at the end of the play, when Lucifer comes to collect what is owed him, Faustus makes this explicit by incredulously asking himself 'why is this [soul] immortal that thou hast?'.[127] The fact that it does not become clear until this point that Faustus did not believe his soul was immortal demonstrates the extent to which Marlowe is able to avoid presenting Faustus as a cognisant advocate of atheistic views. Building upon the conventions of the anti-atheist discourse, Marlowe limits Faustus' unbelief to its external performance by conveying his most severe form of blasphemy indirectly through his assent to the deal with Lucifer. His unbelief is not just limited to a performative speech act; it becomes encapsulated in the physical action of signing the contract and is thus distanced even further from intellective reasoning. Faustus is therefore a typical outward atheist whose persona is invented to confute the idea that unbelief can emerge from a process of rational thought.

From this point onwards, the play consists predominantly of episodes where Faustus indulges in the bodily pleasures and mockery that early modern writers considered

---

[126] *Faustus,* 2.1.82; SD.
[127] *Faustus,* 5.2.106.

characteristic of atheists. He travels to Rome and scoffs at Catholic rituals by stealing from the friars and assaulting them with fireworks, reciting derisory anti-Catholic rhymes, and (in the B-text) punching the Pope.[128] As with the conjuring and contract-signing episodes, Faustus' antipathy toward religion in these scenes is not coherently articulated but conveyed wordlessly through his behaviour. Not only do these expressions of unbelief rely upon behavioural, rather than intellective antitheism, their jingoistic anti-Catholicism would likely have made these episodes appealing to Protestant audiences, who often considered atheism and Catholicism to be coextensive.[129] As the narrative progresses, Faustus' powers become increasingly limited in scope to the point where creating visual trickery is the only thing of which he seems capable. Even as he expresses fear that his 'fatal time doth draw to a final end', Faustus dismisses these thoughts in favour of continuing to perform increasingly farcical illusions, such as duping a horse-courser into accepting a mount that vanishes on contact with water.[130] Faustus comes to the end of his twenty-four years of power not as an assertive usurper who challenges God's omnipotence, but as a performer of inane tricks whose erstwhile blasphemy is ultimately met with severe punishment. A similar fate befalls Barabas, who over the course of *Jew* becomes a less compelling, articulate, and powerful version of the character he was at the beginning, ignominiously being boiled alive in the cauldron he set to kill his enemies.

As the moment of Faustus' damnation approaches, he 'banquet[s] and carouse[s] and swill[s] / Amongst the students', conforming to the widespread belief that atheists typically died in a drunken stupor, epitomised by Nashe's assertion that 'theyr deathes for the most parte haue beene drunken, violent, and secluded from repentance'.[131] Not only were atheists

[128] *Faustus,* 3.1.65–86, 3.2.87.
[129] Cf. chap. 1, 64, 77; chap. 2, 108, chap. 4, 151.
[130] *Faustus,* 4.1.145–185.
[131] *Faustus,* 5.1.4–5. Nashe, *Christs Teares*, 121. Cf. Greene, *Greenes, Groats-Worth of Witte*, sig. F1r; Thomas Middleton, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, ed. Paul Mulholland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 4.5.

frequently considered to be drunkards, the state of unbelief was itself often described in terms of intoxication or somatic malfunction. When Nashe personifies 'Atheisme' as 'the third sonne of Pride', he states that 'Too much ioy of this world hath made him drunke'.[132] By using drunkenness as a vehicle to convey the state of mental disorder brought about by yielding too completely to temporal 'ioy', Nashe suggests that unbelief was not the product of a sound mind, but the raving of one who had become intoxicated with his own debauchery. By the 1620s, it had become common to write about atheism as a form of mental illness.[133] When they explained atheism as a condition rooted in somatic corruption or humoral imbalance, writers like Robert Burton ensured that atheism was categorised 'no longer [as] a theological, but a physical and social problem'.[134]

Faustus' swiftly retracted statement of repentance in this scene continues his habit of vacillating between embracing and abjuring the Christian faith.[135] Mephistopheles' requirement that Faustus re-sign the contract in his own blood emphasises the extent to which, over the course of his twenty-four-year empowerment, Faustus has become no more certain in his unbelief and must constantly be distracted with new forms of sensual pleasure to motivate him to ignore the pleas of his conscience. After reasserting his loyalty to Lucifer, Faustus is rewarded with Helen of Troy, whom Mephistopheles summons to be Faustus' 'paramour'.[136] Tamburlaine's relationship with Zenocrate is also presented in such a way that his desire for her appears to stand in for his unbelief. For example, his claim that her 'eies are brighter than the Lamps of *heaven*', rather than say, 'the sun', introduces the idea that being

---

[132] Nashe, *Christs Teares*, 114.

[133] Earlier writers like William Perkins associated atheism with a defective or 'wounded' conscience, allowing atheism to be considered a physical condition: a 'wound in the bodie that plucks out the heart': *Cases of Conscience*, 203.

[134] Pfister, 'Elizabethan Atheism', 77; see Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 395–408; John Abernethy, *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise Containing Physicke for the Soule [...]* (London, 1615), 27; Jackson, *Treatise of Unbeliefe*, 9–10.

[135] *Faustus,* 5.1.64–75.

[136] *Faustus,* 5.1.84.

with her on earth is preferable to the idea of the divine.[137] Reciprocally, Zenocrate places her faith in Tamburlaine in a way that emphasises his opposition to Islam's prophet: 'If Mahomet should come from heaven and sweare, / My royall Lord is slaine or conquered', Zenocrate claims she would not believe Him.[138] In Faustus' case, he states that Helen's 'sweet embracings may extinguish clean / These thoughts that do dissuade me from my vow', indicating both that he does not truly believe in the blasphemy he has outwardly agreed to and that he considers it possible to distract himself from his own hypocrisy by enjoying the pleasure of Helen's 'sweet embracings'.[139]

As his final hour elapses, Faustus expresses contrition more fully but even as he wishes that Christ's blood will save him, he recognises that God will 'not have mercy on my soul'.[140] Though Tamburlaine and Barabas also face death at the end of their plays, neither character expresses the same degree of contrition as Faustus, perhaps because, for them, unbelief is an implicit correlative of their politic attitudes to religion, rather than something they must affirm, however indirectly. As the devils drag Faustus to hell, '*Thunder and Lightning'* can be heard on stage, a phenomenon strongly associated with atheism due to the frequently recounted story of Caligula, who was so afraid that his blasphemy would result in providential punishment that he became startled by the sound of thunder.[141] The play therefore ends by staging one of the most common tropes of the anti-atheist discourse: that atheists would ultimately receive the violent judgement they deserved and that they would

---

[137] *1 Tamburlaine,* 3.3.120, emphasis added. Cf. Tamburlaine's claim that even though has overcome obstacles 'which hath stoopt the topmost of the Gods', he is more preoccupied with Zenocrate's earthly virtues: *1 Tamburlaine,* 5.1.183–90.
[138] *1 Tamburlaine,* 5.1.208–211.
[139] *Faustus,* 5.1.86–7.
[140] *Faustus,* 5.2.79; 99.
[141] The source is Suetonius, *The Historie of Twelve Caesars Emperours of Rome*, 147. Caligula's atheism is discussed in Robert Persons, *A Christian Directorie Guiding Men to Their Salvation. Devided into Three Bookes [...]* ([Rouen], 1585), 277; George Whetstone, *The English Myrror. A Regard Wherein al Estates May Behold the Conquests of Envy [...]* (London, 1586), 242; Du-Plessis-Mornay, *Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, 11; Smith, *Gods Arrowe*, sig. B1v. Tourneur plays on the expectation that atheists are afraid of thunder and lightning in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, 2.4.142–165.

regret having rejected God. This conclusion is indicative of Marlowe's commitment to writing a play that dramatizes the principles of the anti-atheist discourse without directly invoking its language, thus allowing audiences to infer that atheism is being represented based on the circumstances of Faustus' actions. Both in its overall narrative and its finer details of characterisation, such as Faustus' skill in disputation, his pursuit of voluptuousness, and his death during a thunderstorm, the play presents Faustus as a hypocritical atheist who outwardly expresses unbelief while inwardly retaining some faith.

DRAMATIC PRECEDENTS FOR MARLOWE'S REPRESENTATIONS OF ATHEISM

In this chapter, I am arguing that Marlowe's plays were a major influence upon later dramatic representations of atheism, including Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy.* To make a claim for Marlowe's innovativeness, it is first necessary to establish how unbelief was portrayed earlier in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The two fundamental qualities that comprise the early modern atheist—unbelief and negative *ethos*—existed in earlier Tudor drama preceding Marlowe, though not in a combination recognisable as atheism. Faustus, for example, may be read as an atheist because he justifies his blasphemy, scoffing, and voluptuousness by discounting the value of his immortal soul. As we have seen, denial of the immortality of the soul was not a new idea. This form of unbelief was articulated not only in ancient confutations of Epicureanism and Stoicism, but also in classical plays such as Seneca's *Troades*. Jasper Heywood's English translation of this work, *Troas* (1558), articulated the idea that the soul was not immortal much more explicitly than any of the atheist characters who appear in later Elizabethan public theatre. Whether or not this particular translation was performed, perhaps at Oxford where Heywood studied or at the Inns of Court, students at early modern grammar schools and universities regularly performed Seneca's plays in Latin

and English from the 1560s onward.[142] The sententiae scattered throughout plays like *Troades* were seen as both morally and stylistically edifying. Though Seneca was a pagan, he was regarded by many as a proto-Christian with an exemplary attitude toward death.[143] As we saw earlier, Sidney even used Stoic arguments in Pamela's reply to Cecropia.[144] In the context of Seneca's reputation for moral rectitude and his well-established position in the curriculum of early modern schools and universities, the potentially troubling content of some his works appears to have gone largely unremarked upon, just as discussions of atheism and unbelief by sixteenth-century classicists were often neutral and matter-of-fact.[145]

A good example of such troubling content can be found in the Chorus following the second act of *Troades.* The Chorus essentially makes a declamation arguing in favour of the following proposition: 'Hath not the soul likewise his funeral, / But still alas do wretches live in thrall?'.[146] The Chorus goes on to speculate that the soul dies with the body and concludes that 'Death hurts the corpse and spareth not the sprite'.[147] The speech therefore offers a fairly conclusive and articulate denial of the soul's immortality. Heywood's translation expands Seneca's Chorus by adding three new stanzas that remind readers of events unfolding in the play, including (poignantly in this context) Astyanax's impending death. Heywood explains the various additions he makes to Seneca's text in 'The Preface to the Readers', stating that 'for as much as this work seemed unto me in some places unperfect […] I have (where I thought good) with addition of mine own pen supplied the want of some things'.[148] The liberal attitude Heywood displays toward Seneca's text, which he augments as he sees fit, would surely have allowed him to expurgate or sanitise the Second Chorus' annihilationist

[142] Jessica Winston, 'Seneca in Early Elizabethan England', *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2006): 30.
[143] James Ker and Jessica Winston, 'Introduction', in *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012), 8–11.
[144] See chap. 2, 134–135.
[145] See chap. 1, 52–68.
[146] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Troades*, trans. Jasper Heywood in *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies*, ed. James Ker and Jessica Winston (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012), 67–134, 2.Cho.6–7.
[147] Seneca, *Troades*, 2.Cho.8, 43.
[148] Seneca, *Troades,* Pref.31–36.

argument had he found it particularly subversive. Alternatively, he could have chosen to warn readers about this passage in the preface, dismissing it as pagan error and supplying a Christian corrective. That Heywood chose not to do either of these things indicates the extent to which, in the context of a speech structured as a formal rhetorical declamation that occurs within a classical tragedy written by 'the flower of all writers, Seneca', Heywood did not consider a developed argument against the immortality of the soul to be inherently corrupting to readers. Compared to the way Marlowe frames Faustus' denial of the immortality of the soul as an expression of outward atheism that has not been deeply considered, Heywood was clearly less concerned about confuting unbelief in his work.

As I argue throughout this thesis, early modern anxieties about atheism revolve not only around the arguments of unbelief, but also around the context in which unbelief is expressed and the kind of individual who expresses it. This is a distinction that certainly applies to atheists in Renaissance drama, whose negative *ethos* is often conveyed partly through their typical dramatic roles as villains or anti-heroes. The emergence of atheists as compelling but villainous protagonists in the plays of the late sixteenth century—epitomised by Marlowe's Barabas, Shakespeare's Aaron, and Greene's Selimus—may be attributed to the way these characters are descended from the morality Vice. Characters like Barabas, Aaron, and Selimus inherit the Vice's habit of conspiratorially informing audiences of his sinful nature and his intentions to deceive other characters. The Vice figure that originated in medieval morality plays—who personifies evil, tempts others toward sin, and brings audiences onside by revealing his deceptions to them—provides a clear structural precedent for representations of atheists in Renaissance drama. Sixteenth-century writers increasingly used the Vice to represent specific threats to Protestant Christianity. As we saw in the above discussion of *Jew,* Marlowe followed this precedent by adapting aspects of the morality structure to incorporate elements of the anti-atheist discourse that emerged in the 1580s.

The plots of traditional medieval morality plays revolve around a conflict between a group of personified moral abstractions who represent spiritual virtues, such as 'Mercy' and 'Truth', and another group representing temporal distractions, such as 'Flesh' and 'World', who each compete for the soul of a protagonist representing all Christians.[149] The evil characters often speak in a fragmented, nonsensical idiolect, entertain audiences with violent, blasphemous, and scatological humour; and are led by devils and vices who outline their plans to deceive or mislead the everyman protagonist. Twenty-first-century scholars like Cox and Steenbrugge have rejected what they see as the overly teleological arguments of Bevington and Spivack, who suggested that the traditional morality play became increasingly secularised over the course of the sixteenth century.[150] In Bevington's model, predominantly allegorical medieval moralities gave way first to 'intermediate' moralities, in which characters representing abstract moral qualities were replaced with figures representing social and ethical types, and ultimately to 'hybrid' plays, which use the traditional morality structure to stage narratives drawn from chronicle and romance.[151] Steenbrugge rightly points out that Bevington's very linear argument is easily disrupted by individual plays that do not fit his chronology and that the development from abstract personifications to realistic human characters posited by Bevington is not clear cut. The minor vices of traditional morality plays do represent real-world moral problems, have human bodies and characteristics, and sometimes even the hint of a backstory.[152] Furthermore, the emergence of characters with apparently greater levels of interiority from the 1570s onward is better explained by the

[149] There are five extant 'traditional' medieval moralities: *The Pride of Life, Wisdom, Mankind, Everyman*, and *The Castle of Perseverance,* which features the characters listed here. See Pamela M. King, 'Morality Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 240–64.
[150] Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred*, 9; Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice*, 203–17; Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*; Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, 205–50.
[151] Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, 128–98.
[152] Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice*, 208–12. For an opposing view arguing that the Protestant abolition of penance led to new kinds of secular drama in the sixteenth century, see Lorna Hutson, 'Theatre'.

increasingly widespread use of forensic rhetoric to create intrigue plots based on Latin New Comedy than by a progressive advancement in the character of the Vice.[153]

Steenbrugge is therefore justified in claiming that over the course of the sixteenth century, the narratives of moral plays and interludes did not undergo a linear 'development towards more secular sins'.[154] But it is also clear that when Marlowe incorporated the Vice figure and other structural elements of the morality tradition into his plays, he did so at a time when anxieties about atheism and religious hypocrisy were at an all-time high. As I noted in Chapter 3, historians disagree about what it means to say Europe became more secular following the Reformation. Yet, most do acknowledge that the division of Western Christendom into multiple disparate confessions created a new imperative for both Catholic and Protestant authorities to control and monitor how and what their subjects believed. In this thesis, I have shown that anxieties about the rise of unbelief and about the difficulty of distinguishing between genuine faith and outward conformity resulted in sixteenth-century English writers inventing atheist personas to account for and confute unbelief. For writers of prose fiction like Lyly and Sidney, this meant literally creating fictive atheists from scratch. For polemicists like Whitaker and Rainolds, this meant attributing an atheist *ethos* to the views and behaviour of their doctrinal opponents. Marlowe's reworkings of morality play conventions demonstrate that he was similarly invested in using the newly established conception of atheist *ethos* to transform an existing dramatic tradition.

Whereas the medieval morality Vice was a personification of sin, Marlowe's versions of this character personify late sixteenth-century concerns about the difficulty of detecting inward atheism and religious hypocrisy. This transformation may be illustrated by surveying how the forms of sin represented in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century moralities differ from the

---

[153] Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion*. See also 212–213, above.
[154] Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice*, 208.

way unbelief is represented in *Tamburlaine, Jew, Faustus,* and the plays they influenced. In early moralities, Vices typically divert protagonists from Christianity by discouraging them from participating in religious activities, rather than affecting a change in their attitudes or beliefs. In *Mankind,* for example, the chief Vice Titivillus persuades Mankind to reconcile with the evil characters 'Nought', 'Nowadays', and 'Newguise', who exhort the protagonist to accompany them to the alehouse on Sunday 'And forbear mass and matins, hours, and prime'.[155] The apparent ease with which Mankind abandons his faith provokes an 'inward affliction' in 'Mercy', who 'cannot bear it evenly that Mankind is so flexible'. Mankind's own perception of his consequent unworthiness to meet 'Mercy' leads to such despair that he calls for a rope to hang himself.[156] The battle for Mankind's soul is, therefore, an internal one that greatly afflicts his conscience. Yet, it is predicated upon his unwillingness to attend church and behave in a manner befitting a pious Christian, not upon whether he has faith that God exists. The early Tudor *Hick Scorner* comes closer to dramatizing unbelief but, like *Mankind,* locates the challenge to religion presented by its Vice figures in their comic outward blasphemy and profanity, rather than in their inward denial of God's existence. For example, when 'Free Will' is told by 'Contemplation' to think of God, he blasphemously suggests that he knows God because he has recently drunk ale with him.[157] Later, an even more blasphemous version of this gambit is used by 'Imagination', who rejects the idea that God could help him on the basis that when he was imprisoned in Newgate, 'he and I never drank together'.[158] Neither 'Free Will' nor 'Imagination' speak of God as if his existence were in doubt, but by profanely referring to him as a worldly person with whom they can drink, his divine status is traduced. These early characters therefore do not represent concerns

---

[155] G. A. Lester, ed., *Mankind*, in *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans* (London: A & C Black, 2002), l.711.
[156] *Mankind,* ll.739–40, 799.
[157] Ian Lancashire, ed., *Hick Scorner*, in *Two Tudor Interludes: The Interlude of Youth, Hick Scorner* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), l.743.
[158] *Hick Scorner,* l.954.

about the rise of speculative unbelief among atheists who have abandoned religion altogether. Rather, they deal with the more quotidian problem of Christians not taking their religion seriously.

One major way moralities changed after the Henrician Reformation was the tendency of authors to incorporate elements of anti-Catholicism into the characterisation of their Vices. Here, the form of religious dereliction represented by the Vice is no longer failure to participate in a universal Christian culture but a personal choice that has political as well as religious implications. R. Wever's *Lusty Juventus* (1551), for example, combines a traditional morality structure with a specifically mid sixteenth-century setting. Here, the Vice 'Hypocrisy' represents an explicitly Catholic attempt to undermine the Protestant theology of its hero.[159] 'Hypocrisy's claim to have 'brought vp such supersticion / Under the name of holynes and religion, / that diceyued almost all' by propagating idolatrous Catholic distractions like 'holy Cardinals, holy Popes, / Holy vestimentes, holy copes, / Holy Harmettes and Friers, / Holy priestes' is a good example of how the Vice character could be adapted to provide immediate social commentary.[160] As in a traditional morality play, Hypocrisy directly informs the audience of the nature of his deception and speaks in a humorous sing-song style. Traditional Vice characters often utter bursts of nonsensical or scatological chatter, such as the refrains 'But he wipe his arse clean' and 'Holyke, holyke, holyke' in *Mankind*. Here, these are replaced with a list of offices, vestments, and holy objects of the Catholic Church spanning over thirty-six lines. Consequently, a sense of ridiculousness is imparted upon these items and by extension Catholicism itself, showing that

---

[159] Jane Griffiths, '*Lusty Juventus*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, ed. Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 262–73.
[160] R. Wever, *An Enterlude Called Lusty Iuuentus. Liuely Describng the Frailtie of Youth: Of Nature, Prone to Vyce: By Grace and Good Councell Traynable to Vertue*, ed. Helen Scarborough Thomas (New York, NY: Garland, 1982), ll.405–11.

when a Vice was written to represent a specific socio-religious threat, the character could be an effective polemical tool while also remaining entertaining and compelling.

Hybrid plays, which combine the morality structure with narratives drawn from other sources like chronicle and romance provide further opportunities for the Vice to represent new anxieties about atheism and unbelief. In Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1581), the Italian merchant Mercadore is a vice character who evokes the figure of the atheist without actually being an unbeliever. *Three Ladies* is a hybrid of morality play and city comedy in which the chief Vice, Lady Lucre, personifies the sin of usury while also taking on the specific persona of a London landlord. Mercadore's characterisation as a ruthless merchant willing to 'go to de Turks, Moors, pagans,' and even 'da great devil' in service of Lady Lucre suggests typical Italianate atheism and his national otherness is highlighted through his comic accent.[161] Mercadore has borrowed money from the Turkish Jew Gerontus, whom he has been instructed to cozen by Lady Lucre. He therefore purports to convert to Islam in order to have the debt written off under Turkish law. Mercadore blasphemously asserts that 'Me be weary of my Christ's religion, and for dat me come away'.[162] The significance of Mercadore's impending apostasy is highlighted multiple times by Gerontus, who encourages Mercadore to 'respect your faith, and do not seek to deceive me'.[163] Indeed, Gerontus is so concerned for the fate of Mercadore's soul that he voluntarily writes off the debt. When Mercadore is subsequently invited to convert to Islam of his own free will, his deception is revealed: 'Signor, no; not for all da good in da world me forsake-a my Christ'.[164] The play therefore highlights the possibility of taking a politic attitude toward religion and deceiving others about the true nature of one's faith, but does not leave

[161] Robert Wilson, *The Three Ladies of London*, in *The Oxford Anthology of Tudor Drama*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 399–463, 5.87–88. On Italianate atheism, see chap. 2, 107–109.
[162] Wilson, *Three Ladies,* 14.37.
[163] Wilson, *Three Ladies,* 14.33, 40.
[164] Wilson, *Three Ladies,* 14.43.

Mercadore's true beliefs in doubt: his sins are blasphemy, deception, and greed, not apostasy or unbelief. After the debt is cancelled, Mercadore has no further incentive to lie about his love of Christ, which disinclines audiences from speculating further about his true beliefs. *Three Ladies* therefore represents a Vice who goes through the motions of renouncing Christianity, but whose faith is ultimately not called into question.

Marlowe's innovativeness may be best demonstrated by comparing *Doctor Faustus* to a closely related play, Nathaniel Woodes' *The Conflict of Conscience* (1572). *Conflict* dramatizes the story of Francesco Spiera, a Paduan convert to Protestantism, who following his investigation by the Inquisition in 1548, publicly renounced his Reformed beliefs and then underwent a crisis of faith. Believing that he had been abandoned by God and was possessed by the devil, Spiera became suicidal and eventually starved to death. In the later seventeenth century, several English writers used Spiera's story to demonstrate the analogues between apostasy and atheism, using examples of 'English Spiras'—whose apostasy from Christianity had caused them to die of despair—as a method of anti-atheist confutation.[165] Woodes' play, however, emerged within a tradition of Protestant retellings of Spiera's life that pre-date its use in anti-atheist confutation and makes Spiera's story the basis of a morality play.[166] After an initial print run in which the protagonist is called 'Spiera', Woodes changed the character's name to 'Philologus', which he explains means loving to talk about God without truly understanding his word. This was something all Christians risked: 'If that we practise this in deede, Philologi we are'.[167] Philologus does not self-consciously reject religion, but rather finds himself unable to participate in the culture of either Catholic or Reformed

[165] Kenneth Sheppard, 'Atheism, Apostasy, and the Afterlives of Francis Spira in Early Modern England', *The Seventeenth Century* 27, no. 4 (2012): 410–34.
[166] Michael MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies* 31, no. 1 (1992): 32–61.
[167] Nathaniel Woodes, *An Excellent New Commedie Intitutled, The Conflict of Conscience Contayninge a Most Lamentable Example of the Dolefull Desperation of a Miserable Worldlinge, Termed by the Name of Philologus [...]* (London, 1581), sig. A2v; for the original version, see *The Conflict of Conscience*, ed. Herbert Davis and F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Malone Society, 1952).

Christianity. He is therefore not confuted in the way that an atheist would be, and his fate is presented as a conceivable risk for Protestants.

Toward the end of the play, the character explains to his pious interlocutors that ‘I have no fayth, the wordes you speake my hart doth not beléeve, / I must confesse that I for sinne, am justly throwne to hell’. Going through the motions of reciting a prayer has little impact on his outlook: ‘My lyppes have spoke the wordes in déede, but yet I féele my heart, […] rather seeke[s] his holy name for to blaspheame and cursse’.[168] The despair and frustration of Philologus, who is steeped in religion but incapable of truly believing it, is of a different order to the clandestine socially disruptive atheism confuted by anti-atheist writers. Though Philologus no longer has ‘fayth’, in the sense that he has lost his personal conviction that the promise of salvation offered by scripture is true, he is not attacking the fundamental value of religion. Philologus conceptualises his unbelief entirely in Christian terms: he thinks he has been possessed by the devil and that he is going to hell, locating the cause of his failure to believe within himself. Philologus is thus best described as a Christian undergoing a crisis of faith, rather than an atheist who rejects religion outright. Though Spiera would be portrayed as an atheist by later English writers, this was not how Woodes approached the story in the 1570s.

Woodes’ dramatization of internal religious crisis provided a model for Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and perhaps even directly influenced it.[169] But whereas Philologus’ unbelief is predicated upon his personal inability to uphold the faith of the culture he was born into, Faustus rejects Christianity in favour of conjuring. Faustus is further distinguished from Philologus in that his unbelief appears to be predicated upon an argument against the immortality of the soul that is implicitly similar to the one articulated in *Troades*. Yet, unlike

---

[168] Woodes, *Conflict of Conscience* (1581), sig. H4.
[169] David M. Bevington, ‘Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Nathaniel Woodes’s *The Conflict of Conscience*’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485–1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 704–16.

in Heywood's translation of Seneca, Marlowe assigns this argument to a naturalistic representation of a Christian living in sixteenth-century Europe. As I suggested above, the sense that Faustus' unbelief is only 'apparent' is significant. Unlike in *Mankind,* which never examines the personal beliefs of its protagonist, or in *Three Ladies,* which ultimately clarifies that Mercadore does believe in Christ, *Faustus* invites audiences to infer Faustus' unbelief from his speech and behaviour, and thus to identify him with the emerging figure of the atheist. *Faustus* therefore presents a version of the morality psychomachia in which the struggle represented is not between good and evil for the soul of an everyman, but rather the personal vacillations of an atheist who struggles to justify his unbelief. In a similar way, Barabas in *Jew* is a version of the morality Vice inflected by concerns about Machiavellian religious hypocrisy, the consequences of which do not affect his soul, but his position in Maltese society.

MARLOWE'S INFLUENCE: EARLY MODERN ATHEISM ON STAGE

Because Marlowe's contemporaries imitated his characters and style, the anti-atheist tropes and conventions that Marlowe applied to his appropriations of the morality Vice coalesced into atheist stereotypes that became entrenched in English drama. *Tamburlaine* and *Jew* were imitated, adapted, and alluded to with particular frequency, to the extent that 'the rich Jew of Malta' became a stock figure.[170] For Irving Ribner, imitations of the *Tamburlaine* plays such as *The Wars of Cyrus* (1588) were deliberately printed as orthodox 'antidotes' to the

[170] Tucker Brooke, 'The Reputation of Christopher Marlowe', *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 25 (1922): 380. Such allusions rarely mention Marlowe by name; his personal literary reputation was centred primarily on the quality of his poetry: see J. A. Downie, 'Christopher Marlowe's Posthumous Reputation', in *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade*, ed. Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 258–71.

universally recognised heterodoxy of Marlowe's drama.[171] Conversely, Peter Berek argues that such imitations demonstrate primarily aesthetic rather than ideological engagements with Marlowe's text.[172] Evaluating the relative truth of these statements is beyond the scope of this chapter, especially because each imitation of Marlowe engages with his work in a different way.[173] Putting aside the question of how individual authors responded to Marlowe's representations of inward and outward atheism, it is clear that many attempted to reproduce the implicit unbelief of Marlowe's protagonists in more obvious ways.

Imitations of the *Tamburlaine* plays quickly established the tyrannical Muslim atheist as a popular dramatic archetype by emphasising the unbelief of their protagonists. In the prologue to Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588), key elements of Tamburlaine's character are distilled into the usurper Mully Mahamet, who is introduced as an 'unbelieving Moor' noted for 'barbarous cruelty' and 'ambitious tyranny'.[174] In Greene's *Alphonsus* (1587), the tyrannical Amuracke curses 'thou proud iniurious God, / *Mahound* I mean' and later announces his intention 'with weapons to assay' him.[175] By re-writing the ambiguous Quran-burning scene in *2 Tamburlaine* as a literal declaration of war on Mahomet, Greene makes Amuracke's antipathy toward religion clear. Lodge and Peele's *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1589) centres on the fate of Rasni, a Tamburlaine-style conqueror who

[171] Irving Ribner, '*Tamburlaine* and *The Wars of Cyrus*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 53, no. 4 (1954): 569–73; idem. 'Greene's Attack on Marlowe: Some Light on *Alphonsus* and *Selimus*', *Studies in Philology* 52, no. 2 (1955): 162–71.
[172] Peter Berek, 'Tamburlaine's Weak Sons: Imitation as Interpretation Before 1593', *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982): 55–82. Cf. James P. Bednarz, who usefully paraphrases Ribner to argue that 'Greene's strategy for dealing with Marlowe in the theatre was to write morally acceptable alternatives to *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*'; see 'Marlowe and the English Literary Scene', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97.
[173] See Tom Rutter, 'Allusions to Marlowe in Printed Plays, 1594', in *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade*, ed. Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 199–213.
[174] George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar,* in *The Stukeley Plays*, ed. Charles Edelman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), I.prol.32, 6, 34.
[175] Robert Greene, *Alphonsvs King of Arragon*, in *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene*, vol. I, ed. John Churton Collins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), 3.2.895–909, 4.3.1422–23.

progresses from ‘Contempt of God’ to ‘vnfained zeale’ over the course of the play.[176] Like Tamburlaine, Rasni seems to believe that God exists but is powerless to intervene in human affairs: ‘Rasni is God on earth and none but he’.[177] The unbelief implicit in this position remains unexamined in *Tamburlaine*, but Lodge and Greene highlight it through Rasni’s eventual redemption. When one of his followers is consumed by fire as a providential punishment for his blasphemy, Rasni realises that ‘I am not chiefe, there is more great then I’.[178] Greene went even further in *Selimus* (1591), in which the eponymous protagonist openly expresses anti-providentialism, Machiavellianism, and annihilationism. Though Selimus believes that ‘Some god […] (What god I do not know, nor greatly care)’ was responsible for creating the world, he has no regard for God’s ability to shape the events that take place in it, elevating his own ‘resolution’ above ‘Fortune’.[179] For Selimus, ‘The names of gods, religion, heaven, and hell’ were invented by Machiavellian rulers ‘to make men quietly a yoke to bear’.[180] The threat of punishment in the afterlife is nothing but a political device, ‘since in death nothing shall to us fall’.[181]

In less than five years since its first performance, Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* established an archetype that had a lasting impact on representations of atheism in early modern drama. Even once the vogue for imitations of *Tamburlaine* had subsisted, Islam, tyranny, and unbelief remained closely associated character traits. Muslim characters, in particular, were often presented as atheistical villains well into the seventeenth century. In the second act of John Mason’s *The Turke* (1607), Mulleases is introduced praying to ‘Thou God of *Mecha*,

---

[176] Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge, *A Looking Glasse for London and England*, in *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene*, *Vol. 1.* ed. John Churton Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), 5.5.2269, 2255.
[177] Lodge and Greene, *Looking Glass,* 1.1.26–30.
[178] Lodge and Greene, *Looking Glass,* 2.1.1175.
[179] Greene, *Selimus,* 2.76–77, 58–59.
[180] Greene, *Selimus,* 2.98, 106.
[181] Greene, *Selimus,* 2.135.

mighty *Mahomet*'.[182] Yet, as his Machiavellian plan for social advancement develops, he consciously abandons his piety in favour of temporal ambition:

> Thus I ascend, and from proud Fortunes wheele,
> Pull my owne fate: forgiuenes *Mahomet*
> My hopes make me prophane; and my proud thoughts
> Vsurpe aboue thy greatnesse.[183]

In the following scene, he tries to woo Amada by telling her 'I would forsake a God' for her love, and, along with Borgia, he is dismissed as a 'Detested Atheist'.[184] Mason was likely influenced by *Lust's Dominion* (1600), in which another Machiavellian Moor, Eleazar, dismisses providence and asserts control of fortune: 'I have stood upon the top of fortunes wheel, / And backward turn'd the Iron screw of fate'.[185] Atheism also remained a common character trait for non-Muslim tyrants. The eponymous protagonist of Jonson's *Sejanus* (1604), for example, rejects his priest's interpretation of a sacrifice, sweeps the alter clear, and tells the priest to pick up the religious articles 'Which I, in spite of thy blind mistress, or / Thy juggling mystery, religion, throw / Thus, scornèd, on the earth'.[186] Another tyrant who rejects the idea that temporal events have religious significance is Shakespeare's Macbeth, who famously claims that life 'is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing'.[187]

Marlowe's plays were also responsible for popularising another common form of dramatic atheism, the Machiavellian Vice. Marlowe's most notorious character of this type was the Duke of Guise, who in *The Massacre at Paris* (1593) states that 'My polycie hath

---

[182] John Mason, *The Turk*, ed. Fernand Lagarde (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1979), 2.1.6.
[183] Mason, *The Turk,* 2.1.200–204.
[184] Mason, *The Turk,* 2.2.118.
[185] *Lust's Dominion*, ed. Fredson Bowers in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 5.1.26–27. The Marlovian quality of these lines is reflected in the play as a whole: see Annette Drew-Bear, 'Marlovian Influences in *Lust's Dominion*', *Marlowe Studies* 4 (2014): 63–78. For *Dominion'*s influence on Mason, see Frank W. Wadsworth, 'The Relationship of *Lust's Dominion* and John Mason's *The Turke*', *ELH* 20, no. 3 (1953): 194–99.
[186] Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall*, ed. Philip J. Ayres (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 5.192–94.
[187] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Arden, 2015), 5.5.26–28.

framde religion'.[188] But in terms of popularising the figure of the Machiavellian Vice by inspiring imitations and allusions, Ithamore and Barabas from *Jew* were by far the most influential. For example, Aaron in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1592) is an irredeemably evil character whose machinations drive forward the action of the play in the same way as the traditional morality Vice. Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare is indicated by the close parallels between the speeches of Barabas and Ithamore in *Jew* and Aaron's proud and ludicrous admission of evil deeds: 'Oft have I digged up dead men from their graves / And set them upright at their dear friends' door'.[189] The difference between Shakespeare's Aaron and Marlowe's characters and is that Shakespeare makes the unbelief of his Machiavel explicit. When Aaron asks Lucius to swear not to kill his child, Lucius responds by asking 'Who should I swear by? / Thou believest no god. / That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?'. Rather than dissembling, Aaron openly admits what Lucius accuses him of: 'What if I do not? – as indeed I do not – '.[190] Unbelieving Machiavels like Aaron appear in several Shakespeare plays written in the 1590s. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who appears prominently in *3 Henry VI* (1591) and *Richard III* (1593) is an ambitious and theatrically minded character who like Barabas is 'determined to prove a villain'.[191] Richard revels in his ability to 'Change shapes with Proteus for advantages, / And set the murderous Machiavel to school'.[192] His cynical cultivation of a pious public image epitomises the anxiety that

---

[188] Christopher Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris with the Death of the Duke of Guise*, in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe,* Vol. 5, ed. Edward J. Esche, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 2.65. Cf. Pandulph in Shakespeare's *King John,* whose perfidious declamation against maintaining a religious oath has both Machiavellian and Marlovian qualities: see Tom McAlindon, 'Swearing and Forswearing in Shakespeare's Histories: The Playwright as Contra-Machiavel', *The Review of English Studies* 51, no. 202 (2000): 220–22; and Robert A. Logan, *Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 13.

[189] William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), 5.1.135–36. Cf. 230–231, above.

[190] Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus,* 5.1.70–76.

[191] William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. James R. Siemon (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2009), 1.1.30.

[192] William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part 3*, ed. John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001), 3.2.192–93.

Machiavellian princes would outwardly feign religiosity to consolidate their power while remaining inward atheists:

> But then I sigh, and, with a piece of scripture,
> Tell them that God bids us do good for evil;
> And thus I clothe my naked villainy
> With odd old ends, stol'n forth of Holy Writ,
> And seem a saint when most I play the devil.[193]

Later in the play, we see this strategy working when Buckingham councils Richard to 'look you get a prayer book in your hand, / And stand between two churchmen', so that when the Mayor arrives, Richard appears engaged in religious study.[194] The audience becomes complicit in Richard's deception when the Mayor notes that 'his grace stands, 'tween two clergymen' and proceeds to offer him the throne.[195]

As with the enduring attribution of unbelief to Muslims and tyrants, dramatic representations of Machiavellian villains persisted into the seventeenth century. Shakespeare used the trope again in his characterisation of the bastard Edmund in *King Lear* (1605). Like Barabas, Richard, and other descendants of the morality Vice, Edmund's machinations drive the narrative, and he shares his evil plots directly with the audience. Edmund is also a pagan who mocks the idea of divine providence: 'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars'.[196] Atheistic Machiavels also feature in plays where they do not function in Vice roles. For example, in the opening scene of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), Antonio reports that the villainous Cardinal, 'strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters'.[197]

---

[193] Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.3.333–37.
[194] Shakespeare, *Richard III,* 3.7.46–48.
[195] Shakespeare, *Richard III,* 3.7.96.
[196] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London: Arden, 1997), 1.2.119–122. For other forms of pagan atheism in the play, see Elton, *King Lear and the Gods*, 115–46.
[197] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.1.156–158; cf. idem. *The White Devil*, ed. Christina Luckyj, 3rd ed. (London: A & C Black, 2008), 4.2.38; 5.6.54.

Alongside the other 'political monsters' with whom the Cardinal associates, Antonio's reference to the Cardinal's acquaintance with 'atheists' helps establish him as a corrupt and hypocritical Machiavel whose outward religiosity belies his inwardly evil nature. The darker atmosphere of Jacobean and Caroline tragedies like Webster's made them conducive to representations of atheism and unbelief. In the opening lines of Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1631), Friar Bonaventura exhorts Giovanni to 'Dispute no more in this!', since 'Wits that presumed / On wit too much, by striving how to prove / There was no God […] filled the world with devilish atheism.[198] The Friar's reference to Giovanni's disputatiousness (and the subsequent discussion of his time at university in Bologna) evoke the figure of the humanist-educated Italianate atheist discussed in Chapter Two, priming readers to view Giovanni's infatuation with his sister as a rejection of divine, as well as natural law.[199]

Representations of atheism and unbelief in seventeenth-century drama also began to diverge from the precedents established by Marlowe. New archetypes such as the hypocritical puritan atheist became established within the well-known tradition of stage puritanism.[200] For example, Malheureux in Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1604) loses his faith when consumed by lust, leading him to argue that 'There is no God in blood, no reason in desire'.[201] Malheureux is also familiar with the scepticism of Montaigne, whom he paraphrases when he states that 'the strongest argument that speaks / Against the soul's eternity is lust'.[202] The concupiscence of people belonging to religious sects often seems to have occasioned their religious hypocrisy. In Middleton's *The Family of Love* (1607), Mrs.

[198] John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. Sonia Massai (London: Arden, 2011), 1.1.1–8; cf. idem. *The Lover's Melancholy*, ed. R. F. Hill (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 1.2.129; 3.3.39.
[199] For parallels between the sophistry of Faustus and Giovanni, see Cyrus Hoy, '"Ignorance in Knowledge": Marlowe's Faustus and Ford's Giovanni', *Modern Philology* 57, no. 3 (1960): 145–54. Ryrie claims that 'Incest would become a hallmark of the imaginary seventeenth century atheist'. However, the only examples of this he provides are a ballad, Suetonius' 'Life of Caligula', Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedy,* and Ford's *'Tis Pity.* Incest is not a character trait or plot device used in any other play listed in this chapter, except for Lodge and Peele's *Looking Glass.* See Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 80.
[200] See intro., n.3.
[201] John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan*, ed. David Crane (London: A & C Black, 1997), 4.2.13.
[202] Marston, 1.1.87–88.

Purge creates a blasphemous double-entendre when she conceals her adultery by claiming to have donated her 'ring' to 'the relief of the distressed Geneva'.[203] The tendency of religious zealots to identify atheism everywhere in society was also mocked. For example, the anabaptist Tribulation in Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), overzealously asks 'Where have you greater atheists, than your cooks?'.[204] Tribulation's deluded suggestion here is that the perceived ability of hot fumes to provoke anger has created a sect of blasphemous chefs. Other seventeenth-century representations of atheism and unbelief were more idiosyncratic. Some characters like Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1603) experience profound anxieties about what will happen to them after death: 'Ay, but to die, and go we know not where; / To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot'.[205] Claudio is by no means a typical atheist, but he obviously does not believe in the immortality of the soul.[206] More unusual still is Dampit in Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605). Dampit is described as 'the most notorious, usuring, blasphemous, atheistical, brothel-vomiting rascal' and he later admits to having last prayed during the armada crises of 1588 and 1599.[207] While Dampit's immorality and decayed physical state are appropriate to the atheist archetype, his unbelief is never directly challenged or punished, indicating the absence of a clear confutational agenda in Middleton's play. As we get further into the seventeenth century and Marlowe's direct influence begins to recede, it becomes clear that dramatic representations of atheism were no longer primarily about replicating stock characters and were now developing to reflect changing conceptions of atheism.

---

[203] Thomas Middleton, *The Family of Love*, ed. Simon Shepherd (Nottingham: Nottingham Drama Texts, 1979), 5.3.2149–51.

[204] Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. Elizabeth Cook, 2nd ed. (London: A & C Black, 1991), 3.2.21; cf. Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston, *Eastward Ho!*, ed. Michael Neill (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 4.2.25–31.

[205] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Arden, 1967), 3.1.117–18.

[206] On the play's scepticism toward immortality more broadly, see Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 102–32.

[207] Middleton, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, 1.4.13–15; 3.4.1–5.

In 1611, the booksellers John Stepneth and Richard Redmer published a quarto edition of Cyril Tourneur's anti-revenge play, *The Atheist's Tragedy.* On the quarto's title page, 'Atheist's' is the single largest word. It fills an entire line, is even bigger than 'Tragedie', and dwarfs both the subtitle and author. The title evokes the downfall of a character identified by role rather than name, indicating that by the early seventeenth century, 'atheist' was considered a sufficiently well-known and engaging word to perform the bulk of a printed play's advertising.[208] *The Atheist's Tragedy* was written just six years before 'An Athiest' first appeared in a book of Theophrastan character sketches, by which time the figure of the atheist was undoubtedly ubiquitous.[209] The frequency of references to atheism and representations of unbelief in early seventeenth-century drama has gone largely unacknowledged by literary critics. Yet, as the preceding survey shows, dramatists of this period were not only comfortable incorporating anti-atheist commonplaces into their plays, but in many cases required certain characters to be unbelievers to make their behaviour credible or to align them with popular stock figures. The typical characterisation of villainous tyrants and hypocritical Machiavels as atheists originates with the dramatic archetypes initially popularised by Marlowe and the forms of unbelief expressed by these characters conform to the ideas established by the anti-atheist discourse examined throughout this thesis.

---

[208] On the role of title pages in advertising printed plays, see Peter Berek, 'Genres, Early Modern Theatrical Title Pages, and the Authority of Print', in *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England*, ed. Marta Straznicky (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 159–75.
[209] John Stephens, *Essayes and Characters, Ironicall, and Instructive. The Second Impression.* (London, 1615), 258–63.

Conclusion

When I set out to write a thesis on atheism in early modern English literature, my aim was to draw attention to what I considered a niche but overlooked literary phenomenon: the appearance of atheist characters in plays and prose fiction at a time when few historical atheists appear to have existed. When I started working in this area, I was struck by how little attention literary scholars paid to early modern atheism, considering the saturation of the discipline in many other areas. Why, for example, is the topic of 'Shakespeare and religion' a major sub-discipline catered for by monographs, collections of essays, and introductory surveys, while 'Shakespeare and irreligion' (let alone atheism) is a minor concern addressed by only a handful of scholars?[1] My initial assumption was that the lack of scholarly interest in this issue reflected a lack of contemporary interest: surely, atheism was a modern phenomenon and it would be anachronistic to look for it in the sixteenth century. What I have shown in this thesis, however, is that atheism was a central point of reference in a range of politico-religious debates in early modern England. It was not the case that a few radical writers created atheist characters as novel curiosities. Rather, there was an entire discourse concerned with explaining and discrediting the perceived rise of atheism that attracted contributions from a range of high-profile authors.

The neglect of atheism within early modern literary criticism is perhaps a product of the 'turn to religion', which has involved scholars moving away from post-modern understandings of religion as 'another field for anthropological investigation or decoding' and toward recovering early modern experiences of religious belief.[2] It is now axiomatic that

---

[1] Cf. the predominantly older criticism cited in intro., n.70 with the wealth of recent work on Shakespeare and religion, e.g. Hannibal Hamlin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); David Scott Kastan, *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010).
[2] Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies', *Criticism* 46, no. 1 (2004): 181.

'Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was everywhere, all the time, not just confined to Sunday worship or the practice of the particularly pious'.[3] This renewed focus on the importance of religion can make early modern references to atheism seem troublingly anachronistic. For example, McGinnis is quick to assure readers that Gifford's Atheos is 'hardly an atheist by the modern definition', though McGinnis does not go on to explore contemporary meanings of the term.[4] The assumption that early modern atheism is not a worthwhile subject of scholarly investigation remains predicated upon Febvre's argument that accusing someone of atheism was as a 'supreme insult' that could not be 'propped up in any real or substantial way'.[5] Febvre's influence is evident on later scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and John Sommerville, who respectively describe atheism as 'a characteristic smear of otherness' and 'too arduous an intellectual effort to contemplate'.[6] This line of thinking remains just as prevalent in the twenty-first century. John D. Cox, for example, contends that 'carefully argued philosophical atheism […] needs to be distinguished from the naïve "atheism" of Shakespeare's contemporaries, which belonged for the most part to vituperation and rhetorical abuse rather than rational religious doubt'.[7] This thesis has demonstrated that early modern conceptions of atheism were far more complex and substantial than scholars like Cox typically make out, and that much about the politico-religious tensions of the period may be learned from the different ways writers use the term.

Here, I want to make a final argument for the importance of attending to early modern discussions of atheism by briefly exploring the case of the puritan politician and diarist, Simonds D'Ewes (1602–1650). Sears McGee's recent highly comprehensive biography of

[3] Hannibal Hamlin, 'Preface', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, ed. Hannibal Hamlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xii.
[4] McGinnis, *George Gifford*, 3.
[5] See chap. 3, 152–153.
[6] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 22; C. John Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 179.
[7] John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 9.

D'Ewes indexes twenty-two pages mentioning atheism, a term that D'Ewes uses again and again in his life writing and sermon notes. Describing D'Ewes' experience at grammar school, McGee writes that

> Looking back from 1638, he opined that 'I cannot but with horrour consider the desperate Atheisme I then liued in.' By atheism, he meant not a principled position against the existence of God but a life lived as if there were no God and therefore no punishment for sinful behavior or heterodox belief.[8]

McGee confidently asserts that, here, D'Ewes is talking about sinful behaviour rather than unbelief, citing Dixon to show that in this period, '"the term [atheism] is used as a descriptor of something else"'.[9] Perhaps wary of anachronism, McGee emphasises that in early modern usage, atheism did not always mean denying God's existence directly. However, as we have seen, other forms of unbelief, like denying the immortality of the soul, were widely considered to be just as threatening during this period. McGee's exposition also obscures the fact that D'Ewes' intense puritanism later led him led him to experience periods of substantial religious doubt.[10] Attending the bedside of a dying friend in 1624,

> Simonds was frightened to discover himself pitched 'upon those two dangerous rockes of atheisme'— namely, doubting first whether the Scripture's promise of salvation was valid, and second, doubting even 'whether ther weere a soule.' 'I was soe amazed to finde my selfe intangled in these desperate scruples' and yet at the same time 'resolued not to smother them'.[11]

McGee describes this period of doubt as a process of D'Ewes re-establishing 'his confidence about the existences of the soul and of eternal life against the devil's insidious temptations', while glossing over D'Ewes' remarkable identification of atheistic tendencies within himself and his resolution 'not to smother them'.[12] If early modern atheism were a more familiar and better-understood phenomenon, McGee might have placed greater emphasis upon how

[8] McGee, *An Industrious Mind*, 24.
[9] McGee, 24 n.24.
[10] Cf. Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 118–19.
[11] McGee, *An Industrious Mind*, 97.
[12] McGee, 98.

intriguingly willing D'Ewes is to consider himself an atheist at various points throughout his life, while also fiercely criticising the atheism he perceived in others. How might D'Ewes' understanding of atheism be related to his puritanism? And what are to make of the fact that D'Ewes' mother grew up in Maldon attending the sermons of the puritan evangelist and anti-atheist, George Gifford?[13] It is not that McGee glosses over these questions so much as that they do not seem to occur to him at all.

This thesis proposes taking early modern discussions of atheism seriously. I have demonstrated that the conception of atheism that emerged in this period was not a natural or default way of understanding unbelief, but a literary invention that emerged in response to a range of post-Reformation religious anxieties. In his now famous study of Elizabethan puritanism, Patrick Collinson stated that 'I have tried to remember that Elizabethans rarely used words ending in 'ism', and hardly at all to describe principles in the abstract. 'Isms' were more often parties and factions inseparable from the people who led or composed them'.[14] Atheism is an exception that proves Collinson's rule because although Elizabethans frequently decried the rise of atheism, their conception of atheism was inextricable from the figure of the atheist, who emerged in the late sixteenth century as the epitome of moral abjection and negative *ethos*. I have suggested the publication of Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* in 1611 represents the peak of the anti-atheist discourse I have been describing. For a figure like D'Ewes to identify himself as pitched upon the 'rockes of atheisme' less than thirty years later, a great deal about how atheism was understood must have changed. Studying the development of anti-atheism over the course of the seventeenth century is one of many further avenues of enquiry that present themselves once we acknowledge the early modern fixation with atheism.

---

[13] McGee, 27.
[14] Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, 13.

This thesis has demonstrated the role of literary invention in shaping early modern England's fascination with atheism, and the role of literature in making this fixation possible. For atheism to become a central concern in English society, where there were few high-profile unbelievers, the figure of the atheist first had to be imagined. Anti-atheist writers in the sixteenth century developed a discourse that addressed the threat of unbelief rather than its actual presence in society. The structural and argumentative principles of this discourse were drawn from precedents found in classical anti-atheism, post-Reformation religious polemic, and contemporary anti-Machiavellianism. Using the habits of thought developed through their training in rhetoric and dialectic, writers invented arguments and personas to account for the possibility of rejecting a wide range of religious beliefs including the immortality of the soul, the divinity of scripture, and the existence of God and divine providence. Because anti-atheist writers sought to confute unbelief as well as explain it, the forms of atheism they invented revolved around the idea that no morally upright person could seriously deny the existence of God. For this reason, early modern atheists were typically imagined either as outwardly debauched hypocrites or inwardly scheming Machiavels. Outward atheists were considered arrogant scoffers who deluded themselves into thinking that God did not exist only to justify their sinful lifestyles. Inward atheists were perceived as being more committed to unbelief, but evil enough and intelligent enough to hide their hostility to religion behind outward expressions of piety.

These two forms of atheism proved highly useful to writers navigating the political and religious upheavals of the post-Reformation world. One of the most effective ways to argue that a religious movement was a true church was to define it against the putatively atheistic tendencies of its rivals. While not all churches acknowledged the same temporal authorities or doctrinal priorities, all Christians rejected atheism and were loath to think of themselves as contributing to its proliferation. Polemicists of all political and confessional

affiliations could therefore argue that beliefs or policies they were opposed to were conducive to atheism. On the other hand, deploying anti-atheist rhetoric could foster consensus and minimize interconfessional conflict because unbelief was universally reviled by early modern Christians. I have shown how writers like de Mornay and Smith used this strategy to great effect, though the phenomena is likely much more widespread. John Donne, for example, uses anti-atheism in several of his sermons to accommodate doctrinally varied audiences while causing minimal controversy.[15] The use of anti-atheist rhetoric in sermons generally is an important area this thesis has been unable to handle in depth, though the anti-atheist techniques used by preachers is undoubtedly deserving of further study. The sermon form greatly influenced texts like Nashe's *Christs Teares* (1593) and Smith's *Gods Arrowe* (1593), and anti-atheist rhetoric was also deployed extensively in published sermons like Adam Hill's *The Crie of England* (1595) and Thomas Playfere's *The Pathway to Perfection* (1597). The great popularity of sermons meant that preachers who invented anti-atheist arguments for the moral edification of their auditors would have been responsible for shaping and communicating the concept of atheism to the masses.

Another route through which atheism entered the popular imagination was the appearance of atheist characters in plays and dialogues. Lyly's *Anatomy of Wit* (1578), for example, was an incredibly popular text that conveyed to the reading public Lyly's concerns about the role of classical philosophy and humanist rhetoric in converting impressionable students to atheism. Characters such as Lyly's Atheos and Sidney's Cecropia were available points of cultural reference years before contemporary figures like Marlowe and Ralegh developed their reputations for atheism. Thus, the atheist was first a stock character in early modern fiction that subsequently became used to label real people, rather than a social reality

[15] See e.g. John Donne, *Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn, 1620–1623*, ed. Katrin Ettenhuber, *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne,* vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), sermon 4; idem. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Reuben Potter and Evelyn Mary Spearing Simpson, vol. 8 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953), sermon 14.

that writers attempted to imitate mimetically. The ongoing role of the dialogue form in shaping early modern conceptions of atheism is undoubtedly deserving of further scholarly attention. The texts surveyed in Chapter 2 constitute only some of the earliest and most compelling invented conversations with atheists. It remains to be established how far the precedents set by these texts were continued in later dialogues featuring atheist speakers, such as Jeremy Corderoy's *A Warning for Worldlings* (1608), Henoch Clapham's *Errour on the left hand* (1608), and Henry Cuffe's *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (1633).

No literary form did more to popularise conceptions of atheism than publicly performed stage plays, which regularly featured atheists in prominent roles from the late 1580s onward. I have traced the origin of this dramatic trend to the influence of Marlowe, who modelled at least three of his protagonists on the figure emerging in contemporary anti-atheist discourses. Marlowe's influence on early modern theatre was such that the characters he created became dramatic archetypes that were consistently imitated and adapted. The recurring ascription of unbelief to usurping tyrants and evil Machiavels resulted in the characters that originated in Marlowe's plays becoming fixed in the public imagination by the turn of the seventeenth century. The question of whether the allegations of atheism levelled at Marlowe and his contemporaries were related to Marlowe's desire to include atheist characters in his plays is a complex issue that deserves its own study. Since it was not just Marlowe and Greene who included atheists in their fictive works and levelled charges of atheism against one another, but other writers in their milieu such as Gabriel Harvey, Nashe, and Peele, it seems that a fascination with atheism was common to the university wits. Nashe's claim that Harvey was hostile toward 'Religion, against which in the publique Schooles he set vp Atheistical Questions', suggests that as with the dialogues discussed in

Chapter 2, disputations *in utramque partem* may have provoked the fixation with atheism demonstrated by Marlowe and his contemporaries.[16]

The conception of atheism that developed in the late sixteenth century made it difficult for later writers to conceive of unbelief in positive terms. When the polymathic physician Thomas Browne described his personal religious outlook in the 1630s, he began by admitting that unbelief was 'the generall scandal of my profession'.[17] Browne's suggestion that the widespread lack of religion among doctors was an open 'scandal' recalls the reluctant tolerance of this phenomenon we saw in Bullein's *A dialogue both pleasant and pietifull*. Yet, Browne's later claim that no argument has been able to 'encline me to any point of infidelity or desperate positions of Atheisme; for I have beene these many yeares of opinion there was never any [atheist]' is indicative of how he had absorbed the paradigm that serious inward unbelief was impossible.[18] In the seventeenth century, many committed and sceptical theists like Browne, Thomas Traherne, William Chillingworth, and indeed Symonds D'Ewes, sought to strip Christianity back to its most true and essential elements, and by doing so came to grapple with the idea of unbelief.[19] Even as they did so, the possibility of becoming an atheist remained a frightening and abhorrent prospect because of the way sixteenth-century writers had so firmly established the category as synonymous with negative *ethos*. The Enlightenment precipitated a gradual shift in attitudes to unbelief, but the ethical conception of atheism that emerged in the sixteenth century remained the dominant framework through which unbelief was understood. Because atheism was so strongly associated with immorality, self-identifying atheists did not emerge in large numbers until well after unbelief was legalised. Atheism could be tolerated but never endorsed. The invention of a voice and

---

[16] Thomas Nashe, *Have with Yov to Saffron-Walden*, ed. R. B. McKerrow, *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, Vol. 3 (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1905), 81.
[17] Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *Thomas Browne: The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Penguin, 1977), 61.
[18] Browne, 86.
[19] See Ryrie, *Unbelievers*, 60–74, chap. 5.

character that expressed the possibility of unbelief outlived its origins in sixteenth-century literature; the atheist would long persist as a powerful and powerfully reviled cultural presence.

Bibliography

Abernethy, John. *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise Containing Physicke for the Soule [...]*. London, 1615.

The British Library. 'Accusations against Christopher Marlowe by Richard Baines and Others'. Accessed August 2020. www.bl.uk/collection-items/accusations-against-christopher-marlowe-by-richard-baines-and-others.

Adams, Simon. 'Dudley, Robert, Earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588)'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Aelian. *A Registre of Hystories Conteining Martiall Exploites of Worthy Warriours [...]*. Translated by Abraham Fleming. London, 1576.

Aers, David. 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject"'. In *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, edited by David Aers, 177–202. New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Alexander, Gavin. 'Prosopopoeia: The Speaking Figure'. In *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, edited by Sylvia Adamson, Katrin Ettenhuber, and Gavin Alexander, 97–112. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

———. 'Sidney, Scott, and the Proportions of Poetics.' *Sidney Journal* 33, no. 1 (2015).

———, ed. *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*. London: Penguin, 2004.

———. *Writing after Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney 1586–1640*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Allen, Don Cameron. *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964.

Allen, William. *A True, Sincere and Modest Defence, of English Catholiques [...]*. Rouen, 1584.

———. *An Apologie and True Declaration of the Institution and Endevours of the Two English Colleges [...]*. Rheims, 1581.

Alley, William. *Ptōchomuseion. The Poore Mans Librarie*. London, 1565.

Altman, Joel B. *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978.

Anderson, Anthony. *A Godlie Sermon, Preached on Newe Yeeres Day Last [...]*. London, 1576.

Aristotle. *The 'Art' of Rhetoric*. Translated by John Henry Freese. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.

Arnold, John. *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2005.

Ascham, Roger. *The Scholemaster or Plaine and Perfite Way of Teachyng Children, to Understand, Write, and Speake, the Latin Tong [...]*. London, 1570.

Athenagoras. *The Most Notable and Excellent Discourse of the Christian Philosopher Athenagoras [...]*. Translated by Richard Porder. London, 1573.

Aubrey, John. *Brief Lives: With, An Apparatus for the Lives of Our English Mathematical Writers*. Edited by Kate Bennett. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Aylmer, Gerald E. 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England'. In *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill*, edited by Christopher Hill, D. H. Pennington, and Keith Thomas, 22–46. Oxford: Clarendon, 1978.

Bacon, Francis. 'Of Atheisme'. In *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, edited by Michael Kiernan, 51–54. *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, Vol. 15. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

———. ‘Of Unity in Religion’. In *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, edited by Michael Kiernan, 11–16. *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, Vol. 15. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

———. *The Advancement of Learning*. Edited by Michael Kiernan. *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, Vol. 4, 2000.

Barker, Francis. *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Barnard, John, and Maureen Bell. ‘Appendix 1: Statistical Tables’. In *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 4: 1557–1695*, edited by D. F. McKenzie and John Barnard, 779–93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Barrow, Henry. *Refutation of M. G. Giffardes Reprochful Booke*, 1591.

———. *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1587–1590*. Edited by Leland H. Carlson. London: Allen and Unwin for the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, 1962.

Battenhouse, Roy W. *Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, a Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941.

———. ‘Tamburlaine, the “Scourge of God”’. *PMLA* 56, no. 2 (1941): 337–48.

Bawcutt, N. W. ‘The “Myth of Gentillet” Reconsidered: An Aspect of Elizabethan Machiavellianism’. *The Modern Language Review* 99, no. 4 (2004): 863–74.

Baylie, Richard. ‘A Briefe Relation of What Passed in a Third Private Conference, Betweene a Certaine B. and Me, Before Etc.’ In *A Replie to Jesuit Fishers Answere to Certain Questions Propounded by His Most Gratious Ma[jes]tie: King James*, by Francis White. London, 1624.

Beard, Thomas. *The Theatre of Gods Judgements: Or, a Collection of Histories [...]*. London, 1597.

Becon, Thomas. *The Sicke Mans Salve Wherin the Faithfull Christians May Learne Both How to Behave Them Selves Paciently and Thankefully [...]*. London, 1561.

Bednarz, James P. ‘Marlowe and the English Literary Scene’. In *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, edited by Patrick Cheney, 90–105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Beer, B. L. ‘London and the Rebellions of 1548–1549’. *Journal of British Studies* 12, no. 1 (1972): 15–38.

Bell, Dean Phillip. *Jews in the Early Modern World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

Belsey, Catherine. *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*. London: Methuen, 1985.

Berek, Peter. ‘Genres, Early Modern Theatrical Title Pages, and the Authority of Print’. In *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England*, edited by Marta Straznicky, 159–75. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.

———. ‘Tamburlaine’s Weak Sons: Imitation as Interpretation Before 1593’. *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982): 55–82.

Berman, David. *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*. London: Croom Helm, 1988.

Bevington, David M. ‘Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Nathaniel Woodes’s *The Conflict of Conscience*’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485–1603*, edited by Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank, 704–16. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

———. *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962.

———. ‘Introduction’. In *Endymion*, by John Lyly, edited by David M. Bevington. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Bevington, David M., and Eric Rasmussen. ‘Introduction’. In *Dr. Faustus: The A- and B-Texts (1604, 1616): A Parallel-Text Edition*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

Beza, Theodore. *Jesu Christi D. N. Novum Testamentum, Sive Novum Foedus*. Geneva, 1565.

Bird, Samuel. *A Friendlie Communcication or Dialogue Betweene Paule and Damas [...]*. London, 1580.

Bogaert, Arnould. *A Pronostication for Divers Yeares Ryght Utyle and Profytable to al Sortes of People [...]*. Translated by John Coke. London, 1553.

Bond, R. Warwick, ed. *The Complete Works of John Lyly*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902.

Bowes, Thomas. ‘Dedication to Sir John Puckering’. In *The Second Part of the French Academie [...]*, by Pierre de La Primaudaye, sigs. a3r-a4v. London, 1594.

———. ‘To the Christian Reader Grace and Peace’. In *The Second Part of the French Academie [...]*, by Pierre de La Primaudaye, a5r-b4v. London, 1594.

Bowker, Margaret, ed. *An Episcopal Court Book for the Diocese of Lincoln: 1514–1520*. Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society, 1967.

Boyle, Robert. *Boyle on Atheism*. Edited by J. J. MacIntosh. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

Breton, Nicholas. *The Good and the Badde, or Descriptions of the Worthies, and Unworthies of This Age*. London, 1616.

Bristow, Richard. *A Briefe Treatise of Diverse Plaine and Sure Wayes to Finde out the Truthe in This Doubtful and Dangerous Time of Heresie [...]*. Antwerp, 1574.

Brooke, Tucker. ‘The Reputation of Christopher Marlowe’. *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 25 (1922): 347–408.

Brown, Callum G. *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Browne, Thomas. *Religio Medici*. In *Thomas Browne: The Major Works*, edited by C. A. Patrides, 53–161. London: Penguin, 1977.

Bruno, Giordano. *De Gl’heroici Furori.* London, 1585.

———. *Spaccio de La Bestia Trionfante*. London, 1584.

Buckley, George Truett. *Atheism in the English Renaissance*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1932.

Buckley, Michael J. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.

Bullein, William. *A Dialogue Bothe Pleasaunte and Pietifull Wherein Is a Goodly Regimente against the Fever Pestilence [...]*. London, 1564.

Bullivant, Stephen. ‘Defining “Atheism”’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 11–20. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Translated by S. G. C. Middlemore. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

Burnett, Stephen. ‘Western Theologies and Judaism in the Early Modern World’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600–1800*, edited by Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A. G. Roeber, 469–81. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Edited by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair. Vol. 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Burton, William. *Davids Evidence, or, The Assurance of Gods Love [...]*. London, 1592.

Busson, Henri. ‘Les Noms Des Incrédules Au XVIe Siècle’. *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 16, no. 3 (1954): 273–83.
———. *Les Sources et Le Développement Du Rationalisme Dans La Littérature Française de La Renaissance (1533–1601)*. Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1922.
C. S. Knighton. ‘Whitaker, William (1547/8–1595), Theologian and College Head’. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Caldwell, Melissa M. *Skepticism, Belief and the Reformation of Moral Value in Early Modern England*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2016.
Cantimpré, Thomas of. *Bonum Universale de Apibus*. Edited by Georges Colvener. Duacum, 1627.
Carew, Richard. *The Survey of Cornwall.* London, 1602.
Carpenter, John. *A Preparative to Contentation Conteining a Display of the Wonderfull Distractions of Men in Opinions and Straunge Conceit [...]*. London, 1597.
Cartwright, Thomas. *A Replye to an Answere Made of M. Doctor Whitgifte Against the Admonition to the Parliament.* [Hemel Hempstead], 1573.
———. *The Second Replie of Thomas Cartwright: Against Maister Doctor Whitgiftes Second Answer, Touching the Churche Discipline*. [Heidelberg], 1575.
Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. Vol. 4. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923.
Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *An Epistle or Letter of Exhortation Written in Latyne [...]*. Translated by Goddred Gilby. London, 1561.
———. *De Inventione*. Translated by H. M. Hubbell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949.
———. *De Natura Deorum*. Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933.
———. *De Officiis*. Translated by Walter Miller. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913.
Clark, Andrew, ed. *Register of the University of Oxford*. Vol. 2, Part 1. Oxford: Oxford Historical Society, 1887.
Clark, William. *A Replie unto a Certaine Libell, Latelie Set Foorth by Father Parsons [...]*. London, 1603.
Cole, Douglas. *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962.
Collinson, Patrick. ‘Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism’. In *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, 150–70, 1995.
———. ‘Separation in and out of the Church: The Consistency of Barrow and Greenwood’. *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 5, no. 5 (1994): 239–58.
———. ‘The Coherence of the Text: How It Hangeth Together: The Bible in Reformation England’. In *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, edited by W. P. Stephens and James Atkinson, 84–108. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
———. *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1967.
Colynet, Antony. *The True History of the Civill Warres of France [...]*. London, 1591.
Cooper, Thomas. *Certaine Sermons Wherin Is Contained the Defense of the Gospell [...]*. London, 1580.
———. *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae Tam Accurate Congestus [...]*. London, 1565.
Cosin, Richard. *An Apologie for Sundrie Proceedings by Jurisdiction Ecclesiasticall [...]*. London, 1593.

Costello, William T. *The Scholastic Curriculum at Early Seventeenth-Century Cambridge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

Coverdale, Miles. 'Preface'. In *The Hope of the Faithful [...]*, by Heinrich Bullinger. [Wesel], 1555.

Cowper, William. *Three Heavenly Treatises, Concerning Christ [...]*. London, 1612.

Cox, John D. *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007.

———. *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Cox, Virginia. *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in Its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Crawforth, Hannah Jane. *Etymology and the Invention of English in Early Modern Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Cressy, David. 'The Atheist's Sermon: Belief, Unbelief, and Traditionalism in the Elizabethan North'. In *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England*, 162–70. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Cuffe, Henry. *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life Together with the Originall Causes, Progresse, and End Thereof.* London, 1607.

Curtis, Mark H. *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition, 1558–1642: An Essay on Changing Relations between the English Universities and English Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.

Davidson, Nicholas. 'Christopher Marlowe and Atheism'. In *Christopher Marlowe and English Renaissance Culture*, edited by Darryll Grantley and Peter Roberts. Aldershot: Scolar, 1996.

———. 'Unbelief and Atheism in Italy, 1500–1700'. In *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, edited by Michael Hunter and David Wootton, 55–86. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Deats, Sara Munson. *Doctor Faustus: A Critical Guide*. London: Continuum, 2010.

Deats, Sara Munson, and Lisa S. Starks. '"So Neatly Plotted, and so Well Perform'd": Villain as Playwright in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*'. *Theatre Journal* 44, no. 3 (1992): 375–89.

Dent, Arthur. *The Plaine Mans Path-Way to Heaven Wherein Euery Man May Cleerely See, Whether He Shall Be Saued or Damned.* London, 1607.

Diehl, Huston. 'Disciplining Puritans and Players: Early Modern English Comedy and the Culture of Reform'. *Religion & Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 81–104.

Dimmock, Matthew. *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Diogenes Laertius. *The Lives, Opinions, and Remarkable Sayings of the Most Famous Ancient Philosophers*. Translated by T. Fetherstone, Samuel White, E. Smith, J. Philips, R. Kippax, William Baxter, and M. R. London, 1688.

Dixon, Leif. 'England's "Atheisticall Generation": Orthodox and Unbelief in the Revolutionary Period'. In *Revolutionary England, c.1630– c.1660: Essays for Clive Holmes*, edited by George Southcombe and Grant Tapsell, 146–62. London: Routledge, 2017.

———. 'William Perkins, "Atheisme" and the Crises of England's Long Reformation'. *The Journal of British Studies* 50, no. 4 (2011): 790–812.

Dolven, Jeff. *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Donne, John. *Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn, 1620–1623*. Edited by Katrin Ettenhuber. *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

———. *The Sermons of John Donne*. Edited by George Reuben Potter and Evelyn Mary Spearing Simpson. Vol. 8. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953.

Dove, John. *A Confutation of Atheisme*. London, 1605.

Downame, George. *Two Sermons the One Commending the Ministerie in Generall: The Other Defending the Office of Bishops in Particular [...]*. London, 1608.

Downie, J. A. 'Christopher Marlowe's Posthumous Reputation'. In *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade*, edited by Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson, 258–71. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Drew-Bear, Annette. 'Marlovian Influences in *Lust's Dominion*'. *Marlowe Studies* 4 (2014): 63–78.

Duffy, Eamon. 'Allen, William (1532–1594), Cardinal'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

———. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.

Duncan-Jones, Katherine. *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991.

Du-Plessis-Mornay, Philippe. *A Woorke Concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion [...]*. Translated by Arthur Golding. London, 1587.

Edwards, John. 'Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria circa 1450–1500'. *Past & Present*, no. 120 (1988): 3–25.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Elton, William R. *King Lear and the Gods*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966.

Elyot, Thomas. *Bibliotheca Eliotae Eliotis Librarie*. London, 1542.

———. *The Dictionary of Sir Thomas Eliot Knyght*. London, 1538.

Erdozain, Dominic. *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Ettenhuber, Katrin. '"A Comely Gate to so Rich and Glorious a Citie": The Paratextual Architecture of the Rheims New Testament and the King James Bible'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530–1700*, edited by Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie, 54–69. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Febvre, Lucien. *Le Problème de l'incroyance Au XVIe Siècle: La Religion de Rabelais*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1942.

———. *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*. Translated by Beatrice Gottlieb. Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Ferrell, Lori Anne. 'Sermons'. In *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England*, edited by Andy Kesson and Emma Smith, 193–201. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.

Field, John. *A Godly Exhortation, by Occasion of the Late Judgement of God, Shewed at Parris-Garden [...]*. London, 1583.

Florio, John. *A Worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious, and Exact Dictionarie in Italian and English*. London, 1598.

Ford, John. *The Lover's Melancholy*. Edited by R. F. Hill. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.

———. *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Edited by Sonia Massai. London: Arden, 2011.

Fotherby, Martin. *Atheomastix Clearing Foure Truthes, against Atheists and Infidels [...]*. London, 1622.
Foxe, John. *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online*. (1570 edition). Sheffield: HRI Online Publications, 2011. http//www.johnfoxe.org. Accessed July 2019.
Fulbecke, William. *A Booke of Christian Ethicks or Moral Philosophie [...]*. London, 1587.
Fulke, William. *A Defense of the Sincere and True Translations of the Holie Scriptures into the English Tong [...]*. London, 1583.
———. *A Retentive, to Stay Good Christians, in True Faith and Religion, against the Motives of Richard Bristow [...]*. London, 1580.
———. *An Examination of M. Doctor Whitgiftes Censures, Contained in Two Tables [[[.]*. London, 1575.
G. G. *A Dispute Betwixt an Atheist and a Christian the Atheist Being a Flemming, the Christian an Englishman.* London, 1646.
Gajda, Alexandra. 'The Gordian Knot of Policy: Statecraft and the Prudent Prince'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare*, edited by R. Malcolm Smuts, 286–305. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
Gascoigne, George. *The Glasse of Governement*. London, 1575.
Gentillet, Innocent. *A Declaration Concerning the Needfulnesse of Peace to Be Made in Fraunce [...]*. Translated by George Harte. London, 1575.
———. *A Discourse upon the Meanes of Wel Governing [...] Against Nicholas Machiavell the Florentine*. Translated by Simon Patericke. London, 1602.
Gifford, George. *A Briefe Discourse of Certaine Points of the Religion Which Is among the Common Sort of Christians, Which May Bee Termed the Countrie Divinitie [...]*. London, 1582.
———. *A Catechisme Conteining the Summe of Christian Religion [...]*. London, 1583.
Golding, Arthur. 'Dediction to Francis Russell'. In *A Little Booke of John Calvines Concerninge Offences [...]*, by Jean Calvin. London, 1567.
Gosson, Stephen. *The Schoole of Abuse Conteining a Plesaunt Invectiue against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters, and Such like Caterpillers of a Commonwelth [...]*. London, 1579.
Grafton, Anthony, and Lisa Jardine. *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe*. London: Duckworth, 1986.
Gray, John. *Seven Types of Atheism*. London: Allen Lane, 2018.
Green, Ian M. *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
———. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
———. *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*. London: Vintage, 2012.
Greene, Robert. *Alphonsvs King of Arragon*. In *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene*, Vol. 1. Edited by John Churton Collins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905.
———. *Greenes, Groats-Worth of Witte, Bought with a Million of Repentance [...]*. London, 1592.
———. *Perimedes the Blacke-Smith a Golden Methode, How to Use the Minde in Pleasant and Profitable Exercise [...]*. London, 1588.
———. *Selimus.* In *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England: Selimus, A Christian Turned Turk, and The Renegado.* Edited by Daniel J. Vitkus. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Greene, Robert, and Thomas Lodge. *A Looking Glasse for London and England*. In *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene,* Vol. 1. Edited by John Churton Collins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905.

Greenlaw, Edwin. 'The Captivity Episode in Sidney's *Arcadia*'. In *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature*, edited by John Matthews Manly, 54–63. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1923.

Greenwood, John, and Henry Barrow. *The Writings of John Greenwood, 1587– 1590: Together with the Joint Writings of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, 1587–1590*. Edited by Leland H. Carlson. London: Allen and Unwin for the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, 1962.

Gregory, Brad S. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

Griffiths, Jane. '*Lusty Juventus*'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, edited by Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker, 262–73. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Habermann, Johann. *The Enemie to Atheisme: Or, Christian Godly Prayers for All Degrees of Persons*. Translated by Thomas Rogers. London, 1580.

Hadfield, Andrew. *Lying in Early Modern English Culture: From the Oath of Supremacy to the Oath of Allegiance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

———. 'Tamburlaine as the Scourge of God and The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth'. *Notes and Queries* 50, no. 4 (2003): 399–400.

Haigh, Christopher. *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

———. *The Plain Man's Pathways to Heaven: Kinds of Christianity in Post-Reformation England, 1570–1640*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hale, William Hale, ed. *A Series of Precedents and Proceedings in Criminal Causes Extending from the Year 1475 to 1640 [...]*. London: Francis and John Rivington, 1847.

Hamlin, Hannibal. 'Preface'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin, xi–xiv. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Hamlin, William M. *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare's England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Harding, Thomas. *A Confutation of a Booke Intituled An Apologie of the Church of England*. Antwerp, 1565.

Harvey, John. *A Discoursive Probleme Concerning Prophesies How Far They Are to Be Valued [...]*. London, 1588.

Hawarde, John. *Les Reportes Del Cases in Camera Stellata, 1593 to 1609*. Edited by W. Paley Baildon. London, 1894.

Helgerson, Richard. *The Elizabethan Prodigals*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976.

Hill, Christopher. 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution'. In *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, edited by J. F. McGregor and B. Reay, 191–211. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

———. *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*. London: Penguin, 1994.

Hillerbrand, Hans Joachim. *The Division of Christendom: Christianity in the Sixteenth Century*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Hitchens, Christopher. *Letters to a Young Contrarian*. Oxford: Perseus, 2001.

Holinshed, Raphael, William Harrison, John Harrison, George Bishop, and Rafe Newberie. *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles [...]*. London, 1587.

Honan, Park. *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hooker, Richard. *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Edited by Arthur Stephen McGrade. Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hoover, Jesse. '"They Bee Full Donatists" The Rhetoric of Donatism in Early Separatist Polemics'. *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 15, no. 2 (2013): 154–76.

Hoskins, John. *Directions for Speech and Style*. Edited by Hoyt H. Hudson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1935.

Hotson, Leslie. *Shakespeare versus Shallow*. London: Nonesuch Press, 1931.

Hoy, Cyrus. '"Ignorance in Knowledge": Marlowe's Faustus and Ford's Giovanni'. *Modern Philology* 57, no. 3 (1960): 145–54.

Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Huloet, Richard. *Abcedarium Anglico Latinum, pro Tyrunculis Richardo Huloeto Exscriptore*. London, 1552.

———. *Huloets Dictionarie Newelie Corrected, Amended, Set in Order and Enlarged [...]*. Edited by John Higgins. London, 1572.

Hulse, Clark. 'Tudor Aesthetics'. In *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600*, edited by Arthur F. Kinney, 29–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Hunt, David. 'Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code'. In *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity*, edited by Jill Harries and I. N. Wood, 2nd ed. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010.

Hunter, G. K. *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

———. 'Lyly, John (1554–1606)'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hunter, Michael. '"Aikenhead the Atheist": The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century'. In *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, edited by Michael Hunter and David Wootton, 221–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

———. 'Science and Heterodoxy: An Early Modern Problem Reconsidered'. In *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, edited by David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman, 437–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

———. 'The Problem of "Atheism" in Early Modern England'. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35 (1985): 135–57.

Hunter, Michael, and David Wootton. *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.

Hutchinson, Roger. *The Image of God, or Laie Mans Boke [...]*. London, 1560.

Hutson, Lorna. *Circumstantial Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

———. *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

———. 'Theatre'. In *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, edited by James Simpson and Brian Cummings, 227–46. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Hyman, Gavin. *A Short History of Atheism*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2010.

Ingram, William. *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Israel, Jonathan I. *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750*. Third Edition. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997.

J. Blom, and F. Blom. 'Rainolds [Reynolds], William (1544?–1594), Roman Catholic Priest and Author'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Jackson, Abraham. *Gods Call, for Mans Heart in 1 Knowledge, 2 Love, 3 Feare [...]*. London, 1618.

Jackson, John F. 'Hutchinson, Roger (d. 1555), Religious Writer'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Jackson, Thomas. *A Treatise Containing the Originall of Unbeliefe, Misbeliefe, or Misperswasions Concerning the Veritie, Unitie, and Attributes of the Deitie [...]*. London, 1625.

Jacob, Henry. *A Christian and Modest Offer of a Most Indifferent Conference, or Disputation [...]*. London, 1606.

Jardine, Lisa. 'The Place of Dialectic Teaching in Sixteenth-Century Cambridge'. *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1 January 1974): 31–62.

Jenkins, Claude, ed. 'An Unpublished Record of Archbishop Parker's Visitation in 1573'. *Archaeologia Cantiana* 29 (1911): 270–318.

Jenkins, Gary W. 'Smith, Henry (c. 1560–1591), Church of England Clergyman'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Jones, Philip. *Certaine Sermons Preached of Late at Ciceter, in the Countie of Glocester [...]*. London, 1588.

Jonson, Ben. *Sejanus His Fall*. Edited by Philip J. Ayres. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.

———. *The Alchemist*. Edited by Elizabeth Cook. 2nd ed. London: A & C Black, 1991.

Jonson, Ben, George Chapman, and John Marston. *Eastward Ho!* Edited by Michael Neill. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Jowett, John. 'Johannes Factotum: Henry Chettle and *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*'. *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 87, no. 4 (1993): 453–86.

Justin Martyr, Saint. *The First Apology*. Translated by Thomas B. Falls. *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr. The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 6. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948.

Kahn, Victoria. *The Trouble with Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Kastan, David Scott. *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Kellison, Matthew. *A Survey of the New Religion Detecting Manie Grosse Absurdities Which It Implieth.* Douai, 1603.

Ken Jackson, and Arthur F. Marotti. 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies'. *Criticism* 46, no. 1 (2004): 167–90.

Kendall, R. T. *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Ker, James, and Jessica Winston. 'Introduction'. In *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies*, 1–61. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012.

Kewes, Paulina. '"Plesures in Lernyng" and the Politics of Counsel in Early Elizabethan England: Royal Visits to Cambridge and Oxford'. *English Literary Renaissance* 46, no. 3 (2017): 333–75.

King, Pamela M. 'Morality Plays'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle, 240–64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Kinney, Arthur F. *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

Kirschbaum, Leo. ‘Marlowe’s Faustus: A Reconsideration’. *The Review of English Studies* 19, no. 75 (1943): 225–41.

Kocher, Paul H. ‘Marlowe’s Atheist Lecture’. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 39, no. 1 (1940): 98–106.

———. ‘The Physician as Atheist in Elizabethan England’. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1946): 229.

Konstan, David. ‘Epicurus on the Gods’. In *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, edited by Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders, 53–71. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Kors, Alan Charles. *Atheism in France: 1650–1729. Volume 1. The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990.

———. *Epicureans and Atheists in France, 1650–1729*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

———. *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650–1729*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Kristeller, Paul Oskar. ‘The Myth of Renaissance Atheism and the French Tradition of Free Thought’. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6, no. 3 (1968): 233–43.

La Primaudaye, Pierre de. *The Second Part of the French Academie [...]*. Translated by Thomas Bowes. London, 1594.

———. *The Third Volume of the French Academie [...]*. Translated by R. Dolman. London, 1601.

Lake, Peter. ‘Anti-Popery: The Structure of a Prejudice.’ In *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics, 1603–1642*, edited by Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, 72–106. London: Longman, 1989.

———. *Bad Queen Bess?: Libels, Secret Histories, and the Politics of Publicity in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

———. ‘Calvinism and the English Church 1570–1635’. *Past & Present*, no. 114 (1987): 32–76.

———. *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Lancashire, Ian, ed. *Hick Scorner*. In *Two Tudor Interludes: The Interlude of Youth, Hick Scorner*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980.

Lester, G. A., ed. *Mankind*. In *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans*. London: A & C Black, 2002.

Levao, Ronald. *Renaissance Minds and Their Fictions: Cusanus, Sidney, Shakespeare*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

Levinson, Ronald B. ‘The “Godlesse Minde” in Sidney’s *Arcadia*’. *Modern Philology* 29, no. 1 (1931): 21–26.

Ley, John. *A Discourse of Disputations Chiefly Concerning Matters of Religion, with Animadversions on Two Printed Books [...]*. London, 1658.

Lincoln, Evelyn. *The Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

Lodge, Thomas. *Wits Miserie, and the Worlds Madnesse Discovering the Devils Incarnat of This Age*. London, 1596.

Logan, Robert A. *Shakespeare’s Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare’s Artistry*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

Lust’s Dominion. In *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, Vol. 4, edited by Fredson Bowers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Luther, Martin. *A Commentarie upon the Fiftene Psalmes [...]*. Translated by Henry Bull. London, 1577.

Lyly, John. *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit and Euphues and His England*. Edited by Leah Scragg. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700*. London: Allen Lane, 2003.

MacDonald, Michael. 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England'. *Journal of British Studies* 31, no. 1 (1992): 32–61.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Nicholas Machiavel's Prince*. Translated by Edward Dacres. London, 1640.

Mack, Peter. *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

MacKenzie, Cameron A. *The Battle for the Bible in England, 1557–1582*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2002.

MacLure, Millar, ed. *Christopher Marlowe: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Mallin, Eric Scott. *Godless Shakespeare*. London: Continuum, 2007.

Malorat, Augustin. 'An Excellent Exposition of the Two Last Epistles of S. John'. In *The Lectures or Daily Sermons, of That Reverend Divine, D. John Calvine [...]*, by Jean Calvin, translated by Nathaniel Baxter. London, 1578.

Marcus, Leah S. 'Marlowe's Magic Books: The Material Text'. In *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, edited by Emily C. Bartels and Emma Smith, 15–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Marlorat, Augustin. *A Catholike Exposition upon the Revelation of Sainct John.* Translated by Arthur Golding. London, 1574.

Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. In *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, Vol. 2. Edited by Roma Gill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

———. *Dr Faustus: The A- and B-Texts (1604, 1616): A Parallel-Text Edition*. Edited by David M. Bevington and Eric Rasmussen. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

———. *The Jew of Malta.* In *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe,* Vol. 4. Edited by Roma Gill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

———. *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts 1 and 2.* In *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*. Vol. 5. Edited by David Fuller and Edward J. Esche. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

———. *The Massacre at Paris with the Death of the Duke of Guise*. In *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*. Vol. 5. Edited by Edward J. Esche. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Marston, John. *The Dutch Courtesan*. Edited by David Crane. London: A & C Black, 1997.

Martin, Gregory. *A Discoverie of the Manifold Corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the Heretikes of Our Daies [...]*. Rheims, 1582.

———. *A Treatise of Schisme Shewing, That al Catholikes Ought in Any Wise to Abstaine Altogether from Heretical Conventicles [...]*. London, 1578.

Martin, Gregory, trans. *The New Testament of Jesus Christ, Translated Faithfully into English, out of the Authentical Latin*. Rheims, 1582.

Maslen, R. W. *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-Espionage and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997.

Mason, John. *The Turk*. Edited by Fernand Lagarde. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1979.

Maus, Katharine Eisaman. 'Introduction'. In *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ix–xxxi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

———. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

McAlindon, Tom. 'Swearing and Forswearing in Shakespeare's Histories: The Playwright as Contra-Machiavel'. *The Review of English Studies* 51, no. 202 (2000): 208–29.

McCabe, Richard A. 'Wit, Eloquence, and Wisdom in *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*'. *Studies in Philology* 81, no. 3 (1984): 299–324.

McCoog, Thomas M. 'Douai College'. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, edited by Hans J. Hillerbrand. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

McCullen, Joseph T. 'Dr Faustus and Renaissance Learning'. *The Modern Language Review* 51, no. 1 (1956): 6–16.

McGee, J. Sears. *An Industrious Mind: The Worlds of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.

McGinnis, Timothy Scott. *George Gifford and the Reformation of the Common Sort: Puritan Priorities in Elizabethan Religious Life*. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2004.

Menzer, Paul. 'Introduction'. In *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe. London: Methuen Drama, 2018.

Meres, Francis. *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury Being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth*. London, 1598.

Metz, Alpert of. *De Diversitate Temporum*. Edited by Roel Vander Plaetse. *The Electronic Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. Brepols Publishers. Accessed December 2017.

Meyer, Edward Stockton. *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama*. New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1897.

Middleton, Thomas. *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. Edited by Paul Mulholland. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

———. *The Family of Love*. Edited by Simon Shepherd. Nottingham: Nottingham Drama Texts, 1979.

Miller, Anthony. 'Sidney's Apology for Poetry and Plutarch's *Moralia*'. *English Literary Renaissance* 17, no. 3 (1987): 259–76.

Milward, Peter. *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age: A Survey of Printed Sources*. London: Scolar Press, 1977.

More, George. *A Demonstration of God in His Workes Against All Such as Eyther in Word or Life Deny There Is a God.* London, 1597.

Munday, Anthony. *The Masque of the League and the Spanyard Discovered*. London, 1592.

Murray, Alexander. 'Piety and Impiety in Thirteenth-Century Italy'. *Studies in Church History* 8 (1972): 83–106.

Murray, Molly. *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Narveson, Kate. *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.

Nashe, Thomas. *Christs Teares over Iervsalem*. Edited by R. B. McKerrow. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, Vol. 2. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1910.

———. *Have with Yov to Saffron-Walden*. Edited by R. B. McKerrow. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, Vol. 3. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1905.

Nelson, Alan H. *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003.

Ng, Su Fang. *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Northbrooke, John. *Spiritus Est Vicarius Christi in Terra [...]*. London, 1577.

Norton, Thomas. *A Discourse Touching the Pretended Match Betwene the Duke of Norfolke and the Queene of Scottes*. London, 1569.

Palmer, Ada. *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Palmer, D. J. 'Magic and Poetry in *Doctor Faustus*'. *Critical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1964): 56–67.

Palmer, D. W. 'Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century'. *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, no. 3 (1983): 234–59.

Park, Katharine. 'Psychology: The Organic Soul'. In *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, edited by C. B. Schmitt, Eckhard Kessler, Jill Kraye, and Quentin Skinner, 464–84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Pastore, Stefania. 'Doubt and Unbelief in the Early Modern Era: Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and the Spanish Tradition'. In *Formations of Belief: Historical Approaches to Religion and the Secular*, edited by Philip Nord, Katja Guenther, and Max Weiss, 67–84. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Pattenson, Matthew. *The Image of Bothe Churches [...]*. Tornay, 1623.

Peele, George. *The Stukeley Plays*. Edited by Charles Edelman. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Pellegrini, Angelo M. 'Bruno, Sidney, and Spenser'. *Studies in Philology* 40, no. 2 (1943): 128–44.

Perkins, William. *A Golden Chaine: Or The Description of Theologie [...]*. Cambridge, 1600.

———. *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration Whether a Man Be in the Estate of Damnation or in the Estate of Grace [...]*. London, 1590.

———. *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience Distinguished into Three Bookes [...]*. Cambridge, 1606.

Persons, Robert. *A Christian Directorie Guiding Men to Their Salvation. Devided into Three Bookes [...]*. [Rouen], 1585.

———. *An Advertisement Written to a Secretarie of My L. Treasurers of England, by an Englishe Intelligencer as He Passed Throughe Germanie [...]*. Antwerp, 1592.

Pfister, Manfred. 'Elizabethan Atheism: Discourse without Subject'. *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 127 (1991): 59–81.

Philodemus. *On piety. Part 1: critical text with commentary*. Edited and translated by Dirk Obbink. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Pilkington, James. *A Godlie Exposition upon Certeine Chapters of Nehemiah [...]*. Edited by John Foxe and Robert Some. Cambridge, 1585.

Pincombe, Mike. *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the Later Sixteenth Century*. Harlow: Longman, 2001.

Plummer, Charles. *Elizabethan Oxford: Reprints of Rare Tracts*. Oxford: Oxford Historical Society, 1887.

Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Vol. 8. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919.

———. 'Superstition'. In *Moralia, Volume II*, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, 451–96. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928.

———. *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes [...]*. Translated by Thomas North. London, 1579.

Pooley, Roger. 'Unbelief and the Bible'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530–1700*, edited by Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie, 613–25. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Popkin, Richard H. *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*. Revised and Expanded edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Porder, Richard. ‘Dedication to William Fleetewood’. In *The Most Notable and Excellent Discourse of the Christian Philosopher Athenagoras [...]*, by Athenagoras, translated by Richard Porder. London, 1573.

Prouty, Charles Tyler. *George Gascoigne: Elizabethan Courtier, Soldier, and Poet*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1942.

Prynne, William. *Histrio-Mastix The Players Scourge, or, Actors Tragaedie [...]*. London, 1633.

Puttenham, George. *The Arte of English Poesie Contrived into Three Bookes: The First of Poets and Poesie, the Second of Proportion, the Third of Ornament.* London, 1589.

Questier, Michael C. *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Quintilian. *The Orator's Education*. Translated by D. A. Russell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Raab, Felix. *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation, 1500–1700*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964.

Rainolde, Richard. *A Booke Called the Foundacion of Rhetorike Because All Other Partes of Rhetorike Are Grounded Thereupon [...]*. London, 1563.

Rainolds, John. *The Summe of the Conference Betwene John Rainoldes and John Hart Touching the Head and the Faith of the Church.* London, 1584.

Rainolds, William. *A Refutation of Sundry Reprehensions, Cavils, and False Sleightes [...]*. Paris, 1583.

———. *A Treatise Conteyning the True Catholike and Apostolike Faith of the Holy Sacrifice and Sacrament [...]*. Antwerp, 1593.

Raleigh, Walter. *The History of the World*. London, 1614.

Redwood, John. *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Reid, Lindsay Ann. ‘The Spectre of the School of Night: Former Scholarly Fictions and the Stuff of Academic Fiction’. *Early Modern Literary Studies,* Special Issue 23 (2014).

Ribner, Irving. ‘Greene's Attack on Marlowe: Some Light on *Alphonsus* and *Selimus*’. *Studies in Philology* 52, no. 2 (1955): 162–71.

———. ‘Marlowe's Tragicke Glasse’. In *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, edited by Hardin Craig and Richard Hosley, 91–114. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.

———. ‘*Tamburlaine* and *The Wars of Cyrus*’. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 53, no. 4 (1954): 569–73.

———. ‘The Significance of Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel*’. *Modern Language Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1949): 153–57.

Richard Bauckham. ‘Fulke, William (1536/7–1589), Theologian and College Head’. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Richardson, Catherine. *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.

Ricœur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.

Riggs, David. *The World of Christopher Marlowe*. London: Faber, 2004.

Robichaud, Denis J-J. ‘Renaissance and Reformation’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 179–94. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Robinson, Richard. ‘The Epistle Dedicatorie’. In *Part of the Harmony of King Davids Harp Conteining the First XXI. Psalmes of King David [...]*, by Victorinus Strigel, translated by Richard Robinson. London, 1582.

Rodda, Joshua. *Public Religious Disputation in England, 1558–1626*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014.

Rosenberg, Eleanor. *Leicester, Patron of Letters*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1955.

Rutter, Tom. 'Allusions to Marlowe in Printed Plays, 1594'. In *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade*, edited by Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson, 199–213. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Ryrie, Alec. *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt*. London: William Collins, 2019.

Sacks, David Harris. 'The Promise and the Contract in Early Modern England: Slade's Case in Perspective'. In *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Victoria Ann Kahn and Lorna Hutson, 28–53. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

Santayana, George. 'The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare'. In *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 147–65. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916.

Schielke, Samuli. 'The Islamic World'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 638–50. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Schneider, Regina. *Sidney's (Re)Writing of the Arcadia*. New York, NY: AMS Press, 2008.

Schreiner, Susan Elizabeth. *Are You Alone Wise?: The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era*. New York, NY: Oxford university Press, 2011.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You'. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Sedley, David. 'Epicurus' Theological Innatism'. In *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, edited by Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders, 29–52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

———. 'From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 139–50. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Sell, Jonathan P. A. '"Warts and all": John Lyly's atheist aesthetics'. *SEDERI: yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*, no. 24 (2014): 95–118.

Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Troades*. In *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies*, edited by James Ker and Jessica Winston, translated by Jasper Heywood, 67–134. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012.

Serres, Jean de. *A General Inventorie of the History of France from the Beginning of That Monarchie, unto the Treatie of Vervins [...]*. Translated by Edward Grimestone. London, 1607.

Shagan, Ethan H. *The Birth of Modern Belief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Shakespeare, William. *King Henry VI Part 3*. Edited by John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001.

———. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes. London: Arden, 1997.

———. *Macbeth*. Edited by Kenneth Muir. London: Arden, 2015.

———. *Measure for Measure*. Edited by J. W. Lever. London: Arden, 1967.

———. *Richard III*. Edited by James R. Siemon. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2009.

———. *Titus Andronicus*. Edited by Jonathan Bate. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015.

Shapiro, Barbara J. *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000.

Sharpe, J. A. *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Shell, Alison. *Shakespeare and Religion*. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010.
———. 'Tragedy and Religion'. In *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, edited by Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr., 44–57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
Sheppard, Kenneth. *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England, 1580–1720: The Atheist Answered and His Error Confuted*. Leiden: Brill, 2015.
———. 'Atheism, Apostasy, and the Afterlives of Francis Spira in Early Modern England'. *The Seventeenth Century* 27, no. 4 (2012): 410–34.
Sherry, Richard. *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes Very Profytable for the Better Understanding of Good Authors [...]*. London, 1550.
Shrank, Cathy. 'Citing Scripture in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Morality Drama'. In *Enacting the Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama*, edited by Eva von Contzen and Chanita Goodblatt, 104–19. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.
Shuger, Debora K. 'St. Mary the Virgin and the Birth of the Public Sphere'. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2009): 313–46.
———. *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.
Shutte, Christopher. *A Verie Godlie and Necessary Sermon [...]*. London, 1578.
Sidney, Philip. *An Apology for Poetry, or, The Defence of Poesy*. Edited by Geoffrey Shepherd and R. W. Maslen. Third Edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
———. *Aphorisms of Sir Philip Sidney*. Edited by Jane Porter. Vol. II. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807.
———. *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*. Edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
———. *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. Edited by Maurice Evans. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.
———. *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (the New Arcadia)*. Edited by Victor Skretkowicz. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.
———. *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (the Old Arcadia)*. Edited by Jean Robertson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
———. *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*. Edited by Fulke Greville. London, 1590.
Siedentop, Larry. *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. London: Allen Lane, 2014.
Sinfield, Alan. *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
———. 'Sidney, Du Plessis-Mornay and the Pagans'. *Philological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1979): 26.
Singer, Dorothea Waley. *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought*. New York, NY: Schuman, 1950.
'Sir Walter Rauleigh His Lamentation [...]'. London, 1618.
Skinner, Quentin. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
Skretkowiz, Victor. 'Building Sidney's Reputation: Texts and Editors of the *Arcadia*'. In *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend*, edited by J. A. van Dorsten, Arthur F. Kinney, and Dominic Baker-Smith, 111–24. Leiden: Brill, 1986.
Smith, Helen. '"Wilt Thou Not Read Me, Atheist?" The Bible and Conversion'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c.1530–1700*, edited by

Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Judith Willie, 350–64. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
Smith, Henry. *Gods Arrowe against Atheists*. London, 1593.
———. 'The Betraying of Christ'. In *The Sermons of Maister Henrie Smith Gathered into One Volume [...]*, 880–902. London, 1593.
Smith, Richard, trans. *The Trial of Trueth or a Treatise Wherein Is Declared Who Should Be Judge Betwene the Reformed Churches, and the Romish [...]*. London, 1591.
Sofer, Andrew. 'How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*'. *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.
Sommerville, C. John. *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.
Spivack, Bernard. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958.
Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.
Steinberg, Theodore L. 'The Anatomy of Euphues'. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 17, no. 1 (1977): 27–38.
Stephens, John. *Essayes and Characters, Ironicall, and Instructive. The Second Impression.* London, 1615.
Stillman, Robert E. *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.
Stockwood, John. *A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse on Barthelmew Day [...]*. London, 1578.
Stone, Lawrence. 'Review of *The Charities of London, 1480–1660* by W. K. Jordan'. *The English Historical Review* 77, no. 303 (1962): 327–29.
Stoughton, Thomas. *A Generall Treatise against Poperie and in Defence of the Religion by Publike Authoritie Professed in England [...]*. Cambridge, 1598.
Stow, John. *The Chronicles of England from Brute unto This Present Yeare of Christ 1580*. London, 1580.
Stow, John, and Edmond Howes. *The Annales, or a Generall Chronicle of England [...]*. London, 1615.
Strathmann, Ernest A. *Sir Walter Ralegh: A Study in Elizabethan Skepticism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1951.
Strier, Richard. 'Shakespeare and the Skeptics'. *Religion & Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 171–96.
Stubbes, John. *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf Whereinto England Is like to Be Swallowed by Another French Mariage [...]*. London, 1579.
Stubbes, Phillip. *The Anatomie of Abuses Contayning a Discoverie, or Briefe Summarie of Such Notable Vices and Imperfections, as Now Raigne in Many Christian Countreyes of the Worlde [...]*. London, 1583.
Suetonius. *The Historie of Twelve Caesars Emperours of Rome*. Translated by Philemon Holland. London, 1606.
Sutcliffe, Matthew. *A Ful and Round Answer to N.D. Alias Robert Parsons the Noddie His Foolish and Rude Warne-Word [...]*. London, 1604.
Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
The Copie of a Leter, Wryten by a Master of Arte of Cambrige, to His Friend in London [...], 1584.

Thomas M. McCoog. 'Martin, Gregory (1542?–1582), Roman Catholic Priest and Biblical Translator'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Thompson, Craig R. *Universities in Tudor England*. Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1959.
Topsell, Edward. *Times Lamentation: Or An Exposition on the Prophet Joel [...]*. London, 1599.
A Treatise of Treasons Against Q. Elizabeth, and the Croune of England Divided into Two Partes [...]. Louvain, 1572.
Tourneur, Cyril. *The Atheist's Tragedy*. In *Four Revenge Tragedies*, edited by Katharine Eisaman Maus, 249–330. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
Tyacke, Nicholas. *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c.1590–1640*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.
Udall, John. *The True Remedie against Famine and Warres [...]*. London, 1588.
Usher, Brett. 'Gifford, George (1547/8–1600)'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Valera, Cipriano de. *An Answere or Admonition to Those of the Church of Rome, Touching the Jubile, Proclaimed by the Bull [...]*. London, 1600.
Vaughan, William. *The Golden-Grove Moralized in Three Bookes [...]*. London, 1600.
Véron, John. *The Overthrow of the Justification of Workes [...]*. London, 1561.
Vickers, Brian, ed. *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.
———. *In Defence of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
Wadsworth, Frank W. 'The Relationship of *Lust's Dominion* and John Mason's *The Turke*'. *ELH* 20, no. 3 (1953): 194–99.
Walker, D. P. 'Ways of Dealing With Atheists: A Background to Pamela's Refutation of Cecropia'. *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 17, no. 2 (1955): 252–77.
Walsh, Joseph J. 'On Christian Atheism'. *Vigiliae Christianae* 45, no. 3 (1991): 255–77.
Walsham, Alexandra. 'Unclasping the Book? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Vernacular Bible'. *Journal of British Studies* 42, no. 2 (2003): 141–66.
Watson, Robert N. *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.
Webster, John. *The Duchess of Malfi*. Edited by Brian Gibbons. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
———. *The White Devil*. Edited by Christina Luckyj. 3rd ed. London: A & C Black, 2008.
Werth, Tiffany Jo. 'A Heart of Stone: The Ungodly in Early Modern England'. In *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, edited by Jean E. Feerick and Vincent Joseph Nardizzi, 181–203. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
———. 'Atheist, Adulterer, Sodomite, Thief, Murderer, Lyer, Perjurer, Witch, Conjuror or Brute Beast? Discovering the Ungodly in Shakespeare's England'. *Literature Compass* 10, no. 2 (2013): 175–88.
Westerman, William. *The Sworde of Maintenance*. London, 1600.
Wever, R. *An Enterlude Called Lusty Iuuentus. Liuely Describng the Frailtie of Youth: Of Nature, Prone to Vyce: By Grace and Good Councell Traynable to Vertue*. Edited by Helen Scarborough Thomas. New York, NY: Garland, 1982.
Whetstone, George. *An Heptameron of Civill Discourses Containing: The Christmasse Exercise of Sundrie Well Courted Gentlemen and Gentlewomen*. London, 1582.
———. *The English Myrror. A Regard Wherein al Estates May Behold the Conquests of Envy [...]*. London, 1586.
Whitaker, William. *Ad Nicolai Sanderi Demonstrationes Quadraginta [...]*. London, 1583.
———. *An Answere to a Certeine Booke, Written by Maister William Rainolds [...]*. London, 1585.

White, B. R. *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
Whitgift, John. *An Answere to a Certen Libel Intituled, An Admonition to the Parliament*. London, 1572.
———. *The Defense of the Aunswere to the Admonition against the Replie of T.C.* London, 1574.
Whitmarsh, Tim. *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.
Whitney, Lois. 'Concerning Nature in *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*'. *Studies in Philology* 24, no. 2 (1927): 207–22.
Wilkinson, William. *A Confutation of Certaine Articles Delivered unto the Familye of Love [...]*. London, 1579.
Wilson, Robert. *The Three Ladies of London*. In *The Oxford Anthology of Tudor Drama*, edited by Greg Walker, 399–463. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
Winston, Jessica. 'Seneca in Early Elizabethan England'. *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2006): 29–59.
Withington, Phil. '"For This Is True or Els I Do Lye": Thomas Smith, William Bullein, and Mid-Tudor Dialogue'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485–1603*, edited by Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank, 455–70. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
Woodes, Nathaniel. *An Excellent New Commedie Intitutled, The Conflict of Conscience Contayninge a Most Lamentable Example of the Dolefull Desperation of a Miserable Worldlinge, Termed by the Name of Philologus [...]*. London, 1581.
———. *The Conflict of Conscience*. Edited by Herbert Davis and F. P. Wilson. Oxford: Malone Society, 1952.
Wooding, Lucy E. C. *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
Wootton, David. 'Lucien Febvre and the Problem of Unbelief in the Early Modern Period'. *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 4 (1988): 695–730.
———. 'New Histories of Atheism'. In *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 13–53. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
———. *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
———. 'Unbelief in Early Modern Europe'. *History Workshop*, no. 20 (1985): 82–100.
Wright, Stephen. 'Carlile, Christopher, D.D. (d. 1588?)'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Wynn, Thomas. 'Libertinage'. In *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, edited by Emma Wilson, Nicholas Hammond, and William Burgwinkle, 412–19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Zackariah C. Long. 'Toward an Early Modern Theory of Trauma: Conscience in *Richard III*'. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 49–72.
Zenk, Thomas. 'New Atheism'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 245–58. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
Zlatar, Antoinina Bevan. *Reformation Fictions: Polemical Protestant Dialogues in Elizabethan England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.