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Unbelief:
Atheism in the Literary Imagination,
1690–1810

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by

James Bryant Reeves

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Atheism in the Literary Imagination,
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Doctor of Philosophy in English
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Professor Felicity A. Nussbaum, Chair

This dissertation argues that eighteenth-century British authors often employed atheism to explore both the limits of modern selfhood and the limits of literary representation. Authors like Jonathan Swift, Sarah Fielding, Phebe Gibbes, and William Cowper imagined godless worlds dominated by atheists and atheistic tenets to interrogate Lockean and later Scottish Enlightenment understandings of the self. These authors cast the atheist as the fundamental incarnation of a completely autonomous self, and they each raised the issue of that self's ability (or, more accurately, inability) to integrate successfully into a wider community defined by developing notions of civility, sociability, and fellow feeling. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this atheistic self was found wanting. For the authors discussed throughout "Unbelief," a truly sociable self was a believing self. And, because atheism barred one from sociability, theists from

all corners of Britain's empire were entitled to participate, if in varying degrees, in the believing world these authors promoted. How authors went about this was counterintuitive. Instead of directly addressing atheistic arguments in the manner of sermons and apologetic tracts, literary works instantiated a speculative genre that takes atheism's premises for granted, depicting worlds in which God is absent and atheists rule the roost. Hence, the narrator of Swift's *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) begins by informing us that two men recently discovered there is no God. Swift notably satirizes these British atheists by juxtaposing them to Turkish Muslims, who to their credit still believe in God. Although Swift most certainly felt little attraction to Islam, it is nonetheless telling that the chasm between real, substantive Christianity and the religions Britain encountered in the East was narrowed for him by the more troubling presence of atheism at home. In response to atheism's perceived spread, this chasm continued to shrink throughout the century. Thus, just as texts like Swift's *Argument* present speculative fictions meant to forestall the rise of real-world unbelief, so too did religious pluralism arise, at least in part, as a reaction against atheism.

The dissertation of James Bryant Reeves is approved.

Helen E. Deutsch

Margaret C. Jacob

Felicity A. Nussbaum, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

DEDICATION

For Benjamin, Brooklyn, and William. I'll always believe in you.

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VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Towards a Literary History of Atheism

HERE are to be met with in these *Western Parts*, infinite Numbers of People, who not only despise and vilify our *Law*, but *their own*, and openly scoff at all *Religions* in the World. These are known by the Name of *Libertines* or *Atheists*, which is to say, People that profess themselves Enemies to the Belief of a *God*. A lewd and unthinking Herd of Animals…

Giovanni Paolo Marana, *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*[1]

We live in an Age … much addicted to Atheism.

Matthew Hole, *Against Atheists*[2]

The explicit aim of the inaugural Boyle Lectures delivered in 1692 by the theologian and classical scholar Richard Bentley was to prove "the Christian Religion against notorious Infidels, viz. *Atheists*, *Deists*, *Pagans*, *Jews* and *Mahometans*; not descending to any Controversies that are among Christians themselves."[3] While the catchall term "Infidels" reflects the recently deceased Robert Boyle's desire that the lectures would promote Christianity over and against a wide variety of heterodox belief systems, it is nonetheless telling that the chief term associated with infidelity here is "Atheists." Indeed, Bentley's Boyle Lectures have absolutely nothing to say about "*Pagans*, *Jews*, and *Mahometans*." His eight sermons are instead devoted entirely to

[1] Giovanni Paolo Marana, *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, trans. William Bradshaw and Robert Midgley, vol. 2 of 8 (1684; London: Printed for A. Wilde, 1748), 251.

[2] Matthew Hole, *The Witnesses that God Almighty Hath Left Us of Himself, Against Atheists* (London, 1720), 4.

[3] Richard Bentley, *Eight Sermons Preach'd at the Honourable Robert Boyle's Lecture, in the First Year, MDCXCII*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cornelius Crownfield, 1724), Epistle Dedicatory.

demonstrating that "Speculative Atheism" is a "Labyrinth of Nonsense and Folly."[4] Bentley's primary goal, in other words, was to defend theism, not a particular brand of Christianity.

Following in the wake of the 1689 Act of Toleration and the Established Church's concomitant loosening of the reins over matters spiritual, the Boyle Lectures mark a sea change in British thinking about heterodoxy. As the lectures testify, atheism was one of British culture's chief concerns in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. To be sure, apologetic tracts, sermons, and books written against atheism were published at an astonishing rate in the period.[5] Accusations of atheism were also rampant, despite the odd fact that many orthodox thinkers argued against the possibility of atheism's existence.[6] Even men who professed to be Christians, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Matthew Tindal, were not immune to the charge. Of course, freethinkers and deists like John Toland and Charles Blount were consistently labeled atheists. Despite the fact that his own *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) had proven controversial, for instance, Jonathan Swift, in his *Mr. C-Ns's Discourse of Free-Thinking, put into plain English* (1713), leveled the charge of atheism against the freethinker Anthony Collins, refusing

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[4] Ibid., 5, 4. Bentley does address deism, however. While it is in principle less "odious" than atheism, the deist's denial of an intervening Providence is "coincident and all one *in the issue* with the rankest Atheism" (7, emphasis added). In other words, while Bentley is willing to admit that deists aren't speculative atheists, he insists that deistic tenets are consistent with practical atheism. Although his lectures were not concerned with proving a particular brand of Christianity, the printed edition cited above includes a ninth sermon ("Of Revelation and the Messias," delivered at Cambridge on July 5, 1696) that does argue for the truth of Christian revelation at the expense of other religions.

[5] See, for instance, William Nicholls, *A Conference with a Theist* (London, 1696); John Edwards, *A Demonstration of the Existence of God* (London, 1696); Thomas Wise, *A Confutation of the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism* (London, 1706); Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (London, 1706); Thomas Curteis, *Dissertation on the Extreme Folly and Danger of Infidelity* (London, 1725); and Ralph Heathcote, *A Discourse upon the Being of God Against Atheists* (London, 1763).

[6] As Bentley put it, Christian apologists commonly appealed to an "Innate Idea of God, imprinted upon every Soul of Man at their Creation, in Characters that can never be defaced. Whence it will follow, that Speculative Atheism does only subsist in *Our* speculation" (*Eight Sermons*, 5). Bentley himself rejected this idea, but it remained common throughout the eighteenth century. See David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London; New York: Croom Helm, 1988), 1–47.

to take Collins's famous claim that "Ignorance is the foundation of *Atheism*, and *Free-Thinking* the cure of it"[7] at face value. Atheism was, in short, Britain's new bugbear. And while the dissenters, pagans, Jews, and "Mahometans" mentioned by Boyle would continue to be the objects of satire and ridicule throughout the eighteenth century, the threat posed by such groups was often refracted or even diminished in light of the threat posed by atheism's perceived spread.

Of course, atheism did not spring up instantaneously, and many Britons had given the issue considerable thought before the 1690s. Yet while atheism had been on the British radar for quite some time (Francis Bacon famously declared in the 1612 edition of his *Essays* that he would rather be a Jew or a Muslim than an atheist), it became a more prominent, more troubling issue in the late 1600s. If early in the century Bacon could argue that, despite its faults, atheism was not detrimental to civilization, the countless authors who began taking up the pen against unbelief late in the century believed otherwise. Partly as a result of England's relatively recent civil wars, many Britons had developed a strong distaste for religious violence, leading some to reject the truth of Christian revelation altogether. After the Licensing Act lapsed in 1695, numerous arguments against orthodoxy were made public and defended in print.[8] Myriad orthodox thinkers responded, insisting that deism, Socinianism, Arianism, and so forth were

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[7] Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking, Occasion'd by The Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Free-Thinkers* (London, 1713), 85. Berman agrees with Swift's assessment, regarding Collins, as well as Blount and Toland, as covert atheists. See Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*, 70–92; and David Berman, "Disclaimers as Offence Mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland," in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 255–72.

[8] Heretical ideas also circulated via clandestine manuscripts. As Margaret Jacob showed several years ago, tracts like the infamous *Traité des trios imposteurs*—which claimed that Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad were frauds—were known in radical circles throughout the century. Jacob argues that Englishmen such as John Toland (1670–1722) came into contact with the *Traité*'s ideas through their ties to Freemasonry and to radicals amongst the Dutch-based French Huguenots. See Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans*, 2nd rev. ed. (1981; Lafayette, LA: Cornerstone Books, 2006).

nothing more than atheism in disguise. Atheism, in short, was thought to have gained a cultural foothold it had lacked in Bacon's time.

For Britons at the turn of the century, atheism was everywhere and nowhere; it was perceived to be on the rise (hence the need to root it out and write apologias for Christianity), yet no one actually claimed to be an atheist. One of the supreme paradoxes of the eighteenth century, then, is atheism's near omnipresence in British cultural productions, despite the fact that, so far as we know, there were no open, self-avowed British atheists until at least 1782.[9] Atheism's specter is indeed present not only in sermons, lectures, and apologetic works, but in the period's more strictly literary output as well, a fact that has gone almost wholly unnoticed by literary critics.[10] In fact, atheism pops up in a wide variety of eighteenth-century literary texts. To provide only a few prominent examples: Anne Finch's short poem "The Atheist and the Acorn" (1713) describes a "dull presuming Atheist" who demands to know why, if God exists, acorns, and not pumpkins, grow on trees. The atheist is quickly put in his place by a falling acorn that lands in his eye[11]; Millwood, the prostitute who seduces George Barnwell and convinces him to murder his prosperous uncle in George Lillo's incredibly popular *The London Merchant* (1731), delivers a speech at the play's dénouement in which she insists, somewhat unexpectedly, that she

[9] See Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*, 110–20. Berman argues that the first explicit avowal of atheism in Britain was William Hammon and Matthew Turner's *Answer to Dr. Priestly's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (London, 1782).

[10] One notable exception is Roger D. Lund, who has produced several essays on atheism and heterodoxy in the period. See Lund's "Strange Complicities: Atheism and Conspiracy in *A Tale of a Tub*," in *British Literature 1640–1789: A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert DeMaria, Jr. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 142–68; "Guilt by Association: The Atheist Cabal and the Rise of the Public Sphere in Augustan England," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 34.3 (2002): 391–421; "Infectious Wit: Metaphor, Atheism, and the Plague in Eighteenth-Century London," *Literature and Medicine* 22.1 (2003): 45–64; and his edited collection, *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[11] Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions, Written by a Lady* (London, 1713), 202.

"is not Fool enough to be an Atheist"[12]; in a letter written to Richard West on November 16, 1739, Thomas Gray describes Turin as a "place pregnant with religion and poetry," before asserting that there "are certain scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other arguments"[13]; Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1743) derides those who "reason downward, till [they] doubt of God," thrusting "some Mechanic Cause into his place" (IV: 472, 475)[14]; and, finally, Samuel Richardson strenuously defended his decision not to make *Clarissa*'s (1748) Lovelace an atheist on the grounds that Clarissa could never be tempted to abscond with an unbeliever. Richardson therefore denied his correspondent Joseph Highmore's blunt request that the author "Let the Dog be an Atheist, or worse, if worse can be."[15] As these examples clearly indicate, the figure of the atheist was positioned beyond the pale of sympathy, and authors and playwrights seemingly took it for granted that both their characters and their audiences would be unable and unwilling to identify imaginatively with atheists.

Crucially, however, while sermons and apologetic tracts were aimed largely at discrediting or dismantling atheistic arguments, literary works more often than not eschewed such straightforward apologetics, employing atheism instead to explore both the limits of modern selfhood and the limits of literary representation. With this in mind, this study investigates the centrality of atheism in literary representations throughout the eighteenth century. The key authors I address—Jonathan Swift, Sarah Fielding, Phebe Gibbes, and William Cowper—all

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[12] George Lillo, *The London Merchant; or, The History of George Barnwell* (London, 1731), 54.

[13] Thomas Gray, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 128.

[14] Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text with Selected Annotations*, ed. John Butt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 789–90. All references to Pope's poetry are to this edition.

[15] Quoted in Derek Taylor, *Reason and Religion in Clarissa: Samuel Richardson and "the famous Mr. Norris, of Bemerton"* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 136. Taylor points out that Lady Bradshaigh also marveled that Richardson "declared not [Lovelace] an unbeliever."

imagined godless worlds dominated by atheists and atheistic tenets to interrogate what Misty Anderson refers to as "Lockean and later Scottish Enlightenment epistemologies of the self."[16] These authors cast the atheist as the fundamental incarnation of a completely autonomous Lockean self, and they each raised the issue of that self's ability (or, more accurately, inability) to integrate successfully into a wider community defined by developing notions of civility, sociability, and fellow feeling. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this atheistic self was found wanting. In Sarah Fielding's estimation, for instance, the atheist's "happiness centers only in [himself]," and "the greatest Sufferings that can happen to his Fellow-Creatures, have no sort of Effect on him." As a result, he is "much an Enemy to himself, and to all Mankind."[17] For these authors, and for countless authors like them, a truly modern, sociable self was a believing self.

This indictment of atheists and atheism has much broader implications than the mere repression of a marginal number of eighteenth-century Britons, though of course such oppression is worth noting in and of itself.[18] These literary imaginings of atheistic worlds and atheistic selves have intense bearing on our understanding of secularism, the narratives of secularization that we create, and what it means for literature itself to be secular. While scholars have recently begun to question the merits of the Enlightenment narrative of progress and secularization, a

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[16] Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in 18th-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief & the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 12.

[17] Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple and Volume the Last*, ed. Peter Sabor, Eighteenth-Century Novels by Women (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 8, 56, 223. Subsequent references to *David Simple* and *Volume the Last* (1753) are to this edition and are cited parenthetically.

[18] That such oppression is worth noting alongside other oppressions based on class, gender, race, and sexuality, is startlingly evident when we consider that as late as 1697 the young Thomas Aikenhead, a student at the University of Edinburgh, was suspected of atheism and subsequently executed for blasphemy. See Michael Hunter, "'Aikenhead the Atheist': The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century," in Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 221–54. In England, another doubting Thomas, the heterodox Thomas Woolston (1668–1733), lost his Cambridge fellowship and died in prison after being convicted of blasphemy in the late 1720s.

narrative that assumes that the (eventual) rise of unbelief and the Nietzschean death of God are part and parcel of modernity,[19] the authors discussed in this study created what were effectively proleptic secularization narratives. By doing so, they damned the "rise of unbelief"[20] from the start. In other words, a Weberian notion of disenchantment was anticipated and short-circuited by the imaginary writings of a Swift, a Fielding, or a Cowper. On one hand, these authors discovered in atheism a generative literary concept that helped produce some of their most well-known works. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), and Cowper's "The Castaway" (1799; 1803), for instance, all capitalize on the idea of a world without God. At the same time, the disenchanted, unbelieving worlds these works imagine are attempts to demonstrate the incommensurability between unbelief and modern ideals of sociability, community, and what we would now call "universal human rights."[21] The problems these authors identified in a triumphant secularization narrative are, of course, still being emphasized today by scholars such as Peter L. Berger and Alasdair MacIntyre.[22] This is much less surprising when we take into account the fact that the narrative we've only recently begun to discredit has its roots, at least in part, in a dominant literary construct meant to forestall the very realization of that narrative in the first place.

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[19] For a helpful overview of this narrative of Enlightenment and its recent critics, see Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *The American Historical Review* 108.4 (2003): 1061–80.

[20] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 79.

[21] Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, & Modernity*, Religion and postmodernism (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 54.

[22] See Peter Berger, "Secularization Falsified," *First Things* (2008): 23–27; and Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). MacIntyre claims that in a completely secular world "moral judgments" are no more than "linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices." Quoted in Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, 56. Pecora, who is adamant that we must not abandon the task of secularization, nonetheless admits, "there are no complete answers to MacIntyre's concerns" (*Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, 57).

The second major prong of my argument is that this insistence that a world characterized by unbelief is one inhospitable to community and sociability had a corollary effect on Western Christianity's relationship to the Orient. In short, the threat posed by unbelief combined with Britain's increasing exposure to other religions via the nation's economic and political projects in the East and West Indies produced in many thinkers an unprecedented ecumenical approach to other world religions. Atheism's status as the unimaginable opposite of Western Christianity, in other words, reduced the imaginative gap between the established Church, dissenting sects, and the "*Pagans*, *Jews*, and *Mahometans*" mentioned by Boyle. This is not to say that hostility to these groups disappeared or that they did not continue to face severe legal and cultural oppression.[23] At the same time, however, British authors frequently appealed to religions from the Orient, namely Islam and Hinduism, to promote reform amongst Christians and to stave off the more immediate, homegrown danger of atheism. Thus Jonathan Swift critiques British irreligion in *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) by claiming, in a statement dripping with irony, that the Turks "would be more scandalized at our infidelity, than our Christian Neighbours. Because, the *Turks* are not only strict Observers of religious Worship; but, what is worse, believe a God." The Turks are not only "too remote" geographically to serve as Britain's allies against continental enemies, but, to Britain's shame, their theism also distances them socially, theologically, and culturally. In this regard, the Turks are closer to Britain's "Christian Neighbours" than Britain itself is. While Swift most certainly felt little attraction to

[23] Thus while it is suggestive, for instance, that Catholics and Jews were able to serve as MPs much earlier than atheists (Catholics in 1829, Jews in 1858, and atheists in 1888), it is worth remembering that the first Muslim MP in Britain was not elected until 1997. In the United States, by contrast, the first and only avowed atheist to serve in Congress, Pete Stark, was not elected until 1973.

Islam, the chasm between real, substantive Christianity and the religions Britain encountered in the East was narrowed for him by the more troubling presence of atheism at home.[24]

Thus cosmopolitanism and atheism are not mutually constitutive. As my chapter on Phebe Gibbes below suggests, an awareness, and even an appreciation, of different cultures and religions has historically been used to support theism just as often as it has been used to support unbelief. This point is convincingly made by Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt in their introduction to a collection of essays on Jean Frederic Bernard and Bernard Picart's great eighteenth-century work on world religions, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peoples du monde* (1723–1743). According to Hunt, Jacob, and Mijnhardt, Bernard and Picart were "cosmopolitan" religious "seekers," and their encyclopedia, which presented "a wide range of heterodox religious options," dissected "the notions of divinity found around the world—not necessarily to debunk them … but rather to make evident their commonalities." In other words, early attempts at what we now call comparative religion were not necessarily meant to discredit belief. [25]

An appreciation of non-Christian religions could therefore be used to shore up faith in Christianity, even as, for many, it altered the very scope of what it meant to be Christian in the first place. While the primary authors addressed in this study all wrote within a broadly Anglican framework, it is worth noting that, with the obvious exception of Cowper, none were known for

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[24] Jonathan Swift, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, vol. 2 of 14, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 38. Subsequent references to these volumes will be given parenthetically as *PW*, followed by the volume number and page number.

[25] See Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and W. W. Mijnhardt, eds., *Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010), 5–7. In the same collection, Jacques Revel outlines the uses to which religious cosmopolitanism could be put in the eighteenth century, concluding that both Protestants and Catholics alike shored up their apologetics by arguing for "one shared origin" or "legitimate root" for all religions (331). By pointing out commonalities between religions, the orthodox could argue, against their detractors, that the multiplicity of religions testified to the truth, rather than the falsity, of their faith. See Revel, "The Uses of Comparison: Religions in the Early Eighteenth Century," in Hunt et al., *Bernard Picart*, 331–47.

being especially devout or doctrinaire. Fielding and Gibbes produced works that can more accurately be called pious or didactic than religious, while Swift opened himself up to the charge of heterodoxy on multiple occasions. Even the evangelical Cowper stopped attending church services towards the end of his life. The fact that these authors were far from zealous yet were adamantly against atheism is telling. Modernity's enduring hesitancy about unbelief is not simply the result of evangelical fanaticism, but stems from long-standing doubts about the social, moral, and cultural repercussions of unbelief. In eighteenth-century Britain, these doubts led many to forge imaginative ecumenical ties with Christians of all stripes and, even more intriguingly, to extend this ecumenical impulse to non-Christian theists beyond Britain's borders. By imagining Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and so forth as allies against unbelief, and by insisting that non-Christian theists already adhere to Christianity's most crucial components (namely, belief in God and the love of one's neighbor), the authors discussed throughout this dissertation testify to a unique form of Christian ecumenicalism. Writing from diverse Anglican perspectives, authors like Gibbes and Cowper envisioned a world in which other faiths are not only respected; they are also considered legitimate partners in Christianity's fight against unbelief.

To this date, atheism in eighteenth-century British literature has been critically neglected and has yet to receive a full-length scholarly study. This dissertation remedies that neglect by demonstrating how literary representations of atheists contributed to the formulation of a modern self both at home and abroad. For if atheism barred one from being a sociable, civil self, theists from all corners of Britain's empire were entitled to participate, if in varying degrees, in the modern, believing world promoted by the authors discussed throughout this study. Just as the perceived spread of unbelief inspired a proto-secularization narrative that was counterintuitively employed by eighteenth-century British literati against unbelief, so too did religious pluralism arise, at least in part, as a reaction against atheism.

In order to make this argument, I first need to clarify some of my study's most crucial terms: namely, atheism, ecumenicalism, secularization, and the modern self. The first and most obvious term to be defined is of course "atheism." As Michael Hunter and David Wootton point out, atheism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant something quite different than it does today. Early moderns tended to "conflate with 'atheism' a range of positions that appeared … to militate towards it, particularly deistic formulations of religious belief that played down the role of revelation and an active personal deity."[26] This orthodox conflation of "atheists" with "deists," "pagans," "Jews," "Mahometans," "Socinians," "Arians," and even misbehaving Christians has led scholars of unbelief in two quite divergent directions. Some, like David Berman, argue against these orthodox conflations while simultaneously attempting to identify strands of true, modern atheism in early modern heterodox writing. Berman seems to replicate the suspicious readings of the eighteenth-century orthodox, although to quite different ends, by searching for coded messages and latent clues in the writings of John Toland, Charles Blount, and Anthony Collins.[27] Given the difficulties of identifying true atheists, however, others consider "atheism" as somewhat of a red herring. Thus, in his preface to a collection of essays on orthodox (that is, Anglican) responses to heterodoxy in England from 1660–1750, Roger D. Lund argues that because true atheists "refused to announce themselves," our histories of unbelief must rely on orthodox critiques of "the protean variety of heterodox *behavior*," rather than explicit statements of heterodox *belief*, in order to locate "atheism" in the long eighteenth century.[28]

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[26] Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 2. This is of course evident in the Boyle Lectures' aforementioned use of "Infidels" to describe not only "*Atheists*," but "*Deists*, *Pagans*, *Jews* and *Mahometans*" as well.

[27] See Nigel Smith, "The Charge of Atheism and the Language of Radical Speculation," and Berman, "Disclaimers as Offence Mechanisms in Charles Blount and John Toland," in Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 131–58, 255–72.

[28] Roger D. Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy*, 8. Emphasis added.

While Lund's argument is partially correct—the eighteenth century was overwhelmingly concerned with what was considered heterodox behavior, and Berman-esque searches for true atheism will always be far from conclusive—his dismissal of belief's scholarly importance is a bit misleading. Lund is right to point out that the relationship between belief and behavior is nothing if not confusing in the eighteenth century. Consider, for instance, the following couplet from Cowper's "The Progress of Error": "Faults in the life breed errors in the brain; / And these, reciprocally, those again."[29] In this circular vein of thinking, it is indeed impossible to separate entirely atheistic beliefs from atheistic behavior. At the same time, the couplet evinces Cowper's awareness that, although inextricably related, belief and behavior are in fact two distinct phenomena. In other words, the couplet is attempting to tease out the relationship between belief and behavior without fully subsuming one into the other. The period's terminology reflects this distinction. In fact, the heterodox behavior Lund refers to is consistently described throughout the eighteenth century as "practical atheism," while the more modern notion of atheism as the "disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God"[30] was known variously as "contemplative," "downright," or, most commonly, "speculative atheism." John Tillotson (1630–1694) helpfully defines the distinction as follows:

> Now all that are irreligious are so upon one of these two accounts: either, first, because they do not believe the foundations and principles of religion, as the existence of GOD, the immortality of the soul, and future rewards: or else, secondly, because though they do in some sort believe these things, yet they live contrary to this their belief; and of this kind are the far greatest part of wicked men. The first sort are guilty of that which we call speculative, the other of practical atheism.[31]

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[29] William Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 29. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Cowper's poetry are to this edition.

[30] See "atheism, n.," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2014.

[31] John Tillotson, *Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions, by the most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson*, vol. 1 (London, 1757), 13–14.

Thus while practical and speculative atheism could and did bleed into one another, eighteenth-century thinkers had a highly developed and readily available vocabulary at their fingertips to help distinguish the two.

Despite the tendency to conflate different heterodox beliefs, distinctions between atheists and other heterodox individuals were also understood quite well. Enlightenment-era theists were most certainly aware that deists were not atheists. The claim that they might as well be, a claim that Bentley's first Boyle Lecture makes, is grounded in the perceived similarities between the practical effects of each belief system, not their actual theoretical tenets. Unsurprisingly, deists and freethinkers railed against this sort of conflation, insisting that the two were not the same.[32] For their part, orthodox thinkers wishing to disparage deists by charging them with the pejorative title "atheist" typically begin their harangues by trying to prove that deism and atheism *are not* separate categories. Thus orthodox attempts to dismiss the technical differences between the two can be read as reactions against a more general recognition of their differences.

None of these theoretical distinctions offer much help to the historian attempting to identify real-life, flesh-and-blood atheists in the eighteenth century. The fact remains that deists and freethinkers rejected the title "atheist," even if scholars like Berman recognize atheistic tendencies in their works. Lund's suggestion that historians of heterodoxy focus instead on the behaviors that branded one an atheist may be the only viable option for the sober-minded historian wishing to avoid "the danger of accepting conflations of differing positions made by hostile contemporaries."[33] The situation is quite different for literary critics, however. By and large, imaginative texts from the period make it abundantly clear when speculative atheism, as

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[32] See, for example, Peter Annet, *Judging for Ourselves; or Free-thinking, the Great Duty of Religion* (London, 1739), 3. Annet decries conflations of heterodox beliefs, claiming that in order to discountenance others from "exerting their natural Right of judging for themselves" the orthodox place both freethinkers and deists "in one Class with *Atheists*."

[33] Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 6–7.

opposed to various other types of heterodox beliefs and behaviors, is being addressed. While real atheists are hard to locate in the eighteenth century, imaginary atheists are not. The atheists (and the atheism) this study explores in the works of Swift, Fielding, Gibbes, and Cowper are therefore of the speculative variety; my readings of these authors focus both on imaginative worlds in which God is entirely absent and on characters that, in Tillotson's terms, "do not believe the foundations and principles of religion," chiefly "the existence of GOD." This focus allows us to consider the paradoxical ways in which atheism's presence in the period's literature was meant to prevent its presence in the real world.

The atheists addressed throughout this study are doubly speculative, as they exist only in the minds of their authors and readers. There is an obvious difference, therefore, between the real-world "speculative" atheists who so worried the orthodox and the speculative (in the double sense of the word) atheists whom theists wrote about in their poetry, prose, and novels and with whom I am concerned here. While fully recognizing this irony, I believe that a focus on imaginative atheists can help us understand the period's fascination with and understanding of real speculative atheism in ways unavailable to typical studies of unbelief. Too many studies of early modern atheism get bogged down in simply debating the veracity of various charges of unbelief that were leveled against select individuals. Such studies tell us very little about why atheism was so troubling in the first place. My study responds to this scholarly blind spot, not by claiming that theists' portrayals of atheism tell us anything about real atheists, but by arguing that they tell us quite a good deal about cultural perceptions of atheism and why unbelief was so marginal in the period.

Given my claim that distaste for atheism produced what I have referred to above as an "ecumenical impulse," it is also worth briefly clarifying my usage of "ecumenical." The *OED* defines the term primarily as, "Belonging to or representing the whole (Christian) world." In this

sense, the word implies "universal" cooperation and respect among different religious sects, but, crucially, this "universal" import applies only to Christianity. Historically, ecumenicalism pertains to the "general councils of the early … Roman Catholic Church." Yet while ecumenicalism traditionally refers to movements within Christianity itself, I use the term throughout this dissertation to describe imaginative engagements with non-Christian faiths. Fully acknowledging the term's Christian roots and ecclesiastical limitations, I generally use "ecumenical" in the second sense provided by the *OED*: "Belonging to the whole world; universal, general, world-wide."[34] At the same time, the word's Christian origins make it especially useful when applied to the authors discussed throughout this study. In fact, my employment of "ecumenical" indicates that these authors were not abandoning Christianity or speaking from positions outside of it. They were imagining a universal Christian response to unbelief that paradoxically includes non-Christians as well. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing that the ecumenical impulse I'm describing appears in works written by British authors to a predominantly Christian British audience. True to ecumenicalism's provenance, then, my usage of the term applies to developments within specific strands of Christianity, even as those developments involve both the acceptance of and appreciation for other world religions.

The next problematic term that needs clarification is "secularization." In his monumental *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor identifies two common definitions of secularization before offering his own, more nuanced definition of the term. The first definition Taylor offers focuses on the separation of church and state and assumes that, as a result of that separation, public spaces have been "emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality." The second considers secularity as "the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God,

[34] See "ecumenical, adj.," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, August 2016.

and no longer going to Church."[35] In other words, secularization in this sense is defined as the triumph of rationality, science, and unbelief over an outmoded, unreasonable belief in God. There is something to be said for both of these common definitions. After all, as Taylor rightly points out, "the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more … milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others."[36] Unbelief is certainly more prevalent in the West now than it was three hundred years ago. It is more conspicuous, too. While there were no self-declared atheists in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century, for example, numerous public figures today are vocal atheists. The highly visible New Atheism of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, and the politically active atheism of someone like Madalyn Murray O'Hair, would have been unthinkable in the 1700s. Clearly unbelief has become more acceptable and more mainstream since the eighteenth century.

Thus while I am sympathetic to Brian Cummings's recent argument that the history of individualization is not necessarily a "secularizing history," I disagree with his suggestion that we abandon the secularizing frame altogether. For one, it is unclear how we would even go about doing so. In addition, Cummings's wholesale rejection of secularization forces him to deny that there is any substantial difference between the modern world and the past. He critiques Taylor, for instance, for attributing legitimacy "to the sense that once upon a time things were very different, and that history in relation to religion shows a distinctive regressive pattern which has only recently been disturbed." Cummings's desire to eliminate the sense of discontinuity between past and present is evident elsewhere, such as when he claims that he wants to "reclaim the artists of the past as our contemporaries, rather than as interesting only as prophets of their

[35] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

[36] Ibid., 13.

suppression by us." Surely, however, *something* has changed since the late eighteenth century. After all, the very fact that we "suppress" the artists of the past, and that Cummings must show us how to stop suppressing them, suggests that we are operating in a framework quite unlike their own.[37]

Nonetheless, Cummings is right to insist that commonly held definitions of secularization, like the first two offered by Taylor, fail to attend to the persistence of belief in the modern world.[38] Taylor, therefore, nuances our understanding of secularization by claiming, in his third definition of the term, that rather than signaling the demise of belief, secularization consists in "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." Secularity, in short, is a "plurality of options."[39] I find this definition of secularization compelling, as it accounts for both the endurance of belief in contemporary society as well as the modern rise of unbelief. It is, quite simply, more historically accurate than the previous, more commonly reproduced definitions Taylor provides.

Acknowledging the explanatory power of Taylor's third definition of secularization, this dissertation seeks to understand why his first two definitions—secularization as both the separation of church and state and the rise of unbelief—are at once so widely held and yet notably unsatisfactory. I suggest, as stated above, that this is due in large part to the fact that these narratives were anticipated and popularized by literary works intent on exploiting unbelief on behalf of theism. These works help us understand why these tendentious secularization

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[37] See Cummings's *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, & Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7, 4, 48–49.

[38] For more on the ways in which this persistence is evident, see Berger, "Secularization Falsified"; David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*.

[39] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

narratives have had such cultural resonance *and* why unbelief has never quite managed to do away with God, despite the confident pronouncements of figures as prominent as Shelley, Nietzsche, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Freud.[40] The seeds of discontent were sown in the narratives themselves. And, while the authors addressed in this study did not, and indeed could not, prevent secularization in Taylor's third sense, their potent depictions of imaginary atheistic worlds helped stave off secularization in senses one and two, insuring that the modern self was never wholly equivalent to an atheistic self.

This leads me to the final term that needs to be parsed before I can make my argument successfully: the modern self. I follow Misty Anderson and Dror Wahrman in using "self" rather than "subject" or "subjectivity" because self helps us conceive of the "cultural function" of belief in "historical terms that capture the experiences of autonomy and vulnerability that were part of developing [Lockean] discourses of individual consciousness."[41] "Subject," on the other hand, "seeks confirmation for present formulations of self (and implicitly, their ideological presuppositions) in the story of the past and thus tends to ignore or devalue other possible formations of human experience."[42] In addition to this theoretical distinction, I use "self" simply because eighteenth-century authors themselves commonly use the term when describing atheists. Imaginary atheists serve as potent cultural representations of the autonomous, sensual, empirical self that is conscious of itself *as* a self, and they help demonstrate the inherent tensions between the Lockean, self-governing individual and the idea of self that developed in the Scottish Enlightenment, a sociable self that could only be understood "by observing its interactions with

[40] Of course, not all of these thinkers regarded secularization positively, even if they were averse to religion. Max Weber, for example, famously considered the disenchantment brought about by modern rationality and capitalist instrumentality as an "iron cage." See his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 123.

[41] Anderson, *Imagining Methodism*, 12.

[42] Ibid., 13.

others."[43] The atheist, in other words, was commonly employed to show the difficulties of making a truly autonomous self sociable.

Still, a modern scholar might reasonably consider the denigration of atheists throughout the period as sufficient cause for retaining the language of subjectivity. To be sure, the imaginary atheists I survey are consistently regarded as essentially flawed beings by their authors. They are, in other words, "subject to [theists'] control and, with limited freedom, positioned within authority relations." Despite this possible objection, I retain the language of "self" because I am chiefly interested in the period's understanding of selfhood and atheism's role in the eighteenth-century creation of a theistic modern self. Of course, this self is, to use Felicity Nussbaum's words, "an ideological construct that is recruited into place" within a "specific historical formation" and is, therefore, not to be regarded as an eternally present truth.[44]

Calling the self "modern" also raises a few problems. As Rita Felski notes, modernity has "mobile and shifting meanings" that have changed over time, making it hard to know what we are actually referring to when we call something modern.[45] Rather than abandoning the term altogether, however, Felski suggests that cultural studies attempt to understand how people in the past imagined modernity, how they understood their own periodizations. Doing so will enable us better to understand "long-term processes of structural change and equally important … the differing, uneven, and often contradictory impact of such processes on particular social

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[43] Introduction to Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning, eds., *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 1st ed., Palgrave studies in cultural and intellectual history (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6. See also Sarah Knott's notion of the "socially turned self" in *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[44] See Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), xi–xii, 1–57.

[45] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8.

groups."[46] Indeed, while "modern" all too often means little more than the development of the autonomous male individual, a development brought about by "capitalism, bureaucracy, technological development, and so on," Felski asks us to consider the ways in which gender acts as the "central organizing metaphor in the construction of historical time."[47] This suggestion is apt for a scholar investigating atheism in eighteenth-century Britain. In fact, as my chapter on Phebe Gibbes discusses at greater length, the imaginary atheists examined throughout this study, characters considered incapable of existing successfully in a modernity defined by sociability and fellow feeling, are overwhelmingly male. Moreover, these atheists were considered especially dangerous to the period's females. Atheism, therefore, was understood in highly gendered terms. With this in mind, I follow Felski in seeing modernity as a process that is variously understood, and I use the term "modern self" as a way of denoting the eighteenth century's understanding of the relationship between belief and modernity, as well as the prominent role gender plays in that relationship.

Several distinct, yet readily assimilable, areas of scholarship inform my claim about atheism's role in eighteenth-century literature. First, a handful of studies over the past three decades have provided cogent histories of heterodoxy and unbelief.[48] These studies identify atheism, heterodoxy, and irreligion as key concerns in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British culture, and they provide the historical contextualization necessary to make my case about the ways imaginative literature addressed atheism. As historical studies, however, these works are

[46] Ibid., 9.

[47] Ibid., 9–10.

[48] See Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*; Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*; Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*, New Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

mainly interested in identifying heterodox individuals and charting the development and transmission of radical ideas. I argue that a sustained focus on the ways in which the period's literature *imagined* atheism is necessary to understand both its pervasiveness and its incredible cultural significance.

Next, this study relies on an expansive body of scholarship on secularization and secularism that has developed within the past decade.[49] These texts, chief among them Taylor's aforementioned *A Secular Age*, reconsider long-held assumptions about the relationship between modernity and belief and, in the process, revise previous theorizations of secularity put forth by writers of the twentieth century.[50] In addition to accounting for the endurance of belief in the modern world, these works also assume that belief is itself partly responsible for the advent of secularism. Building on Carl Schmitt's dictum, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,"[51] for example, Gil Anidjar argues that secularism is nothing more than a repackaged version of Christianity:

> I propose to take for granted that the religious and the secular are terms that, hopelessly codependent, continue to inform each other and have persisted historically, institutionally in *masking* … the one pertinent religion, the one and diverse Christianity and Western Christendom in their transformations and reincarnations, producing the love (or hatred) of religion. … Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular and thus

[49] For a few prominent examples, see Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007); Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (2006): 52–77; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Berger, "Secularization Falsified"; Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17–29; Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2008); Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*; Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

[50] See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace, New ed., Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

[51] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36. See also 36–52. For Schmitt, atheism is incapable of grounding a successful politics because it does away with the extra-legal authority required for legitimacy, the political exception, and decisionism. Schmitt's intuition that modern politics relies on hollowed out, and thus inept, theological concepts is anticipated, as I discuss below, by Swift's *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*.

> *made* religion. It made religion the problem—rather than itself. … Most importantly, moreover, secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion.[52]

Anidjar's claim that Christianity is responsible for and is actively promoting the progression of secularization is part of his larger argument that Western academia is unwittingly advancing the interests of (a hollowed out) Christianity over and against Eastern religions and peoples. While I find Anidjar's rather abstruse argument untenable, and although his claims appear to me to be just as imperializing as the academy he critiques, I do find the connection he forges between secularization and belief suggestive.[53] Indeed, my own argument that eighteenth-century authors, all of them theists, found the idea of an unbelieving world creatively productive owes much to Anidjar's counterintuitive account of religion's symbiotic relationship to a secularity that has traditionally been considered its enemy. Where I differ with Anidjar, of course, is in my understanding of these authors' aims. They were not attempting to divest their religion of its substance in order to smuggle it into modernity via secularization; they were claiming that a modernity devoid of theistic substance is simply inconceivable. Moreover, they were not primarily concerned with promoting an exclusive Christianity that damned all others. Rather, the works of Swift, Fielding, Gibbes, and Cowper promote a broadly conceived theism that attempts to write atheism out of the modern world.

As both my response to Anidjar and my argument about a burgeoning ecumenical impulse in the eighteenth century indicate, this dissertation also relies on numerous postcolonial studies and works on Orientalism. Since Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978), critics have

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[52] Anidjar, "Secularism," 62.

[53] My main problem with Anidjar's argument has to do with his rather loose conception of Christianity. What, after all, *is* Christianity in Anidjar's account? Is Christianity still Christianity if it is emptied of all its theological baggage? Surely most Christian divines wouldn't go for this, but Anidjar never bothers raising the issue. In addition, he seems to assume that *Western* Christianity is Christianity. As David Hempton has recently demonstrated, this assumption is simply a historical falsity. See Hempton's recent *The Church in the Long Eighteenth Century*, The I.B.Tauris History of the Christian Church 5 (New York, NY: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2011).

been attuned to the ways in which the "relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."[54] Beginning in the late eighteenth century, according to Said, Western European empires, mainly Britain and France, began developing extensive systems of knowledge about the Orient, placing "things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing."[55] The discourses that developed alongside and from this systematic knowledge "promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')"[56] and were useful for maintaining colonial rule in Egypt, India, and elsewhere. In short, Orientalism is for Said "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction"[57] between Occident and Orient, us and them, the English (or French) and the Indians (or Egyptians).

Said's foundational work looms large over my thinking about the West's appreciation of Eastern religions. My study is sensitive to the fact that the West often appropriated Eastern religion for its own ends, ends that went hand-in-hand with oppressive forms of colonialism and empire. At the same time, however, I follow Tim Keirn and Norbert Schürer in rejecting crude readings of *Orientalism* that preclude the possibility that Europeans "have any agenda other than

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[54] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 5. For other works on Orientalism see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Rosalind Ballaster, *Fabulous Orients: Fictions of the East in England, 1662–1785* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004); and Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[55] Said, *Orientalism*, 41.

[56] Ibid., 43.

[57] Ibid., 2.

conquest and domination."[58] The authors addressed in this study were not simply mouthpieces unwittingly serving the purposes of empire when they wrote about the Orient. Although many of their depictions of the East are colored by naivety and misinformation, and although they occasionally betray a regrettable sense of superiority to Hindus and Muslims, I take their expressions of sympathy for Eastern religions and peoples as genuine. In other words, I agree with Urs App that religious motives, which Said disregards in favor of the purely political, often outweighed material, economic considerations, especially in the eighteenth century. According to App, religion was highly influential in the eventual creation of the "secular, institutionalized study of the Orient" that Said refers to as "Orientalism." Moreover, App argues that "the role of colonialism (and generally of economic and political interests) in the birth of Orientalism dwindles to insignificance compared to role of religion."[59] While I would wish to amend App's claim that economic and political interests are "insignificant," I agree that they aren't the sole, or even dominant, interests that framed Occidental perceptions of the Orient.

With this in mind, my study complements *Orientalism* by exploring a crucial period in the history of Occidental relationships with the Orient, one that notably predates the period covered by Said. While Said claims that the hegemonic, political Orientalism discussed in his book began, more or less, with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798,[60] this dissertation investigates British Orientalism in a period during which Britain's empire was still under formation. In addition, because atheism was not yet considered a foreign danger or contaminant from abroad, a development I discuss below in my coda on Percy Shelley, the Orient was capable of being enlisted by theistic Britons in the fight against unbelief. That is to say, the

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[58] Tim Keirn and Norbert Schürer, eds., *British Encounters with India, 1750–1830: A Sourcebook* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 15.

[59] Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), xi.

[60] See Said, *Orientalism*, 42.

religious tenor of eighteenth-century Orientalism meant that the Orient could be imagined in terms that were considerably more ecumenical and cosmopolitan than those employed by later, nineteenth-century Orientalists.

Finally, this dissertation draws on a (very small) handful of literary studies that have examined the presence of unbelief in eighteenth-century literature. While critics of the literary periods that bookend my study have produced studies on atheism in Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantic poets, and while critical theorists have recently engaged in a sustained debate on atheism's role in the thinking of Jacques Derrida, eighteenth-century studies have yet to produce a sustained, full-length examination of atheism's complicated, multi-faceted influence on the period's literature.[61] The closest the field comes to such an examination is Sarah Ellenzweig's *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760* (2008). Ellenzweig's work focuses on English freethinkers, arguing that eighteenth-century religious skeptics were "deeply ambivalent about the democratization of both religious and political institutions."[62] Although freethinking was religiously radical, according to Ellenzweig, it was politically conservative. With this in mind, she locates strands of freethinking in the works of otherwise conservative thinkers, such as Swift and Pope, arguing that they were invested in religion only as a "series of heuristic fictions."[63] And, while she does not address

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[61] For the first three, see Dan Falk, *The Science of Shakespeare: a New Look at the Playwright's Universe* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2014); Michael Bryson, *The Atheist Milton* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); and Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830*, Cambridge studies in Romanticism 37 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For the debate on Derrida, see Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); and John D. Caputo's response, "The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011): 32–125. In the same issue of *JCRT*, Hägglund has defended himself against Caputo's critiques. See "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John Caputo," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011): 126–50.

[62] Sarah Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

speculative atheism directly, Ellenzweig gestures at a connection between these heuristic fictions and modern unbelief. "Modern atheism," she writes, "shares a surprising legacy with aspects of early conservative thought."[64]

As the chapters that follow spell out at greater length, I find Ellenzweig's conclusions unconvincing. Not only is the genealogy she creates between eighteenth-century conservatism and modern atheism tenuous, but she also elides the difference between Swift's skepticism, which amounts to a distrust in humanity's capacity for reason and the mind's ability to discern truth, and Lucretian materialism, which confidently pronounces that reality is godless and consists in matter alone.[65] What is more, Ellenzweig mistakenly views Swift's imaginative writings as the key to uncovering the "pious frauds" expressed throughout his sermons, letters, and religious works.[66] In contrast, I view the religious writings as aids to understanding the overall tenor of Swift's imaginative works. In fact, I argue that the "heuristic fiction" that was the greatest boon to Swift's literary creativity was the fiction (to him) of a godless universe. Unlike Ellenzweig's book, my dissertation examines the *function* of unbelief in the period's imaginative writings, rather than simply trying to ascertain whether or not an author like Swift was a believer. Yet by elucidating the role that atheism, specifically, plays in the writings of Swift and others, I

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[63] Ibid., 2.

[64] Ibid., 3.

[65] See Christian Thorne, *The Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 52–53, where Thorne rightly points out that skepticism and atheism, though related in some instances, are not the same thing. Skepticism, according to Thorne's wonderful account, "suggests that knowledge *of any kind* is impossible." Thus, "neither atheism nor solipsism is really 'skepticism' to the extent that they are both restricted in scope." Swift's oeuvre seems to me to be more concerned with dismantling the coherence of atheism as a worldview than with questioning (or, for that matter, defending) Christian orthodoxy.

[66] Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief*, 120.

suggest that what may at first appear to be positive enunciations of unbelief are ultimately part of an extended project in which atheism is ironically undercut.

In order to delineate atheism's significance in eighteenth-century British culture, this study considers a wide variety of literary texts and genres, including prose satire, conduct books, sermons, novels, and poetry. It also examines the works of authors who run the gamut in terms of class, gender, politics, and religion. The dissertation's cornerstone is my first chapter, "Jonathan Swift: 'A Compleat System of Atheism,'" in which I argue that Swift's satires often take atheism's tenets for granted, exploring what were, for Swift, unbelief's most egregious flaws. In the process, Swift created narratives that ironically hail the rise of unbelief and that are eerily similar to later, wholly serious narratives of secularization. Notably, these narratives evince Swift's tendency to soften his stance on other world religions and cultures when faced with the prospect of a godless, unbelieving world. In my second chapter, "The Limits of Self in *David Simple* and *Volume the Last*," I argue that Sarah Fielding's two mid-century novels portray theism as a necessary ingredient in making isolated Lockean selves social, thus denying atheists the capacity for sympathy and fellow feeling. Chapter Three, "Theism, Gender, and the Orient," examines the gendered critique of atheism made by Phebe Gibbes in her *Lady Louisa Stroud* (1764) and *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), both of which represent atheism as hostile to female community and suggest that Western and Eastern theists should unite to curb irreligion's perceived spread. In my fourth chapter, "William Cowper: Ecumenical Poetics," I chart Cowper's career-long opposition to both atheism and empire, arguing that Cowper fostered an ecumenical stance towards non-Christian religions in response to what he felt was atheism's imperial bent. The dissertation's coda, "Shelley, Sympathy, and Unbelief," documents an 1810/1811 epistolary prank in which Percy Shelley outlined his atheistic creed to a completely befuddled

correspondent. As this exchange makes clear, Shelley's writings against theism are largely concerned with countering dominant eighteenth-century perceptions of unbelief. Indeed, the poet's letters indicate the influence such perceptions maintained well into the nineteenth century and beyond.

As each of these chapters demonstrates, a literary history of atheism has much to offer scholars of the eighteenth century and scholars of literature more generally. In fact, many of the formal innovations traditionally associated with the period's literature can be read, in some respects, as responses to unbelief. The formal reactions to atheism documented throughout this study are numerous. To name only a few: the textual lacunae that interrupt Swift's poems and satires on unbelief, thereby mirroring what he considered to be the moral and philosophical vacuity of atheistic materialism; Alexander Pope's habit of forming entire poems out of randomly combined heroic couplets, a process Swift compared to the atomic collisions and cosmic accidents promoted by Epicurean philosophy; Sarah Fielding's polyphonic *David Simple*, which allows every character except the novel's solitary, unsympathetic atheist to narrate his or her own individual history; Phebe Gibbes's *Lady Louisa Stroud*, which advocates belief by contrasting sociable, letter-writing theists with a self-absorbed atheist who never participates in the novel's epistolary community; and, finally, William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), a poem written in conversational blank verse that Cowper considered to be both a poetic representation of godly simplicity and an antidote to the artifice and degeneracy sanctioned by unbelief. In brief, atheism's emergence affected eighteenth-century literature on the level of both content and form.

In each case, however, the author's response to unbelief is predominantly satiric. As Felicity Nussbaum notes, satirists traditionally portray a "just and true society locked in a moral

struggle with a false one."[67] The authors discussed in the following chapters considered atheism and atheistic beliefs to be the ultimate antitheses of what is "just" and "true." Thus even as atheism proved creatively productive, eighteenth-century efforts to imagine godlessness can also be read as so many satiric attempts to give form to the formless. That is, authors contained atheism by incorporating its threat into the very fabric of their works. Long before it was a widely held worldview, then, British literati countered atheism in rather paradoxical fashion: instead of arguing against the rise of unbelief, they imagined its fruition.

[67] Felicity Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women, 1660–1750* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 16.

CHAPTER ONE

Jonathan Swift: "A Compleat System of Atheism"

If honour I would here define,
It answers faith in things divine.

Jonathan Swift, "To Stella, Visiting me in My Sickness" (ll. 9–10)[1]

We must keep silence as far as we can and only talk to ourselves about God, whom we know to be true, and thus convince ourselves that he is.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*[2]

The impious yet nominally Christian narrator of Jonathan Swift's *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) boldly claims that two unlearned men, relying solely on their "natural Abilities," recently "made a Discovery, that there was no God." While the *Argument*'s narrator applauds this "Discovery" and is adamant that real Christianity is hostile to British notions of "Wealth and Power" (*PW*, 2:28), he maintains that there is no need to abolish *nominal* Christianity. After all, he suggests, the country's young men "have not the least Tincture left" of "all our foolish Notions of Justice, Piety, Love of our Country; all our Opinions of God, or a future State, Heaven, Hell, and the like" (*PW*, 2:33–34). Christianity, in other words, is practically already dead. There is therefore no reason that "stanch Unbelievers" (*PW*, 2:34)—"*Atheists*, *Deists*, *Socinians*, *Anti-Trinitarians*, and other sub-divisions of Free-Thinkers"—cannot, indeed should not, support the "present Ecclesiastical Establishment" (*PW*, 2:36), which continues to benefit the nation politically and monetarily. Paradoxically, the Church's

[1] Jonathan Swift, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin, 1983), 321. All subsequent references to Swift's poetry are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[2] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 26.

(nonexistent) God should continue to provide a target of ridicule for wits and enthusiasts (*PW*, 2:35–36), who would direct their abuse elsewhere if not allowed a deity to blaspheme. Despite this caveat, the narrator makes it clear that only children and the uneducated actually continue to believe in "scattered Notions about a superior Power" (*PW*, 2:34). Such beliefs are useful for the money- and power-hungry freethinker only insofar as they assist him and others like him in keeping the rabble quiet and "the Bank and *East-India* Stock" supplied with "Trade" (*PW*, 2:38). Christianity has divested itself of its theological contents, and it is now a mere political tool in the hands of an expanding British Empire.

At the heart of this ironic narrative of belief's decline and the rise of atheism—a narrative uncannily, and of course unintentionally, echoed by the wholly serious secularization narratives promulgated by later thinkers like Carl Schmitt—lies a critique of unbelief that Swift would continue to make throughout his writing career. As a philosophical system, atheism is incapable, according to Swift, of supplying the necessary moral ballast to support virtuous living. And, although one of the *Argument*'s goals is obviously to repudiate those who have abandoned "real Christianity" in favor of its modern, hollowed-out counterpart, it is noteworthy that Swift's final satiric thrust defends theism in general, rather than Christianity specifically:

> AND therefore, if, notwithstanding all I have said, it shall still be thought necessary to have a Bill brought in for repealing Christianity; I would humbly offer an Amendment, that instead of the Word *Christianity*, may be put *Religion* in general; which I conceive, will much better answer all the good Ends proposed by the Projectors of it. For, as long as we leave in Being a God, and his Providence, with all the necessary Consequences, which curious and inquisitive Men will be apt to draw from such Premises; we do not strike at the Root of the Evil, although we should ever so effectually annihilate the present Scheme of the Gospel. For, of what Use is Freedom of Thought, if it will not produce Freedom of Action; which is the sole End, how remote soever, in Appearance, of all Objections against Christianity? (*PW*, 2:37–38)

The aim of the freethinker's arguments against Christianity, this passage suggests, is not only to "annihilate the present Scheme of the Gospel," a prospect that obviously troubles Swift, but to

annihilate God himself, a prospect that Swift considers even more problematic. Swift positions himself, contra the *Argument*'s narrator, as one of those "curious and inquisitive Men" capable of drawing the (to him) obvious inference: without God, humanity is free to do what it pleases. Not a comforting thought for the author of *Gulliver's Travels*' fourth book.

As this chapter argues, the *Argument*'s notion of a godless world dominated by atheists is one that Swift consistently exploited throughout his writing career. In the chapter's first section, I chart Swift's life-long opposition to atheism by providing brief readings of the "Ode to the Athenian Society" (1692), *The Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man* (1708), the "Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately entered into Holy Orders" (1720), and Swift's published sermons. In these texts, Swift explicitly opposes atheism, particularly the Epicurean variety that had recently reared its head in England via Thomas Creech's 1682 translation of Lucretius' *De rerum natura.* This distrust extends also to the philosophical materialism of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and the substance monism of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), both of which Swift considered to be modern revivals of Epicurus' system and were, in his mind, detrimental to the welfare of both Church and state.

After delineating Swift's distrust of modern atheistic materialism, the chapter's second section demonstrates how Swift's satires oppose atheism not by arguing against it, but by paradoxically taking its premises for granted. *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), the *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729), for instance, all present counter-factual worlds in which Swift hypothetically concedes that all reality is reducible to matter alone. As Patrick Reilly bluntly puts it, God "is a hypothesis the satires can do without."[3] At the same time, the imaginative godless worlds the satires depict suggest that, in

[3] Patrick Reilly, *Jonathan Swift: The Brave Desponder* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 11.

Swift's thinking, atheism is something to be lamented, not celebrated. For Swift, as for the modern theologian John Milbank, atheism implies that either human values and institutions "are a pure illusion and offense against life, or they are 'absurd gestures' in the face of the void."[4] Swift's commitment to the Church of England was informed by this insight just as much as it was by any positive belief in specific Church doctrines, and his discomfort with atheism's ramifications provides his works with much of their satiric urgency and enduring vitality. Indeed if Swift had an "extraordinarily proleptic sense of himself as a problem for the future,"[5] as Edward Said argues in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), this is nowhere more evident than in the chastening effect his satires have on the "thoroughly nontheistic" critical movement known as the New Materialism. According to Swift, the materialist's insistence that there is no God and that human beings are "walking, talking minerals" may not always produce generosity, sympathy, and "ethical behavior."[6] Sometimes it might just sanction the skinning of Yahoos.

At the same time that the satires demonstrate the moral failings Swift perceived in Epicurean materialism, they also evince the strange sympathies that opposition to atheism could engender throughout the eighteenth century. I thus conclude this chapter by briefly arguing that, when atheism is Swift's satiric target, he demonstrates a considerable amount of compassion and understanding for groups he otherwise detested. From the Turks of *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, to the Irish Catholics of *A Modest Proposal*, to the Jews, Turks, and "*Bonzes* in *China*" (*PW*, 4:32) of *Mr C-Ns's Discourse*, atheism proves to be a substantial

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[4] John Milbank, "A Closer Walk on the Wild Side," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 57.

[5] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 69.

[6] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 16, 11, 13.

incitement for Swift to abandon his animosity against various religious groups and social classes. Fear of atheism, in other words, makes the decidedly unecumenical Swift appear as an occasional pluralist. The bottom line for Swift is that, when confronted with atheism, any god is better than no god.

The arguments put forward in this chapter attempt to make sense of a persistent point of contention in Swift scholarship. Critics of Swift's work have long been divided on the exact nature and extent of Swift's religious beliefs. Following the lead of Phillip Harth, who confidently declared in 1961 that Swift's orthodoxy had been established "once and for all,"[7] a significant number of scholars have assumed that Swift was a devout Anglican committed to defending the Church and its theological tenets.[8] For instance, Marcus Walsh cites Swift's resistance to repealing the Test Act, his involvement in the "First Fruits" affair of 1707–1711, his commitment to improving St. Patrick's cathedral, and his lifelong practice of charity in support of the argument that "none of Swift's views on Christian belief, worship, and behavior are significantly at variance with orthodox thinking amongst late seventeenth-century Anglican writers."[9] Moreover, Walsh reminds us that it is not appropriate "to judge [Swift] by modern assumptions about individual Christian spirituality and behavior."[10] To do so, Walsh implies, would be to judge Swift by the very spiritual principles he despised in the Puritans and

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[7] Phillip Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism: The Religious Background of A Tale of a Tub* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 21.

[8] See Lund, "Atheism in *A Tale of a Tub*"; Gregory Lynall, *Swift and Science: The Satire, Politics, and Theology of Natural Knowledge, 1690–1730* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Marcus Walsh, "Swift and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 161–76.

[9] Walsh, "Swift and Religion," 166.

[10] Ibid., 174–75.

enthusiasts. Put quite simply, Swift was a wholly Anglican apologist, and his orthodoxy should not be doubted.

Despite these confident pronouncements, however, critics have continued to question Swift's orthodoxy. Repeating William Wotton's (1666–1727) and the Archbishop of York's (John Sharp, 1644/5–1714) early doubts about Swift's faith, Michael DePorte points out that in Swift's satires "we rub up against things that don't quite square with the religious tracts and sermons, and are hard to explain away."[11] *A Tale of a Tub* has proven especially problematic. Most recently, Sarah Ellenzweig has read the book's central allegory as confirmation that Swift's satire is "informed by, not directed against, materialism, thus fall[ing] on *revealed religion* and its mistaken belief in spiritual transcendence."[12] Although she ostensibly places Swift within the skeptical tradition represented by Erasmus and Montaigne, a tradition that proposed that we must "abide by the dictates of faith in matters of religion" because "reason establishe[s] no adequate knowledge or truth,"[13] Ellenzweig repeatedly suggests that Swift flatly rejected all revealed religion. According to her account, religion is for Swift "erroneous,"[14] a "delusion,"[15] "hollow,"[16] "a series of pious frauds,"[17] "primitive duplicity."[18] The frequency with which Ellenzweig

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[11] Michael DePorte, "Swift, God, and Power," in *Walking Naboth's Vineyard: New Studies of Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox and Brenda Tooley (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 81.

[12] Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief*, 96.

[13] Ibid., 119.

[14] Ibid., 100.

[15] Ibid., 116, 118, 119, 124, 126.

[16] Ibid., 113.

[17] Ibid., 120, 127, 129.

[18] Ibid., 130.

employs such terms evinces her conviction that Swift was certainly no believer. Despite her talk of skepticism, then, Ellenzweig views Swift as a confident, Lucretian unbeliever, rather than a fideist or skeptic in the manner of Montaigne or Pascal. For the satirist, according to Ellenzweig, "the category of spirit itself" is mistaken, and the universe is composed of nothing more than "material, quotidian" objects.[19]

In this light, it is hard to know what to make of Ellenzweig's handful of brief (and muted) recognitions that Swift was in fact opposed to atheism.[20] Even if this opposition is considered in purely pragmatic terms, it makes little sense that Swift would *promote* the idea of philosophical materialism in *A Tale of a Tub*, especially given his concerns about that very philosophy's ability to undermine the Established Church. In addition, how can a reading of Swift as materialist possibly make sense of his "Ode to the Athenian Society," his "Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately entered into Holy Orders," his sermons "On the Testimony of Conscience" and "On the Trinity" (1744), and his final poem to Stella (1727–1728), all of which explicitly reject atheism and receive little to no attention in Ellenzweig's study? The pertinent, and obvious, point to be made is that Swift cannot be a philosophical materialist and a theist (even a skeptical one) at the same time. Nor can it be claimed that Swift simply embraced "natural religion" or a pantheistic conception of God, as Ellenzweig seems to hint towards the end of her study.[21] Such philosophies, as Swift's *Mr C-Ns's Discourse* makes clear, were tantamount to atheism for the satirist. In the end, Ellenzweig's commitment to casting Swift as a freethinker forces her to elide important philosophical distinctions and to stretch the bounds of interpretation beyond belief.

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[19] Ibid., 90, 98.

[20] See ibid., 109, 131.

[21] Ibid., 131.

Yet if Swift was no atheist, what are we to make of his repeated exploitation of philosophical materialism in *A Tale* and elsewhere? In other words, why do critics like Ellenzweig continue to find traces of unbelief in Swift's work? And, if Swift is really an apologist for the Christian faith, as Harth and his followers claim, why does he seem so little concerned with defending that faith? This chapter responds to these quandaries by insisting that Swift was more concerned with exploring the ramifications of unbelief than he was with propping up Christian belief. At the heart of the scholarly impasse regarding Swift's personal beliefs is the misguided, and unstated, assumption that Swift was either an Anglican apologist devoted to his orthodox Christian beliefs (Harth) or a knowing materialist (Ellenzweig) whose commitment to the Church was wholly pragmatic. In contrast to this reductive binary, I sidestep the question of Swift's orthodoxy, arguing that even if Swift had considerable doubts about Christianity, that does not make him a *de facto* atheist.[22] Swift does not have to be the orthodox believer of Harth's critical camp to be a harsh critic of atheism. In fact, the general theism Swift seems inclined to promote when his works address atheism suggests just the opposite. This chapter, therefore, moves us beyond the critical stalemate that has dominated discussions of Swift's religion, focusing instead on the ways in which Swift's satire is simultaneously informed by and directed against atheism.[23]

[22] Nor should it cause us to label him a freethinker or non-Christian, for that matter. After all, I think it is fair to assume that most thoughtful believers in any creed, religious or otherwise, have had their doubts and hesitations. The point to be made regarding Swift is that such doubt is miles away from the confident rejection of revealed religion that he considered characteristic of freethinking.

[23] The chapter also moves beyond criticism's regrettable insistence that *A Tale of a Tub* is the key to unlocking Swift's religious sympathies. Critics from Harth to Ellenzweig have fixated on the *Tale*, paying only minimal attention to Swift's other satires. By showing how Swift's engagement with Epicurean materialism is sustained throughout his oeuvre, I hope to provide a fuller picture of Swift's response to atheism.

I. Swift and Atheism

Swift's concern with atheism first surfaces in his 1692 "Ode to The Athenian Society," a rather colorless Pindaric ode that was printed in the *Athenian Gazette* while Swift was still serving as Sir William Temple's secretary at Moor Park. According to Samuel Johnson's "Life of Swift," the "Ode," which was Swift's first foray into print, was the impetus behind John Dryden's scathing remark, "Cousin Swift, you will never be a poet."[24] However, despite the poem's scattershot construction—it addresses topics ranging from women and war to literary criticism, fame, and vanity without any clear unifying purpose—it tells us a great deal about Swift's early thoughts on unbelief. It likewise evinces traces of the ironic authorial stance he would eventually adopt to combat irreligion.

In the poem's fourth stanza, Swift denounces those who, due to their "want of brains" (l. 85), are prone to "censure" (l. 91) and "rail" (l. 84) at the *Gazette*'s anonymous authors:[25]

> The wits, I mean the atheists of the age,
> Who fain would rule the pulpit, as they do the stage,
> Wondrous reformers of philosophy,
> Of morals and divinity,
> By the new modish system of reducing all to sense,
> Against all logic and concluding laws,
> Do own the effects of Providence,
> And yet deny the cause. (ll. 103–10)

Swift denounces atheistical materialism by playing on the multiple meanings of "sense," as he would continue to do throughout his career.[26] By "reducing all to sense," by which Swift means

[24] Samuel Johnson, "Life of Swift," in *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 7. In his recent biography of Swift, Leo Damrosch concurs with Dryden's (perhaps apocryphal) assessment, calling the poem "truly awful." See his *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 82. For a more generous assessment, see Frank T. Boyle, *Swift as Nemesis: Modernity and Its Satirist* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 81–92.

[25] In reality, the bookseller John Dunton (1659–1733) was the *Gazette*'s sole author; there was no Athenian "Society." Swift was predictably incensed upon learning of his mistake. See Gilbert D. McEwen, *The Oracle of the Coffee House: John Dunton's Athenian Mercury* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1972), 34; and Pat Rogers's headnote to the poem in *The Complete Poems*, 603–4.

the purely physical faculties of perception, the materialists have actually "*left* the narrow path of sense" (l. 68, emphasis added). They have abandoned tried-and-true, common sense notions of "Providence," notions arising from the "logic" of "cause" and "effect." Instead, the atheists pursue "modish," or fashionable, and thus transient, systems. There is also, perhaps, a subdued swipe at John Locke's empirical psychology here, with the term "modish" alluding to Locke's famous discussion of complex ideas, which he refers to as "modes" in the *Essay on Humane Understanding* (1690).

Be that as it may, Swift's more immediate target is the philosophical materialism of Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* (1651) notoriously—in the chapters "*Of* SENSE" and "Of Religion"—declares that there is no such thing as an incorporeal substance (including God and the human soul) and that good and evil are simply expressions of human appetites and desires.[27] In what would become a typically Swiftian move, the narrator denounces Hobbes by briefly *praising* him and by simultaneously assuming an air of false humility. Hobbes and his materialist followers are "wondrous reformers," while, for his part, the narrator claims to be a "fool" (l. 71) who "believe[s] in much, [he] can ne'er hope to see" (l. 134).[28] The narrator is more than willing to "confess" his "weakness" and "ignorance" (l. 133) in speculative matters. Ironically, this

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[26] For a later example, see "Verses Occasioned by the Sudden Drying Up of St Patrick's Well" (c. 1729; 1765), in which Swift praises St. Patrick for converting the Irish "both to God and sense" (l. 30). On the other hand, the modern Irish who have abandoned this faith in things divine have become "senseless" (l. 51).

[27] See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13–14, 75–86. In a 1666 meeting of the House of Commons, a bill was brought against Hobbes for suspected atheism, but it was ultimately unsuccessful. The exact nature of Hobbes's religious beliefs is still up for debate. See, for instance, J. G. A. Pocock's "Thomas Hobbes: Atheist or Enthusiast? His Place in a Restoration Debate," *History of Political Thought* 11.4 (1990): 737–49; and Richard Tuck, "The Christian Atheism of Thomas Hobbes," in Hunter and Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, 111–30.

[28] The poem therefore echoes St. Paul's declaration that he is a "fool for Christ's sake" (1 Corinthians 4:10, AV).

makes his belief in the unseen the more reasonable position for Swift, as, unlike the modish system-makers who affect to possess more knowledge than is rightly possible, the Swiftian narrator holds to outmoded notions of "Providence," "logic," and "concluding laws."

The Hobbesian materialist is not the only "atheist" to receive Swift's backhanded compliments, however. For, according to Swift's narrator, Hobbes lays claim to a rather dubious ancient tradition; his is a modern incarnation of the "ancient" (l. 119) Epicurean materialism promulgated by Lucretius. Like Hobbes, Lucretius denied the existence of spirits and incorporeal substances—"constant NATURE all Things breeds / From MATTER,"[29] as his English translator Thomas Creech put it—and both men believed that religion was the result of fear and human ignorance. According to Lucretius, matter is eternal and the universe is therefore the result of "CHANCE" (1:1027). Lucretian cosmology involves infinite atoms, or "SEEDS" (2:120), which fall through a "VACUUM" (2:83) until they collide with other atoms and eventually form the complex physical bodies we see all around us. Since it would be impossible for atoms to collide if they fell in straight lines parallel to one another, Lucretius introduces the famous idea of the "swerve," the notion that atoms "MOVE of THEMSELVES" and therefore lose "their Line of Motion" (2:126, 122). This declination accounts for atomic collisions and, by extension, the formation of the cosmos. Given infinite time, infinite atoms, and infinite collisions, a universe like ours will eventually emerge. Or so the argument goes.[30]

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[29] Titus Lucretius Carus, *Of the Nature of Things, in Six Books*, trans. Thomas Creech, vol. 1 of 2 (1682; London: J. Matthews for G. Sawbridge, 1714). The reference here is to Book I, lines 206–7. Subsequent references are to this edition and include both book number and line number.

[30] For a helpful overview of Lucretian atomism, particularly as it was understood in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, see Jonathan Kramnick, "Living with Lucretius," in Helen Deutsch and Mary Terrall, eds., *Vital Matters: Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death* (Toronto; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 13–38.

There are several apparent problems with the Epicurean system Lucretius outlines. Perhaps most obvious, to give an example noted by Creech in his commentary on the poem, is the way in which Lucretius constantly resorts to infinity to make his cosmology viable. By doing so, he necessarily involves himself in logical contradictions. If space is infinite, the various atoms contained within it would never be able to collide; they would always be too far apart. To counter this difficulty, Lucretius insists that there are an infinite number of atoms (see 2:501, for example). But, of course, if the atoms themselves are infinite, space would be *completely* filled with atoms, and there would be no void. Atoms would be incapable of moving or swerving, then, and the formation of altogether new shapes and physical bodies (like planets and humans) would be impossible. Everything would subsist in one immutable form for all eternity. As Creech succinctly avers: "infinite Atoms must fill all the Space that is: because if there be any Place that can receive another, there may be conceiv'd an Addition to the former Number." Creech finds this contradiction "absurd."[31]

Swift was certainly aware of the perceived defects in Epicurean cosmology. After all, he was an attentive reader of Lucretius. We know that in 1697 alone he read *De rerum natura* at least three times, for instance.[32] After her death, he proudly claimed that his life-long friend and pupil, Esther Johnson (1681–1728), whom he referred to affectionately as "Stella," understood "the Platonic and the Epicurean philosophy, and judged very well of the defects of the latter" (*PW*, 5:231).[33] In addition, when Gulliver visits Glubbdubdrib and converses with a host of dead

[31] See his commentary on 2:536 in *Of the Nature of Things*, 136.

[32] See the introduction to Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Marcus Walsh (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xxxviii. Subsequent references to the Cambridge editions of Swift's work are cited parenthetically as *CE* and include both volume number and page number.

ancients in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift tellingly has Aristotle, whom he elsewhere lauds as "the most comprehensive genius that ever lived" (*PW*, 5:345), declare Epicureanism defective. After Gulliver calls Aristotle up from the grave, the latter "freely acknowledge[s] his own Mistakes in Natural Philosophy, because he proceeded in many things upon Conjecture, as all Men must do." These errors notwithstanding, Aristotle claims that the most salient features of his philosophical system have been vindicated with time. The "Doctrine of *Epicurus*," on the other hand, is now wholly "exploded." Swift's Aristotle concludes by echoing the claim made much earlier in the "Ode to the Athenian Society." According to Aristotle, materialism is a "Fashion," a "Vogue" that will one day be replaced by an equally ridiculous "System of Nature" (*CE*, 16:295–96).[34]

This is not to say, however, that Swift dismissed Epicurus' philosophy wholesale. In fact, while Swift denounced Lucretian (and thus Epicurean) cosmology, he was quite comfortable embracing other aspects of Epicureanism. For instance, Swift praised the Epicurean ideal of pleasurable retreat in his "Ode to the Honourable Sir William Temple" (see especially the fourth stanza). In addition, his *Mr. C-ns's Discourse of Free-Thinking, put into plain English* (1713) pillories the idea that the Epicurean promotion of friendship is incompatible with Christianity (see *PW*, 4:42). "Heathen *Philosophers*" like Epicurus, Swift writes in "A Letter to Young Gentleman," fall "undoubtedly very short" of the precepts and doctrines delivered in "the Gospel." Yet in Swift's thinking their "System of Morality" is by and large compatible with

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[33] He also proudly claimed that Stella "could point out all the errors of Hobbes" regarding "religion" (*PW*, 5:231).

[34] Dutton Kearney suggestively points to the ongoing relevance of this passage, asserting that Swift's allegiance to Aristotle over Epicurus, Descartes, and other "modish" philosophers has recently been echoed by Alasdair MacIntyre in his highly influential *After Virtue*, especially in the chapter entitled "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" See Kearney's introduction to *Gulliver's Travels* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), xvi.

Christian notions of mercy, justice, and "loving our Enemies." Heathens like Epicurus should not be blamed, in short, for their ignorance of "certain Facts which happened long after their Death." Instead, Christians should actively promote those aspects of heathen philosophy most in line with Christ's teachings, while rejecting those that cannot be subsumed into a "Divine[ly] sanctioned" Christianity (*PW*, 9:73). With this in the mind, Swift could approve of particular Epicurean doctrines without accepting Epicurus' repudiation of the supernatural.

Swift's love/hate relationship with Lucretius and Epicurus was not unique. The editor of the 1714 edition of Creech's *De rerum natura* provides a typical eighteenth-century assessment of the poem: not "all that Lucretius has written [is] impious, false, or ridiculous: on the contrary, many excellent Things are contain'd in his Poem; many that well deserve to be read and remember'd even by Christians … I wish there were as much to be said in Behalf of [its] Theology."[35] Like Creech and his eighteenth-century editor, Swift was more than happy to embrace those aspects of Epicureanism he considered proper for Christians. This embrace should not lead us to suppose that he was a supporter of Epicureanism tout court. To the contrary, he was firmly convinced that its theology was anathema.

Despite his familiarity with Epicurean cosmology, however, Swift never provides detailed arguments against it, as does Creech. As Gregory Lynall has argued, Swift's refusal to do so evinces the satirist's distrust of the "physico-theology emerging as the dominant Anglican argument against atheism."[36] This prevalent Anglican mode of apologetics relied heavily on natural theology and is typified for Lynall by Bentley's Boyle Lectures. For his part, Swift considered an over-reliance on natural theology as a way of conceding the field to philosophical

[35] See the preface to Lucretius, *Of the Nature of Things*.

[36] Gregory Lynall, *Swift and Science*, 70.

materialists.[37] Thus, in the "Ode to the Athenian Society" he does not argue against atheism directly. Instead, he seemingly takes its absurdity and undesirability for granted. He merely laughs it away, as it were. And, while Swift's later satiric mouthpieces are characterized by their persistent naivety, unreflective deference to the "moderns," and brazen support of positions Swift himself found abominable, the narrator of the "Athenian Society" abandons his ironic, self-debasing stance as soon as he switches his focus from Hobbes to Hobbes's ancient forebear. In other words, Swift's positions converge with those of his narrator throughout much of the ode. His particular satiric weapon in the poem is therefore sarcasm and not impersonation (as it would be in later works).[38]

Swift's disdain is evident when he imagines modern Epicureans preposterously denying that the *Gazette* has any human authors. Consistent with their "ancient methods," they "straight deny you [the Athenian Society] to be men, or anything at all" (ll. 119–20). By putting humans on the same level as things, Swift's materialists are forced into the outlandish position that texts are random combinations of atoms and that authors therefore do not exist:

> I laugh at the grave answer they will make,
> Which they have always ready, general and cheap;
> 'Tis but to say, that what we daily meet,
> And by a fond mistake
> Perhaps imagine to be wondrous wit
> And think, alas, to be by mortals writ,
> Is but a crowd of atoms jostling in a heap,
> Which from eternal seeds begun,
> Jostling some thousand years till ripened by the sun,

[37] See ibid., 69–88.

[38] Seamus Deane helpfully outlines Swift's later, more characteristic brand of satire: "Sometimes [Swift] plays the role of mimic; sometimes, more subtly and dismayingly, that of ventriloquist. In general, the mimicry creates ironic effects, the ventriloquial efforts, sustained for longer and with stonier dedication (*Gulliver's Travels*, *A Modest Proposal*), create parody." See Seamus Deane, "Classic Swift," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*. Ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 241–55, online, July 25, 2016. Available: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521802474.014.

They're now, just now, as naturally born,
As from the womb of earth a field of corn. (ll. 121–31)

In these lines, Swift presents several Epicurean shibboleths—chance, atoms, seeds—as entirely nonsensical. After all, he suggests, if this world can arise from "atoms jostling in a heap," why not a weekly gazette as well? Why differentiate human intention ("by mortals writ") and material activity ("from eternal seeds begun")? A journal is just as material ("naturally born") as a "field of corn," so why distinguish between the two at all? While such questions might appeal to modern day advocates of object-oriented ontology or the New Materialism, Swift dismisses them as "laugh[able]" and "cheap." If, as I argue below, the later Swift's singular brand of irony is a form of anxiety, a begrudging admittance that modernity opens religious belief up "to doubt, argument, mediating explanations, and the like," the "Athenian Society" betrays little of this uneasiness.[39] In Swift's first poem, the atheists are plainly ridiculous, their arguments not worth serious refutation.

In the 1710 *Examiner* essays he wrote in support of the newly triumphant Tory ministry, Swift appears equally convinced that atheism is but a passing fad. Although "Atheism, Infidelity, Prophaneness, and Licentiousness" were the order of the day before Queen Anne "changed her Ministry," the Whiggish "Pedantry of Republican Politicks" will now no longer inundate the nation with schemes for "making the *Being* and the Worship of God, a *Creature* of the State" (*PW*, 3:49). Although the clergy regrettably still includes "*certain Persons*" who are "openly celebrated" by "Atheists, Republicans, and Fanaticks," these irreligious prelates will be weeded out by "TIME and *Mortality*" (*PW*, 3:51). In an essay on the Test Act dated January 4, 1710, Swift likewise refers to freethinkers like Matthew Tindal (1657–1733), John Toland (1670–1722), and

[39] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 31. As Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun remind us, Taylor's ultimate point is that, in *western* modernity at least, "stances of skepticism and faith are interwoven and mutually 'fragilized.'" See Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 7.

Anthony Collins (1676–1729) dismissively as "*weak Unbelievers*" (*PW*, 3:55). Just over twenty days later, he ridicules the idea, which he ascribes to Tindal and his ilk, that the Test Act should be repealed so that "Atheists, Deists, *and* Socinians" will be able "*to serve their Country in any Employment*, *Ecclesiastical*, *Civil*, *or Military*" (*PW*, 3:71). The new Tory regime, according to Swift's partisan polemics, will thankfully rid Britain of such impiety, and atheism (and the Whiggism with which Swift associates it in these essays) will be recognized for the deception that it is.

Of course, Swift employs the term "atheists" rather more loosely in these essays than in the "Ode to the Athenian Society." Tindal, Toland, and Collins never claimed to be atheists, after all. One might be forgiven for assuming that Swift cares less about belief than politics here and that "atheist" is primarily a pejorative term used to bludgeon his political adversaries and to ingratiate himself with the recently appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Harley (1661–1724). In other contexts, Swift does indeed use atheism as a somewhat vaguely defined insult. In his marginal comments to Edward Herbert, Lord Cherbury's *Life and Raigne of Henry VIII* (1649), for example, Swift condemns Henry VIII for murdering "(Vir)tue her self"—that is, Thomas More (1478–1535)—and for giving money derived from church lands to court favorites "like an atheist dog as he was" (*PW*, 5:248). Henry's status as an atheist has nothing to do with what he believed or professed, but with Swift's disdain for his political expediency and perceived hypocrisy.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the term always functions in this manner for Swift. In the decidedly moderate *Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man* (1708), for instance, Swift makes it clear that his various condemnations of atheism are, in fact, meant to discourage mistaken religious *belief*, not just Whiggish political principles or impious behavior.

Claiming to be "no *Bigot* in Religion" (*PW*, 2:2), the Swift of the *Sentiments* takes direct aim at "libertine and atheistical Tenets," insisting that atheists are enemies of both Church and State. Imploring extreme Whigs—who equate "Liberty of Conscience" with "an unlimited Freedom of Opinion," thus permitting atheism to spread unchecked—and extreme Tories—whose "Veneration for Monarchical Government" and the "Apostolic Institution" is akin to the fervor of "nonjuring Zealots" and "Papists" (*PW*, 2:3)—to seek moderation and to make religion no part of their disputes, Swift provides a basic description of a "*Church-of*-England *Man*" (*PW*, 2:5), one with which each party can get on board.

First and foremost, Swift argues, "a Member of the Church of *England*, ought to believe a God, and his Providence, together with revealed Religion, and the Divinity of *Christ*." Swift admits it is "odd" to maintain as much in print, since the point would seem to be self evident, but he offers the following explanation: "Beside those many Thousands, who (to speak in the Phrase of Divines) do practically deny all this by the Immorality of their Lives; there is no small Number, who in their Conversation and Writings directly or by consequence endeavour to overthrow it; Yet all these place themselves in the List of the National Church" (*PW*, 2:4). As this passage indicates, Swift was completely aware of the distinction priests and philosophers often made between practical and speculative atheism. Although he elsewhere opines that practical atheism is the root of its speculative cousin—"Men always grow vicious before they become Unbelievers," he writes in "A Letter to a Young Gentleman about to Enter Holy Orders" (*PW*, 9:78)—he considered both forms of atheism incompatible with church membership or civil service.[40] Moreover, as he indicates in "On the Irish Bishops" (1732), speculative atheism was

[40] Advising his imagined poetic protégé on how best to curry a monarch's favor, the hack narrator of "Directions for a Birthday Song" (c. 1729; 1765) tellingly argues the opposite: "Reject with scorn that stupid notion / To praise your hero for devotion: / Nor entertain a thought so odd, / That princes should

for Swift the more heinous of the two offenses. Weighing the merits of Edward Tenison, Bishop of Ossory, against those of "Satan" (l. 4), Swift decides in favor of the latter. Although Satan is the ultimate malefactor, he is also only a practical atheist. At least he "*believes and … trembles*" (l. 8), Swift says, insinuating that the Bishop of Ossory does neither. With all this in mind, we can be quite sure that when Swift employs the term "atheist" he frequently has a speculative unbeliever in mind, whatever the validity of this particular aspersion.

To put it a bit differently, "atheist" isn't merely a putdown in Swift's vocabulary, though it sometimes is just that. To the contrary, it often tells us a good deal about his take on those who flatly denied God's existence. The freethinkers he most often brands "atheists"—Tindal, Toland, Collins, and Thomas Woolston (1668–1733), amongst others—receive the dubious mantle not because Swift lazily confounded all sorts of heterodox positions or because he found their writings insipid and distasteful, though he most certainly did, but because he truly believed their arguments logically ("by consequence") implied atheism just as much as they did Arianism, deism, or Socinianism. As he states somewhat later in *The Sentiments*, it is "a Scandal" that such writers either "deny the very Being of a God" or that their arguments do so "by their Consequences" (*PW*, 2:10).

Swift sermons, as one would expect, are likewise concerned with atheism. Yet, as is typical in Swift's writings, he remains reluctant to provide positive, rational arguments in support of theism. Instead, he portrays atheism as obviously incorrect. In his sermon "On the Trinity," for instance, Swift encourages his auditors to believe in divine revelation and biblical miracles (such as Saint Peter's walking upon water in Matthew 14 and Jesus' resurrection from the dead) by providing a rather telling rationale. "These we *must* believe," he writes, "or give up our Holy

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believe in God" (ll. 261–64). Swift's target here is of course not only the impious hack, but the monarch (in this case George II) who would supposedly resent being called a believer.

Religion to Atheists and Infidels" (*PW*, 9:166, emphasis added). The atheist's beliefs (or lack thereof) are "defective," "absurd," "ridiculous." The theory that the earth was made by "Chance" and that there is no eternal punishment for "Vice" nor rewards for "Virtue" is simply "false" and "detestable" (*PW*, 9:167).[41]

In "On the Testimony of Conscience," Swift fleshes these complaints out a bit more. Atheism's crucial demerit, according to the sermon, is that it provides no "firm Foundation for Virtue." In God's absence, virtue and morality become nothing more than personal quests for public approval (what Swift calls "*Honour*"), and there is no objective standard by which to judge competing human "Interests." Swift offers a lengthy explication of this point:

> You trust a moral Man with your Money in the Way of Trade; you trust another with the Defence of your Cause at Law, and perhaps they both deal justly with you. Why? Not from any Regard they have for Justice, but because their Fortune depends upon their Credit, and a Stain of open publick Dishonesty must be to their Disadvantage. But let it consist with such a Man's Interest and Safety to wrong you, and then it will be impossible you can have any Hold upon him; because there is nothing left to give him a Check, or to put the Balance against his Profit. For, if he hath nothing to govern himself by, but the Opinion of the World, as long as he can conceal his Injustice from the World, he thinks he is safe. (*PW*, 9:152)

As we will see below, the association Swift makes between atheism and self "Interest," "Trade," and an unbridled pursuit of "Money," a pursuit that wholly disregards human wellbeing, features heavily in his satires against atheism and atheistic materialism, particularly in the *Modest Proposal*. More immediately, however, this passage indicates Swift's awareness of a disturbing lacuna in emerging secular (that is to say, non-theistic) accounts of virtue, one that, by some accounts, has yet to be filled.

Alasdair MacIntyre forcefully lays out the problem Swift identifies: "morality did in the eighteenth century, as a matter of historical fact, presuppose something very like the teleological

[41] In his "Thoughts on Religion," Swift likewise maintains that "want of belief is a *defect* that ought to be concealed when it cannot be overcome" (*PW*, 9:261, emphasis added).

scheme of God, freedom and happiness … Detach morality from that framework and you will no longer have morality." In MacIntyre's reckoning, modern secular agents still rely heavily on "moral expressions," but because the idea of God has largely been discarded, there is always a gap between the meaning of those expressions and the "the ways in which they are put to use." Moral expressions continue to be used, but they no longer signify objective norms. They now represent only personal desires or, in Swiftian terms, "Interests." The key question for both MacIntyre and Swift is why moral expressions of this sort should be heeded at all. Like Swift, MacIntyre concludes: "Each moral agent now [speaks] unconstrained by the externalities of divine law … but why should anyone else now listen to him? It was and is to this question that both utilitarianism and analytical moral philosophy must be understood as attempting to give cogent answers; and … it is precisely this question which both fail to answer cogently."[42] In sum, without God morality becomes nothing more than what Hobbes declared it to be, ornate expressions of human desires and intentions. Yet while Hobbes employs this observation in the service of his social contract theory and political absolutism, both Swift and MacIntyre insist that godlessness makes all political, social, and moral commitments "precarious and uncertain, and liable to perpetual changes" (*PW*, 9:154), to use Swift's phrase. Because of this, Swift argues that atheism is to be shunned and Christianity is to be extolled, even if we are at a loss to explain its supernatural doctrines.

Nonetheless, Swift claims that there is no need to explain the supernatural in the first place. After all, he argues in "On the Trinity," why should we expect to comprehend divinity when we cannot even comprehend the mystery of the "commonest Actions of Nature" (*PW*, 9:164)? The Gospels do not enjoin us to *understand*, but to put our "Faith" in God, to place an

[42] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 56, 68.

"entire Dependence" upon his "Truth," "Power," "Justice," and "Mercy" (*PW*, 9:164). God's existence is therefore not something to be argued; it is to be assumed on trust. In addition, belief is plain common sense. Atheism, on the other hand, is "against the common Light of Nature as well as Reason; against the universal Sentiments of all civilized Nations, and offensive to the Ears even of a sober Heathen" (*PW*, 9:167). Unbelief is thus not a symbol of progress and rational advancement. Rather, it bears witness to the decline of civilization itself. As Swift wrote to William King, the Archbishop of Dublin on January 6, 1708/9, "true Religion" is a sign that a nation is "flourish[ing]." Atheism, for its part, makes nations "barbarous."[43] In brief, atheism requires that we "give up our Senses" and "contradict our Reason" (*PW*, 9:168), making us little better than "beasts" (*PW*, 9:79).

Sermons are of course meant to edify parishioners and to instill orthodox belief and behavior. They are, in that sense, a performative genre. Swift's public homilies are therefore not necessarily expressions of his own private beliefs. All the same, it is telling that his opposition to both "freethinking" and "atheism" is so relentlessly persistent across genres. Even more telling, perhaps, is the fact that this opposition surfaces in his private correspondence. In general, Swift's letters are reticent regarding issues of faith. Occasionally, however, Swift frankly declares his antipathy for unbelief, such as when he complains to Alexander Pope that Ireland is filled with "young wicked Dunces and Atheists" (April 22, 1736).[44] Swift's correspondence is particularly revealing, however, when his interlocutor is none other than the decidedly heterodox Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751). We can infer from several of Bolingbroke's letters in reply to Swift—unfortunately, the letters to which he is replying are no longer extant—that Swift

[43] Harold Williams, ed., *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, vol. 1 of 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 117.

[44] *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 477.

expressed his disdain for atheism openly with his aporetic friend. On the other hand, Bolingbroke was eager to satisfy Swift of his own theological orthodoxy.

In a letter written on September 12, 1724, for example, Bolingbroke takes issue with Swift's assumption that he (Bolingbroke) is an "English free thinker." He agrees with Swift that freethinkers are the "Pests of Society" because they attempt to "losen [sic] the bands of it" and to destroy the edifice of "Reveal'd Religion." The vile freethinkers, according to Bolingbroke, are dead set "upon pulling down" Swift's "house" (that is to say, revealed religion). Bolingbroke casts Swift as an adamant defender of the structure, even to the point of, in Bolingbroke's estimation, unnecessarily slighting "Natural Religion." In addition, Swift had apparently at some point accused Bolingbroke's philosophy of being akin to Spinoza's substance monism, the belief that the universe is entirely corporeal, that God and Nature are equivalent, and that all things are modifications of one underlying material substance. It is a charge Bolingbroke roundly rejects: "I make no doubt but you are by this time abundantly convinc'd of my orthodoxy, & that you will name me no more in the same breath with Spinosa, whose System of one infinite substance I despise and abhor."[45] In a letter written almost seven years later, Bolingbroke likewise sought to assure Swift that he believed the systems of both "Democritus and Epicurus" to be "absurd."[46] Clearly Bolingbroke considered Swift's beliefs orthodox. At the very least, his attempts to reassure Swift that he, too, was not beyond the theological pale evinces his belief that Swift would be far from thrilled were his friend an atheistical "esprit fort."

As Alexander Pope began composing the *Essay on Man* (1734) in 1731, Bolingbroke wrote Swift an especially revealing letter. Lauding Pope's poem as a "noble work," Bolingbroke

[45] *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 27, 29.

[46] Ibid., 486.

argues that the only rational way to answer cavils against God's goodness, given the apparent existence of evil in the world, is to insist that there *is* no evil. Instead, all things "are linked in a mutual Dependancy" and the "parts [are] necessary to each other & necessary to the whole."[47] To use Pope's phrase, "All partial evil" is "universal Good" (II: 292). Thus whatever appears evil is, in reality, simply a necessary part of a benevolent universal system created by God. "Whatever IS, is RIGHT" (II: 294), in Pope's famous rendering.

Pope's theodicy, with its barefaced denial that evil is even a problem in the first place, is for Bolingbroke a much more reasonable form of apologetics than that typically offered by divines (like Swift). In fact, he chides Swift for the clergy's insistence that "a future state of Rewards & punishments" is sufficient to justify God against the various evils men suffer in the present. Maintaining that he does "not like concessions made against Demonstration," Bolingbroke asks Swift to consider the possibility that a future state might "not account for Gods justice, in the present state." Including Swift among those who admit "the unequal Dispensations of Providence" in order to argue the "necessity" of such a future state, Bolingbroke appeals to Swift's disdain of "atheists in all ages." By admitting the existence of evil, Swift is making "concessions" to "the atheist"; it would be better not to agree with atheists in anything.[48]

The point to be made here is not that Swift necessarily ascribed to all of the orthodox positions with which Bolingbroke aligns him. Rather, it is that Bolingbroke took Swift's hatred of atheism for granted. Whatever personal doubts Swift may have harbored, his freethinking friend was seemingly unaware of any. Moreover, it is certainly noteworthy that Bolingbroke

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[47] Ibid., 489.

[48] *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 489.

attempted to bring Swift "into [his] way of thinking"[49] by presenting his philosophy as a more formidable opponent of atheism than conventional Christian apologetics. It is evident that Swift was constitutionally opposed to unbelief and that his closest friends were well aware of this opposition. Swift could therefore scoff at the idea that he "ne'er believed in God" ("The Author upon Himself," l. 6), an idea notably spread by his political adversaries, without needing to directly refute the assertion. Indeed, as I have been arguing, his career-long opposition to atheism stands as a sufficient refutation. Modern critics who question that opposition might, then, take Swift's claim to have "reconciled divinity and wit" (l. 12) a bit more seriously.

II. "Grant this the case": Swift's Atheistic Fictions

As Swift's friend Esther Johnson hastened to her death in 1727, Swift's thoughts turned, somewhat inexplicably, to atheism. "Stella" had been one of Swift's closest companions for the better part of twenty-seven years, and he was profoundly affected by her persistent illness and physical dissolution. In a prayer Swift composed and probably read in her presence in October of that year, his anguish is palpable: "O All-powerful Being, the least Motion of whose Will can create or destroy a World; pity us the mournful Friends of thy distressed Servant, who sink under the Weight of her present Condition, and the Fear of losing the most valuable of our Friends" (*PW*, 9:254–55). In this prayer, and in two others Swift composed shortly afterwards, the Dean of St. Patrick's finds comfort in the belief that Stella will soon be received into "Everlasting Habitations," that she will enjoy "Felicity" (*PW*, 9:253, 254) as the reward of her many "Virtues" (*PW*, 9:253). In the poem Swift wrote to commemorate what would turn out to be Stella's final

[49] *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 7.

birthday in 1727, however, Swift allowed himself to consider a rather less pious position: what if there is no "All-powerful Being"?

Indeed, Stella's final birthday poem—Swift had written her one per year beginning in 1719—laments Stella's decline and her "approaching ills" (l. 5) before offering a somewhat unexpected meditation on the consequences of unbelief:

> Were future happiness and pain,
> A mere contrivance of the brain,
> As atheists argue, to entice,
> And fit their proselytes for vice;
> (The only comfort they propose,
> To have companions for their woes.)
> Grant this the case, yet sure 'tis hard,
> That virtue, styled its own reward,
> …
> Should acting, die, nor leave behind
> Some lasting pleasure in the mind;
> Which by remembrance will assuage,
> Grief, sickness, poverty, and age;
> And strongly shoot a radiant dart,
> To shine through life's declining part. (ll. 19–26, 29–34)

The thrust of Swift's argument is somewhat tortuous. Critics of Swift's work, who have by and large ignored the prefatory comments on atheism here, have often assumed that the poem's goal is to ground meaning and fullness in a life well lived, without any reference to divine or spiritual matters. In an article on "Swift's Poetry" published in 1972, for instance, Robert W. Uphaus asserts that the poem's message is quite simply that "Happiness … is the knowledge that attends consciousness of virtue."[50] Leo Damrosch more pointedly maintains that Swift "doesn't suggest that the prospect of eternal bliss will help Stella to face death. Instead, he encourages her to remember the past. She can have no regrets, at least, about how she has conducted her life."[51]

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[50] Robert W. Uphaus, "Swift's Poetry: The Making of Meaning," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 5.4 (1972): 577.

[51] Leo Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 405.

Even without God or the afterlife, this reading implies, Stella can take solace in the memory of her virtuous life.

By bracketing Swift's comments on atheism, however, such interpretations miss the much broader, more orthodox point Swift is making in the 1727 birthday poem. In fact, "Stella's Birthday (1727)" suggests that virtue can only retain its influence if the atheists are wrong. As the sermons and "Letter to a Gentleman" indicate, the idea of virtue does not even apply for Swift in God's absence. In a godless universe, virtuous deeds mean very little; they "die" (l. 29) the moment they are enacted, leaving no "lasting pleasure in the mind." Thus even if the atheists are technically right ("Grant this the case"), Swift implores Stella ("Believe me," l. 67) to renounce their unpalatable—and painful ("sure 'tis hard")[52]—system. The atheists' creed provides no comfort (other than the vice-sanctioning belief that hell is a fiction) and no reason to suppose Stella's "former actions" (l. 71) matter at all. With this in mind, Stella should keep trusting that virtue does mean something, that "all the effects of virtue" do not end. Moreover, because she receives satisfaction from virtuous actions—virtue "feeds" (l. 62) her mind, as Swift puts it—Stella should intuitively recognize that virtue is not a fleeting "shadow" (l. 51), but is real, substantial, and meaningful.

If Stella keeps this in mind, she can boldly look forward to a "better state" (l. 78) and be assured that her "contempt for things below" (l. 68) was not in vain. Swift is therefore not simply telling her to look back and enjoy the remembrance of her past virtue, as Damrosch's reading suggests. Swift also tells Stella that virtue allows her to "go with courage on" (l. 76), that it will help her face the future (and she clearly has very little future left on earth at this point). For once explicitly occupying the role of "gravest of divines" (l. 13), Swift encourages Stella to shun the

[52] The *OED* defines "hard" as something that "involves suffering, difficulty, or hardship." See sense 2a, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2015.

hopelessness of atheism and to seek solace ("fortify your heart," l. 72) in the fact that her godliness will support her, "whatever heaven intends" (l. 79). In sum, if the atheists are right and the future state is "a mere contrivance of the brain" (l. 20), so too is virtue a "mere chimera of the mind" (l. 53). By arguing that the latter is not true, Swift likewise disputes the atheist's assertion that God and the afterlife are chimeras as well.

This reading is supported by the numerous biblical sources and ideas that Swift references throughout the poem. Most notable, perhaps, is Swift's dependence on Matthew 6:25–34, a pericope in which Christ exhorts his followers not to worry about procuring food and drink, claiming that life is "more than meat" and that "righteousness" is of more consequence than sustenance (Matthew 6:25, 33, AV). In the biblical source from which Swift draws, Christ reminds his auditors of God's providential care of the universe—he famously declares that birds "sow not, neither do they reap… yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them" (6:26, AV)—and he concludes by advising his companions not to be anxious about the future: "take no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself" (6:34, AV). For his part, Swift begins Stella's final birthday poem by briefly lamenting that she is "sick" and he has "grown old" (l. 4). Yet he quickly calls to mind Christ's aforementioned injunction, writing, "Tomorrow will be time enough, / To hear such mortifying stuff" (ll. 7–8). With this in mind, Swift heeds Christ's advice and refuses to dwell on Stella's age and infirmities. He thus proceeds to declare God's providential care—"Providence on mortals waits, / Preserving what it first creates" (ll. 41–42)—and to assert, in Christ-like fashion, that life is more than meat: "is not virtue in mankind / The nutriment that feeds the mind?" (ll. 61–62).

The poem's fourth and fifth stanzas also provide an extended poetic meditation on 1 Corinthians 13. According to the biblical text, "charity" is the noblest virtue and all good deeds

are meaningless without it. "And though I bestow my goods to feed the poor," St. Paul writes, if I "have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (v. 3, AV). Swift claims that Stella had the virtue in spades. He recalls her "skilful hand employed to save / Despairing wretches from the grave; / And then supporting with [her] store, / Those whom [she] dragged from death before" (ll. 37–40). St. Paul maintains that charity "Rejoiceth not in iniquity" (v. 6); Swift praises Stella's "detestation … / For vice" (ll. 47–48). Charity "suffereth long," "Beareth all things," and "endureth all things" (vv. 4, 7); Stella exhibits "patience under torturing pain, / Where stubborn Stoics would complain" (ll. 49–50). Charity "envieth not, … is not puffed up" and "seeketh not her own" (vv. 4–5); Stella's selflessness "make[s] her just, / To merit humbled in the dust" (ll. 5–6). And, finally, Paul ends the biblical passage by providing his auditors similar comforts to those Swift offers Stella. Although all things "shall be done away," and though we cannot now be sure what awaits us beyond the grave ("For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" [v. 12]), our virtuous, charitable acts will remain forever ("now abideth faith, hope, and charity; but the greatest of these is charity" [v. 13]). Echoing Paul's metaphor, Swift insists that Stella's virtuous actions will not fade like "forms reflected from a glass" (l. 52), but will bear her on even after her body's inevitable dissolution. As these religious echoes indicate, the general thrust of the poem is resolutely orthodox; "Stella's Birthday (1727)" is a homily of sorts, an earnest gesture of religious consolation made to a dying friend.

Yet beneath the orthodox sentiments and assurances that Stella's life was beyond reproach lies an interesting, perhaps insoluble, interpretive problem: why would an Anglican priest bring up atheism in this context at all? That is, why would he propose to a dying woman, even hypothetically, that God might not exist? Had Stella expressed doubts to Swift? Was the

poem his attempt to assuage those doubts? Or was Swift himself troubled by the possibility that nothing awaited his dying friend beyond the grave? Why, in this urgent time, does Swift turn his thoughts to atheism?

Part of what makes Stella's final birthday poem so intriguing, then, is the fact that Swift entertains the possibility of atheism for as long as he does and when he does. Despite his confident rejections of atheism elsewhere, and despite the fact that the poem ultimately rejects atheism as "hard," much of its vibrancy arises from the tension between Swift's professed beliefs and the fact that the atheism question is so intractably present. Indeed, throughout his career, and in his famous satires in particular, Swift repeatedly engages in the sort of hypothetical thought experiment he employs in both "Stella's Birthday (1727)" and the aforementioned *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*. In this section, I demonstrate that Swift's satires repeatedly "grant" atheism "the case," mouthing the sentiments of atheistic narrators and portraying worlds in which God is nonexistent. Resolutely opposed to atheism as he was, unbelief nonetheless proved creatively generative for the satirist. In fact, his satires might well be described as a "compleat System of Atheism" (*PW*, 4:37), to borrow a phrase from Swift's *Mr C-n's Discourse*. Of course, the worlds the satires depict are worlds Swift was hell-bent on condemning. In this way, Swift effectively turned Pascal's dictum—"we must talk to ourselves about God, whom we know to be true, and thus convince ourselves that he is"—on its head. For Swift, belief was just as much about rejecting its opposite as it was about embracing any positive beliefs in the divine. According to the logic of his satires, we must continually talk to ourselves about atheism, which we know to be false, in order to *convince* ourselves that it is.

That Swift was aware of atheism's creative potential is evident in a short poem he wrote in 1726 to Alexander Pope, entitled "Dr Swift to Mr Pope, While He was Writing the 'Dunciad'"

(pub. 1732). Swift jokingly compares Pope's method of assembling his poem out of assorted poetic fragments to the Epicureanism he elsewhere derides: "Each atom by some other struck, / All turns and motions tries; / Till in a lump together stuck, / Behold a poem rise!" (ll. 13–16). Immediately following this mock-paean to Pope's Epicurean poetics, however, Swift demands that Pope recognize Swift's own formative role in the poem's creation: "Yet to the Dean his share allot; / He claims it by a canon; / That, *without which a thing is not* / Is, *causa sine qua non*" (ll. 17–20). Swift had in fact visited Pope in England during the fall of 1727, when Pope was finishing work on *The Dunciad*. Swift had a recurring fit of deafness during the visit, making conversation with Pope difficult, thus allowing Pope time to complete his poem. In light of this, Swift can claim to be the unrecognized cause without which Pope's poem would not exist ("*causa sine qua non*"). As a divine ("the Dean"), moreover, he insists that this logical principle ("canon") of causation be recognized. Swift is to Pope's poetry as God is to the universe, in other words. Of course, Swift's actual involvement in *The Dunciad*'s composition was slight. Pope's poem really was the result of his Epicurean poetics. (It is worth pointing out the obvious fact that *The Dunciad* is a poem about the rise of dullness and chaos, a mock-epic reversal of the theistic creation story of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It is telling that Swift associates this poetic universe, in which dunces "reason downward, till we doubt of God" [IV: 472],[53] with Epicurean cosmology.) If the "Ode to the Athenian Society" derides Epicureanism as an absurdity inimical to true poetic wit, "Dr Swift to Mr Pope" indicates Swift's later belief that Epicurean materialism is a fruitful poetic and satiric fiction.

In his own poetry, Swift often employs materialism against itself. By impersonating atheistic Grub Street hacks who laud the spread of unbelief and Britons' supposed obsession with

[53] Although this particular line was not added until Pope's four-book *New Dunciad* was published in 1742, the sense that the dunces are godless is present throughout all editions of the poem.

fame and money, Swift suggests that atheism is vacuous while also paradoxically exploiting its premises to flesh out his fictive poetic worlds. In "On Poetry: A Rhapsody" (1733), for example, Swift's narrator is an aged hack—he is an "old experienced sinner" with the "scribbling itch" (ll. 74–75)—who writes to instruct a "young beginner" (l. 76) in the ways of "modern wit" (l. 93). Claiming that true poets inevitably fail to "rise in church, or law, or state" (l. 40), the narrator lays out a series of rules for "earn[ing] a stock of pence and praise" (l. 66). A scribbler must sprinkle "numerous breaks – and dashes" (l. 94) throughout his poems; he must frequently use "*italic type*" and "CAPITALS" (ll. 96, 99); he must write lampoons and imitate the bad rhymes of the laboring-class poet Stephen Duck (1705–1756) (ll. 190–92); and, most importantly, he must sycophantically write in praise of the monarch (ll. 205–48). By agreeing to write for hire and to write in praise of those who worship money (see the reference to Walpole's "South Sea schemes" at line 232), the neophyte scribbler will "thrive" (l. 235) without fail.

This pursuit of profit, even at the expense of artistic integrity, is commensurate with a rejection of things divine. According to Swift's narrator, the fledgling hack must be willing to give up the Christian faith completely. If the "administration" (l. 198) awards bishoprics to non-Christians, for instance, the hack must come to their defense by arguing that faith in Christ is not necessary to be a proper Protestant: "To bishop-haters answer thus / (The only logic used by us), / What though they don't believe in Christ, / Deny them Protestants – though liest" (ll. 201–4). Christianity is not about faith, doctrines, or even virtuous behavior for the old hack. It is merely a tool of the government. The hack agrees with Hobbes—who "clearly proves that every creature / Lives in a state of war by nature" (ll. 335–36)—that religion is an institution founded upon, and supported by, competition rather than belief in the supernatural. Because religion has nothing to do with God, the young hack should therefore feel free to praise the administration on all

accounts—"You cannot err on flattery's side" (l. 524)—even when they disregard or disparage the Church's supernatural teachings.

To some extent, Swift concurred with Hobbes's dismal assessment of human nature. In works like the *Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels* humans are almost always depicted exploiting and warring against other humans. However, Swift viewed this barbarism as a turn away from true religion, not as religion's cause. Indeed, there is more than a hint of ironic Swiftian indignation in the phrase "clearly proves" here. For Swift, the idea that someone could "prove" what man was like in the state of nature was as absurd as the idea, parroted in the *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, that two unlearned men could "prove" there is no God. Like the *Argument*'s unlearned atheists, "On Poetry's" narrator is likewise convinced that God is absent. He maintains that, when offering panegyrics to King George, scribblers should not hesitate to prefer the monarch to God himself. After all, he declares,

> … for many a year
> Jove never intermeddled here
> Nor, though his priests be duly paid,
> Did ever we desire his aid:
> We now can better do without him,
> Since Woolston gave us arms to rout him. (ll. 543–48)

The hack casts Thomas Woolston, whose *The Moderator Between an Infidel and an Apostate* (1725) had denied the existence of miracles and questioned a literal interpretation of Christ's resurrection, as a veritable hero, with God assuming the role of "intermeddling," but thankfully "routed," villain. Freeing Britain from its religious shackles, Woolston helped usher in an age in which hacks, ministers, and priests can pursue their own interests uninhibited.

Immediately after this stanza, however, Swift ends the poem with a characteristic editorial interjection: "*Caetera desiderantur*," or "The rest is missing." The old hack's ramblings about God's nonexistence and Woolston's unimpeachable logic are dismissed as no more than hot

air. The hack fails to supply Woolston's arguments, the ending implies, because they do not actually accomplish that for which the hack gives them credit. More pointedly, the lacuna evinces Swift's opinion that the hack's materialism (philosophical and otherwise) is part and parcel of the vacuous, empty-headed aesthetic ironically promoted throughout the poem. The hack's godlessness, in other words, is the ultimate expression of what the hack refers to as "the low sublime" (l. 386), the quality of writing excessively "ill" (l. 386) in praise of excessively worthless objects. The low sublime delights in depicting images such as that of "a flea" being "prey[ed]" on by "smaller fleas," and it descends to portray yet smaller fleas that feed on *them*, "so proceed[ing] *ad infinitum*" (ll. 353–56). In place of God and religion, the atheistic hack offers microscopic insects that devour one another. And, his commitment to Epicurean materialism—he notably follows Lucretius in asserting the idea of infinite space: "in nature depth and height / Are equally held infinite" (ll. 405–6)—produces a degenerate, trifling brand of poetry: "In poetry the height we know; / 'Tis only infinite below" (ll. 407–8).[54]

Six years later in "Verses on the Death of Dr Swift" (1739) Swift depicts his writings as a bulwark against such cultural degeneration and the irreligion that attends it. Speaking in *propria persona*, Swift imagines what the world will be like once "the Dean is dead" (l. 178). In an imagined conversation that takes place exactly one year after Swift's imagined death, a "country squire" (l. 253) asks the bookseller Bernard Lintot for Swift's writings in "verse and prose" (l. 254). Lintot informs the squire that, although Swift was famous "in his time," his way of writing is now entirely "out of date" (ll. 263, 252). Instead, Lintot recommends Colley Cibber's most recent birthday ode to King George (l. 270) and Stephen Duck's ode to Queen Caroline (l. 272). More provocatively, Lintot endorses the works of none other than Thomas Woolston:

[54] For an excellent overview of the connection between bathos, the sublime, and skepticism in eighteenth-century satire, see James Noggle, *The Skeptical Sublime: Aesthetic Ideology in Pope and the Tory Satirists* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

'Here's Woolston's tracts, the twelfth edition;
'Tis read by every politician:
The country members, when in town,
To all their boroughs send them down:
You never met a thing so smart;
The courtiers have them all by heart:
Those maids of honour (who can read)
Are taught to use them for their creed.
The reverend author's good intention,
Hath been rewarded with a pension:
He doth an honour to his gown,
By bravely running priestcraft down:
He shows, as sure as God's in Gloucester,
That Jesus was a grand impostor:
That all his miracles were cheats,
Performed as jugglers do their feats:
The church had never such a writer:
A shame he hath not got a mitre!' (ll. 281–98)

With Swift out of the way, Woolston's heterodoxy—which, as we will recall from "On Poetry," logically implied atheism for the satirist—is free to spread unchecked. Politicians, courtiers, maids of honor, and even the clergy themselves all now agree with Woolston that miracles are "cheats" and that the Christian religion is more useful for furthering the Church's wholly political ends than it is for teaching divine truths. Post-Swiftian Christianity, the poem speculates, will be a thoroughly secularized Christianity.

Immediately following this hypothetical rise of unbelief, the poem imagines an "impartial" (l. 306) spectator passing judgment on Swift's life. Unsurprisingly, given the fact that he is Swift's own creation, the spectator maintains that Swift was almost single-handedly responsible for holding irreligion's spread at bay. Amplifying Swift's virtues in much the same way Stella's 1727 birthday poem amplifies hers, the imagined eulogist claims that Swift's satires were all written with a "moral view" (l. 313) in mind. Swift "succoured virtue" and resolutely fought for Irish "LIBERTY" (ll. 335, 351). More germane for present purposes, the commentator describes Swift as one who refused to "turn religion to a fable" (l. 387). Thus, if Woolston and

his followers are dead-set on running God out of Britain, as the poem here suggests, it will have to happen over Swift's dead body.

As biased as the account given in "Verses on the Death" surely is, I propose that we take seriously Swift's belief that his major satires attack atheism and irreligion. Even the infamous *Tale of a Tub*, which Swift's political and personal adversaries denounced as "a piece of waggish Divinity" meant "to banter all Christianity,"[55] was viewed by Swift as an ironic takedown of atheism. In his words, the *Tale* takes aim at all "Abuses and Corruptions in Learning and Religion" (*CE*, 1:10). These abuses include both the extreme religious positions (namely, Catholicism and Calvinism) ridiculed in the *Tale*'s central allegory *and* the atheistic materialism promoted by the *Tale*'s narrator in his numerous interjectory digressions. Charles Gildon's (1665–1724) complaint that "the Atheist and Buffoon" run "Hand in Hand through every Page"[56] of the *Tale* is thus not without merit. However, what Gildon and the modern critics who follow his lead fail to recognize is that, as Swift himself claims in the "Apology" appended to the 1710 edition of the work, "Irony" runs "through the Thread of *the whole Book*" (*CE*, 1:8, emphasis added). Swift's narrator, as Roger D. Lund points out, is not only a mad hack given to "self-regarding vanity." He is also a proponent of "the atheistical materialism of Lucretius."[57] And although he often voices truths that Swift elsewhere affirms—that madmen rule the world, for example—he is also one of Swift's many targets. Swift uses a fictional atheist not only to ridicule

[55] John Dennis, "To the Examiner. Upon his Wise Paper of the Tenth of January, 1712," in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 2 of 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1943), 397–98.

[56] Charles Gildon, "To the Author of the British Mercury," *The British Mercury*, June 4, 1712, cited in Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, "'Trips, Spies, Amusements' and the Apogee of the Public Sphere," *Münster* (2003): 177–224, 179–80.

[57] Lund, "Atheism in *A Tale of a Tub*," 46.

those brands of religion Swift found opprobrious, but also to ridicule atheism itself. If enthusiasm and papacy are madness, in other words, so too is atheism.

As is well known, the *Tale*'s narrator is exactly the sort of hack writer Swift despised. He is by his own admission "so entirely satisfied with the whole present Procedure of human Things, that [he has] been for some Years preparing Materials towards *A Panegyric upon the World*" (*CE*, 1:32). He is attached to "Vogue" and "the *Modern way*" of writing upon topics "wherin [he has] no concern," and, quite unlike Swift, he is firmly supportive of his "more [monetarily] successful Brethren the *Moderns*" (*CE*, 1:32–33, 26). Like them, he disguises his own incoherent ramblings as abstruse knowledge. "Where I am not understood," he writes, "it shall be concluded, that something very useful and profound is coucht underneath" (*CE*, 1:29). He is, in short, the sort of transient, modish author Swift employs as his mouthpiece in "On Poetry." And, like the narrator of that later poem, he too is pleased that "*Knavery and Atheism are Epidemick as the Pox*" (*CE*, 1:31).

The hack's atheism is made most apparent by his support of Epicurus' materialism. In an attempt to explain why orators are more successful at capturing their audience's attention when they speak from an elevated position, the hack offers a "true, natural Solution" to the problem:

> The deepest Account, and the most fairly digested of any I have yet met with, is this, That Air being a heavy Body, and therefore (according to the System of *Epicurus*) continually descending, must needs be more so, when loaden and press'd down by Words; which are also Bodies of much Weight and Gravity, as it is manifest from those deep *Impressions* they make and leave upon us; and therefore must be delivered from a due Altitude, or else they will neither carry a good Aim, nor fall down with a sufficient Force. (*CE*, 1:38)

Like Lucretius, the hack declares everything to be material. Even words are material objects and are thus subject to the laws of gravity. Following the Lucretian idea that sights, sounds, and ideas are made of tiny atoms that enter the brain and leave lasting "Impressions," the hack literalizes the idea that certain words can be "weighty." According to his absurd materialistic logic,

however, it is not the content of one's speech that gives it "Force." It is the number of words one uses. No matter how many ludicrous things one has to say, they will have their desired effect if one simply continues to pile them on.

Elsewhere, the hack concurs with the Lucretian (and Hobbesian) idea that religion is the result of human imagination, fears, and anxieties. Expressing his bemusement that "the most unciviliz'd Parts of Mankind, have some way or other, climbed up into the Conception of a God," he declares that "certain Ghastly Notions," like that of "a *Devil*," have been produced by "Fears." Though he is at a loss how to explain God's origin ("some way or other" mankind's "Imaginations … lifted up very high"), the hack is nonetheless certain that it can be explained in terms that are "natural enough." Gods are "framed" (*CE*, 1:103); they are not self-existent. Like words and sounds, then, belief itself is a purely natural phenomenon with no supernatural referent (an idea that Edward Gibbon would later take up more seriously when explaining the spread of Christianity, and that Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud would resort to when explaining the supposed sociological and psychological roots of religion).

Swift betrays little to no sympathy for these positions, and he offers several telling clues that indicate that the hack's praise of Epicureanism is both naïve and misguided. The hack's belief that Epicureanism offers the "deepest Account" of nature, for instance, is laced in irony. We know, of course, that the hack is not deeply read. Thus, his claim to be able to judge between various "accounts" is dubious at best. Moreover, his continual reference to the "*System*" (*CE*, 1:38, emphasis mine)—always a loathsome word for Swift—of Epicurus indicates that his praise of Epicureanism is just one more way in which he acquiesces unreflectively to modern intellectual fads. Most revealingly of all is the fact that the hack is self-admittedly insane. As he writes in the most famous of all the *Tale*'s digressions, "I my self, the Author of these

momentous Truths, am a Person, whose Imaginations are hard-mouth'd, and exceedingly disposed to run away with his *Reason*, which I have observed from long Experience, to be a very light Rider, and easily shook off" (*CE*, 1:116). The hack's enthusiastic encomiums on atheistic materialism are the ramblings of a madman.

As the narrator himself maintains, madness is also the cause of atheism. The "Imaginations" of materialistic thinkers like "*Epicurus*, *Diogenes*, *Apollonius*, *Lucretius*, *Paracelsus*, *Des Cartes*, and others" like them, were all inspired by "*Madness* or *Phrenzy*."[58] Epicurus' singular form of madness was his belief that his system of atoms, void, and the swerve would one day be accepted by all: "*Epicurus*, modestly hoped, that one Time or other, a certain Fortuitous Concourse of all Mens Opinions, after perpetual Justlings, the Sharp with the Smooth, the Light and the Heavy, the Round and the Square, would by certain *Clinamina* [i.e. swervings], unite in the Notions of *Atoms* and *Void*" (*CE*, 1:108). As we know from Swift's own defiance of Epicureanism throughout his oeuvre, this "modest" hope of bringing all men to accept Epicurean philosophy was ill founded. A "Fortuitous Concourse" is just as likely to make men agree on philosophical matters as it is to produce a universe like ours, Swift suggests. Since the former is decidedly impossible, we can infer that the latter is as well. The hack praises Epicurus, therefore, not because his opinions are true, but because his mad philosophy, like those of his "Brother *Modernists*," contributes to humanity's perpetual fascination with "*Conquests* and *Systems*," without which mankind would notably be "reduced" to "the same Belief in Things Invisible" (*CE*, 1:109). In Swift's thinking, such a "reduction" would be a great step forward indeed.

For the hack, however, God's absence allows a sort of proto-Nietzschean transvaluation of values, eliminating traditional boundaries of right and wrong and moral categories such as

[58] Each of the philosophers in this list was considered by Swift to be a forerunner to modern atheism. For a detailed discussion of the logic behind this grouping, see Lund, "Atheism in *A Tale of a Tub*," 150–54.

honor and dishonor. Doing away with God makes it possible for a hack like the *Tale*'s narrator to assume airs of grandeur and to claim for himself and his works a worthiness that they would otherwise lack. By explaining all human events in terms of atoms, swerves, vapors, or other material phenomena, human actions become understandable as mere accidents, not intentional actions that deserve praise or blame. The hack maintains,

> [O]ne Man chusing a proper Juncture, leaps into a Gulph, from thence proceeds a Hero, and is called the Saver of his Country; Another atchieves the same Enterprise, but unluckily timing it, has left the Brand of *Madness*, fixt as a Reproach upon his Memory; Upon so nice a Distinction are we taught to repeat the Name of *Curtius* with Reverence and Love; that of *Empedocles*, with Hatred and Contempt. Thus, also it is usually conceived, that the Elder *Brutus* only personated the *Fool* and *Madman*, for the Good of the Publick: but this was nothing else, than a Redundancy of the same *Vapor*… (*CE*, 1:113)

When all can be ascribed to "Vapor" and material accident, according to the hack, it makes little sense to praise Marcus Curtius for sacrificing himself to save the Roman Forum. Nor does it make sense to condemn Empedocles, who committed suicide by leaping into Mount Etna in order to convince his followers he was divine, for self-murder and vanity. In a world driven by materialism, accident, and chance, intention is simply a nonsensical category. (After claiming he will explain the origins of human personhood, the self, and individuality, the hack notably inserts a lacuna, "*Hic multa desiderantur*," implying that there is a defect in the manuscript and that no such explanation is forthcoming [see *CE*, 1:110].) Virtue, vice, honor, and dishonor, are likewise arbitrary "Distinctions." While such a topsy-turvy world might be anathema to those who, like Swift, are committed to the idea of virtue, the "fools" and "knaves" (*CE*, 1:112) who overrun modern Britain seek solace and comfort in such transvaluation, much like the vicious atheists in Stella's 1727 birthday poem.[59]

[59] Of course, not all modern atheists would agree with this assessment. For instance, Stathis Gourgouris endorses a "radical performative" atheism that, borrowing a cue from ancient Stoicism, does not seek to live as if God does not exist, but "*to live as if God does not matter*." According to Gourgouris, this

If the atheists thought more fully about the implications of their doctrines, Swift suggests, they would have to admit that trading virtue for materiality is a poor exchange indeed. A knave might find it comforting that his vicious actions do not, in the grand scheme of things, matter at all. Yet the corollary of this insight is that the knave himself is a wholly insignificant, purposeless collection of atoms. Swift maintains that the materialists fail to acknowledge this startling fact. What is more, by basing their philosophy in notions of chance, and by eliminating human agency, they offer no tenable, practical solutions for addressing the "Flaws and Imperfections of Nature." The best the atheist can do is ignore the intuition that the world is not as it should be:

> He that can with Epicurus content his Ideas with the *Films* and *Images* that fly off upon his Senses from the *Superficies* of Things; Such a Man truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving the Sower and the Dregs, for Philosophy and Reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined Point of Felicity, called, *the Possession of being well deceived*; The Serene Peaceful State of being a Fool among Knaves. (*CE*, 1:112)

The Epicurean belief that all things are material—including "Images," which travel from "the Superficies" of physical objects to the human eye—is here cast as willful ignorance. The Epicurean refuses to look beyond appearances to the "Sower and the Dregs" that lie beneath his "Serene Peaceful" system, a "sublime" form of stupidity that anticipates the "low sublime" of "On Poetry's" equally atheistic hack. The atheist can only claim to be happy because he abandons "Philosophy and Reason" and pretends that materialism is to be celebrated.[60] Swift, however, is neither a fool nor a knave, and he confronts materialism's frightening implications head on.

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indifference is capable of countering "the globality of religious politics" by opening life "to infinite possibilities." Yet it is hard to see how this indifference squares with his palpable impatience with "religious politics" or his need to argue for performative atheism in the first place. His claim that religious belief is predicated on "the decision to believe," that "openness" is impossible in a theistic framework, and that "uncertainty" is inherently valuable likewise warrants scrutiny. See Stathis Gourgouris, "Why I Am Not a Postsecularist," *boundary 2* 40.1 (2013): 41–54, 45, 47, 49, 53.

In the *Tale*'s most memorable moment, Swift provides a chilling picture of what, for him, atheism has to offer. The hack begrudgingly admits,

> Reason is certainly in the Right, and […] in most Corporeal Beings, which have fallen under my Cognizance, the *Outside* hath been infinitely preferable to the *In*: Whereof I have been farther convinced from some late Experiments. Last week I saw a Woman *flay'd*, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse. Yesterday I ordered the Carcass of a *Beau* to be stript in my Presence; when we were all amazed to find so many unsuspected Faults under one Suit of Cloaths. (*CE*, 1:112)

After offering this image of flayed carcasses and dead beaus, the hack retreats to his naïve Epicureanism, claiming he would rather not know his system's faults than have to face the horrifying "Defects" (*CE*, 1:112) of matter. The hack may occasionally express the proto-Nietzschean insight that traditional values and meaning cannot persist in God's absence, but, unlike Nietszche, neither he nor Swift has any faith in the coming of an Übermensch. In *A Tale of a Tub*, materialism simply cannot produce transcendence and human greatness. Instead of a Superman, Swift's speculative atheistic world produces a hack.

Swift's satiric denunciation of atheism should be kept in mind when reading the allegorical sections of the *Tale*. Swift does not go back and forth from satirizing materialism in the digressions to promoting it in the story of Peter, Jack, and Martin. Instead, the *Tale* presents the failures of Peter (Catholicism) and Jack (Calvinism, Presbyterianism) as akin to those of atheism. Peter and Jack, in other words, are satirized for being *too much like the atheists*, not for believing in God, spirits, and the supernatural. Theirs are material religions; they are "refined" from "the Dross and Grossness of *Sense*" (*CE*, 1:39), as the hack admits almost immediately after expressing his admiration for "the System of *Epicurus*" (*CE*, 1:38). Catholics (Peter) and

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[60] Lund notes that Gilbert Burnet makes a similar point in his account of Rochester's deathbed conversion. According to Burnet, Rochester claimed to have been undone by "all those flights of Wit, that do feed Atheism and Irreligion; which have a false glittering in them, that dazzles some weak sighted Minds, who have not capacity enough to penetrate further than the Surfaces of things." See Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of John Earl of Rochester* (London, 1724), 96–97; and Lund, "Atheism in *A Tale of a Tub*," 159.

Calvinists (Jack) are ridiculous, then, not because Swift discredits their belief in the divine. They are ridiculous because their materialistic behaviors, doctrines, and desires make a mockery of the God they purportedly worship (the allegorical "Father" of the *Tale*). In that sense, they are like atheists in disguise.

To argue otherwise, one must either do violence to the allegory itself or completely ignore the complicated contours of early eighteenth-century religious belief. For instance, Michael DePorte's suggestion that Swift was not, perhaps, a true believer rests on the fact that the *Tale*'s story of the coats "stresses not the father's love for his sons, but his desire to exercise power over them after he is gone." If the father had simply allowed Peter and Jack more leeway, if he had "left them the coats to wear as they saw fit,"[61] they would have never strayed in the first place. Yet reading Swift's work (or most religious work written in the eighteenth century, for that matter), it is hard to imagine Swift ever considering this type of "love" the cornerstone of religious belief. DePorte is right to focus on "power" in his reading of the *Tale*, but he is wrong to assume that the father's desire for authority should be read as evidence of Swift's doubts. The father's authority is, to the contrary, what makes his existence necessary for Swift. Jack and Peter start behaving like villains and atheists not because their father does not love them, but because they quite simply refuse to accept "their Father's Authority" (*CE*, 1:57). Without that authority in place, Swift suggests that humankind and human culture would be reduced to a state of barbarity.

Sarah Ellenzweig's aforementioned reading of the *Tale*, in which she implies that Swift was a closeted materialist of sorts, is marred by an equally tendentious manner of close reading. Ellenzweig points out that the coats given to Peter, Jack, and Martin are material objects, and she uses this to support her claim that Swift denied the possibility of spirit and considered all

[61] DePorte, "Swift, God, and Power," 83.

religious practice to be grounded in matter alone. The allegory's hack narrator might agree with such an interpretation, of course, but for Swift's purposes the problem is that materialism, especially when it is dressed up in religious garb, is both ridiculous and destructive. In addition, it is worth remembering that allegories must represent their subject matter using physical objects and beings. It would be impossible for an allegory to do otherwise. (Christ's various parables about the Kingdom of God are a case in point.) Thus from Swift's perspective the point is not necessarily that the coats are coats. The idol-worshipping (and Spinozist) Sartorialists, as Ellenzweig happily notes, also consider their religion to be a coat. The crucial point is that the coats were given by the father, who maintains the requisite authority to determine how the three brothers should wear their new coverings. The Sartorialists, on the other hand, create their own coats, which they then begin to worship. Ellenzweig views this latter fact as an indication that all religion is a human construct, failing to recognize that even the biblical prophets were happy to point out that their pagan neighbors were worshiping objects fashioned by their own hands (see Psalm 115 and Isaiah 44 for two prominent examples among many). By Ellenzweig's logic, the biblical authors would therefore have considered all religion, including their own, to be manmade.[62] Swift's *Tale*, on the other hand, agrees with the biblical opinion that atheism is foolishness (see, most famously, Psalm 14).

It is worth emphasizing once more that I am not arguing that Swift was wholeheartedly convinced that each and every doctrine of Anglicanism was true. I am arguing that he was wholeheartedly convinced that atheism was not. Or, at the very least, he was convinced that it was too insidious to support, whatever its actual truth-value. Swift may have indeed entered into his hack characters with a gusto that borders on what John Traugott calls a "demonic energy,"

[62] See Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief*, 92–98.

allowing him in some sense to "become his enemies" as he batters various religious creeds into the dust. However, while Traugott and critics like DePorte and Ellenzweig are correct that Swift's "pyrrhonistic imagination" leaves absolutely nothing it touches in the *Tale* standing, they oddly fail to apply this standard to the hack and his irreligion. Once Swift has used the hack to dismantle the doctrinal verities of his religious opponents—a turn of the screw Traugott recognizes as "the characteristic entrapment of the reader in Swift's irony," the moment when we realize that Swift has outwitted us, stripping us of our intellectual pretensions by siding with his Grubstreet mouthpiece—Swift steps back and turns the satiric screw again.[63] Indeed, while the hack's various remarks on human corporeality are naïve and nonchalant ("you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse"), and while he willfully disregards materiality's frightening implications, a lingering sense of disgust remains as one reads the *Tale*. This excess— a satiric urgency that belies the hack's flippancy—testifies to Swift's own distaste for nature's "Flaws and Imperfections." In short, Swift disassociates himself from the hack's materialism, even as he employs that materialism to deconstruct religious enthusiasm.

This disgust with pure materiality animates much of the *Tale*, providing it with its unmistakable verve and helping explain its otherwise lackluster endorsement of Swift's Anglicanism, represented in the central allegory by the "wooden," "insipid" Martin.[64] Again, Swift's main interest in the *Tale* and elsewhere is in exposing what he considered to be the perniciousness of atheistic materialism, not in defending Anglican doctrines. James Noggle is therefore correct to insist that although the *Tale* is perhaps the most pyrrhonistic of all Swift's satires—it ruthlessly undercuts almost all philosophical belief systems, including dissenting

[63] John Traugott, "A Tale of a Tub," in *Focus: Swift*, ed. Claude Rawson (London: Sphere Books, 1971), 88, 89, 79, 90.

[64] Ibid., 79, 92.

religion, Catholicism, and Epicureanism, while offering no divine alternative—it does not amount to a rejection of theism or the supernatural. Paradoxically, in fact, Swift's steadfast refusal to portray the spiritual in *A Tale of a Tub* is a way of protecting the spirit from contamination. As Noggle writes, "in Swift … it is only through the apparent embrace of vulgar materialism that the spirit is duly regarded."[65] By not providing a thorough rendering of true spirit, that is, Swift guarantees that it remains untouched by his otherwise boundless satiric lash. Although it remains an open question what genuine spirituality might actually look like to the satirist, this is a problem that the *Tale* is quite simply uninterested in addressing. From start to finish, its satiric energy is engaged by, and directed against, atheism.

Swift would direct his satire against materialism once more in his 1729 *Modest Proposal*, in which the anonymous Proposer infamously suggests that the English alleviate Irish suffering, poverty, and starvation by turning Irish babies into edible commodities. In the process, Swift recapitulates the *Tale*'s idea that materialism goes hand in hand with "conquest" and "system" making. Swift's ire in *A Modest Proposal* is directed largely against the cultural (rather than philosophical) materialism of the English, whose greed and moral apathy, according to Swift, reduced both the Irish and the Anglo-Irish settlers to misery. Nonetheless, his argument cannot rightly be reduced to an economic argument only. As Roger D. Lund contends, for Swift the corruptions of the age, including cultural materialism, had as their root cause "some new form of atheistical materialism."[66] The problem in the imaginative worlds of both the *Tale* and *A Modest Proposal*, to put it simply, is that atheism has become the *de facto* mindset. As a result, Swift's atheistic narrators consider human beings to be mere assemblages of material parts. Yet while

[65] Noggle, *The Skeptical Sublime*, 76.

[66] Lund, "Atheism in *A Tale of a Tub*," 34.

the *Tale*'s hack consciously disavows the moral, ethical consequences of human materiality, the Modest Proposer uses materialism to justify mass infanticide and cannibalism.

Like the *Tale*'s image of a flayed woman, *A Modest Proposal* takes Swift's preoccupation with materiality to its terrifying logical extreme. If we are only matter, it asks, why not start acting like we are truly nothing more than materials? If the poor are found "wanting Food and Raiment," they should therefore "contribute to the Feeding, and partly to the Cloathing" (*PW*, 12:110) of themselves using, quite literally, their own resources. They should, in short, be transformed into the very objects they lack. Luckily enough, for the Modest Proposer human beings are merely the sum of their parts. Thus, infants are capable of being reduced to "the fore or hind Quarter" (*PW*, 12:112), to the "Rags" (*PW*, 12:111) that clothe them, and to unfed, "useless Mouths and Backs" (*PW*, 12:117). Because of this, "human" is a term that means very little to the Proposer. The infants he hypothetically dissects are "*Creatures* in human figure" (*PW*, 12:117, emphasis added), and there is nothing to distinguish them from other consumable animals like pigs (see *PW*, 12:116). At the risk of stating the obvious, the danger of such reduction for Swift is that it is irreversible. Once you have turned a baby into "four Dishes of excellent nutritive Meat" (*PW*, 12:112), there is no going back. He or she cannot be reassembled. For Swift, materialism was thus to be avoided at all costs.

The Proposer is entirely unaware of his venture's opprobrious nature. His focus is on entirely empirical (and economic) realities, so much so that he literalizes figurative language in order to argue on behalf of his system. English landlords are already "devouring" (*PW*, 12:112) the Irish metaphorically, so why not allow them literally to devour Irish children? His proposal is grounded in what is "*solid* and *real*" (*PW*, 12:117), not in abstract concepts of human sympathy or moral value. However, for those still swayed by moral arguments, he offers a perverse moral

justification for his project: by making infants into tradable, edible commodities, morals will actually improve. Set on turning a profit and putting food on their own table, poor Irish women will begin viewing their children as blessings rather than curses. The children, that is, will now be loved and cared for, whereas they were entirely neglected before (see *PW*, 12:115). Obviously, what the Proposer fails to mention is that this love and care will come to a swift halt once the baby is slaughtered. Although Swift's depiction of Ireland is, as Carole Fabricant argues, wholly focused on empirical "reality" and the "daily disturbances of human existence," this is not because he denied "eternal, transcendent verities."[67] Rather, the lack of eternal verities causes those disturbances in the first place. Swift does not celebrate or endorse cold hard empiricism. He suggests that it is what leads the Proposer (and the English) to devour their neighbors across the Irish Sea.

In sum, Swift suggests that materiality provides no compelling rationale for arguing against the decimation of those the Proposer deems "*Savages*" (*PW*, 12:111). For the Proposer economic values always outweigh moral values because the former are grounded in what is "*real*" (*PW*, 12:117). Hence, he refuses to accept sentimental objections to his project because they ultimately undermine England's tangible economic interests. In *A Modest Proposal*, value is a monetary term only. Even as the Proposer offers perverse lip service to the traditional Christian notion of charity—he insists his project is necessary for "*relieving the Poor*" (*PW*, 12:118)—he quickly proceeds to offer a much more revealing rationale behind his project: it will introduce new modish fashions into English society. While Swift deplored transient fashions, the Proposer rejoices that the skin of Irish babies will soon furnish English socialites with chic gloves and

[67] Carole Fabricant, *Swift's Landscape* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 271. Fabricant follows this claim by asserting that Swift's rejection of eternal truths led him to advocate "morally informed passion and political struggle" (271) in the here and now. As I have been arguing, however, Swift considered the idea that *anything* could be "*morally* informed" in God's absence as entirely illogical.

boots (see *PW*, 12:112). For Swift, therefore, England's subjection of Ireland, its fascination with projects and systems, and its attraction to ridiculous, transitory fads, are facilitated by, and commensurate with, the Proposer's philosophical materialism. In Swift's mind, if one embraces a purely materialistic outlook, there is no reason why he or she might not also embrace the consumption and wearing of small children.

Swift's oeuvre contains another ominous depiction of humans transformed into fashion accessories. In the fourth and final book of Swift's magnum opus, Lemuel Gulliver begins dismembering the bestial human beings that overrun Houyhnhnmland. Convinced that the "Yahoos" he encounters in his fourth voyage are "Brutes" and "savage" (*CE*, 16:409) animals, Gulliver begins dissecting the bodies of their presumably slaughtered corpses, turning their various parts into tools or clothing. He uses "*Yahoos* Hairs" (*CE*, 16:345) to assemble "Springes," or small traps to catch rabbits, birds, and other small game. When his clothes and shoes are "in a declining condition," he remedies their defects "by some Contrivance from the Hides of *Yahoos*, or other Brutes" (*CE*, 16:351). In place of leather, he later dries "the Skins of *Yahoos*" (*CE*, 16:416) in the sun and then proceeds to fashion shoes with them. And, finally, when he departs Houyhnhnmland in a small canoe, he covers his craft "with the Skins of *Yahoos*," composing his sail out "of the Skins of the same Animal" and making "use of the youngest [he can] get" (*CE*, 16:424). Gulliver assumes that the Yahoos' lack of rationality and their affinity with other animals effectively sanction their deaths and dismemberment. His Houyhnhnm masters similarly entertain a plan that would exterminate Yahoos "from the Face of the Earth" (*CE*, 16:408). Because Yahoos are a nuisance—they are "cunning, malicious, treacherous, … revengeful" (*CE*, 16:399), and they continually wage war with one another—and

because they are merely assemblages of objects—hairs, skins, arms, legs—Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms have no qualms sentencing them to death.

The rub comes, however, when Gulliver admits what he does not want to admit. The Yahoos are, like him, human animals. Gulliver, too, is "a real *Yahoo*, in every Limb and Feature" (*CE*, 16:401). Thus if Yahoos are soulless, material brutes and therefore can be hunted and slain for the most utilitarian purposes, so too can the slaughter and exploitation of humans be justified. The Yahoos may not like the fact that Gulliver is employing their sun-dried hides as shoes, but there is no objective moral reason why their interests and needs should outweigh Gulliver's (or vice versa, of course, which is partly what makes Gulliver's self-identification as a Yahoo so troubling). Indeed, like the Modest Proposer, Gulliver advances a rather uncomfortable proposition. If the materialists are right, there is nothing inherently wrong with exterminating mankind (or, at least, its most "savage" members).

Despite Gulliver's implicit materialism here and Swift's sustained critiques of atheism elsewhere, critics have been quick to downplay the religious elements of *Gulliver's Travels*. Claude Rawson, for instance, emphatically insists that "*Gulliver's Travels* is a secular book" and that "its concerns" are wholly "secular." According to Rawson, we should not read the work as though it were a "religious allegory."[68] Michael McKeon, on the other hand, hints at the work's religious underpinnings, but he argues that Swift exposes and undercuts those underpinnings rather than upholding them. In McKeon's account, *Gulliver's Travels* "subverts" the generic conventions of "spiritual autobiography," since Gulliver's "conviction of human depravity issues not in repentance and faith but in the paradoxically prideful mortifications of misanthropy."[69]

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[68] See his introduction to Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Claude Rawson (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxxii, xxxviii.

John Mullan likewise juxtaposes Swift's text to the providential workings of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). For Mullan, "*Gulliver's Travels* is an experiment in godlessness that leaves its narrator without humility or hope." It is a "mockery" of *Robinson Crusoe*'s providential "individualism" and of the "modern world" in which such individualism is rampant.[70] In this sense, as J. Paul Hunter notes, *Gulliver's Travels* provides a "kind of parodic answer to the early novel and [is] a satire of the novelistic consciousness."[71] Whereas novels are characterized by plot, character, and a sense that everything is bound together by "grand patterns of divine or natural order," *Gulliver's Travels* is a haphazard work that advances in fits and starts. Gulliver is not a consistent character but a mouthpiece for Swift's satiric thrusts against "solipsism,"[72] and the random happenings of his journey provide Swift with grist for his satiric mill. In brief, Swift "bends all [his] details to [his] satirical purpose."[73] The work's formlessness, its solipsistic narrator, and its general repudiation of Defoe's novelistic individualism render it a harsh, godless riposte to the optimistic certainties of providential realism and the cosmic orderliness supported by the early novel.

As I demonstrate in the following chapter on Sarah Fielding, however, critics have also, somewhat ironically, cast the early novel itself as a move towards godlessness. If we are to take

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[69] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*, 15th anniversary ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 341.

[70] John Mullan, "Swift, Defoe, and Narrative Forms," in *The Cambridge Companion to English literature, 1650–1740*, ed. Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 269.

[71] J. Paul Hunter, "*Gulliver's Travels* and the Novel," in *The Genres of Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Frederik N. Smith (Newark: London: University of Delaware Press; Associated University Presses, 1990), 56–74, 56.

[72] Ibid., 72, 73.

[73] Mullan, "Swift, Defoe, and Narrative Forms," 261.

critics of Swift's work and critics of the novel (many of whom, like McKeon, don both hats) at their word, Swift's satire is a godless repudiation of a godless form. Swift takes aim at a genre that is supposedly supportive of atheism, and in the process he dismantles the *providential* fictions that are constitutive of that form. He fights atheism with atheism, in other words. While I take up the vexed issue of the novel's relationship with atheism in the next chapter, here I simply want to point out the fact that Swift would have *agreed* with many of the novel form's critics. Novelistic notions of individualism, the importance of the contemporary, and the "imperialistic possibilities of the human mind"[74] *were* for Swift conducive to, and concomitant with, atheism. If *Gulliver's Travels* parodies such aspects of the novel and the modern world for which it was emblematic, therefore, it is not because Swift rejected the idea that the world was subject to "divine order." It is because he lamented Britons' supposed embrace of irreligion and materialism (both cultural and philosophical). Thus if *Gulliver's Travels* is "an experiment in godlessness," the results of that experiment are dire at best. Like Swift's other satires on atheism, the work offers a harrowing portrayal of a speculative materialistic universe in order to argue the necessity of theism. If you want to do away with God, it seems to suggest, what you will get instead is brutish Yahoos and their equally brutish, Gulliver-esque oppressors.

So far as I am aware, the only critic to have championed the idea that *Gulliver's Travels* is a satire on atheism is Anne Barbeau Gardiner. In a pair of articles published in *Philology* and *Touchstone*, Gardiner argues that Gulliver converts to atheism by the *Travels*' fourth book, where he witnesses, and contributes to, "the great persecution of the church."[75] In Gardiner's reading, Gulliver's admiration of the horses, or Houyhnhnms, he meets in Book IV is a perversion of the

[74] Hunter, "*Gulliver's Travels* and the Novel," 69.

[75] Anne Barbeau Gardiner, "Swift Prophet: The Christian Meaning of *Gulliver's Travels*," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (2004), online, accessed November 21, 2015, available: http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=17-08-034-f.

biblical command, "Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding" (Psalm 32:9, AV).[76] Gardiner intriguingly reminds us that, in another context, Swift refers to his philosophical adversary Spinoza as a "horse," and that in Matthew Tindall's *Rights of the Christian Church Asserted* (1706), which Swift attacked in a 1708 work entitled *Remarks upon a book, Intitled, The Rights of the Christian Church Asserted*, Tindall compares humankind's liberation from the imperious clergy to a horse throwing off its "old Rider."[77] Moreover, Gardiner maintains that Gulliver's belief in the Houyhnhnms' consummate virtue is a fictional representation of the misguided praise freethinkers heaped on Spinoza, whose "exemplary virtue became an article of faith for atheists" after Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) published a paean to the Dutchman in his 1683 *Pensées diverses*. In support of this assertion, Gardiner points out that the closest island to Houyhnhnmland, according to Gulliver himself, is Spinoza's homeland, "New Holland." What is more, on the map of Houyhnhnmland printed at the beginning of Book IV, a nearby island is labeled "De Wits Island"; Spinoza's patron, as Gardiner indicates, was the Dutch ruler Jan De Witt.[78] Finally, Gardiner suggests that Gulliver's name for the humanoid creatures he encounters in Houyhnhnmland, the Yahoos, are so named after the biblical word for God, "Yahu." With all this in mind, she concludes: "There is good reason to think, then, that Swift designed Gulliver's last voyage with Spinoza in mind."[79] The moral of Book IV, for Gardiner, is therefore that the idea of Spinoza's virtue, and thus any "materialist ideal of virtue," is really a fiction. Book IV demonstrates that atheism is "really preparing the way for the liberation of the

[76] Anne Barbeau Gardiner, "'Be ye as the horse!'—Swift, Spinoza, and the Society of Virtuous Atheists," *Philology* 97.2 (2000): 229–53, 229.

[77] Ibid., 231–32.

[78] Ibid., 234.

[79] Ibid., 235.

horses, a general hunting of the Yahoos, and a silencing of the Word that exalts human beings above animals."[80] Atheism is thus a Trojan horse stuffed with hidden dangers. *Gulliver's Travels*, on the other hand, is the spear of Laocoon, which Swift thrusts into "the belly of the beast" in order to warn his fellow Britons not to admit it.[81]

Gardiner's reading is compelling, if a bit heavy-handed and unsatisfying. Occasionally, her close readings of Swift's work leave something to be desired. For instance, she often applies phrases that Swift himself never uses to key moments in *Gulliver's Travels*, giving the false impression that Swift's text explicitly supports her argument. To provide just one example, she claims that the Spinozist idea that all creatures are modifications of matter is ridiculed by Swift's portrait of Gulliver's "Master-Horse." Gardiner argues that since the horse is a "'Mode of Matter'"—she confusingly puts the phrase in quotation marks—he is a reflection on Spinoza's materialist doctrines. However, "Mode of Matter" never appears in Swift's text, and it is hard to understand where Gardiner gets the impression that Gulliver views the horses in this way. Confounding matters (to use a rather apt turn of phrase), Gardiner ignores the fact that, for all their philosophical differences, Swift and Spinoza actually *did* agree on various issues. For example, both men agreed that marriage should be based on reason and intellectual companionship rather than "bodily desire." Because the Houyhnhnms also agree with Spinoza regarding marriage, however, Gardiner avers that Swift *must* be ridiculing the Houyhnhnms' position, even though Swift's own ideas about marriage actually converge on this point.[82]

Overall, Gardiner overestimates both the degree to which the Houyhnhnms represent

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[80] Ibid., 252.

[81] Ibid., 253.

[82] Ibid., 248.

atheistic Spinozists and the degree to which the Yahoos represent the Irish clergy. As Claude Rawson has demonstrated, in fact, Swift's depictions of the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos pull from multiple sources. Amongst other things, the Houyhnhnms are informed by the utopianism of Plato, More, and Montaigne, while the Yahoos are based on traditional caricatures of the bog Irish.[83] To pretend that Swift's ire is consistently leveled at Spinoza, that the Houyhnhnms are abominable, and that the Yahoos do not deserve their fate, one must flatten Swift's text into an elementary, one-to-one allegory, altogether ignoring the multi-directional thrust of Swift's satire. Gardiner's account likewise neglects the countless shifts in Gulliver's character that occur throughout the *Travels*. Gulliver's haphazard adoption of various contradictory tenets—for instance, he ridicules religion's presence in Lilliput and neglects it entirely during his time in Houyhnhnmland, only to then lament England's lack of religion in the *Travels*' concluding paragraphs—indicates that, like the *Tale*'s hack, Gulliver is more of a satiric mouthpiece than he is a consistent novelistic character. As scholars have long recognized, Gulliver's slipperiness allows Swift to direct his satire in multiple directions simultaneously, and although he occasionally voices opinions Swift found opprobrious, we should not always assume that he is Swift's satiric butt.[84]

Still, there is something to be said for Gardiner's more general argument that *Gulliver's Travels* attacks atheism and that Gulliver sometimes assumes certain atheistic positions,

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[83] See Claude Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492–1945* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–9.

[84] For more on Gulliver's various inconsistencies and the shifting satiric perspectives they allow Swift to occupy, see Claude Rawson, "Swift's 'I' Narrators," in Jonathan Swift, *Jonathan Swift: The Essential Writings: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Claude Rawson (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010), 874–89. In the reading of *Gulliver's Travels* that follows, I take Gulliver's elusiveness for granted. My argument regarding his apparent godlessness and the ways in which Swift uses his travels to castigate atheism should therefore be taken as just one among many satiric threads that can be pulled from Swift's text.

especially when we consider the aforementioned passage from Book III in which Aristotle denounces Epicurean materialism.[85] The book's structure provides persuasive evidence that what Gulliver witnesses throughout his travels is the rise and fall of theism. Despite claims that the book's narrative is largely unstructured—J. Paul Hunter, for instance, contends that Book III is simply additive, while Book IV is entirely independent of the other books[86]—it is worth remembering that Swift deliberately chose to place the books in the order he did. Although Book III was the last book written, for example, Swift made sure to print it immediately before the voyage to Houyhnhnmland in Book IV, in which Gulliver enacts his materialist fantasy of disassembling humans into their component parts. As David Womersley states, "The fact that Part III was completed after Part IV, yet still printed as Part III, reveals … that Swift bestowed conscious, shaping thought on the sequences of *Gulliver's Travels*."[87] With this in mind, when one contrasts the presence of theism in the *Travels*' first two books with its absence in the final two, and then compares the relative status of human wellbeing in each of the text's two halves, the results are alarming.

In Gulliver's first two journeys—to the tiny island of Lilliput and the enormous land of Brobdingnag—he encounters societies with firm religious convictions and beliefs. Although the Lilliputians and their neighbors the Blefuscudians engage in ridiculous quarrels over the proper way to break an egg—quarrels that parallel religious arguments between English Protestants and

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[85] It is perhaps not coincidental that the opening passage of Dostoevsky's masterful novelistic assault on atheism, *Demons* (1871–1872), compares Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky—who unwittingly contributes to the spread of materialist doctrines in provincial Russia—to "a certain Gulliver" from "a satirical English novel of the last century." See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons: A Novel in Three Parts*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1994), 7.

[86] See J. Paul Hunter, "*Gulliver's Travels* and the Later Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 216–40.

[87] See Womersley's introduction to the recent Cambridge Edition of the book, especially *CE*, 16:lxxxix.

French Catholics, as well as other "Schism[s] in Religion" (*CE*, 16:71)—and though the "Learned" Lilliputians have abandoned the doctrine of the "Resurrection" (*CE*, 16:83),[88] they are nonetheless adamant that belief in God is absolutely necessary for a state's successful maintenance. As Gulliver puts it,

> Disbelief of a Divine Providence renders a Man uncapable of holding any publick Station: For, since Kings avow themselves to be the Deputies of Providence, the *Lilliputians* think nothing can be more absurd than for a Prince to employ such Men as disown the Authority under which he acteth. (*CE*, 16:87)

The Lilliputians likewise make "Religion" (*CE*, 16:89) a key part of their children's educational upbringing. Curiously, however, Gulliver never acquiesces to these positions. Although the *Lilliputians* "think" theism is necessary for good government, Gulliver is reticent here about his own beliefs. At the same time, it is telling that he finds these religious convictions exotic enough to comment upon in the first place. He seemingly assumes that for his British auditors a prince who believes in God will be as "absurd" as an atheist would be to the Lilliputians.

Gulliver is much more vocal about his religious disagreements with the King of Brobdingnag. The king, long recognized by scholars as Swift's ideal of a good ruler, is noticeably curious regarding matters of belief. He routinely inquires into the "Manners, Religion, Laws, Government, and Learning of *Europe*," and he is incensed by the idea of European wars and "Schisms of Religion" (*CE*, 16:150). He avers that priests should be "promoted" only "on Account of their Knowledge in religious Matters, and the Sanctity of their Lives," and that "prostitute Chaplains" should be shunned (*CE*, 16:183). He also maintains that, while the government cannot force an individual to believe in the national religion, dissenters should nonetheless "be obliged to conceal" opinions that are "prejudicial to the Publick" (*CE*, 16:187), a

[88] Gulliver claims that "Vulgar" (*CE*, 16:84) Lilliputians still believe the doctrine, much like the narrator of the *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* claims that only poor Britons continue to believe in God. The Lilliputians are not quite as irreligious as the Abolisher's Britons, but in both cases Swift takes swipes at those who consider themselves "Learned" yet lack the piety of their social inferiors.

position Swift himself supports in his short "Thoughts on Religion" (see *PW*, 9:261–62). Crucially, the king finds fault with European philosophers, like Hobbes, who have "reduced *Politicks* into a *Science*" (*CE*, 16:193), asserting that "common Sense," "Reason," and "Morality" (*CE*, 16:194–95)—ideas Swift typically associates with belief in God—are all that is necessary to govern well.

Gulliver, on the other hand, demurs with the king's belief that piety and morality are necessary components of a stable government. The idea of objective morality, that one's "Notions of Virtue and Vice were to be offered as a Standard for all Mankind," is for Gulliver the result of "*Prejudices*, and a certain *Narrowness of Thinking*" (*CE*, 16:191). Aligning himself with the "prejudice"-denouncing hack of Swift's *Tale of a Tub* and the modern freethinkers with whom Swift associates him, Gulliver emphatically rejects the king's maxims as "*narrow Principles* and *short Views!*" (*CE*, 16:193). Whereas the king finds fault with the Hobbesian "Wits of *Europe*" (*CE*, 16:194), Gulliver finds the lack of such "wits" in Brobdingnag to be a lamentable "Defect" (*CE*, 16:193). If Gulliver glosses over the Lilliputians' religious sentiments, he unabashedly admits his hostility to Brobdingnagian piety, virtue, and morality.

In the *Travels*' third book, Gulliver travels to a nation far more amenable to his freethinking, modern disposition. On the flying island of Laputa, he converses with a king who "discovered not the least Curiosity to enquire into the Laws, Government, History, Religion, or Manners of the Countries where I had been" (*CE*, 16:238–39). Contra the piously inquisitive King of Brobdingnag, the King of Laputa is entirely indifferent to religious matters. The inhabitants of Laputa are similarly dismissive of tradition and instead embrace all things modern. They build their houses only in "the present Mode," and their gardens are fit only for "modern Usage" (*CE*, 16:254). Moreover, Laputa's "grand Academy" (*CE*, 16:257) of sciences is

fascinated, like Gulliver himself, by "Projects" (*CE*, 16:258), speculations, and, most notably, material things. Amongst other projects, Gulliver witnesses the academy's various "Advancers of speculative Learning" "condensing Air into a dry tangible Substance" (*CE*, 16:265); constructing a language machine that, they believe, will eventually compose "a compleat Body of all Arts and Sciences" (*CE*, 16:269) by combining words at random, just as the Epicureans of Swift's "Ode to the Athenian Society" believe that poems, like universes, can be composed by pure atomistic chance; and, finally, reducing all language to nouns alone, "because in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns" (*CE*, 16:270). The Academy is, in short, obsessed with "tangible," palpable *things*. Whatever ideas cannot be expressed by holding up, or pointing to, specific physical "*Things*," which they carry in "Bundle[s]" on their backs (*CE*, 16:272), are inconceivable to the Laputians. Hence, notions of virtue, vice, religion, and morality have no place in their Academy. Correspondingly, the inhabitants of Laputa seemingly believe all things to be "a meer Effect of Chance" (*CE*, 16:310). Although Aristotle informs Gulliver of Epicureanism's demise shortly after Gulliver leaves Laputa, the Laputians Gulliver has just met evince the philosophy's modern persistence, even in the face of all logical arguments to the contrary. Aristotle may be right about Epicureanism's defects, but Epicurus' philosophy (or at least a modern offshoot) is alive and well, while Aristotle, like the Jonathan Swift of "Verses on the Death," can only speak from the great beyond.

As in the *Modest Proposal*, the Laputians' materialism goes hand-in-hand with their subjection of the poor and needy who live below their flying island. Echoing descriptions of Ireland's want and misery in Swift's own day, Gulliver portrays the land beneath Laputa as filled with filth, squalor, and poverty.[89] The inhabitants of the nation's capital, Lagado, are clothed

[89] For a wonderful overview of such accounts, see Fabricant, *Swift's Landscape*.

"generally in rags." Laborers toil in "unhappily cultivated" fields that yield no crops (*CE*, 16:251). Gulliver avers that he has never seen "a People whose Countenances and Habit expressed so much Misery and Want" (*CE*, 16:252). The King of Laputa and his court, however, care little for the plight of his subjects. While Laputa's scientists busy themselves with their materialist projects, the king engages in open acts of cruelty towards the people of Lagado. In order to "reduce" his subjects to "Obedience," the king's "mildest course" is to keep "the Island hovering over … a Town, and the Lands about it; whereby he can deprive them of the Benefit of the Sun and the Rain, and consequently afflict the Inhabitants with Dearth and Diseases" (*CE*, 16:246–47). If the inhabitants repine at their treatment, the king "proceeds to the last Remedy, by letting the Island drop directly upon their Heads, which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men." Because he is interested in neither religion nor morality, the only thing that keeps the godless king from continually pressing cities to "Rubbish" is self-interest. He and his ministers have "Estates that lie all below" (*CE*, 16:247) their flying island. Thus, wiping out *all* of the poor would also decimate the court's properties. Because he does not lower the island more often, the king pretends to feel "Tenderness to his People." In point of fact, he feels no such sympathy for his subjects. He is simply worried that his island's "Adamantine Bottom" (*CE*, 16:248) will break if it crashes too often into the ground below. Guided entirely by self-interest and a materialist philosophy that places men and women on the same ontological plane as "rubbish," the king continues his campaign of cruelty while still maintaining a veneer of compassion and virtue.

In the final book of *Gulliver's Travels*, the veneer is removed entirely. While the King of Laputa still ostensibly adheres to notions of human dignity (at least for propaganda purposes), Swift's fiction of rational horses and human "Beasts" (*CE*, 16:335) exposes the modern

materialist revival as entirely dehumanizing. Humankind, the Houyhnhnms intuit, has "degenerat[ed] by Degrees" (*CE*, 16:410), and as Gulliver's successive journeys make clear, this degeneration is part and parcel with the Yahoos' neglect of religion. The pious giants of Brobdingnag represent the apex of human civilization for Swift, a (literally) sizeable improvement on the religious institutions of the fractious Lilliputians. Houyhnhnmland, however, represents humankind's nadir. Although the atheistic projectors of Laputa think that, like the Brobdingnagians before them, they have ascended to new heights of human glory and progress, Houyhnhnmland brings their island crashing back down to earth for good. The Laputian ascent into the sky is paradoxically the first step in humanity's long descent into brutishness. If atheism is what modish, Laputian-esque Britons want, what Swift gives them is Houyhnhnmland. And, if they cannot handle the repercussions of God's death, they have only themselves to blame. Thus the *Travels*' wry epigraph, which references Lucretius' own admission that his materialist doctrines are harsh: "*Vulgus abhorret ab his*," or "the people shrink back from it" (*CE*, 16:4).[90]

For Swift, Gulliver's dismemberment of various Yahoos is therefore the logical culmination of humanity's godlessness. The point of Book IV is not that the Yahoos do not deserve such treatment—they are not the innocent, persecuted clergy that Gardiner sees in them, and I certainly do not intend to offer a "soft" reading of Swift's satire that dismisses the Houyhnhnms' Spartan morality as impractical and therefore undesirable. To the contrary, Gulliver's violent actions are, in Swift's mind, exactly what the Yahoos deserve. More importantly, it is what they themselves have been clamoring for. By accepting a view of the world as godless and of themselves as assemblages of atomistic, material parts, the Yahoos have

[90] The reference is to *De rerum natura*'s fourth book, lines 19–20. The epigraph is not present in *Gulliver's Travels*' earliest editions. However, it appears on the title page of Swift's 1735 collected *Works*, Volume III.

brought about their own undoing. This is not to say, of course, that Gulliver himself is a hero. As Swift hints throughout the *Travels*' fourth book, Gulliver is as bestial as the Yahoos he persecutes. Moreover, Swift also implies that Gulliver is not always in his right mind (see the repeated insinuations that he has gone insane at *CE*, 16:111, 208, 210, 341, and 430). Gulliver may think he is capable of transforming into a Houyhnhnm, but, paradoxically, the more he embraces the Houyhnhnms and their rejection of the Yahoos, the more of a Yahoo he becomes.

Indeed, the Houyhnhnms are a utopian fiction; although they exemplify Swift's own moral standards without professing any religious beliefs, their standards cannot be achieved by *humanity* without religion. (It is also worth noting that despite the Houyhnhnms' seeming disinterest in religious matters, they nonetheless detest "Free-thinking" [*CE*, 16:375].) In that sense, at least, the Houyhnhnms are not meant as a model for human behavior, beliefs, and practices. Swift's goal in Book IV is not to glorify the Houyhnhnms. It is to use the Houyhnhnms to mortify human pride and to shine a light on human depravity. Master Houyhnhnm's "Abhorrence of the whole Species" of Yahoos, for instance, is based on the Yahoos' own violence and "Malice" (*CE*, 16:367) towards one another. As Gulliver embraces a similar "abhorrence," fitting his boat and wardrobe up with Yahoos' corpses, he only perpetuates the malice that his Master Houyhnhnm decries. Gulliver's dehumanizing slaughter of Yahoos is not heroic, then, because human heroism simply is not possible in Houyhnhnmland, just as, for Swift, there are no protagonists in a Godless universe.

Swift certainly did not endorse godlessness, yet the unbridled dynamism of his satire was ignited by atheism in all its forms. As I have shown, Swift's atheistic fictions both assume the eventual rise of unbelief and lament its coming. Swift was profoundly pessimistic regarding religion's prospects in the future. A decade after the initial publication of *Gulliver's Travels*, he

wrote frankly to his friend Charles Ford, "I have long given up all hopes of Church or Christianity." Although he believed there would "always be Christians," he regretted that "the Church … is equally the Aversion of both Kingdoms."[91] This pessimism fueled Swift's artistry, leading him to craft fictions that depict hypothetical worlds in which Christianity's doctrines have been discarded, God's nonexistence is taken for granted, and the Church is little more than a political tool in the hands of a self-interested elite. In this sense, he anticipated the death of God that so excited Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and countless others. At the same time, Swift's infectious indignation helped poison the well of atheism's rise. Swift's prescient insight—which, as we will see, was shared by other eighteenth-century thinkers (and was later developed by Nietzsche, Schmitt, MacIntyre, and a host of secularization theorists)—was that in a world without God traditional notions of meaning and value cannot persist unchanged. This insight has led many over the past three centuries to question the desirability of giving up on God. Swift's indignant dissatisfaction with godlessness, in other words, signals the advent of a modernity not wholly inclined to rooting out the divine. It is of course an irony worthy of Swift himself that the decidedly anti-modern satirist would, via the "modish" forms and detestable personae employed in his greatest works, help guarantee that the modern world is characterized just as much by its hostility to unbelief as it is by unbelief's rise.

III. Swift and Sympathy

I want to conclude this chapter by briefly tracing a submerged ecumenical impulse that emerges whenever Swift takes aim at atheism. Although Swift rarely has good things to say about cultures and religions other than his own, his opposition to atheism occasionally leads him to adopt a much more pluralistic outlook. By highlighting these latent inclinations, I certainly do not mean

[91] *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 505.

to claim Swift as a modern liberal hero. I fully take Claude Rawson's point that Swift's statements about the Irish, for instance, are "usually mixed with gruff contempt for their laziness and ignorance, and the squalor of their mode of life."[92] Swift expresses a similar aversion to Turkish Muslims in *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* (1704), a work that casts Muhammad as an imposter and Muslims as naïve religious enthusiasts. My claim is simply that this sort of contempt is muted, and Swift's identification with such groups is heightened, when he makes atheism his focus. As we will see in later chapters on Phebe Gibbes and William Cowper, this ecumenical impulse would develop more fully as the century progressed, attesting to the surprising inter-faith, inter-cultural alliances many Britons envisioned in response to unbelief. Given Swift's unabashedly un-ecumenical frame of mind, it is noteworthy that such an impulse appears in his works at all.

Swift's critique of British atheism in *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, for example, is accompanied by a somewhat unexpected appreciation of Islamic theism. In a statement infused with irony, the atheistic Abolisher maintains that Muslim Turks "would be more scandalized at our infidelity, than our Christian Neighbours. Because, the *Turks* are not only strict Observers of religious Worship; but, what is worse, *believe a God*; which is more than is required of us, even while we preserve the Name of Christians" (*PW*, 2:38, second emphasis mine). The Turks are not only "too remote" geographically to serve as Britain's allies against continental enemies, but, to Britain's shame, their theism also distances them socially, theologically, and culturally. In this regard, the Turks are closer to Britain's "Christian Neighbours" than Britain itself is. While Swift most certainly felt little attraction to what he perceived to be the "strict" religion of "the *Turks*," in the *Argument* the chasm between real,

[92] Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*, 81.

substantive Christianity and the religions Britain encountered in "*East India*" (*PW*, 2:38) is narrowed for him by the more troubling presence of atheism at home.

In *A Modest Proposal*, Swift's ire at the Proposer's (and thus the English's) exploitative atheistic materialism likewise brings out his compassion for the Irish. The Proposer may believe the Irish are "*savages*" (*PW*, 12:111), but for Swift it is the English who actually perpetuate and enforce that savagery. Towards the end of his proposal, Swift's narrator offers a list of "other Expedients" that could potentially curtail Irish poverty. The Proposer refuses to countenance these expedients in preference to his own, but they are measures Swift himself promoted in his other Irish writings. Among other practical measures the narrator discounts are the "*quitting our Animosities, and Factions*" and "*teaching Landlords to have, at least, one Degree of Mercy towards their Tenants*" (*PW*, 12:116). In contrast to the compassion and forbearance Swift advocates here, the atheistic Proposer instead appeals to the ruling elite's most partisan, chauvinistic inclinations. In addition to targeting impoverished children in his proposal, Swift's narrator targets specifically *Catholic* children. "*Popish Infants*" (*PW*, 12:112) are everywhere, he insists, and the most efficient way to lessen their number is to annihilate them. Swift may have resented the Irish poor and the "*Papists*" (*PW*, 12:114) among them, but when detailing the materialist's "Cruelty" (*PW*, 12:113) Swift tends to view them as victims deserving protection. Swift's bitterness about the Irish situation, in other words, led him to extend at least one degree of mercy to those beyond his theological, cultural pale.

Even the deists, Arians, and Socinians Swift so loathed seemingly gain his respect when atheism rears its head in his works. Thus in the poem "On Dr Rundle, Bishop of Derry" (c. 1735; 1762), Swift defends Thomas Rundle, who had been nominated for the Bishopric of Gloucester, against aspersions cast on him by the then Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson. Rundle was

suspected of Arianism, the ancient heresy that denied Christ's divinity, and was thus eventually denied the post in Gloucester. Shortly after this denial, however, he was appointed to a diocese in Ireland, much to the consternation of Irish prelates, like Swift, who found it absurd that a clergyman considered unfit for an English bishopric should be awarded one in Ireland. Upon becoming acquainted with Rundle, Swift developed a sincere respect for the bishop, regardless of his potential heterodoxy.

"On Dr Rundle" therefore castigates those who rejected Rundle's Gloucester appointment by claiming bluntly, "He's still a Christian more than they" (l. 20). The poem denies Rundle's Arianism—Swift writes that only "fools … doubt his faith in Jesus" (l. 26)—yet it simultaneously suggests, if somewhat facetiously, that Arianism should not disqualify him for the clergy. Even if Rundle were "not so gospel-ward devout" (l. 32), this can be no objection to his appointment, given the fact that his detractors never "owned a power divine" (l. 35) in the first place. Rundle may be an Arian, in other words, but at least "'Tis granted he believes a deity" (l. 24). He is a man of "learning, sense and morals" (l. 22), while his opponents are "rogues who ne'er believed in a God" (l. 30). Curiously, Swift suggests that even "were he heathen, Turk, or Jew" (l. 9), Rundle's devotion to "liberty" (l. 31) would nonetheless make him an effective minister.[93] On the other hand, the atheists Swift lampoons only "plunder and enslave" (l. 34) the Irish. It is better that unorthodox, un-Christian theists serve the Church, Swift avers, than the English atheists who are currently running the show.

Gulliver's Travels provides several similar instances of the ecumenical impulse on display here. Before arriving at the atheistic island of Laputa, Gulliver boards a ship manned by a Japanese Captain and several Dutchmen. After hailing the Dutchmen as "Brother Christian[s],"

[93] By stating that Rundle is a "champion" of "liberty" (l. 31), Swift simply means that he fought against English schemes to oppress the Irish Church. In Swift's mind, the Hanoverian court and many of the Irish bishops treated the Church like a mere political tool and money-making scheme.

Gulliver quickly recognizes his mistake. The Dutch are just as irreligious as the Laputians Gulliver will soon encounter. (Before Gulliver boards a ship bound from Japan to Holland at the end of Book III, the Japanese Emperor allows Gulliver to forego the ceremony of *Yefumi*, which required European traders to trample on the crucifix so that the Japanese could discover and eliminate Christians. Startled at Gulliver's desire to avoid the ceremony, the Emperor notably remarks that Gulliver must not be a "*Hollander*" [*CE*, 16:324]). One particular Dutch sailor requests that Gulliver be "thrown into the Sea." The Japanese captain, however, saves Gulliver's life, refusing to cast him into the depths and loading him with a store of provisions that enables him to survive until reaching Laputa. Gulliver admits he "was sorry to find more Mercy in a Heathen" than in Europeans of a "neighboring Country" (*CE*, 16:220). Throughout this scene, Swift portrays the "heathens" of Japan as admirable and respectable. Although we are told nothing about the Japanese captain's religion, he is, to his credit, notably dissimilar to the irreligious Hollanders who betray Gulliver.

The presumably Jewish Portuguese Captain that rescues Gulliver after he has left Houyhnhnmland also exhibits virtues unavailable to Swift's numerous fictional atheists. The captain, Pedro de Mendez, is both "courteous and generous," and the by now misanthropic, materialistic Gulliver marvels to "find such Civilities from a *Yahoo*" (*CE*, 16:430).[94] Mendez famously does Gulliver "all the Service he [is] able," while Gulliver continues raving at the "Corruption[s] of his Nature" (*CE*, 16:431). As Gulliver's "Hatred and Contempt" for humanity continue to increase, Mendez remains "obliging," displaying a "very good *human* Understanding" before "embrac[ing]" (*CE*, 16:432–33) Gulliver at their parting. Thus, as

[94] For Mendez's identity as either a Sephardim (a Jew residing in the Iberian Peninsula) or a Marrano (a Jew that has converted, or at least pretended to convert, to Christianity), see Womersley's brief footnote on *CE*, 16:430; and Maurice A. Géracht, "Pedro De Mendez: Marrano Jew and Good Samaritan in Swift's *Voyages*," *SStud* 5 (1990): 39–52.

Gulliver sinks further into madness—he will soon refuse to sleep with his wife, choosing instead to converse with his stabled horses "at least four Hours every Day" (*CE*, 16:435), a preference humorously ridiculed by Alexander Pope in his short poem "Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver" (c. 1730)—the Jewish Pedro de Mendez embodies all that Swift believed was lacking in an atheistic universe overrun by Yahoos.

It is worth pointing out in this context that the most virtuous society Swift presents in *Gulliver's Travels* is not a Christian society. The Kingdom of Brobdingnag, in fact, worships multiple "Gods" (*CE*, 16:161), and "their Sabbath" day is "*Wednesday*" (*CE*, 16:140). Of course, these details partially contribute to the *Travels*' status as a mock-travel narrative. The Brobdingnagians' foreign gods, small temple, and odd day of worship make them exotic enough for the snobbish European Gulliver to offer commentary upon. The irony is that although Gulliver sees them as backward and "narrow," their commitment to virtue, piety, and practical morality makes them much more admirable than Swift's modish narrator. Like the virtuous heathens Swift lauds in "A Letter to a Young Gentleman," they cannot be blamed for not adhering to a revelation they have never received. Their commitment to their gods and their refusal to fight over particular religious doctrines, which Gulliver will later refer to as "things indifferent" (*CE*, 16:363), make them fit models for imitation, even for the Swift-esque Christian committed to the Established Church.

Jonathan Swift never went as far as his friend Alexander Pope in declaring, as Pope did in his "Universal Prayer," that religious people of all times and places essentially worship the same "Father of all." In Pope's reckoning, God is "In every Clime ador'd, / By Saint, by Savage, and by Sage, / Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!" (ll. 1–4). Swift never accepted this strain of pluralism. Yet as the instances cited above suggest, when confronted with the possibility of atheism, Swift

was more than capable of extending sympathy and respect to those outside of his theological purview. This antipathy towards unbelief helps explain, perhaps, how for all his bluster about the necessity of the Established Church Swift could form lasting, mutually respectful friendships with those who disagreed with his core religious tenets. In a world in which atheism was thought to be on the rise, Swift was more than happy to ally himself with those he considered to be virtuous theists, men like Rundle, Pope, and Bolingbroke.[95] So long as their doctrines admitted the existence of a higher power and their lives bore that belief out, Swift willingly overlooked their disagreements as "things indifferent." There were obviously limits to Swift's sympathy, for the only figure to whom he *never* extended a hand of friendship was, of course, the atheist.

[95] In a letter to Pope dated February 7, 1735/6, Swift jokes about the two men's religious differences before offering an ecumenical olive branch: "Pray be so kind to out-live me, and then die as soon as you please, but without pain, and let us meet in a better place, if my Religion will permit, but rather my Virtue, although much unequal to yours." See *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 457.

CHAPTER TWO

Sarah Fielding: The Limits of Self in *David Simple* and *Volume the Last*

The ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless … The novel form is like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness.

Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*[1]

Now when Jesus saw great multitudes about him, he gave commandment to depart unto the other side. And a certain scribe came, and said unto him, Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said to him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.

Matthew 8:18–20 (AV)

In a recent defense of what he calls "soft atheism," the philosopher Philip Kitcher makes a startling admission: secularists should be troubled by the fact that, historically, unbelief has failed to supply adequate resources for community, sociability, and fellow feeling. Sympathy, according to Kitcher, is thus an urgent point of concern for modern secular society: "there are no serious opportunities, outside the synagogues and churches and mosques, for fellowship with all the dimensions religious communities can provide." In "secular settings," Kitcher writes, "the necessary words go unspoken, the spread of sympathy into others' lives is checked, goals are decided and pursued largely alone." Given this assumption, he concludes that the secular world regrettably "forfeits the most significant aspects of community life."[2]

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[1] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (1920; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 41.

[2] Philip Kitcher, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 120–21. "Soft atheism," according to Kitcher, is a form of unbelief that denies the existence of anything transcendent (and thus God) based on the fact that all world religions "are, almost certainly, false" (19). However, the modifier "soft" allows for the unlikely possibility that science will one day discover evidence of transcendence.

Whatever one makes of Kitcher's claims, and despite the fact that Kitcher himself believes that there is no necessary, logical connection between belief and sympathy, his statement is noteworthy for the ways in which it frankly recapitulates an understanding of unbelief that first attained prominence in the long eighteenth century. Indeed, the alignment of belief with "fellowship," "sympathy," and "community" was one of the key components in eighteenth-century theists' multi-faceted assault against unbelief. As this chapter argues, eighteenth-century moral philosophers, divines, and literati almost unanimously considered theism a necessary ingredient in sustaining community and social stability. With this correlation in place, atheists were, of course, denied the capacity for human sympathy. That a self-avowed atheist like Kitcher still worries over unbelief's ability to foster such sympathy bespeaks the incredible reach and enduring cultural resonance of Enlightenment conceptions of atheism.

In order to make this case, this chapter focuses on two mid-century novels by Sarah Fielding: *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) and its sequel, *Volume the Last* (1753). In these fictions, Fielding notably employs atheism to explore both the limits of modern selfhood and the limits of literary representation. In fact, both novels extensively interrogate what Misty Anderson refers to as "Lockean and later Scottish Enlightenment epistemologies of the self."[3] Like the early eighteenth-century moral philosophers, whom I examine in the chapter's first section, Fielding casts the atheist as the fundamental incarnation of a completely autonomous Lockean self. More to the point, she raises the issue of that self's ability (or, more accurately, inability) to integrate successfully into a wider community defined by developing notions of civility, sociability, and fellow feeling. Unsurprisingly, this atheistic self is found wanting. In Fielding's estimation, the atheist's "happiness centers only in [himself]" (*David Simple*, 8), and "the greatest

[3] Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism*, 12.

Sufferings that can happen to his Fellow-Creatures, have no sort of Effect on him" (56). As a result, he is "much an Enemy to himself, and to all Mankind" (223). For Fielding, then, a truly modern, sociable self is a believing self. If, as Sarah Knott argues, sensibility offered eighteenth-century Britons a "peculiar mode of self," one that was constituted by social relationships and that was "secularized, but … not hostile to religion," Fielding's novels testify that this uniquely modern mode of self was, in the eighteenth century at least, available only to theists.[4]

This argument impacts not only our understanding of the eighteenth-century relationship between self, sociability, and belief, but also our understanding of the early novel as well. In fact, critics of the novel routinely cast the form as an overwhelmingly godless affair. According to Lukács, for instance, the novel form is characterized by a "brutal materiality" that leaves no room for the spiritual. It thus contrasts sharply with the ancient epics of Greece and Rome, which depict a much more "rounded world." In epic, form and essence are homogenous and each individual life is tied directly to some overarching transcendental purpose. For Lukács, epic therefore bears witness to the "totality" of the ancient mindset; it thrives in a world dominated by "community," "completeness," "roundness," and "wholeness." The novel, on the other hand, is "the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem." In other words, it arises at the exact historical moment when the epic worldview collapses, when the "concealed totality of life" is revealed as a fiction and the transcendent is written off as nonexistent. In short, the novel is a thoroughgoing formal expression of the "abandonment of the world by God."[5]

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[4] Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution*, 59, 57.

[5] Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 58, 33, 66, 56, 60, 97. In contrast to Lukács, who views the novel's lack of totality as problematic, Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia" provides a much more positive assessment of the form's "impious," disparate nature. See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).

Despite its histrionics and its sweeping generalizations, Lukács's account has been incredibly influential. In his seminal study of the novel's "formal realism," for example, Ian Watt agrees with Lukács that transcendence was no longer possible in the commercially driven, middle-class society that first gave rise to the novel. Novels are quite simply the product of "secularization," a process that "produced an essentially man-centered world, and one in which the individual was responsible for his own scale of moral and social values." Hence, while Watt spends a considerable amount of time detailing the novel's debt to Puritanism, he nonetheless considers the novel as Puritanism's thoroughly secularized, godless descendant; the novel depicts "the individual's *secular* pilgrimage," and it "exclude[s] whatever is not vouched for by the senses." With this in mind, Watt follows Lukács and baldly contends that the novel is the "epic of a world forsaken by God."[6]

Building on Watt's work, Michael McKeon agrees that the novel is at least partly the result of the "early modern secularization crisis." However, McKeon is much more sensitive than both Lukács and Watt to the ways in which early novels retain and incorporate traces of the sacred. McKeon reads the early novel as an experiment in "how to tell the truth in narrative," a "cultural instrument designed to confront" the secularization crisis head-on, on the level of both "narrative form and content." The novel is therefore one cultural site among others where new ideas and values collide with more traditional worldviews. In McKeon's dialectical thinking, this confrontation takes one of two forms in the early novel: either secularization preserves belief as "a faithful accommodation or translation of the sacred to a profane world" or it causes belief to be "swallowed up" by a "secular reduction of it." By documenting this epistemological crisis, McKeon has done much to increase our awareness of the ways in which the early novel

[6] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 177, 156, 180, 84. Emphasis added.

incorporates "traditional categories" of thinking not as "alien intrusion[s] from without," but as "abstracted" and "constituted" categories that are part of the novel's "own domain."[7]

Yet despite acknowledging that secularization is a rather complex process, McKeon nonetheless implies that it heralds belief's eventual demise. The early novel's commitment to "naïve empiricism," the subjection of all beliefs to "material tests of veracity," is, in the long run, a victory for atheism: "the materialist language of empiricism does not so much mediate sacred truth as comprehend it within its own triumphant epistemology." Empiricism, to put a finer point on it, "is revealed to be not a sophisticated weapon against atheism but its supremely powerful ally." The novel's reliance on the "evidence of the senses" is a profound move away from belief in God, even if it was not intended as such by the early novelists themselves. The form allows only for a "secularized sort of belief," one that recognizes not "an ineffably greater power that lies beyond us, but in the actuality of the fictive." Notwithstanding the broad cultural influence of what McKeon calls "extreme skepticism" and its analogous social counterpart "conservative ideology," both of which assert the utility of traditional value systems left behind by the naïve empiricism, the dialectical advancement of the novel form ensures that, sooner or later, belief and the novel become mutually exclusive categories.[8]

More recent studies continue this trend. To take what is perhaps the most prominent example: in her celebrated essay on "The Rise of Fictionality," Catherine Gallagher argues that

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[7] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, 64, 27, 22, 65, 21.

[8] Ibid., 81, 87, 89, 128. McKeon repeatedly claims that the "increased explicitness and urgency" of eighteenth-century apologetics—defenses of providence and traditional Christian belief, in other words—is a "sign" that belief's viability had severely "diminished" by the middle of the century. This claim is not without some merit. Still, it is worth pointing out that this logic can be applied just as well to arguments against belief. Surely McKeon's claim begs the question: is the urgency and explicitness of the freethinkers, Percy Shelley, or the New Atheists also a sign that their arguments' "persuasive power" (169) is diminishing? As I suggest below, an understanding of secularization that allows for the coexistence of both belief and unbelief in the modern world is preferable to such broad assertions about belief's viability.

the early novel "discovered fiction" by training readers in "an attitude of disbelief." Instead of distinguishing themselves from fantastic romances, these novels emphasized their fictionality in order to open up "a seemingly free space in which to temporarily indulge imaginative play." That is to say, eighteenth-century novels eliminated the dangers of fiction—the possibility that readers would be tricked or deluded by narrative content—by advertising themselves as "suppositional speculation[s]" rather than as accurate representations of reality. Although Gallagher does not address belief in God directly, the implications of her argument are consistent with those put forward by Lukács, Watt, and McKeon. The novel, she writes, "activates our skepticism," and it "discourages" one habit of mind in particular: "faith." What is more, Gallagher understands modernity in general as a historically specific phenomenon that "encourages disbelief." Modernity is for this reason incredibly "fiction-friendly." As the ideal literary form of a secularized modernity, the novel is necessarily in the service of unbelief.[9]

By focusing here on the fiction of Sarah Fielding, I hope to nuance this pervasive notion of the novel's godlessness. There is certainly something to be said for the novel's role in the development of both fiction writ large and the process of secularization. At the same time, the scholarly accounts cited above often evince an outmoded understanding of secularization that often equates the "secular" with "atheism" and complete unbelief. To the extent that the novel is secular, in these accounts, it promotes atheism. By making this assumption, such studies have trouble accommodating novels outside the realist tradition (the didactic novels of Sarah Fielding, for instance), and they fail to recognize that, as I demonstrate below, even deistic empiricists like Lord Kames (1696–1782) found atheism worrisome and were devoted to condemning and dismantling unbelief. If the empiricists viewed their philosophies as refutations of unbelief, one

[9] Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 344–45, 347, 346, 345. As I suggest below, my argument in this chapter is indebted to Gallagher's understanding of novels as "suppositional speculations."

might ask, why are we so quick to consider the early novel's empiricism atheistic? Whatever one's response, it is clear that traditional novel criticism makes little sense of novels written by outspoken theists, from Fielding in the eighteenth century, to Dostoevsky in the nineteenth, to a handful of authors in the twentieth and twenty-first (Wendell Berry, Shusaku Endo, and Marilynne Robinson, to name only a few notable writers).[10] Moreover, the prevailing critical wisdom neglects the fact that, as this chapter's epigraphs indicate, the Lukácsian trope of novelistic "homelessness"—of the universe's hostility to transcendence—is capable of being recast in an altogether religious register. Novelistic homelessness is not necessarily a testament to "the abandonment of the world by God." Rather, it is equally capable of testifying to an antithetical position, one that Fielding herself takes in *Volume the Last*: God exists, but the world has abandoned him.

In making this argument, I would not be so cavalier as to call for a wholesale rejection of the novel form's critical history. What I am suggesting, however, is that a more capacious notion of secularization helps remedy the critical blind spots inherent in the existing criticism. As Charles Taylor points out, instead of signaling the demise of belief, secularization actually consists in "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." Secularity, for Taylor, is simply a "plurality of options."[11] This plurality is on display in the early novel. With this in mind, I suggest that we read Sarah Fielding's promotion of theism not merely as a skeptical response to the atheistic empiricism of her day, as McKeon's otherwise elucidating study might suggest. Instead of rejecting Lockean

[10] *The Brothers Karamazov* is an especially large stumbling block for Lukács and Watt. While Watt dismisses Dostoevsky's promotion of theism in a few short sentences, Lukács simply states, "Dostoevsky did not write novels." See Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152; and Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 84.

[11] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

empiricism wholesale, Fielding confidently adapts Locke's empirical system, drawing out its most theistic impulses in order to argue for the necessity of belief in cultivating sympathy and sociability. Thus, like many other prominent eighteenth-century novelists (including Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Sarah Scott, and, as my next chapter argues, Phebe Gibbes), Fielding positions her novels firmly on the side of belief.

How she does so, however, is somewhat counterintuitive. Rather than depicting a world in which theism is the prevailing mindset and in which God is clearly active, *David Simple* and *Volume the Last* both present fictional worlds lacking God's presence almost entirely. Aside from David and the small handful of benevolent friends he eventually encounters, atheism rules the roost in both texts, and Fielding's imagined London is overrun with self-interest, avarice, and human suffering. David Simple's tortuous journey to find a friend is indeed meant to make these novels' readers skeptical. The goal is not to make them skeptical about belief, however. It is to induce skepticism about *un*belief. Fielding's two novels are therefore not simply didactic. They are speculative ventures that present readers with two competing visions of modernity: one characterized by David and his sympathetic, believing circle of friends, and the other by the hostile, atheistic world that dominates Fielding's fictional London. Given these options, Fielding staunchly rejects unbelief, and she expects her readers to do the same.

Thus if the prevailing irony of the novel form is, for Lukács, its desire to present fully "totalized," transcendent worlds while simultaneously insisting that such totality can only exist in the realm of the novel itself, Fielding's novels operate using an opposite logic. For in *David Simple* and *Volume the Last*, the fictional worlds on display are not totalities in any sense of the term. On the contrary, Fielding asks her readers to consider the world as if God did not exist, to

speculate about the ramifications of a universe in which God is not.[12] In short, she ironically portrays a fractured, haphazard world in order to instill belief in a world that is a totality—a world in which God is. For Fielding, the novel is thus the ideal literary form for training readers in belief.

I. Moral Philosophy, Sociability, and the Existence of God

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke famously outlines his groundbreaking empirical epistemology, arguing that all ideas are derived solely from "Observation and Experience." According to Locke, the "*materials of thinking*" are supplied primarily by "*external, sensible Objects*" and, secondarily, by "*the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves*." In Locke's account, this secondary process of "Reflection" notably demarcates the boundary between childhood and adulthood. A child is not prone to reflection because the "sensible Objects" he or she observes have not yet made deep "Impressions" on the child's mind. Once these impressions are made, however, reflection is possible, and the mind becomes conscious of itself *as* a conscious self. In other words, acquiring selfhood requires that one move beyond a child-like fascination with the external world by shifting the focus of one's thinking inward. As Locke puts it, in adulthood "the Understanding turns inward upon its self, *reflects* on its own *Operations*, and makes [its Ideas] the Object of its own Contemplation."[13]

[12] I am indebted here to Sarah Tindal Kareem's useful notion of the novel as a speculative literary form. Building on Gallagher's work, Kareem argues that novels (and fiction more generally) often present the "untrue" *as if* it were true, effectively molding our understanding of the "real" world. Fiction, in other words, is not mimetic. Instead, it portrays "another world," one that is like our world yet is wholly distinct from it. See Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially 31, 38, 53, 64.

Throughout the eighteenth century, moral philosophers from Shaftesbury (1671–1713) to Adam Smith (1723–1790) attempted to accommodate this Lockean account of the self to developing notions of politeness, sociability, and sympathy. As Sarah Knott notes in her illuminating account of what she calls the "socially turned self," these philosophers took Locke's "sensible self" and argued that it could only be "made and expressed in social interaction by sensations of sympathy and fellow feeling." For such philosophers, Knott argues, "the self's impulses were socially productive," and sympathy was the essential means by which the self achieved complete social integration.[14] If Locke accorded to the self a fundamental inward turn, eighteenth-century moral philosophers insisted that the self's social viability depended upon its impulses being once again directed outwards, towards other sensible, sympathetic selves.

In making this turn to the sociable, the moral philosophers who followed in Locke's wake overwhelmingly rejected Locke's hedonistic premise—put forth in chapters 41 through 43 of the *Essay*'s second book—that the ultimate spring of human actions and desires, and thus the basis of what we call "*good* and *evil*," is nothing more than "Pleasure and Pain."[15] In the words of the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), the moral philosophers renounced the idea that "'tis the *Prospect of private Happiness*, which … is the sole *Motive of Election*," arguing instead that sociability, sympathy, and an innate "moral sense" are the primary actuators of

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[13] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 104, 105, 107.

[14] Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution*, 5, 13, 10.

[15] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 258–59. In their critiques of Lockean hedonism, however, Locke's followers almost unanimously ignored his claim, made at the outset of the *Essay*'s third book, that "GOD … designed Man for a sociable Creature, [and] made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Type of Society" (402).

human conduct.[16] For his part, Hutcheson believed that the notion of a sociable moral sense was not opposed to Locke's "Scheme," but was a "necessary Explication of it."[17] Lord Kames likewise argued that humans are "social animal[s],"[18] and, like Hutcheson before him, he adapted Locke's system to fit this social emphasis. Whereas Locke had imagined the mature, reflecting self as one that is concerned first and foremost with its own happiness, Kames nuanced Locke's narrative of growth and maturity, insisting that a truly reflective human self is paradoxically selfless. It is motivated not by pain and pleasure, but by social affections:

> Beginning with surveying particular objects, we lay in a stock of simple ideas. Our affections keep pace, being all directed to particular objects; and during this period, we are governed chiefly by our passions and appetites. As soon as we begin to form complex and general ideas, these also become the objects of our affections. Then it is, that love to our country begins to unfold itself, benevolence to our neighbours and acquaintance, affection for our relations. We acquire by degrees the taste of public good, and of being useful in life. The pleasures of society are more and more relished, selfish passions are tamed and subdued, and social affections gain the ascendant. We refine upon the pleasures of society, because our happiness consists chiefly in social intercourse.[19]

The mature self, according to Kames, does not turn inwards; it "unfolds" outwards. It is motivated by "affections" grounded wholly in "social intercourse." In sum, such a self is sympathetic, not hedonistic.

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[16] Of course, the moral philosophers quibbled over the exact function of the moral sense, and their systems diverge at several key points. Kames, for instance, places much more emphasis on justice, duty, and the will than does Hutcheson. Whereas Hutcheson believes the moral sense determines our actions immediately, Kames insists that the moral sense does not make decisions itself, as that is the purview of our will. Despite their various disagreements, however, the moral philosophers almost unanimously rejected Lockean hedonism.

[17] Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections: With Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728; Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 134, 157.

[18] Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion: Several Essays Added Concerning the Proof of a Deity*, 3rd ed. (1751, 1779; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 88.

[19] Ibid., 63–64.

Yet despite its perceived hedonism, Locke's epistemological system is not necessarily hostile to belief, the aspersions of his orthodox detractors notwithstanding.[20] In fact, Locke considered his empiricism consistent with, and even supportive of, belief in God, a fact that troubles novel criticism's propensity to equate empiricism and unbelief. Although the idea of God is not innate, the *Essay* argues, it is nonetheless suitable "to the Principles of common Reason." God, for Locke, is therefore as demonstrable as the principles of mathematics: "'Tis as certain, that there is a God, as that the opposite Angles, made by the intersection of two straight Lines, are equal." And, while Locke offers several arguments for God's existence throughout the long *Essay*, his most extensive engagement with the issue occurs in Book IV, Chapter 10, "Of Our Knowledge of the Existence of a GOD." The argument Locke presents here is curious: because we know that we exist and that we each have something inside of us we call our "self"—that "conscious thinking thing," as he famously defines it—we can reasonably infer the existence of an infinitely greater, more intelligent "self" (of God, in other words). The empirical self is thus for Locke evidence of God's existence: in order to demonstrate God's existence, "we need go no farther than our selves, and that undoubted Knowledge we have of our own Existence." The reflecting Lockean self cannot help but be convinced of a God, and this conviction both guarantees that the self's perceptions are reliable and gives moral laws their force.[21]

By arguing for the primacy of human sympathy, the eighteenth-century moral philosophers placed even greater stress on belief, and their opposition to atheism was much more explicit than Locke's. Locke's famous pupil, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, for instance, was

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[20] For an overview of the ways in which empiricism was thought compatible with theism, see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*. Locke's foremost critic was, of course, Bishop Stillingfleet. See his *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1697). Stillingfleet advocated a philosophical dualism that he feared was absent in Locke's empiricism. Locke's system, Stillingfleet argued, had opened the door to infidelity, heterodoxy, and unbelief.

[21] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 90, 94–95, 341, 619, 564, 622.

averse to citing radical egoism as sociability's foundation, and, more critically, he believed that sociability depended entirely upon theism. As Lawrence Klein notes, Shaftesbury's notion of politeness was situated "in the realm of social interaction and exchange, where it governed relations of the self with others." Politeness was only possible for Shaftesbury, however, because "there was a natural fit between the human make-up and the moral imperatives structured into the cosmos" by the Deity.[22] As Shaftesbury himself puts it, the social affections that draw us to others can only be reliable if they are part of the divinely-sanctioned "order and government of the universe."[23] Shaftesbury therefore considered his polite philosophy as a response to Epicureanism, which he thought defective for its "highly individualistic and nominalistic attitude." Philosophy was for Shaftesbury a choice between "Atoms or Deity," and he aligned himself firmly on the side of the latter.[24]

Francis Hutcheson also grounds his philosophy in belief. Indeed, if Locke attempts to prove God's existence by arguing for an infinitely great "self," Hutcheson follows his lead and argues for an infinitely great "moral" agent. The moral sense, according to Hutcheson, "leads us into *Apprehensions of a* DEITY," apprehensions that are both natural and "agreeable." We are intuitively inclined to acknowledge a "Universal MIND with Power and Knowledge." And, because we have an innate moral sense, we can reasonably assume that God does as well. By making an "Analogy to our selves," we "conceive something correspondent to our *Affections* in the DIVINITY." The argument is, for all intents and purposes, circular: the moral sense points to both God's existence and his goodness, and we can trust the moral sense's intuitions because it

[22] See Lawrence Eliot Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2004), 4, 56.

[23] Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 229.

[24] Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 60–61.

has been bestowed by a sympathetic God who delights in "universal Happiness." Based on this line of reasoning, Hutcheson insists that the "only sure Supports to a good Mind"—the only reasonable inducements to virtue, that is—are the "Belief of a DEITY, a PROVIDENCE, and a *future state*." To put it a bit differently, we should follow our moral sense and encourage sympathy because to do so is consistent with, and at the same time gives evidence for, God's nature and his cosmic purposes. Like Locke, therefore, Hutcheson extrapolates God's existence from the existence of the human self. To know that God exists, we need look no further than "the Evidences of divine Goodness appearing in the *Structure of our own Nature*." In turn, if God cares about human society and fellow feeling, we should too.[25]

To provide one final example of moral philosophy's advocacy of belief: In his *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751, rev. 1758 and 1779), Kames rejects the metaphysical speculations of theists like Samuel Clarke and offers a much less abstruse justification for theism. For Kames, God must exist not because we can rationally prove that he exists, but because we simply *feel* that he exists. We have an "innate sense" that leads us to God: God "hath not left us to collect his existence from abstract or perplexed arguments, but makes us *perceive intuitively* that he exists." By using this "internal sense," we rightly determine that the "whole world" is "an effect produced by some invisible designing cause." Reason confirms both "the certainty of [God's] being" and "his perfections," but it comes into play only after we have intuited the "existence" of this "first Supreme Cause." Doubting the reliability of this intuition, Kames asserts, would have dire consequences for human society. Doing so would introduce "universal skepticism" about *all* of our senses, thus undermining the moral, sympathetic program Kames advocates throughout the *Essays*. As he puts it in the famous "deist prayer" with which he

[25] Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, 116–17, 123.

concludes the work, "We must doubt of our own existence, if we can doubt of [God's]." The sociable self is, once again, sufficient evidence of God's existence, and Kames, like Hutcheson and Shaftesbury before him, presents theism and sociability as mutually constitutive projects.[26]

It should come as no surprise, then, that these philosophers consistently oppose atheism while denying atheists access to sympathy, sociability, and fellow feeling. Of the writers cited above, Shaftesbury is the most generous to nonbelievers. Yet, while Shaftesbury concedes that atheists are not entirely evil (after all, they too have been created by God), he does so only because he cannot imagine the possibility that a "perfect atheist" even exists in the first place: "it seems hard to pronounce of any man that 'he is absolutely an atheist,'" just as it is "hard to pronounce of any man that 'he is absolutely corrupt or vicious', there being few, even of the horridest villains, who have not something of virtue." Absolute atheists cannot exist, in other words, because the idea of an absolutely evil being is incompatible with Shaftesbury's conception of natural human virtue and his opposition to a Hobbesian understanding of humans as primarily selfish, fearful beings. Moreover, atheism is for Shaftesbury a merely negative philosophy, one that, while it does not necessarily incline its adherents to vice, nonetheless offers no positive resources for producing sociability and virtue. As he puts it, "it can be no great strengthening to the moral affection, no great support to the pure love of goodness and virtue, to suppose that there is neither goodness nor beauty in the whole itself nor any example or precedent of good affection in any superior being." Lack of belief thus tends "to the weaning of the affections," and it "little" disposes a person "to love or admire anything." Because of this,

[26] Kames, *Essays*, 232, 233, 235. Emphasis added. Despite his apologetic argument's seeming closeness to that put forth by Locke, Kames nonetheless rejects Locke's as "a very infirm demonstration" of God's existence (202). The point of contention seems to be that Locke infers God's existence logically, whereas Kames wishes to ground this inference in an "antecedent conviction" that is wholly independent of the reasoning process. The rub, of course, is that by arguing on behalf of this intuitive conviction Kames also calls into question its self-evidence.

theism is clearly to be preferred to unbelief: "And thus the perfection and height of virtue must be owing to the belief of a god."[27]

Kames and Hutcheson are much more vitriolic in their denunciations of both atheists and atheism. Hutcheson, for instance, argues that "unaffected atheism," or atheism that stems not from ignorance but from an intentional denial of God's existence, "directly argues want of good Affection." One who doubts the existence of a deity simply cannot be virtuous, according to Hutcheson: "Nay, one cannot call that Temper *entire* and *complete*, which has not the strongest Affection toward the greatest Benefactor, and the most worthy Object." In short, if one's "Temper be good," he or she will, without fail, "arise to the Knowledge of the DEITY."[28] Kames concurs. In fact, in Kames's reckoning, atheists are indubitably persons of a "peevish and gloomy cast of mind." Atheists find "no comfort" in either friendship or virtue, as both are, in the atheist's system, products of "mere chance"—they are illusory. Worse still, atheism is the resort of those who are "brutishly involved in corporeal pleasures."[29] Atheism is therefore a form of barbarism, and in sharp contrast to various modern scholars who argue that "modernity seems almost necessarily to culminate in atheism,"[30] Kames contends that a civilized modernity is one shorn of unbelief: "Society," he writes,

> teaches mankind self-denial, and improves the moral sense. Disciplined in society, the taste for order and regularity unfolds itself by degrees: the social affections gain the ascendant; and the morality of actions takes firm hold of the mind. In this improved state,

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[27] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 166, 177, 189, 192.

[28] Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, 195, 197, 202.

[29] Kames, *Essays*, 203, 204, 207.

[30] Gavin Hyman, "Atheism in Modern History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27–46, 43. Peter Watson also advocates this view in his recent *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought To Live Since the Death of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

> the beauty of creation makes a strong impression; and we can never cease admiring the excellency of that Cause, who is the author of so many beautiful effects.[31]

Civilization is here characterized by "social affections," "morality," and "improvement," all of which notably culminate in the recognition of the "Cause" and "author" of creation. The atheist, therefore, denies the deity because he is *not* refined; he has improved neither his affections nor his morals, and because of this his denial of God is paramount to an acknowledgment of his own barbarity. In the modern, sociable world Kames imagines, atheists have no part.

Of course, by arguing for the centrality of theism in eighteenth-century philosophies of sympathy and sociability, I have so far ignored the period's foremost British skeptic: David Hume. By sidestepping Hume, however, I do not intend to suggest that his philosophy is not critical to an understanding of sympathy in the period. However, I do wish to emphasize just what an outlier Hume's take on sympathy actually is. In fact, by according Hume pride of place in our narratives of eighteenth-century philosophies of sympathy, we all too easily lose sight of the role theism played in making Locke's reflective, autonomous self sociable. To be sure, Hume was completely willing to leave God out of his theory of human sympathy. At the same time, Hume's version of the sympathetic self adheres much more closely to Lockean hedonism than do the versions of self outlined by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Kames. In Hume, the basis of human sympathy is always only the human self. And, as a result, sympathy is always in danger of breaking down or collapsing. Indeed, despite Hume's confidence in the sociable nature of human beings, when reading Hume's philosophy one cannot quite shake the feeling that sympathy fails just as often as it succeeds.

In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), for example, Hume agrees with Locke that "we cannot go beyond experience," and Hume's notions of "impressions" and "ideas" correspond

[31] Kames, *Essays*, 208.

to Locke's "sensation" and "reflection," respectively. However, Hume also claims that humans are inherently social and that all our actions are driven by sympathy: "We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society," he famously writes, and whatever "other passions we may be actuated by … the soul animating principle of them all is sympathy." However, Hume grafts sympathy and sociability onto Locke's inwardly turned self by arguing that we feel for others only when there is a discernible relationship or connection between us. In brief, "custom and relation [to ourselves] make us enter deeply into the sentiments of others." For example, we feel pity (a pleasurable feeling, according to Hume) for someone in physical distress because his suffering reminds us of our own relatively comfortable situation: "His pain, consider'd in itself, is painful to us, but augments the idea of our happiness, and gives us pleasure." However, if his distress is too great, or if there is no cultural, consanguineal, or social connection between us, sympathy becomes impossible and his pain will only cause disgust. Thus while Hume retains much of Locke's understanding of the self, creating a philosophy in which self-interest (potentially) produces social cohesion, the possibility always remains that our "impression" of ourselves will be too strong, preventing us from relating to others and eliminating sympathy altogether.[32]

Hume's notion of sympathy is helpful because it demonstrates the inherent tension many moral philosophers perceived between the idea of a socially turned self and the autonomous Lockean self described in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. After all, one might object that, taken to its logical extreme, the idea of a completely autonomous individual, one given entirely to "reflecting" on his own needs and desires, is wholly incompatible with the notion of a sympathetic, socially turned self, especially if, like Mandeville or Hume, we ground

[32] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5, 234–35, 250, 242.

that social turn in purely selfish motives. An entirely selfish individual might exhibit sympathy from time to time, but this sympathetic pose will be abandoned as soon as it no longer serves his purposes. In other words, one might object that sympathy must be grounded in something more than mere self-interest, or that sympathy itself is a necessary but insufficient condition of sociability and societal cohesion.

It is with this in mind that most eighteenth-century moral philosophers argued so vigorously for belief in God. As Kames put it in one of several critiques of Hume's philosophy scattered throughout his *Essays*, to argue that the self is innately driven to sympathy while also insisting that "the chief foundation of morality" is "utility," and not God-given virtue, is to undermine the efficacy and reliability of sympathy itself. Basing morality in "utility" alone, according to Kames, is to deny that morality exists in the first place. The point for Kames is that if justice, virtue, and morality are not structured into a divinely ordered cosmos, sympathy itself is not virtuous. "Virtue," in other words, is what gives meaning to all "benevolence"; it is simply "much more essential" than fellow feeling. Kames's critique of Hume, of Hume's casting morality as mere "utility," is thus a subtle way of both denouncing a godless understanding of sympathy and accusing Hume of atheism. As Kames states, "Does not this look as if [Hume] thought that man was made by chance?"[33] Hume's sympathetic philosophy was found wanting, then, because it neglected the God that Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Kames found so necessary for making Lockean selves sociable.

II. The Limits of Self in *David Simple*

This discourse of theistic sensibility reverberated in the early novel, particularly in the novels of Sarah Fielding, which give extensive narrative form to eighteenth-century understandings of

[33] Kames, *Essays*, 82–83.

sympathy and belief. Given her religious heritage, it is unsurprising that Fielding's works promote belief. Fielding's immediate forebears were staunchly Anglican. Her paternal grandfather, for instance, was the distinguished Latitudinarian John Fielding (c. 1650–1698), and her maternal grandmother, Lady Gould (c. 1654–1733), who raised Sarah and oversaw her education for much of her childhood, was notably anti-Catholic. When Sarah was not yet ten years old, Lady Gould sued for (and won) custody of the six Fielding children—Sarah, Henry, their three sisters, and their younger brother Edmund—after their father sold off much of their inheritance and married the openly Catholic widow Anne Rapha. Indignant at her son-in-law's marriage to a papist, Lady Gould insisted that her grandchildren be raised as respectable Anglicans, not as Catholics.[34] Yet despite her family's particular religious leanings—or perhaps because of them, considering the Latitudinarian strain in her background—Fielding's works contain few specific doctrinal statements. Instead, they advocate a pious yet broadly defined theism, one that melds elements of her inherited Anglicanism with the more deistic promotions of belief made by the century's moral philosophers.

Fielding's personal feelings about the moral philosophers, and Shaftesbury in particular, were complicated, to say the least. In part 4, scene 2 of her experimental novel *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable* (1754), for instance, she vehemently critiques Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, particularly his idea that ridicule is "THE TEST OF TRUTH" and his dismissal of the afterlife as an inducement to virtuous living. Such ideas, according to Fielding, are the product of "specious reasonings," and they make humans believe themselves "superior to the supreme being." Thus while there is little evidence that Fielding was herself a devout believer in specific Christian doctrines, she apparently found Shaftesbury's deistic God a bit too impersonal and aloof. Still,

[34] See Martin C. Battestin, "Fielding, Henry (1707–1754)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), online, accessed August 5, 2016, available: http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9400.

Fielding was not opposed to Shaftesbury's system *tout court*. She candidly admired his promotion of good affections, or "candor," and believed that he "proves his taste and shews his understanding" at several points throughout the *Characteristics*.[35] Most importantly, Fielding's fictions follow Shaftesbury and his philosophical successors in presenting the deity as the basis of human sympathy and sociability, without defending a particular Christian confession or creed.

With this in mind, I want to turn now to Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), a mid-century novel that echoes many of the arguments and positions put forth by the eighteenth-century moral philosophers while also borrowing, as I demonstrate below, from the period's Anglican sermonizing. The novel parallels Hutcheson's philosophy, in particular, as both *David Simple* and Hutcheson's *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* focus extensively on the merits of friendship. Indeed, *David Simple*'s entire plot revolves around its protagonist's search for "a real Friend" (21). What is more, David's confidence that true friendship actually exists is grounded in a logic incredibly akin to that of Hutcheson's argument for divine goodness. David knows that true friends must exist somewhere in the world because he *himself* exists: "his own Mind was a Proof to him, that Generosity, Good-nature, and a Capacity for real Friendship, were to be found in the World" (35). The sympathetic self, for David, is proof that other sympathetic selves exist and that goodness and generosity are real, substantial qualities. In positing the existence of true friendship in this way, *David Simple* simultaneously contends for the necessity of belief in cultivating friendship and sympathy. Belief in God, for Fielding, provides a fixed standard of sympathy that does not rely upon the subjective, and thus unreliable, nature of either Lockean hedonism or Humean self-interest. If

[35] See Sarah Fielding, *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable in Three Volumes*, vol. 2 (London, 1754), 275–309, 292, 283, 303.

David Simple is a novel concerned with making Lockean selves sociable, it does so, I argue, by advocating theism and vociferously rejecting atheism.

The novel is filled with the language of Lockean empiricism. For instance, David declares early in the novel that it is "to Experience alone he must owe his Knowledge" (21). In addition, the novel's characters continually engage in "Reflection" (7) and comment on their "Sensations" (56), "Impressions" (194), and "Ideas" (55). While employing this Lockean terminology, Fielding simultaneously advocates the compassionate "social temper" (38) of her eponymous hero, and her narrator avers that "where Selfishness reigns in any of the Community, there can be no Happiness" (20). The novel depicts a world of reflecting Lockean selves, while didactically insisting that such selves should not be self*ish*.

Yet, if David's (and the reader's) knowledge must come from "Experience alone," the world we experience in Fielding's novel suggests that selfishness is mankind's *modus operandi*. *David Simple* depicts a world brimming with self-interested individuals, one that, with the exception of the small community formed by David and his three friends, is notably lacking in sympathy and fellow feeling. On his journey through London in search of true friendship, David encounters one selfish individual after another: from his first love, Miss Johnson, who is obsessed with her "own Mind" (27) and calls off their engagement because it does not adequately serve her "own Interest" (24), to Mr. Spatter, who receives an unseemly amount of "Delight in *abusing* People" (65), to the anonymous men and women of the city, who are always "tearing one another to pieces from Envy, and … sacrificing each other for every trifling Interest" (36), the characters David meets repeatedly testify that "self" and "sympathy" are, for all intents and purposes, antonyms in Fielding's novelistic world.

The pervasiveness of self-interest is especially problematic for the novel's women. In fact, two of the only amiable characters David encounters in his quest for friendship—the young, destitute Cynthia and her equally impoverished friend Camilla—effectively illustrate the trials and financial obstacles faced throughout the eighteenth century by unmarried and downwardly mobile women of the lower gentry, a class to which Fielding herself belonged. Because their employment options were extremely limited and their dowries were often insufficient to attract well-to-do husbands, such women were largely dependent upon financial support provided by their fathers and other male relatives. When this support failed to materialize, as it did for Sarah Fielding, whose own insolvent father offered her no financial support, women of Fielding's class could quickly find themselves in dire straits. In *David Simple*, Fielding uses the respective histories of Cynthia and Camilla to demonstrate how self-interest, fatherly neglect, and financial competition between women only exacerbate already existing gender disparities.[36]

For instance, as Cynthia relates her history just over a third of the way into the novel we learn that her present low circumstances—she lives in a slavish "State of Dependance" with a domineering, cruel "Lady" (89)[37]—are the result of her sisters' envy and her father's desire to marry her off for purely "*pecuniary*" (91) purposes. Jealous of her "Parts and wit," and "partial to themselves" (80), Cynthia's sisters continually treated her with "Contempt" (81) when she was a child. For his part, Cynthia's father "did not trouble himself much" (84) about her until he decided to make "a bargain," offering her to a "Country Gentleman" to whom she was "a perfect Stranger" (85). Infuriated by Cynthia's rejection of this proposal—she declares sarcastically that

[36] See Peter Sabor's Introduction to Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple*, viii–ix.

[37] Cynthia directly compares her situation to that of African slaves, claiming that the "Lady" treats her like "a *Creature* born to be [a] *Slave*" (90). Ironically referencing the prohibition of slavery on British soil, she continues, "as we are born in a Country where there is no such thing as Slavery, People lay Plots to draw in others to be their Slaves, with the pretence of having an Affection for them" (91).

she "had no kind of Ambition" to be a man's "*upper servant*" or to be sold in a "Trade" (86, 85)—her father hastily "made a *Will*, in which he left [her] nothing" (87). Unfortunately for Cynthia, her father died shortly after making the will, leaving her financial fate in the hands of her ever-malicious siblings. Once more mocking her "Wit *and* Genius," the pair insisted that she "could do very well without money" (87). With nowhere else to turn, Cynthia was therefore forced to enter the tyrannical "Lady's" service. Although David's generosity allows her to part with the Lady, and though her eventual marriage to the noble Valentine supplies her with complete financial security, her history stands as a damning critique of unmitigated self-interest, financial opportunism, and pervasive gender inequalities. According to Fielding, women like Cynthia are exceptionally vulnerable to the self-interested actions of others.

The history of Cynthia's friend Camilla emphasizes this point further. While her youth was spent in relative tranquility, Camilla's life was turned upside down after her mother's death and her father's decision to marry the avaricious Livia. Livia's love of "her Husband's Fortune" quickly led her to consider his children, Camilla and her brother Valentine, as her "greatest Enemies." And, because Livia believed "her Interest" to be "incompatible" (111) with her stepchildren's, she repeatedly attempted to alienate them from their father's affections, while also convincing the household servants that it was "their Interest" to be as "disobliging" (113) as possible to the young innocents. Furthermore, once Livia successfully convinced her new husband to banish his children, she refused to relent, spreading vicious rumors throughout the countryside that the two had willingly fled in order to engage in the "abominable Sin of Incest" (125). The rumor quickly took root, causing Camilla and Valentine's nearby relatives to deny succor. When Valentine contracted a fever that left him indisposed, Camilla was thus forced to ask strangers for financial support. She first appealed to local "Gentlemen," who ignobly

responded as if she were a prostitute; in exchange for "Necessaries," the "Gentlemen" demanded "a Price … too dear for any thing they could do for me" (129), Camilla sadly recalls. Refusing to compromise her virtue, Camilla instead donned a disguise, dying her skin and wearing a fake humpback so that "no one would be under any Temptation from [her] Person." However, the men responded not with pity, but with derision, laughing at her "Misery" as if it were "no manner of Consequence what a *Wretch* suffer'd" (130). In a final act of desperation, Camilla went out in rags to seek alms, only to be robbed by a group of beggars who demanded she stop "begging in their District" (131). Like Cynthia, Camilla's encounter with the benevolent David, whom she marries at the novel's end, ultimately proves to be her saving grace. Nonetheless, her mistreatment at the hands of her stepmother and her experiences throughout Valentine's sickness indicate her own precarious position as an impoverished, unmarried woman. More generally, Camilla's misfortunes illustrate the utter depravity that dominates much of *David Simple*'s novelistic world.

The character most representative of *David Simple*'s hostile universe is David's brother Daniel, who effectively propels David on his quest to find "a real Friend" (21) by robbing him of his inheritance early in the novel, an act notably echoed by Cynthia's aforementioned exclusion from her father's will. If David is "benevolent, sensitive, and idealistic," one of the "earliest examples of the Man of Feeling in English fiction,"[38] his brother Daniel stands as his most obvious foil. Daniel is determined "to promote his own Interest" at all costs, and the novel describes him as "one of those Wretches, whose only Happiness centers in themselves" (8). He is to some degree capable of entering into the thoughts and feelings of others, yet his version of sympathy is perverse at best; he can "find out an ill-disposed Mind in another, by comparing it

[38] Gerard A. Barker, "'David Simple': The Novel of Sensibility in Embryo," *Modern Language Studies* 12.2 (1982): 69.

with what passed in his own Bosom" (8), but he absolutely cannot identify with David's more virtuous disposition.

Bryan Mangano has recently claimed that it is significant that "no thought of religious consolation enters David's head" when Daniel betrays him. For Mangano, it is equally noteworthy that the novel makes no reference to a "deity or spirit" at this point. What David wants is not God, but a friend, and in Mangano's argument the novel's imagined reader supplies this friendship, listening in on David's thoughts "in the place of both God and friend."[39] Yet Mangano's reading of Daniel's betrayal, David's response, and the novel's more general endorsement of friendship ignores one of the novel's most salient plot twists: Daniel, it turns out, is an atheist. He is incapable of true sensibility because, unlike David, he refuses to acknowledge the God who, in Fielding's mind, makes each human life valuable. In fact, Daniel boldly claims that humans are "*low groveling Creatures*" made "by Chance" (137). Intriguingly, throughout the scene in which Daniel makes this claim (he likewise claims that "Accident is the Cause of every thing" [138]), Fielding's narrator continually refers to plot developments as "accidents." For instance, upon Daniel's spotting Cynthia alone and Daniel's realization that he has been given a prime opportunity to seduce her, the narrator states, "*Accident* threw that in his way, which he knew not how to bring about for himself." Moreover, Daniel has "*accidentally* roved into the Garden" (140, 141, emphases added) where Cynthia is sitting. By ascribing Daniel's misdeeds to "accident," Fielding slyly mocks his atheism, implying that it is nothing more than an excuse to abuse others. Indeed, while David's "every Action proceed[s] from Obedience to the *Divine Will*," thereby preventing him from seeing "another's Sufferings without Pain, nor his Pleasures

[39] Bryan Mangano, "Ideal Friendship and the Paradoxes of Narration in Sarah Fielding's David Simple," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 26.2 (2013): 172–73.

without sharing them" (59), Daniel avoids sympathetic attachments because "he had persuaded himself there was no such thing as any one Virtue in the World" (139).

When the novel begins, however, Daniel is not yet an unbeliever. As a clergyman recounts near the novel's end, after betraying his brother Daniel devoted himself to "*Wine* and *Women*," and he stopped at nothing to indulge his "Passions." A slave to his "own Inclinations," Daniel repeatedly attempted to "take hold of the present Moment for Pleasure," disregarding the possibility of an "*uncertain Futurity*" (223). Daniel quickly began making false promises to women in order to seduce them ("*Promises* cost me nothing," he declares in recollection), and he "made no manner of Scruple" of leaving his conquests destitute and penniless. Once tired of women, Daniel wasted all his money on a gaming addiction. In order to recuperate his losses, he resumed his libertine ways, yet he now sought women's "*Money*" instead of their "*Persons*" (224). Upon being threatened by a woman's angry brother who had discovered Daniel's falsehood, Daniel once again began a new "Scheme": in a perverse echo of David's quest for friendship, Daniel became a sort of professional friend, "*Canting*" on "the Value of *real Friendship*" in order to dupe his companions out of their money. When this scheme failed as well, Daniel assumed another "affected" character, that of a religious devotee. In the end, however, his "Propensity to all manner of Vice was so strong" (225) that he gave up the act, abandoning all "Sentiments of Humanity." Finally, he "began to curse the Author of [his] being," and assumed the dubious mantle of the "Atheist" (226).

Daniel's story, as this brief recapitulation makes clear, is full of twists and turns, and on one level it suggests that Daniel is not *really* an atheist. After all, Daniel simply cannot make up his mind about which path to follow in order to best serve his "own Interest" (226). The atheist is just one of many identities Daniel assumes throughout his life, each one as artificial and

insincere as the last. Daniel himself explicitly gestures at his atheism's artificiality. He claims to have "turn[ed] Atheist" only because he was overwhelmed by the "Fear of believing there was a *Deity*." His unbelief is not based entirely on conviction, then, and because of this he must "flatter" himself "into a fixed Opinion" (226) that he actually is an atheist. More tellingly, Daniel's atheism completely disappears when he dies shortly before the novel's conclusion: "his fancied Infidelity vanished into nothing, and in its room succeeded Horrors impossible to be described" (223). Daniel's story thus seems to imply that one's beliefs are entirely dependent upon one's behavior—Daniel converts to atheism only because he is addicted to vice—and that, because of this, there is no such thing as real unbelief. There can be "fancied" atheists, but not sincere atheists.[40]

At the same time, however, the novel paradoxically proposes that Daniel's unbelief is an essential feature of his character. It is worth noting that when Daniel's history is related to the reader, he is referred to simply as "the Atheist." His identity as David's brother is hidden from the reader until well after his death. In fact, while Book III, Chapter 3 contains an account of an "atheist" who argues against God's existence during a stagecoach ride with Daniel's friend Cynthia, a clergyman, and a fop, the atheist remains anonymous throughout the entire chapter. Likewise, in Book IV, Chapter 7 ("In which is related the Life of an Atheist"), the clergyman relates the atheist's life history, as given to him by the atheist himself, without once providing the atheist's proper name. It is not until the following chapter, in which the atheist reveals that his most heinous crime was "cheat[ing his] *fond—good* Brother of his Share of his Father's

[40] The possibility of sincere unbelief was hotly debated in the period. As Richard Bentley put it in his 1692 Boyle Lectures, Christian apologists commonly appealed to an "Innate Idea of God, imprinted upon every Soul of Man at their Creation, in Characters that can never be defaced. Whence it will follow, that Speculative Atheism does only subsist in *Our* speculation" (*Eight Sermons*, 5). Bentley rejected this idea, but it remained common throughout the eighteenth century. See David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*, 1–47.

Patrimony" (228), that we learn that the atheist is Daniel himself.[41] By withholding the atheist's true identity, Fielding thus employs a novelistic device akin to what Sarah Kareem, following Ian Watt, refers to as "delayed decoding," a technique that involves describing an object without naming it. More generally, according to Kareem, novels that spool out plot "in fits and starts," as *David Simple* does here, effectively imitate God's "obscure providential expressions" in narrative form by withholding key information and explaining events only after the fact. Yet while Kareem highlights such formal devices to show how fiction presents mundane, ordinary objects as wonderful and "enchanted," even after the Enlightenment "raz[ed] belief to the ground,"[42] *David Simple*'s delayed revelation serves a rather different purpose: it buttresses belief by maligning its opposite. Indeed, Daniel's atheism is meant to startle Fielding's readers while simultaneously explaining Daniel's character flaws retroactively.

Daniel's conversion to atheism, in other words, is the moment at which his story climaxes, the logical (to Fielding) end point of Daniel's life. By referring to Daniel as "the atheist" throughout these chapters, Fielding effectively casts his atheism as his most salient quality. Although Daniel himself may ultimately reject his atheism as affected, then, Fielding's delayed revelation causes his story to converge with that of "the atheist" in such a way as to punctuate the fact that Daniel *is* "the atheist." To put it a bit differently, the suspense that builds during the atheist's story and the surprise solicited when he and Daniel are revealed to be one and the same suggest that the final character Daniel assumes in his life is the one he has been all

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[41] As do most critics, Mangano fails to acknowledge Daniel's atheism. He claims that Daniel is a "character type," but rather than pointing to the character's irreligion, Mangano argues that Daniel merely represents one who affects "the appearance of friendship." See Mangano, "Ideal Friendship," 178. The only studies that so much as mention atheism in the novel, so far as I am aware, are Linda Bree's *Sarah Fielding* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 31; and Felicity Nussbaum's "Effeminacy and Femininity: Domestic Prose Satire and *David Simple*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11.4 (1999): 421–44. Neither study details the broader implications of Daniel's atheism.

[42] Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 22, 23, 24, 57, 34, 17.

along. Daniel's unbelief may be the product of his behavior, but the opposite is paradoxically true as well; Daniel is vicious because of who he is, because of how he instinctually thinks about the world.

In fact, Daniel ends his life history by claiming that he was always who he became in the end. He was born self-serving, unsympathetic, and lacking compassion: "I came into the World, the most *wretched* of all Mortals" (227), he states. This claim harkens back to a moment much earlier in the novel, when David vaguely intuits that "something in *Daniel*'s *mind*" (8, second emphasis mine) is not quite right. At this point, the narrator avers that Daniel's essential flaw, one which David is unable to comprehend fully, is his desire to "promote his own Interest" (8) without regard for others. Daniel's selfish thoughts and desires are the root of his subsequent misdeeds. Yet by revealing Daniel to be an atheist much later in the novel, redefining his character in terms of unbelief, Fielding equates that self-interest with atheism. In this way, she makes Daniel's disclosure central to our understanding of the novel's plot. Fielding forces her readers to reconsider the implications of both Daniel's betrayal and the world of self-interest David encounters as a result of that betrayal.

Daniel's betrayal of David is, as James Kim puts it, "the novel's primal scene, the unresolved trauma that the rest of the narrative obsessively strives to rework."[43] For Kim, David's fall from economic privilege represents "the melancholy of the downwardly mobile lesser gentry" to which Sarah Fielding herself belonged. Situating *David Simple* in the early modern value crisis mapped out by J. G. A. Pocock, in which "the shift to a credit-based economy created various forms of 'imaginary property' whose rabid circulation through Exchange Alley infected and ultimately undermined the stability of so-called 'real-property,"

[43] James Kim, "Mourning, Melancholia, and Modernity: Sentimental Irony and Downward Mobility in *David Simple*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22.3 (2010): 490.

Kim reads the novel as an expression of Fielding's distaste for "the fallen world of modernity," a world that seeks worth in market valuations rather than in the "intrinsic worth of things."[44] While this reading is right so far as it goes, what I am suggesting here is that for Fielding a "fallen" world of modernity is, in contrast to a modernity governed by David's believing mindset, a world of atheism. If Daniel is emblematic of the novel's countless economically self-interested characters, such economic self-interest is concomitant with unbelief. The London Fielding imagines is destitute of sympathy, in other words, because it is a London that no longer believes in God.

Curiously, Daniel uses this ubiquitous godlessness as the cornerstone of his arguments against the deity. Daniel points out that men are excessively self-interested, ridiculing the clergy in particular for their "*Interest*" in "our *Money*" (138). The problem of human evil is for Daniel the most damning evidence against God's existence:

> For my part, considering the numberless Evils there are in the World, it is amazing to me how any one can have the Assurance to talk of the Deity … [I]f a good Being, who really loved his Creatures, had been the Cause of our coming into this World, undoubtedly we should have been made in such a manner, that we should neither have had Temptations, nor Power to injure ourselves. (138)

Despite the fact that the clergyman to whom this argument is addressed responds by saying that these "were no arguments against the Existence of a Deity" (139) and that the narrator later calls Daniel's statements "ridiculous Arguments" (223), Fielding's novel never provides a straight-forward rejoinder to Daniel's unbelief.[45] The novel silences Daniel's objections only by overturning the coach in which he rides, breaking his leg and, ultimately, ending his life in the

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[44] Ibid., 493, 481, 483.

[45] The clergyman does, however, assert that humankind should not be so quick to complain about evils that it has brought upon itself (a drunk man complaining about the effects of his drunkenness, for instance). Shaftesbury rejects an imagined argument from evil on similar grounds. See his *Characteristics*, 230.

process (142, 228). Given the overwhelming amount of vice David witnesses throughout *David Simple*, such a *deus ex machina* seems an insufficient and unsatisfactory response to Daniel's argument from evil, yet Fielding appears wholly uninterested in providing a more direct apology for David's God.

Instead, the novel responds to Daniel's critiques by employing a longstanding rhetorical trope prominent in the period's sermons. Like *David Simple*, many late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century divines preached against atheism not by providing rational, intellectual defenses of belief, but by imagining godless worlds in which God's hypothetical nonexistence is signaled primarily by the absence of sympathy, charity, and compassion. As early as March 30, 1694, for instance, the Bishop of Durham, William Talbot (1658–1730), delivered a sermon before the Queen on "The Unreasonableness and Mischief of ATHEISM." Talbot's sermon, first printed in 1725, contends that "Belief" is requisite to "all Moral Vertues," including charity and sympathy. If God does not exist, Talbot asserts, individuals may reasonably follow their "Interest or Inclinations," no matter how their actions affect others. He then notably proceeds to imagine a world overrun by atheism. He asks his auditors to "consider [the atheist] making Proselytes of those he trades or converses with," before speculating on what such a mass conversion to atheism would entail. A world filled with atheists, according to Talbot, would be one filled with "Perjury," "Corruption," and "Bribery." In short, the "Bands and Cement of Humane Society" would be completely broken. Thus, "if there be no superior invisible Being," there is nothing to "hinder" humans from following whatever "Purposes they please." Talbot concludes by completely denouncing this speculative atheistic world, expressing his dismay at the mere

thought of such a world materializing in reality: "What a distracted, wild, uncomfortable, and dangerous Place must a Nation be, where such Principles should generally prevail?"[46]

This rhetorical trope continued unabated well into the eighteenth century. For instance, in a 1738 sermon on the Bible's most famous condemnation of atheism (Psalm 14:1), John Balguy (1686–1748) maintains that God is "the grand Support and Security of human Society." After making this claim, Balguy spends a considerable amount of time "suppos[ing]" what the world would be like were there "no Awe of a Supreme Being, no Terrors of a future Judgment to restrain us." Balguy's conclusion is predictably dire: if a "Community of Atheists" were to come into existence, "Injuries and Outrages, Fraud and Falsehood, would prevail and spread far and wide, and the Iniquities of Mankind know no Bounds." A community of atheists would be no community at all, according to Balguy, because only "an invisible Power" can adequately restrain evil and promote virtue. In God's absence, men and women would "follow their several Humours and Interests without Remorse or Controul." Without God, that is, humanity is utterly incapable of sociability and sensibility.[47]

Half a decade after the publication of Fielding's novel, the trope was still in wide use. Thus, in a 1749 sermon on "The Folly of Denying, or of Wishing against, the Existence of the Deity," the Irish John Orr, Rector of Maryborough, begins one of several assaults on unbelief by supposedly taking the atheist's premises for granted:

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[46] William Talbot, *Twelve Sermons Preach'd on Several Subjects and Occasions* (London, 1725), 22, 27, 30, 31. A second edition of Talbot's *Sermons* was published in 1731.

[47] John Balguy, *Five Sermons on the Following Subjects: viz. The Extreme Folly and Wretchedness of an Atheistic Inclination* (London, 1738), 4–6. In his preface to the *Sermons*, Balguy notably distinguishes atheism from deism, arguing that while he is opposed to the latter it is nonetheless much more amenable to virtue and Christianity than atheism is. If "*Christianity should fail*," he writes, "*natural Principles*" would not become "worthless" as long as belief in a benevolent deity subsists. Balguy's sermons reflect eighteenth-century theists' tendency to argue on behalf of theism in general, rather than a particular brand of Christianity, setting the stage for the ecumenical impulse I have charted in the works of Jonathan Swift and, in following chapters, Phebe Gibbes and William Cowper.

> But let us suppose, according to the Atheistick Pretences, though the Thing is certainly impossible, that the Universe could subsist, and Things could go on, just as we find they do, in the natural World, without a Deity and a Providence; yet, how in this Case, would the Happiness, either of human Society, or of particular Persons be provided for?

Because "the Belief of a Deity" is the "Foundation" and "Cause" of "Virtue" for Orr, a world that operates "according to the Atheistick Pretences" would be a troubling world indeed. In such a world, men would "give way to the Impulses of every Passion"; they would "sink into a State of great Degeneracy," introducing "into the World a most dismal Scene of Distraction and Confusion." Worse still, all humankind would be "insupportable to one another."[48] Like many eighteenth-century divines, then, Orr describes a counterfactual, imaginative world dominated by atheists in order to inculcate a desire for belief in his auditors. While sermons like those described here do occasionally provide positive arguments for the existence of a deity, their success is reliant in large part on the persuasive force of this speculative, rhetorical move.

Fielding's refusal to supply an explicit response to Daniel's atheistic critiques reads differently in light of this trend. In fact, I suggest that *David Simple* incorporates this rhetorical trope, giving it narrative form and, in the process, providing a broader, more diffuse response to Daniel's doubts.[49] In other words, the novel replicates the "as if" dynamic of the period's sermons in order to demonstrate the follies of a world dominated by unbelief. Rather than discounting Daniel's premises, Fielding's novel accepts them: mankind *is* self-serving, evil, and driven by

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[48] John Orr, *Sermons upon the Following Subjects. The Natural Difference between Moral Good and Evil. The Efficacy of Religious Faith. The True Happiness of...*, vol. 1 (London, 1749), 100–1, 103.

[49] As Tera Pettella has argued, the novel also "incorporates a number of formal characteristics" derived from the period's devotional reading practices, including "monotonous successions of inset narratives, calamitous trials, as well as irksome (to modern sensibilities) didacticism." While Pettella doesn't mention the story of Daniel's atheism, it is one of many ways in which the novel is informed by devotionals, which were often "indexical, thematic, and driven by topical application." See Tera H. Pettella, "Devotional Reading and the Novel Form: The Case of David Simple," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24.2 (2011): 280, 282.

economic motives. Daniel's forged will is itself the ultimate expression of "Fraud and Falsehood" (Balguy), of "Perjury" (Talbot). And, the novel's London is surely a "State of Great Degeneracy" (Orr), overwhelmed as it is by self-interest, greed, and corruption. From Mr. Johnson, who continually deliberates "which way his Interest would be best promoted" (25), and the three anonymous sisters, who bear "an inveterate Hatred to each other" (38), to Camilla's "Cunning" (111) stepmother and the treacherous Daniel himself, David's journey is quite simply littered with self-serving, unsympathetic individuals. Thus the clergyman does not need to provide an explicit response to Daniel's arguments because, for Fielding, the entirety of *David Simple* successfully refutes them. Fielding's fictional portrayal of an as-if world devoid of belief contravenes atheism in the same way the period's sermons do: not by arguing against it, but by repeatedly presenting it as isolating and undesirable.

As a corollary, *David Simple* follows both the period's sermons and its moral philosophers in suggesting that if society is to adhere to emerging ideals of sensibility, sociability, and the like, theism is an absolute prerequisite. To be sure, the novel's narrator considers David's friendship with Cynthia, Camilla, and Valentine—the only virtuous characters he manages to meet during his quest—as "a Mark of divine Providence" (223). Atheism, according to Fielding, attempts to "take from Men's Minds the greatest Comfort they can possibly enjoy" (223), eliminating the possibility of true friendship by making each individual man a god unto himself. Conversely, as Fielding puts it in *Volume the Last*, theism causes David to "totally neglect all Thoughts of himself" (335), to "forget himself" (327), as it were. By extending his thoughts to a God, David is able to "extend his Views far enough" to consider not only his own happiness, but also the happiness of his "little Society" (237) of friends as well.

The novel ends by directly asserting the preeminence of this "little society" and the belief of which it is emblematic, urging readers to imitate David's theistic sensibility in the real world. If the novel depicts multiple "as if" visions of reality (Daniel's London and David's circle of friends), it firmly enjoins readers to imitate David's sensibility and to shun Daniel's selfish unbelief. Fielding's narrator closes the novel with an explicit appeal: "In short, it is this Tenderness and Benevolence, which alone can give any real Pleasure, and which I most sincerely wish to all my readers" (238). This closing gambit is one of a handful of moments in which the narrator comments on the action of *David Simple*, offering moral advice to, and "sincerely" sympathizing with, Fielding's imagined reader. While the narrator is mostly unobtrusive, she occasionally appeals to the reader's own experience to heighten his or her "Idea" of particular scenes (66, 74, 230), briefly expresses value judgments about particular characters (she refers to David as "poor Mr. *Simple*" and is openly disgusted by the atheist: "every thing without was an Indication of the Confusion within" [74, 137]), and promotes sympathy and virtue (238). Most notably, however, the narrator interjects in order to highlight her desire to forge an "Acquaintance" between David, his friends, and the novel's readers. This acquaintance, according to the narrator, will make readers familiar with the "Scheme of Life" followed by David's "whole Company," allowing them to translate such sociability into the world outside of the novel (236). In other words, the sociability on display in the novel's content is mirrored by the novel's form: the narrator befriends the reader, introduces him or her to David and his circle, and this sociable circle trains the reader for virtuous, theistic sociability in the real world.

The "true Use of Books," according to the theory of fiction outlined in Fielding's *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy* (1749), is "to make you wiser and better,"[50] a

[50] Sarah Fielding, *The Governess, or, The Little Female Academy*, (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2005), 46.

position to which *David Simple*'s narrator likewise subscribes. Thus, if Henry Fielding's narrators in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749) are like "genial raconteurs" telling tales in some "wayside inn,"[51] *David Simple*'s narrator is more of a genial schoolmaster. Like *The Governess*'s magnanimous Mrs. Teachum, who provides only occasional commentary on her young students' personal histories, insuring that her wards fill their minds with "Benevolence and Love,"[52] *David Simple*'s narrator routinely cedes control of the narrative to the novel's characters themselves. Book II, Chapters 6 through 8 are narrated in first-person by David's friend Cynthia; his friend Camilla narrates Book II, Chapter 10 through Book III, Chapter 2; the tragic story of the French Isabelle is told by Isabelle herself in Book III, Chapter 6 through Book IV, Chapter 2; and, finally, Cynthia assumes narrative control again in Book IV, Chapter 4, where she recounts the history of a young woman named Corinna. Fielding's narrator allows for a variety of voices throughout the novel, inserting the reader into an imagined community that cultivates virtue, sympathy, and compassion. This formal heteroglossia not only trains readers in sympathy and sociability, of course. It also trains them in the belief modeled by the novel's protagonists. In short, *David Simple* offers readers practice in forging sympathetic bonds, and it reinforces the idea that such bonds are evidence for, and only subsist when grounded in recognition of, a deity.

David's community of friends gives an optimistic twist to the novel's ending and ultimately discredits the unbelieving, "as if" world represented by his atheistic brother. For despite the ubiquity of selfishness in the novel's imagined London, the community of friends David and the reader find by novel's end testifies that David's faith was not misplaced all along. Fielding's London is a nightmare vision of a world gone wrong, and David's community

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[51] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 285.

[52] Sarah Fielding, *The Governess,* 176.

effectively distances that nightmare from the real world of the novel's readers. Furthermore, Daniel's death consummates the victory of David's worldview. Though Daniel robs David's inheritance early in the novel, Daniel's death adds to David's "Income" (231), restoring his finances and enabling him and his friends to live comfortably with one another. In the end, David's sociable, theistic community thrives because atheism has been weeded out of Fielding's novel. The novel's promotion of sympathy is dependent upon atheism's rejection, and, given the various narrative voices heard throughout *David Simple*, it is telling that Daniel's narrative voice is entirely absent. While David's friends are permitted to tell their stories *in propria persona*, Daniel's "Life" is narrated by someone else entirely: the clergyman who never frankly responds to Daniel's atheistic arguments.

III. Providence, Poetic Justice, and *Volume the Last*

In the years following *David Simple*'s publication, however, Sarah Fielding's optimism faded. While this can partially be attributed to the personal hardships she endured in the early 1750s—in 1750–1751 her three sisters died in a span of seven short months, and she herself was sued for debt in 1751[53]—Fielding's confidence in the worldly prospects of belief receded considerably in the years immediately following *David Simple*. This shift is reflected in her 1749 *Remarks on Clarissa*, in which she expresses her allegiance to the Christian understanding of poetic justice promulgated in Samuel Richardson's highly influential mid-century novel. In the postscript to *Clarissa*, Richardson famously claimed that justice is not possible "on this side of the grave" and that "HEAVEN *only*" rewards virtue and punishes vice. His novel thus depicts the "suffering virtue" of its eponymous heroine at great length and refrains from rewarding her virtue until she

[53] For a biographical overview of Fielding's life, see Bree, *Sarah Fielding*, 1–28.

has died and, presumably, entered the afterlife. Richardson's "*Christian system*" demanded a tragic ending wholly incompatible with the worldly optimism of his earlier *Pamela* (1740).[54]

Fielding's *Remarks* wholeheartedly supports Richardson's decision to end *Clarissa* with its heroine's death, and it vehemently defends Richardson's tragic ending by supporting his Christian notion of poetic justice. The *Remarks* cites Richardson's postscript as decisive, claiming that Clarissa's death is in keeping with God's governance of the universe:

> Rightly I think in the Author's Postscript is it observed, that what is called poetical Justice is chimerical, or rather anti-providential Justice; for God makes his Sun to shine alike on the Just and the Unjust. Why then should Man invent a kind of imaginary Justice, making the common Accidents of Life turn out favourable to the Virtuous only? Vain would be the Comforts spoken to the Virtuous in Affliction, in the sacred Writings, if Affliction could not be their Lot.[55]

According to this aesthetic theory, happy endings should be eschewed in favor of "a truly Christian Philosophy" that promotes a "lively Hope of *future* Happiness," rather than happiness in the here and now.[56] By aligning herself with Richardson's moral agenda, then, Fielding disavowed what she now saw as the "imaginary" idealism of her first novel. To be true to reality, her *Remarks* suggests, an author should painstakingly detail the "Vicissitudes of this transitory Life," and her characters should endure hardship without prevailing and "without repining."[57] Novels, that is, should provide examples of Christian fortitude, not Christian triumph.

Fielding's sequel to *David Simple*, entitled *Volume the Last* and published in 1753, takes up her new appreciation for Richardson's tragic aesthetics, depicting a world far grimmer than

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[54] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985), 1496, 1498, 1495, 1498.

[55] Sarah Fielding, *Remarks on Clarissa*, introduction by Peter Sabor (1749; Los Angeles, CA: The Augustan Reprint Society, 1985), 49.

[56] Ibid., 55. Emphasis added.

[57] Ibid., 38.

anything on display in her earlier fiction.[58] Fielding concludes David's story by complicating her earlier assumption that godly friendship is an adequate recompense for the evils of this world. As in *David Simple*, atheism reigns supreme in *Volume the Last*, and it is Orgueil, described in the earlier novel as one who "will own no other *Deity*" (56) than himself, who takes up the novel's mantle of staunch unbeliever. Throughout the novel, David's "Dependence on God" is contrasted with Orgueil's "Self-dependence," "Self-adoration," "Self-worship," and "Self-admiration" (332–33). While David and his wife Camilla instill into their children's "Minds the Principles of true Religion" (256), constantly reading "History and the Bible" (257) to them in order to cultivate benevolence and fend off "Malevolence" (256), Orgueil sees no need for piety. Moreover, if David and his friends seek out the comforts of sociability, constantly partaking of "the highest Enjoyment that innocent and sprightly Conversation can give" (267), Orgueil believes himself to be entirely self-sufficient, and he cannot "be moved by Compassion" (295) for anyone who does not meet his rigid standards of such sufficiency. Selfless as always, David's thoughts are constantly employed on "his Childrens and his *Camilla*'s wants" (286). Orgueil, on the other hand, thinks only of "preserv[ing] and increase[ing] his Admiration of his own Wisdom" (287). He is, in short, devoid of all "tender Sensations" (56), and both he and his wife display an obstinate "Incapacity of Feeling" (266) and "Hardness of Heart" (328). Like *David Simple*'s Daniel, then, Orgueil is a novelistic embodiment of an insensible atheist.

[58] As Linda Bree points out, "Fielding and her friends considered *Volume the Last* the true sequel to *David Simple*," despite the fact that Fielding's *Familiar Letters Between the Characters of David Simple and Others* (1747) was the novel's immediate successor. *Familiar Letters* follows *David Simple* in critiquing and satirizing unsavory character types, yet it never advances David's story. In fact, it has almost no plot, and it rarely references the events of *David Simple*. While David and his friends occasionally correspond throughout the work, their letters have almost nothing to say about their own circumstances. Instead, the volume's epistles focus on characters completely unconnected to *David Simple*, none of whom is said to be an atheist. See Bree, *Sarah Fielding*, 47.

As such, it is Orgueil who sets in motion David's downfall, sitting idly by as David's friends and family die off one-by-one. Early in the novel, Orgueil irrevocably sunders the union between David and his companions, swiftly undoing all that Fielding's protagonist had achieved in *David Simple*. Lacking money, David and his friend Valentine turn to Orgueil, who secures Valentine a commission on a "*West-India* Vessel" (265), thus forcing David's "Society to a Separation" (264). This separation proves costly. Left in the care of Mrs. Orgueil, Valentine and Cynthia's daughter is treated with continual contempt, contracting a fever after Mrs. Orgueil forces her to sleep in a garret on wet sheets (270). Despite Camilla's attempts to counteract the "Tyranny of Mrs. *Orgueil*" (272), little Cynthia soon dies, leaving David, his wife, and their children heart-stricken. Worse still, David's daughter Fanny is likewise killed off "by a violent Fever" (294) before David and his family learn that Valentine, too, died of a "raging Fever" (298) that is frequent in the country (Jamaica) to which Orgueil had him sent. From this point on, David's woes only increase: his son Peter dies of smallpox (307); the son who bears his name, little David, is "sickened of the Measles" (325) after a careless visit from Orgueil's infected daughter Henrietta, and he dies within three days; David's daughter Joan also catches the disease and dies of a "galloping Consumption" (325); and, finally, his wife Camilla follows Joan to the grave just two months later (327). Notably, during Camilla's sickness Orgueil "cruelly refused" to aid David's ailing family, instead "sending [David] home with empty Advice to do Impossibilities, and with the Stings of Unkindness in his Heart" (328). Orgueil and his family not only bring about David's misfortunes; their indifference adds insult to injury as well.

In pitting David's suffering against Orgueil's indifference, Fielding invites her readers to compare the two men's respective philosophies. For his part, David is cast as the biblical Job, enduring suffering patiently because his faith in God's goodness is unwavering, no matter what

misfortunes befall him in this life. During Camilla's illness, for instance, we are told that, "like *Job*," David "could almost have contended with the Almighty … But, like his royal Example in the Scripture, though he fasted and prayed whilst his Petition could be granted, yet as soon as it was rejected, he humbly acquiesced, satisfied in the Wisdom as well as the Goodness of the great Disposer of Events" (328). Orgueil's philosophy, on the other hand, is described as a mere "Human Philosophy" that has "little Chance" of bringing "Comfort" in times of distress (328). Orgueil subscribes to a type of neo-Stoicism, denying as he does the usefulness of human passions and insisting on the preeminence of "his own Reason alone" (281). Orgueil will thus not acknowledge the supernatural—he flatly denies the existence of miracles, for example (282)—and he instead worships a wholly human "Idol," an "Omnipotent" God that is ironically at "his Command" (281): himself. In Fielding's reckoning, such a philosophy befits an "Infidel" (281) like Orgueil, but it is utterly useless in life's inevitable moments of suffering. After Camilla's death, the novel makes its position clear:

> Had *David* been an Infidel, not all the Books composed by the wisest Philosophers, would have taken one Arrow from a Heart so sensible as his of every tender Connection. He would have raved to Madness, or wept himself to Death: but when the Christian Hope came over his Mind, that his *Camilla* was really happy,—that the loss was all his own—and that a short Time longer struggling through Life would put an End to all his Sorrows also, and render him happy, his Grief would subside, and patient Resignation take its place. (329)

David's philosophy is one that, from start to finish, perceives the self as peripheral; David's first obligation is to the deity (his "Christian Hope"), and his second is to others (he puts Camilla's happiness before his own). By turning away from himself, David finds the fortitude he needs to endure his "Sorrows." Even when its object is no longer present, sympathy supplies David the hope and strength he needs to carry on through life's vale of tears.

By comparing David to Job, however, Fielding also qualifies her novel's promotion of sympathy and sensibility. After all, the end of Job's story more than makes up for the biblical hero's losses, and Job receives his reward *in this world*. David's losses, on the other hand, are never redressed in Fielding's novel. At the novel's conclusion, David dies still hoping for his compensation. Although Cynthia claims that David's dying moments were full of joy and hope—a "Scene of real Pleasure" (342), as she calls them—David's death nonetheless calls into question sympathy's viability as an effective worldly paradigm. Shortly before he dies, in fact, David declares as much. He avows that he has discovered "the Fallacy of fancying any real or lasting Happiness can arise from an Attachment to Objects subject to Infirmities, Diseases, and to certain Death" (341). Hence, although *Volume the Last* supports *David Simple*'s promotion of theism as an escape from the limits of self-interest, it also suggests that such an escape is not always conducive to earthly happiness. David does not find a redemptive community in *Volume the Last*. His friends are torn from him, and, on a purely formal level, the novel provides no community of mutually reinforcing narrative voices, only the voice of an isolated, omniscient narrator who sees David's pain but does nothing to alleviate it. David can only look to heaven for happiness, and an "attachment" to other human beings, what we might in some sense call sympathy, is no longer commensurate with an attachment to God. Fielding does not expose this rift in order to denounce sympathy as impractical or impious, however. Indeed, its exposure stands as a damning critique of the atheistic, self-interested world that has rendered sympathy so inept.

CHAPTER THREE

Phebe Gibbes: Theism, Gender, and the Orient

As the World goes, your Witty Men are usually distinguish'd by the Liberty they take with Religion, good Manners, or their Neighbour's Reputation: But, GOD be thank'd, it is not yet so bad, as that Women should form Cabals to propagate Atheism and Irreligion.

Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*[1]

The truly intelligent well know, that the Differences and Varieties of created Things are a Ray of His glorious Essence, and that the Contrarities of Constitutions are a Type of His wonderful Attributes; whose complete Power formed all Creatures of the animal, vegetable and material World … He appointed to each Tribe its own Faith, and to every Sect its own Religion … [S]ometimes He is employed with the Attendants upon the Mosque, in counting the sacred Beads; sometimes He is in the Temple, at the Adoration of the Idols; the Intimate of the Mussulman, and the Friend of the Hindoo; the Companion of the Christian, and the Confidant of the Jew.

Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *A Code of Gentoo Laws*[2]

If atheists were imagined as unsympathetic, selfish, and immoral throughout the eighteenth century, they were also imagined almost exclusively as male. Atheism was understood in highly gendered terms, and atheists were believed to be an especial danger to the period's females. In order to illustrate this point more fully, this chapter examines the gendered critique of atheism made by the prolific, but sorely understudied, Phebe Gibbes in her sentimental epistolary novel *The History of Lady Louisa Stroud, and the Honourable Miss Caroline Stretton* (1764). Gibbes's novel, which has yet to receive any scholarly treatment,[3] casts atheism as the root of both sexual

[1] Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage, occasion'd by the Duke & Duchess of Mazarine's case* (London, 1700), 21.

[2] Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits* (London, 1776), 3.

[3] A keyword search on the online MLA International Bibliography yields no results for "Lady Louisa Stroud" or "Louisa Stroud." A search for "Phebe Gibbes", on the other hand, yields a handful of results relating to Gibbes's later novel *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), which I discuss later in this chapter. These

violence and patriarchal abuse. Because atheism, according to one of Gibbes's eponymous heroines, levels distinctions between the brute creation and humanity, it allows men to treat women as if they were no more than their lapdogs or "mere gaudy Insect[s], that flutter for a Season" and then "dwindle into [their] native Dust."[4] On the other hand, belief in a God who will eventually right the cultural and institutional wrongs that beset eighteenth-century Englishwomen is crucial to the women's successful resistance to the novel's villainous male seducers.[5]

Gibbes's belief that atheism affects women negatively was not an outlier. Indeed, writers consistently cast atheism as incongruent with proper female delicacy and sensibility, and the idea of a female atheist was, for many, a simple contradiction in terms. In his *Love of Fame* (1728), for instance, Edward Young comments on the rarity of "she-atheists," claiming that, "since nature's birth," one "ne'er appeared on earth" until freethinkers like Anthony Collins began seducing women to irreligion. Despite the freethinkers' influence, however, Young maintains that "most nymphs a godhead own," even as he satirizes women's propensity to ignore God's commands in favor of "transient joy[s]." In the end, Young insists that the "timorous" nature of

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results are consistent with Michael J. Franklin's claim that "only three of Phebe Gibbes's novels [*The Life and Adventures of Mr Francis Clive* (1764); *The Fruitless Repentance; or, the History of Miss Kitty Le Fever* (1769); and *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789)] have received any modern critical attention whatsoever." See his introduction to Phebe Gibbes, *Hartly House, Calcutta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), xiii–xiv. References to *Hartly House* are to this edition and are cited parenthetically.

[4] Phebe Gibbes, *The History of Lady Louisa Stroud, and the Honourable Miss Caroline Stretton*, vol. 1 (London: F. Noble and J. Noble, 1764), 53–54. Subsequent references are to this edition and include both volume number and page number. The novel was published anonymously, as were most of Gibbes's novels. However, the title page to Gibbes's *The Niece; or, the History of Sukey Thornby* (London, 1788) advertises itself as a novel "*By Mrs. P. Gibbes, Author of the History of Lady* LOUISA STROUD."

[5] See *Lady Louisa Stroud*, 1:169, where Louisa declares her faith that God will eventually enact "supreme Vengeance" on rakish men.

most females is inconsistent with the "daring character" required to be an atheist.[6] The Abbé D'Ancourt makes a similar claim in his *The Lady's Preceptor*, which was translated into English in 1743. According to D'Ancourt, an "ill-natured," skeptical disposition "may sit well enough on an Atheist or Free-thinker," but it is simply "insupportable in a young Lady."[7] A decade later, this sentiment was echoed by George Anderson, whose *Estimate of the Profit and Loss of Religion*, although willing to admit the possibility of widespread female atheism, nonetheless declares that the "temperament and constitution" of the "tender-hearted sex" do not "agree" with the "inhuman notions" of "atheism."[8] James Elphinston provides perhaps the most concise statement of this belief in his *Essay on British Liberty* (1777). For Elphinston, a female atheist is nothing less than a "monster," one who has forfeited her status as a woman to become instead "the worst of men."[9]

The exception that proves the rule is found in Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). While Pamela herself is emblematic of "a middle-class mindset based on prudence, self-control and a healthy interest in the domestic sphere,"[10] this middle-class mindset is notably defined in opposition to the irreligion of her most formidable adversary: Mr. B's servant Mrs. Jewkes. Although the

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[6] Edward Young, *Love of Fame, The Universal Passion. In Seven Characteristical Satires* (London, 1728), 146–47.

[7] Abbé d'Ancourt, *The Lady's Preceptor. Or, A Letter to a Young Lady of Distinction upon Politeness* (London, 1743), 7.

[8] George Anderson, *An Estimate of the Profit and Loss of Religion, Personally and Publicly Stated* (Edinburgh, 1753), 73.

[9] James Elphinston, *An Essay on British Liberty: Addressed to both Houses of Parliament* (London, 1777), 122.

[10] Elizabeth Kukorelly Leverington, "Domesticating the Hero: Normative Masculinity in 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded'," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 13.1/2 (2007): 147.

lascivious Mr. B is always capable of reformation ("God can touch his Heart in an Instant,"[11] Pamela optimistically declares early in the novel), Mrs. Jewkes is fundamentally irredeemable. She is quite simply a "Wretch" (114), a "Devil" (120), a "wicked Woman" (132). Moreover, the novel exculpates Mr. B from his several attempts to seduce Pamela by insisting that his misdeeds are the result of Jewkes's "vile instigations" (236).[12] Even when Mrs. Jewkes seemingly softens her stance towards Pamela after Mr. B and Pamela wed, she still lacks "Purity of Heart" (339). The only explanation the novel offers for Mrs. Jewkes's ill nature is given shortly after Pamela leaves Mr. B's house midway through the novel: Mrs. Jewkes, Pamela says, "must be an Atheist" (246).

Pamela's belief that Mrs. Jewkes is an atheist goes hand-in-hand with her characterization of Jewkes as hyper-masculine. Jewkes may be a female atheist, but her potential atheism is one of many characteristics that signal her resolutely unfeminine character. For instance, she tries to kiss Pamela on several occasions, which, according to Pamela, "is not like two Persons of one Sex" (108). What is more, Pamela often points out Mrs. Jewkes's masculine physical traits, such as her "huge Hand" and "man-like Voice" (114). Ultimately, Pamela consigns the atheistic Mrs. Jewkes outside of all acceptable categories of the feminine, proclaiming, "Could any thing, in Womanhood, be so vile!" (186). A female atheist, in other words, is an idea almost beyond Pamela's comprehension.

As Jewkes's willingness to sacrifice Pamela's social and sexual standing for her own advancement indicates, atheism was not only thought to be incompatible with proper femininity, it was also portrayed as detrimental to women's wellbeing. Christine Overall has recently

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[11] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 173. References are to this edition.

[12] Strangely, given Mr. B's cruelty throughout the novel, Pamela still maintains that he is "not half so bad as this Woman [Mrs. Jewkes]" (246).

asserted that feminism and atheism are mutually constitutive, that "being a feminist" quite simply "*requires* that one be an atheist."[13] Eighteenth-century theists, on the other hand, by and large agreed that atheism was inadequate to restrain men from pursuing their own selfish ends and thus preying on women. For his part, Richardson argues in *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum: or, Young Man's Pocket Companion* (1733)—a conduct book meant to "improve the Morals of the YOUTH of this Kingdom, and especially of such who are put out Apprentice"[14]—that only by repudiating atheism and "open Infidelity" (v) can Britons protect the "Persons of [their] *Sisters* and *Daughters*" from lawless encroachments. In a conduct book published much earlier, Richard Allestree similarly warns British women against "the pretensions of the Atheist," asserting that unbelieving males are "brutish" and will stop at nothing to gratify their "appetites."[15] Tellingly, even a seemingly innocuous unbeliever like Henry Fielding's fictional Captain Booth—described before his conversion in *Amelia* (1751) as "little better than an Atheist"—is unable to restrain himself from marital infidelity and from plunging his virtuous wife into debt and hardship due to his commitment to the ideas of "Chance" and "Accident," a commitment most apparent in his unrelenting addiction to gaming.[16]

In these instances, speculative atheism is considered incapable of providing a logical, coherent reason to keep men from oppressing women when doing so serves men's own selfish interests. The writers cited above would have agreed, therefore, with John Cottingham's recent

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[13] Christine Overall, "Feminism and Atheism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 233–49, 233. Emphasis added.

[14] Samuel Richardson, *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum: or, Young Man's Pocket Companion* (London, 1733; Dublin, 1734), iii. References are to this edition.

[15] Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling in two parts. By the author of The Whole Duty of Man, &c. The eighth impression* (Oxford, 1705), 98, 99.

[16] Henry Fielding, *Amelia* (Peterborough, Ont.; Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2010), 444, 417, 329.

critique of secular accounts of moral obligation: "In a godless universe, where God is 'dead'," Cottingham writes, "we are not subject to any higher moral principle, and so questions of value become merely a function of the projects we autonomously decide to pursue." According to Cottingham, there is simply no reason to assume that atheism promotes or supplies objective moral values.[17] The Enlightenment theists who preceded Cottingham applied this idea to gender relations, arguing that the existence of God-given, transcendent morals is necessary to curb men's otherwise boundless desires, passions, and appetites, and that atheism provides no equivalent curb in God's absence. Before we dismiss these critiques out of hand, accepting Christine Overall's argument that atheism is *necessarily* more conducive to women's rights than theism, it is worth remembering that some of atheism's earliest proponents had no qualms about treating women as socially, intellectually, and morally inferior. The infamous French salon of the self-declared atheist Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), for instance, was entirely off-limits to women, and d'Holbach believed that women's education should be limited solely to preparing them for motherhood.[18]

Thus while Overall is right to point out the systematic misogyny of much of traditional theistic religion, I find her arguments lacking. Most problematically, she presupposes that

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[17] John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 92. The point for Cottingham is not that atheists cannot be virtuous—he is adamant that they can be and often are—but that the language of virtue and vice, right and wrong, is only meaningful in a universe in which a transcendent "teleological framework for understanding the nature and ultimate destiny of humanity" (94) is in place. Cottingham maintains that if God does not exist, "our moral language and moral intuitions are radically erroneous"; "whole swathes of our human discourse rest on false presuppositions" (88).

[18] See Susan Dalton, *Engendering the Republic of Letters: Reconnecting Public and Private Spheres in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 12; and Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (1976; Princeton University Press, 2015). Such misogynistic views persist in certain atheist circles to this day. See Amanda Marcotte, "Atheism's shocking woman problem: What's behind the misogyny of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris," *Salon* (2014), online, accessed September 2, 2015, available: http://www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new_atheisms_troubling_misogyny_the_pompous_sexism_of_richard_dawkins_and_sam_harris_partner/.

"women's personhood" is objectively valuable and that an overriding obligation leads us to pursue "feminist goals" as a moral good.[19] However, she fails to demonstrate how such an objective, seemingly transcendent obligation can exist in God's absence. This does not mean she is necessarily wrong about God's nonexistence, of course, but *insisting* on feminists being atheists appears to me to be counterproductive. As this chapter argues, eighteenth-century women considered theism a powerful and necessary component of their fight against patriarchy.

Indeed, although the writers cited above are all notably male, Phebe Gibbes was far from being the only woman of the long eighteenth century to worry over women's place in a world without God. Instead of rejecting theism as inimical to women's interests, in fact, women as diverse as Mary Astell (1666–1731), Anne Finch (1661–1720), Sarah Scott (1720–1795), and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) all based their arguments for female education and equality on astute biblical exegesis and the existence of a God who cares for both men and women alike. Wollstonecraft's momentous defense of *The Rights of Woman* (1792), for example, is predicated on the idea that the "only solid foundation for morality" is "the character of the supreme Being." For Wollstonecraft, this "eternal foundation" leads inevitably to the conclusion that "there can be but one rule of right" for men *and* women, that there cannot reasonably be a difference between masculine and feminine "virtue." Because of this, woman should receive the same educational and societal benefits enjoyed by men.[20] Of course, these authors were not blind to the injustices committed against women in the name of religion. And, as the following discussion of *Lady*

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[19] Overall, "Feminism and Atheism," 246. Additionally, she presents Socrates' infamous Euthyphro dilemma as if it were the death knell of objective theistic morality, ignoring the fact that it has been addressed time and again by theistic philosophers.

[20] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; and, The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria*, eds. Anne K. Mellor and Noelle Chao (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 65, 54. For the ways in which Sarah Scott, in particular, employs theism to argue against negative cultural understandings of female old age, see my "Untimely Old Age and Deformity in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 27.2 (Winter 2014–2015): 229–56.

Louisa Stroud makes clear, they were quick to reject the prominent idea that women's proclivity for theism was grounded in their "timorousness," to use Young's term. Nonetheless, they were firm in their conviction that religion should be reformed, not abandoned. To throw God out altogether would be to submit entirely to the tyranny of a patriarchal society that cared little for the interests and concerns of its female members.

Yet while Gibbes was not alone in making a gendered case for the necessity of theism, she offers a particularly useful example of the ways in which atheism's perceived spread led British theists to forge imaginative inter-faith alliances with non-Christian theists across the globe. As a widow whose only son died in India, and as the author of one of the first British novels set in the Indian subcontinent, Gibbes's work evinces a profound interest in Eastern religions, especially Hinduism. With this in mind, I conclude this chapter by turning to Gibbes's much more widely discussed *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), arguing that its representation of India as a place of female liberty and religious enlightenment should not be read, as critics have been wont to read it, as a critique of Christianity.[21] According to Michael J. Franklin, the novel's colonial setting "problematizes the binaries of gender," reversing "gender and racial polarities" and allowing the novel's heroine, Sophia Goldborne, to identify sympathetically with the Indians she meets throughout the novel. In Franklin's influential account, Hinduism represents for Sophia a "gentle and sensitive religion" that provides a way out of the "dominating masculine discourse

[21] For prominent criticism on *Hartly House*, see Michael J. Franklin, "Radically feminizing India: Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789) and Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* (1811)," in *Romantic Representations of British India*, ed. Michael J. Franklin (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 154–79; Kathryn Freeman's "'She had eyes and chose me': Ambivalence and Miscegenation in Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789)," *European Romantic Review* 22.1 (2011): 35–47, and her chapter on Gibbes in *British Women Writers and the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1785–1835: Re-Orienting Anglo-India* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016), 63–93; Ashok Malhotra, *Making British Indian fictions: 1772–1823* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 121–45; Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 167–91; and Nicole Reynolds, "Phebe Gibbes, Edmund Burke, and the Trials of Empire," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20.2 (2007): 151–76.

of the colonizer," a discourse that is concomitant with the Christianity that, so Franklin claims, Sophia ultimately rejects.[22] I agree with Franklin that Sophia legitimately sympathizes with both Hinduism and India. However, as I argue below, the novel's praise of Hinduism is directed against godlessness in the metropole, not Christianity *per se*. For Gibbes, the problem in Britain is not Christianity. It is Christianity's absence. In this regard, the novel echoes Swift's critique of nominal, insubstantial Christianity in the *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*. More immediately, it recapitulates the distrust of atheism displayed so prominently in Gibbes's own *Lady Louisa Stroud*. If Gibbes's earlier novel suggests that atheism is hostile to women's wellbeing, her later novel calls for both Western and Eastern theists to unite against irreligion and unbelief.

I. Libertines, Lovelace, and *Lady Louisa Stroud*

One of Gibbes's earliest novels, *Lady Louisa Stroud* anticipates many of the themes of her later publications.[23] In fact, Gibbes's novels—she authored at least eleven and possibly upwards of twenty—repeatedly deal with issues of bigamy, female friendship, gaming, and the pitfalls of marriage. In addition, several of her works—including *Elfrida; or, Paternal Ambition* (1786), *Zoriada; or, Village Annals* (1786), and *Hartly House, Calcutta*, to name just a few—echo *Lady Louisa*'s use of India and Britain's various colonial projects as recurring plot devices. Like *Lady Louisa*, her novels routinely feature lively female narrators who question established social mores and are hesitant to marry. All of Gibbes's works are highly allusive, testifying to both her wide reading and her extensive reliance on and reworking of earlier novels, plays, and poetry.[24]

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[22] Franklin, *Romantic Representations of British India*, 156, 159, 161.

[23] Gibbes's first publication, so far as we know, was *The Life and Adventures of Mr Francis Clive* (1764), which was published in the same year as *Lady Louisa Stroud*.

The most obvious novelistic influence on Gibbes's *Lady Louisa Stroud* is Samuel Richardson's hugely popular *Clarissa* (1748). Published less than two decades after Richardson's magnum opus, Gibbes's novel both utilizes and inverts *Clarissa*'s epistolary structure. Whereas Richardson's eponymous heroine is somber, virtuous, and reflective, and her primary correspondent, Anna Howe, is vivacious and, to a degree, insubordinate, Gibbes's novel, which consists of an ongoing epistolary exchange between the "provoking, gay" (1:41) Caroline Stretton and her "judicious Monitor" (1:25) Louisa Stroud, reverses this dynamic. Indeed, although she is named last in the novel's full title—*The History of Lady Louisa Stroud, and the Honourable Miss Caroline Stretton*—the Anna Howe-esque Caroline Stretton is the focus throughout *Lady Louisa Stroud*. The novel's plot revolves almost entirely around her romantic exploits, and much of the novel's appeal is owing to Caroline's lively compositional style. For example, in response to a censorious letter sent by Louisa in the novel's opening pages, Caroline writes,

> What an odd Mixture … am I of Right and Wrong, Error and Perfection? I wish, my Dear, there was a Possibility of sifting the Dross. Now do not shake your wise Head—I stand rebuked. This stile is not sufficiently humble—does not run enough in the Penitentials—I'll try again. O *Louisa*, *Louisa*, with what Reverence do I kiss the Rod! though you must acknowledge you have whipt me severely. (1:20)

If *Clarissa*'s heroine is "above this earth," her consistent piety making her an almost Christlike figure in Richardson's novel, Gibbes's heroine is therefore more akin to the prodigal son of Luke 15.[25] In fact, Caroline playfully remarks that when Louisa accepts Caroline's letters she has "receive[d] the Prodigal" (1:26).

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[24] This overview of Gibbes's career and her works' major themes is indebted to Felicity Nussbaum, "Unearthing Phebe Gibbes," in *Imagining the Eighteenth Century*, ed. A.C. Lashmore-Davies (University of Delaware Press, forthcoming).

[25] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, 1272. For the biblical story of the Prodigal Son, see Luke 15:11–32.

Of course, by assuming the role of the "Prodigal" at this early point in the novel, Caroline indicates that her plot will at some point involve her conversion to Louisa's pious notions of rectitude. This is exactly what occurs. Over the course of the novel, Caroline—who has been sent to Warwickshire by her guardian Sir Ralph in order to prevent a budding affair between her and the already-married Lord Westbury—learns to appreciate "Love, Friendship and Propriety" (2:203) and to abandon the thoughtless course she had previously pursued in London. This reformation is partly the result of Caroline's newfound attraction to the pious Horatio Foster. Horatio is the epitome of "filial Piety" (2:165), and much of the novel relates the anxiety Caroline experiences when her lover travels to India to restore his father's lost fortune. During Horatio's absence, Caroline begins admiring the countryside she previously detested and develops a newfound trust in Providence, a trust that persists even after she receives a false report of Horatio's death. In typical novelistic fashion, however, Horatio eventually returns to England, and both Caroline and Louisa are married to their respective lovers by the novel's end.

The novel's promotion of matrimony is anything but straightforward, however. For one, Caroline's epistolary style remains buoyant despite her newfound piety. Although Caroline "fall[s] in Love" with both Providence and the "Green-fields, bubbling Streams, and friendly Ecchos" (1:182) of rural Warwickshire, it is worth noting that she never entirely assumes Louisa's much more somber disposition. Upon learning of Louisa's attraction to the admirable Lord Roxburgh early in Volume II, for instance, Caroline requests that Louisa send Roxburgh to visit her so that she can assess her friend's new love interest. At the same time, she jokes that she "may eclipse" Louisa in Roxburgh's esteem. While she promises not to "rob" Louisa of Roxburgh's "Person," she states that she is not to be blamed if Roxburgh falls for her: "The Spirit and Vivacity of my Aspect is irresistibly attractive" (2:26), Caroline concludes saucily.

Interestingly, when Louisa first admits to being in love with Roxburgh near the end of the novel's first volume, she picks up some of *Caroline*'s zest and acknowledges that she has "changed Characters" (2:191) with her spirited friend. Thus, Caroline and Louisa's respective marriages and commitments to piety do not signal an outright acceptance of female docility and the "timorousness" advocated by Edward Young and other male writers throughout the period.

More pointedly, Caroline and Louisa's letters are filled with forceful denunciations of both male privilege and the follies of marriage. Men are a "detestable Sex" (1:66), especially those "Male Monsters" (1:172) who seduce women only to abandon them shortly thereafter. For its part, marriage is viewed as a lamentable instance of female submission. Caroline jokes that wives are "tame Animals" (2:215), while repeatedly declaring that she will never be a man's "Bond Servant" (2:102), even if she does eventually enter "the shackled State" (2:203). Even the formerly austere Louisa insists that she will make her lover, Lord Roxburgh, "fetch—carry—leap a Stick" (2:192) before they wed.

This jocularity belies the utter seriousness of the dangers men pose to the novel's women. As Caroline complains, men are often subject to an "insuperable Spirit of Enmity, Deceit and Revenge," and "under the specious Appearance of loving us" (1:60) they routinely lay women's health and reputations to waste just to satisfy a momentary sexual appetite. She sums up the case neatly:

> In Possession of Youth, Beauty, Friends, Reputation, Happiness, should one of these destructive Creatures come to you, and say, I love you to such a Degree, that I will deprive you of every Blessing you enjoy; I will entail upon your future Days (which in the Course of Nature may be many) deep Sorrow and Remorse; I will occasion your Beauty to decay, by your incessant Tears, if not blast it by Disease; I will render you odious and contemptible in the Eyes of your Friends; I will give your Reputation an irreparable Wound; and, instead of Happiness and Affluence, you shall experience wretched Poverty, Hunger, Oppression, Cold, Infamy, and all these dire Evils and Calamities will I bring upon you, merely because you are the Object of my Affection—

> Would you not, my Dear, search for that Villain's Cloven-foot, who could address you in such Terms, in order to give him his proper Appellation? (1:61–62)

Having herself been nearly seduced by the adulterous Westbury, Caroline speaks from first-hand experience. Yet Caroline, of course, was spared the "Poverty, Hunger," and "Oppression" of which she speaks by her vigilant uncle's timely intervention in her affairs and her subsequent removal from the temptations of life in London. Still, the novel provides numerous examples of women who are not quite so fortunate. For instance, Louisa informs Caroline of an anonymous town woman who, allured "by the flattering Prospect of Ease, Plenty, and an Exemption from Dependance," recently agreed to run off with a rake "upon his own Terms" (1:44). The woman's indiscretion failed to win her the "Ease" she so coveted, and instead she "has forfeited the Society of the good and virtuous" in exchange for what Louisa calls "the Refuse of Mankind" (1:45).

The most prominent example of men's faithlessness in the novel is a young girl named Letitia Stukeley, a "poor, fallen, wretched Creature" (1:71) whom Caroline meets shortly after her arrival in Warwickshire. As Caroline relates to Louisa soon after meeting Letitia, Letitia lost her father at the age of sixteen and was sent to live with a family friend and his Lady at their "Country-Seat" (1:72). After her arrival, the gentleman began showering Letitia with presents and, more critically, gave her twenty guineas, which he then instructed her to use in order to "play deep" (1:74). Once Letitia obediently, yet reluctantly, gambled away the man's money, he cornered her in her bedroom, demanding that she return the entire sum. When Letitia was unable to do so, he "insisted upon a Satisfaction—and partly by Compulsion, partly through [Letitia's] Fear, Shame and Confusion, he obtained his wicked, inhuman Purpose" (1:77). Discovering herself to be pregnant, and not wishing to disturb the happiness of the man's family, Letitia absconded to the house of a "tender and indulgent" (1:78) parson and his wife, with whom she is

living when she first meets Caroline. The now destitute Letitia's story serves as a sort of parallel to Caroline's own near seduction, demonstrating to Caroline the utter untrustworthiness of men's protestations and teaching her to value her escape all the more. "I am a thousand Times more culpable than this poor Girl," Caroline reflects. "I that was within an Ace—O my God! what a blessed Deliverance?—If ever I believe, or trust, or approve Man more, I think I shall deserve the greatest of Misfortunes" (1:82).

The appeal to God here is not mere throwaway. In fact, men like Letitia's rapist are, according to Caroline, "Vipers" (1:69); they are related to that godless Edenic serpent who, in Caroline's reckoning, first turned men against their female counterparts (1:59–60). This is made most evident by Mr. Hornton, an atheist whom the novel repeatedly refers to as a "Wretch" (2:66), a "Monster" (2:67), and an "artful villain" (2:68). Caroline notably lacks the ability to dispute Hornton's godless tenets, a fact that she attributes to him being the first avowed "Unbeliever" (1:56) she has ever known. Hornton's atheism makes good on Caroline and Louisa's declarations of men's perfidy, bringing the novel to a crisis early in the second volume. In short, Hornton abducts Letitia, who is still recovering from giving birth to her bastard daughter, in order to prove to the Libertine Lord Desborough, who is in love with Letitia and refuses to use foul means to gain her affection, that he can "reduce her to Reason in one poor Week" (2:62). Hornton is ultimately unsuccessful in "reducing" her to Desborough's mistress, and Letitia dies from shock shortly after her abduction. Caroline thus condemns Hornton as the sole cause of the novel's climactic moment: "that Wretch Hornton, alone, [is] the Incendiary and Perpetrator of all the Mischief!" (2:75).

On one hand, Hornton's complete disregard for women's wellbeing places him firmly in the tradition of eighteenth-century libertinism, a tradition that runs from John Wilmot, 2nd Earl

of Rochester, to the fictional Lovelace of Richardson's *Clarissa*, men who were notorious for rapes, seductions, kidnappings, and an unbridled pursuit of all things sexual. After all, Hornton's name is itself a callback to the rakish Mr. Horner of Wycherley's raucous Restoration comedy *The Country Wife* (1675). And, as several recent studies have shown, libertines were characterized not only by their insatiable sexual desires and their extravagant behavior, but by their disregard for established religion as well.[26] As Roger D. Lund notes, orthodox defenders of Christianity frequently denounced libertines as atheists, "blurring distinctions between rakes, debauchees, and epicureans," irrespective of their actual religious tenets.[27] In some sense, then, Caroline and Louisa's various denunciations of Hornton are denunciations of libertinism *tout court*.

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that Gibbes goes out of her way to suggest that Hornton is not merely another iteration of the eighteenth-century libertine. Both Caroline and Louisa distinguish Hornton from the libertine Lord Desborough, who, unlike Hornton, is "only Profane when his Reason is intoxicated" (2:2–3). Additionally, the term "libertine" appears several times in the novel—Louisa hopes to protect Letitia from Desborough's "Libertine Persecutions" (1:199), while Caroline at one point bluntly declares, "no Libertines for me" (2:59)—but it is used only in reference to Desborough. Not once is the term applied to Hornton, whose exclusive epithet throughout the novel is "the Atheist" (2:60). What is more, Desborough demonstrates certain moral intuitions that are completely lacking in Hornton. At the novel's end, Desborough is reformed and married off to Nell, an amiable country girl Caroline meets in

[26] See, for example, Sarah Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief,* 31–51; Christopher Hill, "Freethinking and Libertinism: The Legacy of the English Revolution," in Roger D. Lund, ed., *The Margins of Orthodoxy*, 54–70; and Roger D. Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit in Augustan England* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

[27] Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit in Augustan England*, 72.

Warwickshire, while Hornton silently disappears from Gibbes's text. Hornton's role as atheist is to accelerate Letitia's death and to provide a firm contrast to the piety of Caroline and her lover Horatio, and because of this he is not once considered a viable object of reformation. Thus, while it is tempting to read Hornton as a successor to Restoration and eighteenth-century rakes from Horner to Lovelace, it is noteworthy that Gibbes clearly distinguishes Hornton from her novel's foremost libertine.

Gibbes was not the only author to make such a distinction. The Restoration libertine *par excellence*, Lord Rochester, for instance, averred, "he had never known an entire *Atheist*, who fully believed there was no God." Rochester claimed always to have had "some Impression" of "the Supream Being," and he simply "could not think the World was made by Chance."[28] Of course, Rochester's biographer, Gilbert Burnet, condemns Rochester's practical atheism as folly, asserting that, since "*Libertines*" both believe in God and "know they must die," their lives must be extremely "melancholly."[29] According to Burnet, such libertines run a great "Hazard for nothing."[30] At the same time, however, Burnet makes it clear that Rochester's unwavering belief in a deity, no matter how vaguely conceived, eventually convinced him that Christianity might in fact be true. Rochester's deathbed conversion, therefore, was not wholly the result of Burnet's timely ministrations, but of the libertine's prior rejection of atheism as well.

Thomas Otway's *The Atheist; or, The Second Part of the Soldier's Fortune* (1684) provides an equally valuable instance of the perceived differences between libertines and atheists. Otway's play clearly differentiates its libertine, Beaugard, from his companion, the

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[28] Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of John Earl of Rochester*, 27, 47.

[29] Ibid., 127.

[30] Ibid., 126.

atheist Daredevil. Beaugard is, for all intents and purposes, a practical atheist. His father calls him an "Atheistical Rogue" in the play's first scene, and Beaugard himself admits that his creed is, in short, "Pleasure, I will have thee."[31] Nonetheless, Beaugard is adamant that, notwithstanding his status as a "zealous Libertine" (41) and his love of "Nights Pleasurable" (20), he still believes in God. By the play's end, Beaugard's belief bears fruit, and he abandons his womanizing ways and marries his beautiful, steadfast love interest, Porcia. Moreover, he amuses himself throughout the play by mocking the avowed unbelief of "the Atheist" (22) Daredevil. Beaugard claims that "Atheism" (27) is one of the two things he hates most (the other being "making merry with the Frailties of [his] Father" [22]), and he denounces Daredevil as a complete scoundrel: "The Villain has less Sincerity than a Bawd, less Courage than a Hector, less Good-nature than a Hangman, and less Charity than a Phanatique" (22).

For all his villainy, the "little Atheistical disbelieving Dog" (39) Daredevil is relatively innocuous in Otway's play. Beaugard's rival Gratian easily dispatches him in a "Scuffle" (80) late in Act IV, and he spends the remainder of the play whining and confined to a bed. Much of the comedy in *The Atheist*'s final act is brought about by both Daredevil's constant worries about his health, which are made in a "small, complaining Voice" (94) and lead him to be mistaken for a woman by the libertine Courtine, and his credulous belief that "his Wounds may be mortal" (80), a belief encouraged by his avaricious surgeon, despite the fact that the "hurt" is, in reality, "no bigger than a Pinhole" (102). Daredevil's outlandish fears cause him to repent and to call for a priest, but upon learning that his life is not truly in danger, he insists that his repentance was feigned. As expected, Beaugard and Courtine reject Daredevil's claim, and the play ends with a series of jokes made at his expense: "Ah! but you repented, *Daredevil*; thou didst repent,"

[31] Thomas Otway, *The Atheist: Or, The Second Part of the Soldier's Fortune* (London, 1684), 15, 18. References are to this edition and are cited parenthetically.

Courtine teases. "I am sorry to hear of it with all my Heart, it will be a foul blot in thy Escutcheon: But thou didst repent" (102). In Otway's play, speculative atheists are not worrisome; they are ridiculous, yes, but their very ridiculousness eliminates the possibility that anyone would ever take their arguments seriously.

Written almost half a century after Otway's play, Joseph Addison's *Evidences of the Christian Religion* (1730) disagrees with Otway's assessment of the Restoration libertine. According to Addison, the "atheistical fellows who appeared the last age did not serve the devil for nought; but revelled in excesses suitable to their principles."[32] The typical Restoration libertine is thus for Addison a prime example of a true atheist, one who effectively practices what he preaches. Still, Addison's larger point is that the atheists of his day are nothing like the Restoration atheists. Modern atheists, according to Addison, have almost nothing at all in common with libertines:

> Would it not be a matter of mirth to find, after all, that the heads of this growing sect are sober wretches, who prate whole evenings over coffee, and have not themselves fire enough to be any further debauchees than meerly in principle? These sages of iniquity are, it seems, themselves only speculatively wicked, and are contented that all the abandoned young men of the age are kept safe from reflection by dabbling in their rhapsodies, without tasting the pleasures for which their doctrines leave them unaccountable.[33]

Because he is *not* like the Restoration libertines, then, the atheist is for Addison as ridiculous as Otway's Daredevil. In Addison's reckoning, speculative atheists are troubling primarily because they keep "abandoned young men" from reflecting upon their actions and because they "disturb the sentiments of other men,"[34] not because their behavior is itself reproachable. More

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[32] Joseph Addison, *The Evidences of the Christian Religion* (London, 1730), 247.

[33] Ibid., 246.

[34] Ibid., 248.

immediately dangerous are those who partake in "mischief … for mischief's sake," the "*Mohocks* and Cut-throats" who stab and deface strangers "without provocation."[35] This is not to say that Addison is not concerned with atheists, of course. After all, while he treats atheists as more of a nuisance than a threat here, his apologetic work is itself a vehement response to their "growing sect." In effect, it is an attempt to stem the tide of unbelief before atheism becomes more than a mere nuisance.

Perhaps the most instructive example for present purposes, however, is Richardson's *Clarissa*, which, as mentioned above, informed the structure and many of the themes of Gibbes's *Lady Louisa Stroud*. Given Richardson's career-long beef with atheism, his refusal to make *Clarissa*'s premier villain and libertine, Lovelace, an unbeliever is at first glance fairly surprising. Indeed, in *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum* and *Pamela*, both of which he published before *Clarissa*, Richardson went out of his way to chastise atheists and their tenets. The *Vade Mecum*, for instance, pulls no punches, maintaining that an atheist is "no better than a Heap of organized Dust." The atheist is a "stalking Machine," the "Offspring of Chance," "the Slave of Necessity," a "Puppet." His lack of belief is "a degrading System, a most mortifying Persuasion." Atheism, in short, is the "Plague of Society, the Corrupter of Manners, and the Underminer of Property."[36] Therefore, if left unchecked, atheism will

> untie the Bonds of Human Society; confound the Distinctions of Right and wrong; take away the Terrors that withhold Evil-Doers; tear up the Fences that inclose and preserve Property; and leave the feeblest of Mankind to the Mercy of the most Potent, and perhaps the most Deprav'd; since, in such a State, whatever the Reason of the Strongest will permit him to think Right, the Weakest must of Course submit to it, without Appeal or Redress.[37]

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[35] Ibid., 247, 248.

[36] Richardson, *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum*, 57.

[37] Ibid., 59. Carol Flynn has commented that "Deism offers the worst temptation of all" for Richardson's imagined young male readers. However, the *Vade Mecum* clearly distinguishes between atheism and

Hence, if Richardson's goal in *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum* is to buttress the moral and economic stability of Britain's merchants, his success depends upon his ability to convince those merchants that theism is consistent with their economic interests (it "preserves Property"), while atheism makes both trade and sociability impossible.

With this cultural understanding of atheism in mind, it makes sense that *Clarissa*'s earliest readers implored Richardson to declare Lovelace an atheist. Seeing that the novel's climax involves Lovelace kidnapping and raping the virtuous Clarissa—a fictional scenario that echoes the *Vade Mecum*'s concerns about the "Weakest," most unprotected members of society being left "to the Mercy" of the "Strongest"—it is not surprising that Joseph Highmore bluntly advised Richardson to "Let the Dog be an Atheist, or worse, if worse can be."[38] Corresponding with Richardson before the publication of the novel's final volumes, Lady Bradshaigh similarly marveled that Richardson made his "villain a sensible man" and "declared him not an unbeliever."[39] From Bradshaigh's perspective, Lovelace should either be completely abominable (that is to say, an atheist) or Richardson should discard his plan to have Clarissa die at the novel's end—"recall the dreadful sentence," she pleaded, "bring it as near as you please, but prevent it."[40] If Lovelace is a nominal believer, according to Bradshaigh, he should be allowed to reform and marry his victim, sparing Clarissa both death and ignominy: "Methinks I see her his wife, or

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deism, devoting just as much time to describing atheists and the dangers posed by their godlessness as it does to discrediting deism. If deists are derided for denying the Christian revelation and the existence of both "a future State and the Immortality of the Soul" (*Vade Mecum*, 58), the aspersions Richardson casts on atheists are much more vehement and degrading. See Carol Flynn, *Samuel Richardson: A Man of Letters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 8.

[38] Quoted in Derek Taylor, *Reason and Religion in Clarissa*, 136.

[39] Anna Laetitia Barbauld, ed., *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, vol. 4 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 200.

[40] Ibid., 201.

wife elect … I see her resentment over, her stifled love returning with double force; with the addition of an esteem for him, to which, from his former demerits, she was before a stranger."[41]

Of course, Richardson ultimately rejected Bradshaigh's wishes, and Clarissa dies in the novel's denouement. For his part, Lovelace dies without reforming and is never labeled an unbeliever. Richardson stood firm in his decision to make his novel's "professed libertines" believers in "a future state of rewards and punishments." Until the end, Lovelace and his companions are neither "infidels" nor "scoffers."[42] On one hand, Richardson defended this decision by arguing that Clarissa could never have been tempted to abscond with an unbeliever. It was necessary to give Lovelace a few good qualities, Richardson averred in a letter to Lady Bradshaigh, "in compliment to the eye and ear of Clarissa." All the same, Richardson maintained that, even if he did believe in God, Lovelace was little better than a devil: "I verily think, that had I made him a worse man, he must have been a devil—*for devils believe and tremble*."[43] Richardson repeated this biblical sentiment in the Preface to the novel's third edition (1751). Against those who argued that Lovelace should have been "drawn an *Infidel* or *Scoffer*,"[44] Richardson's Postscript asserts that making Lovelace a nominal Christian was, as E. Derek Taylor puts it, "a didactic necessity."[45] "[T]here are very many persons," Richardson writes, "whose actions discredit their belief. And are not the very devils, in Scripture, said to *believe* and

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[41] Ibid., 205.

[42] Richardson, *Clarissa*, 35.

[43] Barbauld, *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 4:234. See James 2:19 (AV): "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble."

[44] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa: Preface, Hints of Prefaces, and Postcript* (Los Angeles, CA: The Augustan Reprint Society, 1964), 362.

[45] Taylor, *Reason and Religion in Clarissa*, 137.

tremble?" Lovelace's practical atheism is therefore meant as a warning to those who profess belief yet are "infidel[s] only in *Practice*," a warning Richardson hopes is put to "good Use."[46]

At the same time that Richardson equates Lovelace's libertinism with practical atheism and insists that it is equally, if not more, insidious than its speculative counterpart, he also claims that his novel's tragic ending supplies an argument against speculative unbelief. In the Postscript, Richardson contends that the novel adheres to a "*Christian system*" in which "HEAVEN *only*" rewards virtue and punishes vice.[47] Because true justice is not available "on this side of the grave," Clarissa's wrongs can only be righted in the afterlife.[48] While Thomas Rymer's *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd and Examin'd by the Practice of the Ancients* (1678) had argued that a strict adherence to the dictums of poetic justice was necessary to fend off atheism, Richardson takes an entirely opposite approach here.[49] In Richardson's mind, the injustices committed against Clarissa do not diminish one's faith in God. Instead, poetic *in*justice generates in readers a longing for *divine* justice, a longing that is, as Richardson calls it in a letter to Lady

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[46] Richardson, *Clarissa: Preface, Hints of Prefaces, and Postcript*, 362.

[47] Richardson, *Clarissa*, 1498.

[48] Ibid., 1496. For more on the specific contours of *Clarissa*'s "*Christian system*," see Rosemary Bechler, "'Triall by What is Contrary': Samuel Richardson and the Christian Dialectic," in *Samuel Richardson: Passion and Prudence*, ed. Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Vision Press, 1986), 93–113; Alex Eric Hernandez, "Tragedy and the Economics of Providence in Richardson's *Clarissa*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22.1 (2009): 1–28; James Bryant Reeves, "Posthumous Presence in Richardson's *Clarissa*," *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 53.3 (2013): 601–21; and Taylor, *Reason and Religion in Clarissa*.

[49] See Thomas Rymer, *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd and Examin'd by the Practice of the Ancients and by the Common Sense of all Ages* (London: Richard Tonson, 1678), 14, where Rymer cites the Classical playwrights Sophocles, Euripides, and Camerades as the source of this insight: "Finding also that this *unequal* distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the *wisest*, and by the *Atheist* was made a scandal to the *Divine Providence*. They concluded, that a *Poet* must of necessity see *justice* exactly administered, if he intended to please."

Bradshaigh, a "moral proof" of both God's existence and "a world after this."[50] In other words, our intuitive feeling that Clarissa has been wronged indicates that there really is such a thing as right and wrong in the first place, pointing us beyond this world to the God whom Clarissa worships.

By making this rather diffuse case for *Clarissa* as a "moral proof" and by concurrently keeping Lovelace a believer, Richardson tried to establish his novel as a rejoinder to both practical and speculative atheism at the same time. His success in doing so, however, is up for debate. As Richardson himself acknowledged to his friend Lady Bradshaigh, readers have continually dismissed the author's censures of Lovelace, finding him attractive despite the fact that Richardson revised the character several times in order to make him more vile.[51] Further, critics from the eighteenth century to the present have questioned the effectiveness of Richardson's defense of orthodox Christianity. For example, in a letter to Richardson in which she describes Colley Cibber's reaction to learning of Clarissa's impending death, Laetitia Pilkington remarks that Cibber protested "he should no longer believe Providence, or eternal Wisdom, or Goodness governed the world, if merit, innocence, and beauty were to be so destroyed."[52] One recent critic even goes so far as to argue that the novel is itself informed by the vital materialism of Hobbes and Lucretius and that Clarissa is its "truest materialist."[53] Clearly

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[50] Barbauld, *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 4:225.

[51] See ibid., 234.

[52] Barbauld, *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 2:128–29.

[53] Sarah Ellenzweig, "The Persistence of *Clarissa*," in *Mind, Body, Motion, Matter: Eighteenth-Century British and French Literary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 170–201, 186. Ellenzweig makes an intriguing case that Richardson was well read in materialist philosophy. However, her argument is somewhat over-stated and relies on questionable interpretations of key evidence. For instance, she reads Cibber's comment (cited above) as sufficient evidence that contemporaries challenged

Richardson's apologetic aspirations for the novel have not materialized as completely as he may have wished.

Gibbes follows these authors' lead in distinguishing libertines and atheists, but by making her novel's villain an outright unbeliever, she avoids the pitfalls of Richardson's "moral Proof" and offers a more extensive promotion of theistic belief. To be sure, if Richardson's novel provides an opaque assessment of speculative atheism, confining its strictures on unbelief to brief moments in the 1751 Preface and Postscript, Gibbes's much more extensive portrayal of atheism leaves little doubt where her sympathies lie. Furthermore, her heroine cites the same biblical passage on practical atheism that Richardson used to defend his depiction of Lovelace in order to emphasize just how malevolent the speculative atheist Hornton really is: "Why, *Louisa*, he is worse than the worst Inhabitant of the infernal Regions; for, are we not told, That the very Devils believe and tremble?" (1:53). By juxtaposing Hornton's unbelief to the practical atheism of someone like Lovelace or Lord Desborough in this way, and by making Hornton central to *Lady Louisa*'s plot, Gibbes effectively highlights theism's function as a refuge for her heroines. Indeed, Caroline and Louisa's denunciations of and resistance to gender hierarchy and sexual violence are always dependent upon their commitment to theism (and vice versa).

At the end of the novel, to give one especially salient example, Caroline herself is almost carried off in an abduction plot concocted by a suitor without "the Fear of *God*" before his eyes, as his valet puts it (2:191). In preparation for the abduction, Caroline's godless suitor, whom she refers to variously as a "Brute," a "Bruin," and a "Bear of Prey" (2:190–91), forges a letter, which informs Caroline of her lover Horatio's (supposed) death at sea. Bruin hopes to take advantage of Caroline's grief, catching her off guard and "compel[ling] her to accept of him, for

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Richardson's orthodoxy, but she mistakenly interprets Cibber to mean that *Richardson* no longer believed in Providence. To the contrary, Cibber is clearly referencing his own potential reaction to Clarissa's death.

her dearly beloved Husband" (2:191). Yet, unlike in Letitia Stukeley's case, the plot is thwarted, largely because of Caroline and Louisa's sense of female solidarity. Louisa discovers that Horatio is, in fact, still alive, and immediately communicates the information to Caroline's rural friend Nell, who, in her turn, relates the information to Caroline herself. Upon seeing Caroline's revived spirits, Bruin abandons his plot and runs away. Caroline's vigilant female community is her saving grace, a grace she attributes to divine "Providence" (2:202), exulting: "HOW wonderful the Chain of Human events!" (2:200).

The female solidarity on display here is grounded in Caroline and Louisa's self-assumed roles as virtuous Eves.[54] Caroline, in fact, repeatedly alludes to the biblical myth, which provides her with a powerful reminder of the need for female communities that resist male oppression.[55] Early in the novel, for instance, Caroline writes of her near seduction at the hands of Lord Westbury, reversing the gendered implications of the Eden story by making Westbury the first sinner and her the mere follower:

> But *Westbury*---How shall I speak of him with Temper, who has seduced me from the Eden of your good Opinion, and incited me to pluck, by means of his pernicious Insinuations, the Apple of Repentance? Ah, woe is me! worse, far worse is my Condition than that same Gentlewoman Mrs. *Eve's*! She had a Partner, a Participator, in her humiliating Circumstances—Her *Adam* never abandoned her, notwithstanding she was the first Transgressor. (1:20–21)

If the biblical Eve sinned first, bringing about her husband's, and thus humanity's, subsequent downfall, the modern English Eve is more sinned against than sinning. Worse still, Westbury's

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[54] Gibbes's heroines therefore counter an antifeminist satiric tradition—prevalent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—that cites the biblical Eve as proof of womankind's depravity. See Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate*, especially 20–42.

[55] However, in one particularly humorous (and cruel) instance, Caroline's tendency to allude to the Eden myth actually militates against her desire for female solidarity. Upon first seeing her uncle, Sir Ralph, and his spouse walking in Warwickshire, Caroline refers to the latter as Sir Ralph's "fat Rib." "Not so fast, good Sir," she writes, "not so fast; you forget my Lady wears little Shoes, and is visited with big Corns" (*Lady Louisa Stroud*, vol. 1, 30).

betrayal has brought about a breach in the female community Caroline holds so dear. It has forced her to leave the "Eden" of Louisa's good opinion, yet the modern Eve, contra Milton's version of the biblical matriarch, cannot count on Adam to exit paradise with her hand in hand. Hers really is a solitary way—Caroline refers to herself as a "solitary Eve" several times throughout the novel[56]—and the only possible resistance to male tyranny available to her rests in the "Diffusion" (2:223) of happiness she enjoys in Louisa's friendship.

As mentioned above, however, if the rakish Westbury is an even more faulty Adam, the atheist Hornton is the serpent itself. In the letter immediately following Caroline's first (and only) encounter with Hornton, in which she admits that she isn't capable of refuting his arguments, Caroline begins by relating what initially appears to be a *non sequitur*: her thoughts, once again, on the Eden story. She laments that men and women were never at odds until "the evil-one infused the destructive Venom into the listening Ear of our common Mother—She then first erred, but, as it were, involuntarily" (1:58). Caroline continues to blame Adam for "wittingly" partaking "of that Guilt into which she [Eve] had been *surprised* by the arch fiend" (1:59). While these reflections may initially appear out of place, I suggest that they comment on Caroline's previous interaction with Hornton. For, disgusted as she is with the profligate, Caroline cannot help but feel attracted to him. She admits that he is "well-bred," that he "dances and sings most inimitably, is Master of eight thousand Pounds a Year, and has six of the handsomest long Tails imaginable," before adding that "his Form [is] engaging, and, upon any other subject, I could listen to him from Morn to Noon, from Noon to dewy Eve, a Summer's Day" (1:52, 55). Caroline immediately interrupts this reverie, however, in order to register her recognition that Hornton's "great Qualifications" render him "infinitly [sic] more dangerous, than if his diabolical Majesty

[56] See, for instance, *Lady Louisa Stroud*, vol. 1, 162, and vol. 2, 157.

had retained a less pleasing Advocate" (1:55). The moral of her reflections on Eve's involuntary sin, therefore, is that while Caroline herself is not culpable for her attraction to the godless Hornton, she must keep up her guard and avoid further communication with him.

This is exactly the advice Louisa gives Caroline in response to her letters about Hornton. While we should be merciful when we consider our "Neighbour's Infirmities," Louisa argues, we should have no "connexion with, or countenance the Wicked, who persist in their Wickedness" (1:95). No matter how attractive they may appear on the surface, atheists simply do not deserve one's time or sympathy. Caroline tacitly follows Louisa's advice, and she never comes into contact with Hornton again. Gibbes likewise refuses to dwell on Hornton's attractions. Indeed, rather than giving him a chance to seduce either Caroline or her readers by giving Hornton more page time or allowing his own letters to appear in the novel, as Richardson did with Lovelace, Gibbes dismisses Hornton from her novel entirely until he returns in the climactic scene, only to show his true colors by bringing about Letitia's premature death.

Thus unlike Otway's Restoration comedy, *Lady Louisa Stroud* intimates that atheists are no laughing matter. It is telling that in her brief encounter with Hornton Caroline's characteristic joviality is completely absent. Her description of the scene is devoid of the puns, sarcasm, and witticisms that punctuate her letters elsewhere, a fact that Caroline herself notes. "I fear you will conclude I am turned Methodist" (1:53), she comments, before launching into a series of pious reflections directed at the "Almighty":

> And was this thinking Particle communicated to my Breast, only to inform me, that Annihilation must be my Fate?
>
> O thou Almighty Being, who apparently presides over all thy glorious Works, vouchsafe to steel my Heart against this most pernicious, groveling Principle; enlarge my narrow Understanding, and bless my Lips with such Eloquence, as may enable me humbly to assert thy Entity, and triumph over my hardened Opponent! (1:54–55)

Although she admits soon after this imprecation that her "Giddiness and Inattentions" (1:56) disqualify her from being a formidable "Opponent" in argument, with Louisa's help she successfully "steels" her heart against Hornton's "prophane Error" (1:56), and, as she vigorously asserts, she avoids the "Danger of swallowing" his "Tenets" (1:54).

Caroline's achievement in the novel, then, is that, while she was once more than willing to be seduced by Westbury, she now rejects Hornton's serpentine solicitations, reveling instead in what Gibbes suggests is her much more rational, more empowering relationship with Lady Louisa Stroud. Her rejection of atheism, to put it a bit differently, signals her embrace of female community and fellow feeling. Early in the novel, before the full extent of Hornton's malevolence has been exposed, Caroline's attention is noticeably divided between her own rather trivial affairs and Letitia's imminent childbirth. In one sentence she laments, "Unhappy *Letitia*! yours are, indeed, Misfortunes" (1:81), while in the next she wholly forgets these misfortunes, inquiring of Louisa whether London has had any "Jubilees this Summer" (1:82). Elsewhere, she bemoans Letitia's hardships—"Pretty, injured, worthy creature!" (1:120)—but then immediately proceeds to worry about how Letitia's injuries affect *her*: "What will become of *me*, when I am deprived of my only Companion?" (1:120, emphasis added). By the novel's end, however, Caroline learns to put aside "Self-care" (1:119) and follows Louisa's lead in acknowledging, "*Letitia*'s concerns are ours" (1:194). After Letitia's death, Caroline makes her acceptance of this principle explicit, and the novel concludes with her endorsement of female companionship: "Generous Minds cannot be satisfied with selfish Happiness—it is Diffusion, alone, that can content their ample hearts" (2:223).

Caroline's assumption of this selfless posture, it should be said, takes place entirely in her lover Horatio's absence. While she does indeed marry Horatio in the book's final pages, he is a

practical nonentity for most of the novel. After leaving for India midway through Volume I, in fact, he does not return until the novel's final pages. More crucially, Caroline claims she is only attracted to him in the first place because he resembles her steadfast companion Louisa. "Your Disposition and his," Caroline writes to her friend, "are perfectly similar—he may thank that Circumstance for my Approbation of him—for such is my Esteem for my Friend, that I must infallibly approve every Resemblance of her" (1:127). Caroline's attraction to Horatio thus counterintuitively confirms the benefits of female companionship. Interestingly enough, Horatio's gender identity is itself somewhat fluid thanks to an unfortunate printer's error: his name is mistakenly printed as "Horatia" for the novel's entire first volume.

All the same, in the days leading up to her union with Horatio Caroline repeats her misgivings about marriage and its effects on women. She refers to her wedding as a "Sale" (2:221), and she refuses to witness the signing of the deeds and settlements. For her, the wedding preparations are like "the Prelude to an Execution" (1:140). Her marriage to Horatio represents a sort of social death, then, and even given his piety and good nature, Horatio is implicated in the devaluing of women so endemic to Caroline and Louisa's society. Notwithstanding Caroline's claim that both "*Horatio* and *Letitia* were the Enlightenings of my Reason, and the Enlargers of my Heart" (2:131), Horatio clearly presents an obstacle to the "Diffusion" of happiness Caroline seeks. For Gibbes, this diffusion is only possible between women, and it requires a rejection of both patriarchy and the figure she depicts as emblematic of that patriarchy: the atheist Hornton.

II. Theism in *Hartly House, Calcutta*

As Saree Makdisi reminds us, myriad "mode[s] of Orientalism" existed throughout the Enlightenment, and if the nineteenth-century Orientalism so powerfully documented by Edward Said was chiefly "concerned with knowledge of the Oriental other for the purposes of imperial

administration," the "Orientalism that had preceded it" was "markedly different." Rather than shoring up a British "sense of selfhood or subjectivity" by viewing the Orient as wholly inferior, eighteenth-century imaginings of the East frequently pointed to the porous nature of both Eastern and Western identities.[57] Referring to this earlier, more innocuous mode as "Enlightenment Orientalism," Srinivas Aravamudan agrees that eighteenth-century representations of the Orient "did not tend principally toward domination of the East" but instead "interrogated settled assumptions." Enlightenment Orientalism, that is to say, was informed by mostly laudable "cosmopolitan commitments." According to Aravamudan, the institutionalized, Saidean form of Orientalism only came to the fore after the failed impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, which lasted from 1788 to 1795 and effectively helped "normalize empire under parliamentary oversight and rule of law." With this in mind, Aravamudan claims that Enlightenment Orientalism was often employed as a form of "autocritique," questioning settled European beliefs and assumptions and opening up "other possibilities" and ways of being.[58]

A host of critics, including Aravamudan himself, have pointed to fiction's foundational role in the development of this earlier, more positive mode of Orientalism. Fiction, in the broadest sense of the term, provided authors a space in which one's "sense of self" could be abandoned "to an other … virtually free of risk." Eighteenth-century fiction, to be sure, is chock-full of cosmopolitan possibilities and potentialities. In Ros Ballaster's reckoning, for example, eighteenth-century fictional modes and genres developed a "constantly shifting set of tropes of 'easternness' serving many different roles—social satire, attacks on priestcraft, critiques of absolutism and luxury, debates over female sexuality, explorations of the supernatural, the

[57] Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western*, 10, 13.

[58] Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 4, 80–81, 109.

representation of subaltern experience." In other words, fiction had "political and material effect," particularly those fictions about the East, which "came to be understood as a (sometimes *the*) source of story, a territory of fable and narrative."[59]

Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789) confirms Ballaster's argument. As Michael J. Franklin notes in his introduction to the novel's 2007 Oxford edition, *Hartly House* quite literally (and quite unintentionally) informed Britons' conceptions of real-world India when two of its passages were extracted and reprinted, without attribution, as genuine news items in both *The Aberdeen Magazine* (July 2, 1789) and *The New Annual Register* (June 7, 1790).[60] Moreover, *Hartly House* is profoundly concerned with both "female sexuality" and "explorations of the supernatural," representing India as a site of cross-cultural understanding, female liberty, and, concomitantly, unwavering belief in a supreme being. As I argue in this section, *Hartly House* advocates a sort of cosmopolitan, theistic sensibility, one that overlooks the intricacies of doctrinal statements in favor of a basic belief in the divine, a belief shared by Christians, Muslims, and Hindus alike. In this regard, Gibbes's novel is an example of what Margaret Jacob calls the "religiously cosmopolitan." That is to say, it testifies to Gibbes's desire to "experience people of different nations, creeds and colors with pleasure, curiosity and interest," accepting "the foreign hospitably, without necessarily agreeing with … every cultural value associated with it."[61] *Hartly House* insinuates that theism is ubiquitous in India, and it is this ubiquity that allows it to function as a site favorable to female sensibility and wellbeing. Gibbes's heroine and her

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[59] Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orients*, 14, 17.

[60] See Franklin's introduction to Gibbes, *Hartly House, Calcutta*, xvii–xviii.

[61] Margaret C. Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World: The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 16, 1. For a helpful overview of the burgeoning field of cosmopolitan studies, see Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held, eds., *The Cosmopolitanism Reader* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2010).

readers are therefore encouraged to forge imaginative ties with the novel's Indians and to unite with them against the dangers of unbelief.

Hartly House is, in part, a political intervention on behalf of the embroiled Warren Hastings, whose impeachment trial began in the year prior to the novel's publication. The novel's heroine, the young Sophia Goldborne, travels to India to support her father after her mother's death. Upon arrival, Sophia begins sending her friend Arabella, who remains in England, the thirty-nine letters that comprise the novel, reporting continuously on her growing admiration of life in Hastings's Calcutta. In opposition to the censorious rhetoric of Hastings's lead prosecutor Edmund Burke, Gibbes presents Hastings's Indian regime as one of tolerance and cultural vitality. In her letters, Sophia praises such diverse aspects of Calcutta as its generous and effective hospital (43), the regularity and order of its military (45), the lack of thievery and rapacity amongst the Hindus (58), and the liveliness of the theater (114, 139). Before his replacement by Cornwallis, Hastings himself is extolled by Sophia as "unostentatious and sensible," and Sophia worries that a "change in Governor would introduce a change in Eastern politics" (62), that the cultural respect she finds characteristic of Hastings's regime will fade once he is no longer present to oversee the East India Company's operations. When Hastings is called upon to leave Calcutta, Sophia informs Arabella that "every creature," including the British Company members and the native Indians, "is plunged into disconsolation" (105). Notwithstanding her stated aversion to politics, then—"I am no judge of these matters" (62), she somewhat disingenuously declares at one point—Sophia clearly supports Hastings's policy of governing the inhabitants by their own laws and customs (and in their own language), a position that, whatever its faults, is predicated on her attraction to Indian culture: "I adore the customs of the East" (33), as she succinctly puts it in the novel's ninth letter.

Sophia's appreciation of India is somewhat equivocal, however. As I discuss at greater length below, for example, she is openly repulsed by Indian Muslims, whom she considers "barbarous" (111) and quarrelsome. Moreover, her initial admiration of Calcutta often has little to do with its actual customs and native inhabitants. In the one instance in which Sophia actually describes Indian women—a group of black "*notch-girls*" who sing and dance for the English colonists after a tea party—she is noticeably dismissive. After rejoicing that her own singing "exceeded all [the English gentlemen] could have hoped for from the first daughter of Harmony," Sophia coolly notes that the girls' efforts were "unintelligible" to her, even if they were "well rewarded" by the rest of the company. Although she offers no assessment of the girls' appearances—she remarks that they were "black," "dressed in white muslin, loaded with ribbands of various colours," and had "two or three gold rings in their noses" (26), but she provides no qualitative judgment—her comments elsewhere indicate that she is highly attuned to differences of skin color. In fact, quite early in the novel she praises a "*country-born* young lady" (11) for her elegant "form" and "genteel air," and she attributes both to the fact that the woman's "complexion" is "near the European standard" (12).[62] Given these brief observations on the differences between Indian women and their English counterparts (including, of course, Sophia herself), it is evident that, at least early in the novel, Sophia's admiration of the "East" has more to do with its British administrators than it does with its native "customs."

[62] The term "country-born" is notoriously ambiguous, though most critics agree that it does not refer to "native" Indians. While Michael J. Franklin (see *Hartly House*, 164) argues that the term refers to persons born in India to European parents, others have suggested that it refers primarily to girls with British fathers and Indian mothers. The latter interpretation is supported by one of Gibbes's contemporaries, Jemima Kindersley, in her *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies* (London: J. Nourse, 1777), 272. I owe my awareness of Kindersley and her definition of "country-born" to Samir Soni, personal correspondence, August 19, 2016. Whatever the term's actual signification in *Hartly House*, the point to be made here is that Sophia clearly distinguishes the "country-born" lady from Indian women, and she considers the woman's European "complexion" a significant component of her beauty.

One of Sophia's primary attractions to India, then, is the relative equality afforded to its *British* female inhabitants. She enjoys the indiscriminate mixing of men and women at meal times, for instance, remarking that "the sexes are blended" and that "no two ladies are permitted … in this country, to sit by each other" (22). She similarly marvels at the intentional breaches of European "decorum" prevalent in India. The ladies at Calcutta are more than willing to "sympathize with those whose spirits are distressed," but they are far from delicate: "you behold them so little attentive to female decorum," Sophia writes, "and so fearless of danger, that a scarlet riding dress, which gives them the appearance of the other sex, enraptures them—and, to drive a phaeton and pair … in the midst of numberless spectators, is their delight" (40). British women at Calcutta, then, are on equal footing with men, so much so that, at times, they seem to have switched places (these women have the "appearance of the other sex," after all).

Sophia takes advantage of these freedoms and the respect paid to British women throughout Calcutta. She repeatedly jokes with Arabella about her influence over the Company's men—she has a veritable "train" of "adorers" (31)—and she refuses to marry a man simply because it is customary. Her father's friend, and Sophia's hostess, Mrs. Hartly does her best to convince Sophia that "matrimony [is] the duty of every young woman." Yet Sophia remains "unconvinced" and "unconverted," insisting that she will marry only on her own terms. For Sophia, marriage is only viable if the two partners are equals, and therefore she will not marry until she finds that "*rara avis*," a man who is intellectually suitable: "without a congeniality of taste, of sentiment, of vivacity, and of seriousness, there is no chance of felicity for me as a wife" (41).

Sophia does find such a man, the pious Edmund Doyly, whom she marries at the novel's end. Sophia appreciates Doyly's "sensibility" (91), his "grace" (142), and his humility (147), and

he proves his worth to Sophia by defending her from the drunken encroachments of a "noisy and troublesome" (91) man at a boat party. In fact, when the man attempts to "salute" (91), or kiss, Sophia, Doyly knocks him off of his boat and into the water.[63] The man quickly sobers up, but Doyly's heroism comes at a high price. For, shortly after the boat incident, the drunken man apologizes, awards Doyly a "private secretaryship" (92) to make amends, and almost immediately sends Doyly back to England on official business. Sophia's love interest is thus absent for much of the novel's final volume—he makes his first appearance on page 87, leaves for England on page 103, and he does not return until page 142, fifteen pages before the novel ends.

Thus while Sophia is willing to give up her independence by joining Doyly in matrimony, it is significant that Gibbes sends him away soon after he and Sophia first meet. In Doyly's absence, Sophia continues to enjoy the freedoms she enjoyed upon arriving in Calcutta, and, more importantly, Doyly's departure allows her to develop her friendship with a young Hindu Brahmin whom she refers to affectionately as "My Bramin" (104). As Franklin notes, Sophia's relationship with the Brahmin "profoundly challenges" our understanding of the "discourses of colonialism," as the British Sophia is educated by, and enamored with, the Indian Brahmin.[64] The Brahmin instructs Sophia on the benefits of love, which, as he says, "refines the sentiment, softens the sensibility, expands our natural virtues, … and unites all created beings in one great chain of affection and friendship" (104), and he instills in her a desire to live "inoffensively," to avoid bringing hurt or pain to "any living thing" (50). In a word, the Brahmin

[63] According to the *OED*, one meaning of "salute" is "To kiss, or greet with a kiss." See sense 2e. *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, August 2016. Given Doyly's angry response to the attempted "salute," I take this to be the operative definition in Gibbes's novel.

[64] Franklin, *Romantic Representations of British India*, 159.

teaches Sophia the same lessons of compassion, sympathy, and sociability that, as we saw in the previous chapter, Sarah Fielding was anxious to impart to her mid-century readers.

In this way, Gibbes's novel also invokes the popular writings of Laurence Sterne (1713–1768) and the cult of sensibility to which they contributed. In his posthumously published *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (1773)—a collection of letters written by the already-married Sterne to his twenty-two-year-old love interest, Elizabeth Draper, who lived in Bombay with her English husband—Sterne repeatedly refers to himself as Eliza's "Bramin." For her part, Eliza is Sterne's "fair Indian disciple."[65] Throughout both the *Letters* and his wildly successful *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), Sterne casts himself and his fictional alter ego, Yorick, as "men of *nice sensibility*."[66] In other words, they are quick to form emotional attachments, to shed tears at virtue in distress, and to sympathize with others' woes. Sophia's relationship with *Hartly House*'s sympathetic Brahmin therefore echoes Sterne's sentimental exchange and the virtues of sensibility he imparts to his young female "disciple."

Crucially, Sterne also championed sensibility as an opponent of atheistic materialism. In *A Sentimental Journey*, in fact, Yorick routinely portrays his own feelings and emotions as evidence of the divine. In his most substantial defense of feeling's divine origins, he apostrophizes: "Dear sensibility! source inexhausted of all that's precious in our joys, costly in our sorrows! thou chainest thy martyr down upon his bed of straw—and 'tis thou who lifts him up to HEAVEN—eternal fountain of our feelings!—'tis here I trace thee—and this is thy divinity which stirs within me."[67] With such declarations in mind, Tim Parnell sums up Sterne's position:

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[65] Laurence Sterne, *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (London, 1773), 4, 5.

[66] Ibid., 31.

[67] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings*, eds. Ian Jack and Tim Parnell (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98.

"since matter cannot think, emotion, like other feelings and sensations, has its source in the immaterial soul."[68] More immediately germane to a discussion of Gibbes's novels, Sterne's theistic sensibility has highly gendered implications. Like Gibbes's *Lady Louisa Stroud* and, as we will see, *Hartly House, Calcutta*, Sterne suggests that if God does not exist, nothing will keep men from betraying and ruining womankind. Thus, upon meeting a French woman who claims "she believed nothing," Yorick self-deprecatingly counters,

> I was sure it could not be her interest to level the outworks, without which I could not conceive how such a citadel as hers could be defeated—that … it was a debt I owed my creed, not to conceal it from her—that I had not been five minutes sat upon the sopha besides her, but I had begun to form designs—and what is it, but the sentiments of religion, and the persuasion they had existed in her breast, which could have check'd them as they rose up.[69]

Ironically, Yorick's feelings are not only evidence of God's existence; they are also proof that even kind-hearted parsons are inclined to act viciously ("to form designs") where women are concerned. According to Sterne, it is therefore in women's best "interest" to believe in God and to inculcate that belief in others.

As Yorick's encounter with the French woman demonstrates, proper sensibility is for Sterne entirely compatible with, and is in fact often times dependent upon, sexual desire, as long as that desire is regulated by "the sentiments of religion." *Hartly House*'s aforementioned boat scene, in which Sophia's love interest, Edmund Doyly, fends off the drunken man who attempts to kiss her, demonstrates Phebe Gibbes's awareness of sensibility's erotic dimensions. This awareness is most evident in Sophia's attachment to the Indian Brahmin. Kathryn Freeman emphasizes that Sophia's attraction to the Brahmin is not entirely platonic, notwithstanding the heroine's rather naïve claim that their relationship is centered on "perfections of the mental sort"

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[68] Tim Parnell, introduction to Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, xxii.

[69] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, 93.

(51). As Freeman notes, Sophia's attraction to the Brahmin contains sexual undertones, which force her "to see her identity as formed by India, an identity in which self merges with other."[70] The Brahmin, in fact, openly declares his affection for Sophia—"you are the loveliest of women" (104), he attests—and he therefore laments that his caste requires him to remain celibate. Sophia is caught off-guard by this declaration, yet she simultaneously admits that she "ardently aspire[d] after" the Brahmin's "confession" (104). However, if the relationship is erotically charged, raising the specter of miscegenation, Gibbes ultimately "capitulates" to "the sentimental formula,"[71] killing the Brahmin off (he dies suddenly of a fever [135]) and having Sophia marry the much less exotic Doyly.

Doyly's "oriental" (91) sensibility certainly makes him "the closest Sophia can come to union with the Bramin."[72] Yet in order to remain true to the Brahmin and her earlier claim that she has been "*orientalised* at all points" (8), Sophia begins her marriage by pledging to transform Doyly into her deceased Hindu friend: "Doyly shall figure away as my Bramin; and so well have I instructed him in every humane tenet of that humane religion, that he will not hurt a butterfly, nor can he dispatch even a troublesome musketto without a correspondent pang" (151). Despite the novel's formulaic ending, Gibbes reminds us here of her heroine's nascent cosmopolitan sensibilities and the relative fluidity of gender identities in her fictional Calcutta. After all, while the Brahmin is cast aside by Gibbes and Sophia does finally accept Doyly's hand, it is worth noting that Sophia is Doyly's instructor in these lines. If she has learned a degree of compassion and sympathy from the East, the novel's ending implies that her husband now has a thing or two

[70] Freeman, "Ambivalence and Miscegenation," 4.

[71] Ibid., 38.

[72] Ibid., 42.

to learn from *her*. Thus while Gibbes promotes the dictates of sensibility popularized by writers like Sterne, Sophia's instruction of Edmund thoroughly reconfigures sensibility's "gender and racial polarities," to use Franklin's phrase.[73] The bastions of sensibility in *Hartly House* are not Englishmen. Throughout the novel, sensibility's torch is notably carried by women like Sophia and by non-Christian Indians like her Hindu Brahmin.

Hartly House is the most sustained fictional exploration of colonial India in Gibbes's oeuvre, though it is certainly not the first novel in which she broached the topic. In *Lady Louisa Stroud*, references to India crop up somewhat unexpectedly. For example, quite early in the novel, when Caroline still longs for London society, Gibbes's heroine jocularly alludes to the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation: "That I could but transmigrate into some Animal, bound for the Metropolis!" (1:31). This particular reference is brief, but as we will recall, India's specter looms large throughout the novel's plot, as Caroline's lover Horatio spends almost the entire second volume making his fortune in the East. Caroline initially fears India will be Horatio's undoing—"To *India*? My God! Could any thing have happened more unfortunate?" (1:150)—but instead his time away proves beneficial, teaching Caroline to appreciate the joys of the countryside, to seek female companionship, and to submit to the will of Providence.

It is worth pausing here to note that the parallels between *Lady Louisa Stroud* and *Hartly House* go far beyond these few mentions of India. There are several notable similarities between Gibbes's two novels, despite the fact that *Hartly House* was published over two decades after *Lady Louisa Stroud*. Both novels, to begin with a rather trivial example, contain playful allusions to a famous line in George Farquhar's *The Constant Couple* (1700): "We Love the Precepts for

[73] Michael J. Franklin, introduction to Phebe Gibbes, *Hartly House, Calcutta*, xxxix.

the Teachers sake."[74] While *Lady Louisa*'s Caroline uses the phrase to describe her rural friend Nell's unquestioning devotion to her lover ("She loves the Precepts for the Teacher's Sake" [2:99]), *Hartly House*'s Sophia imagines that Arabella will respond to her admiration for Hindu customs by claiming she (Sophia) really only admires the "person" of the young Brahmin: "What a sweet picture would the pen of Sterne have drawn of this young man's person! But such is the European narrowness of sentiment, that if I was to attempt to do it, you would instantly conclude, I love the precepts for the teacher's sake" (111). Though seemingly negligible, these allusions point to an altogether more significant similarity between the two novels: both feature incredibly lively heroines who are resistant to male privilege. Just as Caroline is "provoking" and "gay" (1:41), Sophia regularly jokes about Arabella marrying a Nabob and the practice of polygamy (39), her own aversion to marriage (41), and her regrettable inability to cause a duel at Calcutta (53). Both women repeatedly lament patriarchal oppression and the state of married English women. What is more, the heroines' respective lovers are pious, are committed to their Indian trading ventures, and, more importantly, are absent for much of the two novels. While Caroline's Horatio makes the journey to India, Sophia Goldborne's lover Doyly of course makes the reverse journey, leaving Sophia alone in Calcutta to develop her interest in Indian culture, politics, and religion. And, like Caroline before her, Sophia claims to value her male lover primarily because he resembles her female correspondent: she is "in danger of listening" to Doyly's proposals, she tells Arabella, because he is "so in fact like yourself in his person" (87). Finally, the women's eventual marriages are fraught with ambivalence, and one gets the sense that wedlock is a regrettable necessity for both.

[74] George Farquhar, *The Constant Couple*, third edition (London: 1701), 51.

Most pertinent for present purposes, however, *Hartly House*'s sympathetic celebration of the Orient is consistent with Gibbes's opposition to atheism in *Lady Louisa Stroud*. *Hartly House* recapitulates the eighteenth-century belief, propagated by figures as diverse as Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze (1661–1739), John Zephaniah Holwell (1711–1798), Voltaire (1694–1778), and Sir William Jones (1746–1794), in a pan-Asian religion that was monotheistic at heart.[75] In fact, Holwell's *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan* (1765–1771) argues that Hinduism was "eminently distinguished in the most early known times" for its belief in "the existence of *One Eternal God*, and *temporal* as well as *future* rewards and punishments," making it largely consistent with Christian beliefs during "the gospel-dispensation."[76]

One of the things that first draws Sophia to Hinduism is her related belief that, beneath its seeming idolatry, the religion promotes an ancient, pure monotheism:

> The foundation of Brumma's doctrine consisted, it is said, in the belief of a Supreme Being, who created a regular gradation of beings, some superior, and some inferior to man;—in the immortality of the soul;—and a future state of rewards and punishments, to be bestowed and received in a transmigration into different bodies, according to the lives they had led in their pre-existent state … [T]he necessity of inculcating this sublime, but otherwise complicated doctrine, into the lower ranks, induced the priests … to have recourse to sensible representations of the Deity and his attributes: so that the original doctrines of Brumma have degenerated into downright and ridiculous idolatry, in the worship of diverse animals, of a variety of images, and some of the most hideous figures, either delineated or carved. (74–75)

This quotation supports Felicity Nussbaum's argument that claims to universality in Enlightenment-era novels about India often "mask the Europeans' attitude of superiority to Indians."[77] Indeed, the split between the exoteric idolatry of the ignorant Indians of the "lower

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[75] See App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, especially 15–132.

[76] John Zephaniah Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan*, vol. 3 (London, 1771), 19–20.

ranks" and the esoteric monotheism the English Sophia detects in Hinduism's "original doctrines" provides a prominent example of Nussbaum's point. Sophia undoubtedly views India with respect and admiration, yet she also evinces here a chauvinistic tendency to praise Indian culture while simultaneously insinuating that the colonist understands that culture better than the Indians do. Sophia gestures at a cosmopolitan ideal in which East and West are united by their shared acknowledgement of and appreciation for a "Supreme Being," but she compromises that ideal in the very act of its enunciation. At the same time, *Hartly House, Calcutta* demonstrates how veneration for Eastern monotheism often masks the eighteenth-century theist's attitude of superiority to the (European) atheist as well. While Eastern religions could be, and were, used to undermine the special truth claims of Christianity, the supposed discovery of theism in the East was just as frequently used both to support the notion that belief in God was universal and to critique godlessness back home.[78]

Sophia Goldborne is certainly disenchanted with English morality. However, this is not due to her preference for Hindu spirituality over and against Christianity, as Michael J. Franklin has argued.[79] Rather, it is the result of her belief that Christian tenets are no longer followed in England. In the letter (Letter XXVI) that makes her admiration of Hinduism most evident, she writes:

> Henceforth, Arabella, you are to consider me in a new point of view.—Ashamed of the manners of modern Christianity, (amongst the professors of which acts of devotion are

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[77] Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, 169.

[78] As Urs App documents, Voltaire used the East for both purposes: "On one hand, he was fighting against biblical authority and was in need of monotheistic religions, rites, and especially sacred scriptures that were old and flexible enough to serve as Ambrosian whips for Judaism and Christianity. The second front had opened among Voltaire's erstwhile sympathizers and friends in Paris who were resolutely materialist and atheist" (*The Birth of Orientalism*, 66–67).

[79] See Franklin, *Romantic Representations of British India*, 161.

> subjects of ridicule, and charity, in all its amiable branches, a polite jest) I am become a convert to the Gentoo faith. (111)

Arabella's rejection of "*modern* Christianity" has nothing to do with religious doctrines, but with the behavior ("the manners") of what are clearly nominal Christians (thus the emphatic insistence that the religion's adherents are merely "professors," men and women who make a "jest" of its dictates). Notably, Sophia continues referring to herself as a Christian even after this declaration. Upon learning of the Brahmin's death, Sophia requests a lock of his hair to keep as a "mental talisman" to protect against "all the irregularities to which *we Christians* are subject" (135, emphasis added). Shortly thereafter she bluntly refers to herself as a "Christian female" (145). Kathryn Freeman reads these instances as proof that Sophia has "tempered" her previous "conversion" to Hinduism and has given up the "playful binary" it instituted between herself ("we Asiatics") and Arabella ("you British").[80] However, it should be stressed that Sophia's status as a Christian does not signal her abandonment of her newfound Hindu ideals. For, in Sophia's mind, Christianity and Hinduism are no longer opposites; they are one side of the same coin.

Indeed, her praise for Hinduism stems from its practical recognition of Jesus' dual command to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and to "love thy neighbor as thyself."[81] Hence, she calls Hinduism "sweet" before asserting that "the love of the Deity, and the love of our fellow-creatures" are "its fundamentals" (104). The goal of such praise, I am suggesting, is to present Hinduism as a religion that, because of its perceived nearness to actual Christianity, is capable of critiquing the colonizers' *nominal* Christianity. Both Christianity and Hinduism, in Sophia's mind, adhere to the belief in one

[80] Freeman, "Ambivalence and Miscegenation," 43.

[81] Matthew 22:36–39 (AV). See also Luke 10:26–27 and Mark 12:30–31.

supreme God, and both instill the same basic beliefs in "peace and charity" (104) and "a future state of rewards and punishments" (75). Sophia thus echoes Warren Hastings's assertion that Hinduism is "a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines."[82] It is with this idea in mind that Sophia proudly considers herself an embodied emblem of religious syncretism: she is "a Christian by profession, but a Gentoo by nature" (151). The target of her censures, then, is not the Christian religion. It is *irreligion*.

Ashok Malhotra correctly argues that India is a place that "provides [Gibbes's] female character the sanction and freedom to behave in an assertive fashion that would not be tolerated if the novel was set in England." However, this is not only because "bourgeois morality at this time asserted the need for the gendered division between private and public spheres," though that certainly is the case.[83] It is also because the "Gentoos" of Gibbes's novel take belief in God seriously, keeping the dangers of atheists like *Lady Louisa*'s Hornton at bay and eliminating, at least temporarily, the perniciousness of English gender relations. As a result, Sophia ultimately commits herself to a form of theistic cosmopolitanism, rejecting religious bigotry in favor of mutual respect and understanding. Speaking of the Brahmin, she writes, "I respect his religious tenets, though I do not subscribe to them; and can never think myself entitled to laugh at any faith that is seriously adopted, and piously adhered to" (101). For Sophia, then, theists the world over should overlook their differences and stand united against injustice, oppression, and male aggression.

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[82] Warren Hastings, "To Nathaniel Smith, Esquire," in *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon*, trans. Charles Wilkins (London, 1785). Quoted in Tim Keirn and Norbert Schürer, *British Encounters with India*, 123.

[83] Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, 143.

As mentioned above, however, Sophia's claim that this respect extends to any faith is complicated by her seeming disdain for Islam. Even after she expresses the cosmopolitan credo above, Gibbes's heroine evinces a thorough disdain for "Mahometans" (111), recycling prevalent stereotypes that cast Muslims as the aggressive, bellicose counterpart to sentimental, sympathetic Hindus.[84] Castigating the "very fatal and barbarous" (111) nature of Calcutta's Muslims, Sophia haughtily states, "all the wealth of Indostan could not bribe me to become a Mahometan" (112). Sophia never explicitly rejects this sentiment. Still, her stance does soften by the novel's end, and, contra her previous claim that she cannot even imagine herself a Muslim, she can at least joke with Arabella about "embrac[ing] the narrow and illiberal faith of the sons of Omar" (145) shortly before her wedding. Most indicative of her expanding sensibilities, however, is her evident attraction to the Mughal Nawab, Mubarak ud-Daula, an attraction that develops late in the novel and that echoes Sophia's erotic attachment to her young Brahmin. As the Nawab's retinue passes through Calcutta on his way to meet the newly installed Governor Cornwallis, Sophia admits to feeling "undone," "dazzled," and "captivated," openly revealing that her "heart" has been "carried off" (153). Furthermore, she jests, "I would have given the world on the instant to have been a Nabobess" (153), before recounting the Nawab's "liberal and courteous demeanour" (155). The Nawab stands as a firm rejoinder to Sophia's prejudice, indicating that her offhand dismissals of Islam are as misguided as her pre-Calcutta conceptions of Hinduism.

Be that as it may, Sophia never explicitly renounces her anti-Islamic prejudice, and the novel's inclusive ideal remains unrealized. Thus while Gibbes uses her young heroine to voice various ecumenical aspirations, Sophia's inability to embody those aspirations fully exposes their ultimate incompatibility with imperial rule. At the end of this scene, in fact, Sophia envisions

[84] See Michael J. Franklin, "Cultural Possession, Imperial Control, and Comparative Religion: The Calcutta Perspectives of Sir William Jones and Nathaniel Brassey Halhed," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 32 (2002): 1–18.

being abducted by the Nawab, quickly transforming her attraction into mere romance fantasy: "an Englishwoman was not born to fear giant knights, or enchanted castles," she writes. Instead of confirming her previous declarations of inclusiveness, Sophia's feelings on Islam are, finally, ambiguous. What is more, Sophia's enchanted view of India is altogether shattered at the novel's end, as she learns of an English army officer who raped an Indian girl after heinously murdering the girl's father (157–58). In the novel's opening pages, India is a place of "boundless joys" (6). After Sophia learns of this rape, however, it becomes for her a world of nightmares: "There are monsters, Arabella, in human shapes, and the Eastern world is, (what I should have returned without conceiving it to be, but for the incident this morning) the scene of tragedies that dishonour mankind" (157). As Franklin reminds us, the "monstrosity and the monster" in this scene "are wholly Occidental."[85] In this light, Sophia's disenchantment should be read as her (unconscious) recognition of both the naivety of her admiration of Calcutta and the fact that the colonial project has spread abroad the irreligion once confined to the metropole.

Gibbes's novel therefore gestures at the possibility of theistic cosmopolitanism, even as that possibility is somewhat stifled by the novel's conclusion. Thus, *Hartly House* provides a prime example of what Srinivas Aravamudan calls the "speculative genre" of Enlightenment Orientalism. For, on one hand, the novel ends by implying that the cosmopolitanism it seemingly advocates is, perhaps, unattainable. On the other, it "makes visible some other possibilities … and suspends certain kinds of colonial teleology," suggesting that the inter-faith alliances it imagines are nonetheless worth the effort.[86]

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[85] Franklin, *Romantic Representations of British India*, 165.

[86] Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 109. Aravamudan credits the birth of this "speculative genre" to Elizabeth Hamilton's slightly later *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), which notably follows Gibbes in promoting religious inclusivism and in portraying atheism as especially harmful to women.

CHAPTER FOUR

William Cowper: Ecumenical Poetics

God, working ever on a social plan,
By various ties attaches man to man:
He made at first, though free and unconfin'd,
One man the common father of the kind;
That ev'ry tribe, though plac'd as he sees best,
Where seas or desarts part them from the rest,
Diff'ring in language, manners, or in face,
Might feel themselves allied to all the race. (William Cowper, "Charity," ll. 15–22)

In the sixth and final book of William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), an "atheist" named Misagathus seeks to prove his steadfast unbelief to "Evander, fam'd for piety" (VI: 486, 490).[1] As the two men travel on horseback, discussing their respective positions on God and morality, Misagathus makes a sudden, rather unexpected decision: he decides to kill both himself and his horse by riding over the side of a nearby cliff. By doing so, he will demonstrate to Evander that "the dread of death" (VI: 511) is, like religion itself, nothing more than "lullabies" and "fantasies" (VI: 507, 508). Misagathus rides to the edge of the cliff "with a madman's fury" (VI: 513), but unfortunately for him his "more rational" (VI: 517) steed refuses to leap to his death. Enraged, Misagathus continues on his way with Evander, only to be surprised moments later when his "far nobler beast" (VI: 529) rushes towards another cliff, this time tossing Misagathus off his back and onto the rocks below. The end of the tale is especially morbid:

[1] In the anecdote referenced here, Misagathus is a Greek transliteration meaning "Hate-good," while Evander means "Good-man." See the notes to Henry Thomas Griffith's edition of William Cowper, *The Task with Tirocinium, and selections from the Minor Poems, A.D. 1784–1799*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 269. So far as I am aware, no modern scholar has addressed the Misagathus anecdote or its implications. Vincent Newey briefly mentions Misagathus, pointing out his poor treatment of animals, but he completely ignores Misagathus' atheism. See his "Cowper Prospects: Self, Nature, Society," in *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, ed. Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 41–56, 48.

[Misagathus] flew
Sheer o'er the craggy barrier; and, immers'd
Deep in the flood, found, when he sought it not,
The death he had deserv'd—and died alone!
So God wrought double justice; made the fool
The victim of his own tremendous choice,
And taught a brute the way to safe revenge. (VI: 553–59)

The moral Cowper draws from this tale is counter-intuitive, especially since he apparently relishes Misagathus' death and expects his audience to do the same.[2] Indeed, after Cowper allows himself and his readers to enjoy Misagathus' lonely, cruel demise, he informs us that the point of the story is that we should not associate with men who lack sensibility and compassion:

I would not enter on my list of friends
(Tho' grac'd with polish'd manners and fine sense,
Yet wanting sensibility) the man
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm. (VI: 560–63)

Because he is willing to kill his horse "needlessly," then, Misagathus should be expelled from human society.[3] Ironically ignoring the fact that he and his imagined readers have themselves just disregarded the dictates of sensibility, effectively laughing Misagathus to his death, Cowper demands that the godly should feel for each and every living thing. Atheists like the imagined Misagathus, with their lack of concern for God and his creation, serve as foils to Cowper's sensible elect. If the former destroy God's creatures and plunder their neighbors at home and abroad for personal gain, the latter leave others "As free to live, and to enjoy that life, / As God was free to form them at the first, / Who, in his sov'reign wisdom, made them all" (VI: 585–87).

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[2] The *Edinburgh Review* cites this passage as one example of an "enthusiastical intolerance" that occasionally mars *The Task*. The *Review* also criticizes the actions of Misagathus' horse as "symptoms of [Cowper's] superstition." See Maurice Cross, ed., *Selections from the Edinburgh Review, Comprising the Best Articles in that Journal from its Commencement to the Present Time*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1835), 120.

[3] Immediately preceding Misagathus' tale, Cowper states that the person who fails to appreciate the "sight of animals enjoying life" is "void / Of sympathy" and is thus "unfit / For human fellowship" (VI: 321–25).

Here, Cowper petitions Christians to put into practice a theistic sensibility that embraces all and sundry. Paradoxically, however, this sensibility constitutes itself by intentionally excluding insensible atheists like Misagathus.

Cowper's promotion of theistic sensibility is not confined to this brief moment in his magnum opus. In fact, Cowper's concern with atheism is incredibly far-reaching. Given Cowper's fervent commitment to evangelical Protestantism, it is not surprising that his writings are unequivocally opposed to atheism. What is surprising, perhaps, is both the extent to which Cowper concerned himself with unbelief and the degree to which this concern intersects with his oft-noted opposition to the slave trade and British rule in India, his promotion of human sympathy and the humane treatment of animals, and his much-touted sense of religious melancholy. Although critics of Cowper's work from his day to the present have commented extensively on these latter issues, they have failed to recognize that Cowper considered his social and political positions as measured responses to unbelief.[4] A tenacious resistance to atheism, in other words, colors almost all of Cowper's thought.

As the anecdote related above indicates, those under atheism's influence were for Cowper worse than brutes; they were incapable of rational thought. Thus Cowper, like Sarah Fielding

[4] For an overview of Cowper's views on empire, colonialism, and slavery see Jeffrey Bilbro, "Who Are Lost and How They're Found: Redemption and Theodicy in Wheatley, Newton, and Cowper," *Early American Literature* 47.3 (2012): 561–89; Karen O'Brien, "'Still at Home': Cowper's Domestic Empires," in *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas M. Woodman (New York, N.Y: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 134–47; and Vincent Newey, "William Cowper and the Condition of England," in *Literature and Nationalism*, ed. Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 120–39. In a chapter on Cowper's mock-heroic style, Richard Terry connects Cowper's theology of divine condescension to his love of animals. See his *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper: An English Genre and Discourse* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 153–70. For more on Cowper and animals, see Erin Parker, "'Doubt Not an Affectionate Host': Cowper's Hares and the Hospitality of Eighteenth-Century Pet Keeping," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 38.2 (2014): 75–104. Finally, Cowper's religious melancholy has elicited scholarship from William Hayley's 1803 *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* to the present. For an overview of (and a somewhat unconvincing rebuttal to) this tradition see Diane Buie, "William Cowper: A Religious Melancholic?," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36.1 (2013): 103–19.

before him, considered belief necessary to cultivate sensibility and fellow feeling. At the same time, I argue in this chapter that Cowper went a step farther than Fielding, aligning various faiths against both atheism and the moral degeneration that, in Cowper's mind, atheism necessarily produced.[5] By examining poems from all phases of Cowper's career—including his 1782 moral satires, the *Olney Hymns* (1779), *The Task*, and "The Castaway" (1799; 1803)—I elucidate the poet's long held belief that, in contradistinction to insensible atheists, Christians should extend their sympathy to all parts of God's creation: to the Indians oppressed by British colonialism, to the poor inhabitants of the British countryside, even to the "shelter'd hare" (III: 334) Cowper domesticated and kept as a pet in Olney. Tellingly, the only figure unworthy of such sympathy in Cowper's thinking is the atheist.

That is not to say, however, that Cowper always lived up to his own ideals or that his poetry never contradicts his sympathetic standards. From time to time, Cowper is hostile not only to atheists, but to non-Christian cultures and religions as well. To provide only one brief example: in his long poem on education entitled "Tirocinium," Cowper equates recalcitrant unbelief with "the malice of a Jew" (l. 168). What I am pointing to here is therefore best described as an ecumenical *impulse*: a desire and tendency, not always successful, to view other world religions and cultures with respect, benignity, and understanding. This impulse runs throughout Cowper's poetry, and it is as notable for the times it falters as it is for the times it succeeds. Most tellingly, Cowper's sympathy has little truck with non-Christian Britons, a category that, for Cowper, included all non-Trinitarians, particularly deists, Socinians, and Unitarians. These homegrown unbelievers were paramount to atheists for Cowper, denying as they did the divinity of Christ and the biblical truths that God had thought fit to reveal to Britain

[5] Cowper's affinity with various ancient Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian poets has been explored in a tantalizing (and rather ahistorical) article by Henry Wells, "William Cowper: A Western Poet on Eastern Pathways," *The Literary Half-Yearly* 15.2 (1974): 5–21.

in its antiquity. This crucial qualification should be kept in mind throughout this chapter. Although deists, Socinians, and Unitarians believed in a supreme being and many considered themselves Christians, Cowper was unwilling to accept them as such. He was, however, willing to accept Trinitarian dissenters. Thus, when I speak of British "theists," I have Cowper's limited, Trinitarian understanding of the term in mind.

On the other hand, Trinitarian doctrine has little to do with Cowper's conceptualization of theism beyond Britain's borders. For Cowper, non-Christians from abroad were excusable, and even respectable, so long as they believed in a deity and did their best with the (small) portion of divine light they had been granted. This means, of course, that while Cowper aimed to respect and accommodate other world religions, he certainly did not agree with their core tenets. Cowper, in other words, was not a religious pluralist. Cowper rejected all faiths but evangelical Christianity as false, yet he aspired to a form of sociability that was available to all theists. One who rejected this sociability was, in Cowper's terms, a "bigot." Thus, although there were clearly limits to the ecumenical impulse I am pointing to here, it is nonetheless revealing for what it tells us about the imaginative multi-faith alliances that eighteenth-century atheism was capable of engendering.

Cowper's preoccupation with unbelief is evident as early as his autobiographical memoir *Adelphi* (c. 1767), written shortly after his conversion to the evangelical faith promulgated by his Methodist cousin, Martin Madan.[6] *Adelphi*'s goal, as Cowper puts it, is to provide a "history of

[6] Cowper's memoir was first published in 1816, sixteen years after the poet's death. Two competing editions were produced that year, both of which prudently excised many details of Cowper's various depressions and spiritual visions. Cowper's original, unabridged manuscript was circulated only amongst his closest friends in the late 1760s, including Mary Unwin, Martin Madan, John Newton, and Maria Cowper. In 1772, Cowper's original narrative was transcribed in his aunt Judith Madan's commonplace book, alongside his biography of his brother John (for its part, published as a stand-alone text in 1802). The commonplace book gives the two narratives the joint title *Adelphi, An Account of the Conversion of W. C. Esquire Faithfully Transcribed from His Own Narrative and Likewise His Narrative of the*

my heart so far as religion has been its object."[7] Following a "tradition well-established among Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, and other Dissenters in the autobiographical documenting of his spiritual progress toward salvation,"[8] Cowper claims that his boyhood years were characterized by a "total forgetfulness of God" (7). He therefore details at length the various means God used to gain his attention and remind him of his own mortality. During his time as a student at Westminster, for instance, a skull thrown up by a nearby gravedigger struck the young Cowper "upon the leg," an event that "alarm[ed]" Cowper's "conscience" and which his memoir refers to as one of "the best religious documents" (6) he received as a boy. He likewise interprets his adolescent bout of smallpox as one of many "ordinary methods which a gracious God employ[ed] for [his] chastisement" (7). Despite these divine supplications, however, Cowper remained obstinate, refusing to indulge "any sentiment of contrition, any thought of God, or eternity" (7). He instead became "an adept in the infernal art of lying" (7), started spending time "in company with Deists" (11), and began experiencing continual "dejection of spirits" (8).

The turning point in Cowper's memoir occurs when, in 1763, Cowper was called upon to defend his sufficiency to act as Clerk of the Journals in the House of Lords, a post procured for him by his barrister uncle Ashley Cowper. Terrified at the thought of this "public exhibition" (15), Cowper's spirits sunk. He "cursed the very hour of [his] birth" and, desperate to escape the trial, "began to look upon madness as the only chance remaining" (17). Being "reconciled to the

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Memorable Conversion of His Brother the Revd. John Cowper. Late Fellow of Bennet College, Cambridge, indicating that Cowper intended for the two texts to be read in conjunction. For more on *Adelphi*'s compelling textual history, see James King, "Cowper's Adelphi Restored: The Excisions to Cowper's Narrative," *The Review of English Studies* 30.119 (1979): 291–305.

[7] William Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, vol. 1 (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1979), 5. References to *Adelphi* are to this edition.

[8] Felicity A. Nussbaum, "Private Subjects in William Cowper's 'Memoir,'" in *The Age of Johnson*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1987), 309.

apprehension of madness," Cowper writes, he soon grew "reconciled to the apprehension of death," succumbing to Satan's "great temptation" of "self-murder" (18). At this point, Cowper's narrative describes in excruciating detail his multiple attempts at suicide, including his ineffectual efforts to poison himself with laudanum (efforts notably rebuffed by "an invisible hand" [21]), his inability to penetrate his breast with a pen-knife (23), and, finally, his failed endeavor to hang himself with his garter, which, according to Cowper, "broke just before eternal death would have taken place upon me" (24). After being discovered half-dead on his bedroom floor by his laundress and a close friend, Cowper forfeited the clerkship and was escorted to St. Alban's and the Collegium Insanorum of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, where the spiritual ministrations of Cotton and Martin Madan eventually won Cowper over to the evangelical faith and its "experimental knowledge of the Redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (37).

Looking back upon his conversion experience only a few years after having left Cotton's asylum, Cowper describes his escape from suicide and madness as an act of "blessed Providence" (24), a necessary part of God's plan to awaken within him a "conviction of sin" (25), thus bringing him one step closer to the salvation he claims to have received by *Adelphi*'s end. Cowper protests that he has experienced a complete "recovery" (42), a spiritual and psychological healing brought about "by God's own hand" (46). *Adelphi*'s narrator, in other words, is entirely sane, no matter how disordered his intellects may have been in the past.

Unsurprisingly, considering the fact that mental illness would dog Cowper for the remainder of his life, *Adelphi*'s critics have questioned this providential outlook, insisting that the narrator of the memoir evinces the very traits of mental instability he disavows. Barrett John Mandel, for example, argues that Cowper relates his experience of madness at such length that "it seems to subsume the conversion experience itself, almost as if the conversion were a product

of the mental instability."[9] Patricia Meyer Spacks similarly maintains that in the very process of writing about his pre-conversion madness Cowper "vivif[ies] the forces that he declares subdued by his acceptance of Christian revelation."[10] Cowper may claim to have turned fully towards God, but *Adelphi* repeatedly reminds us that other possibilities were always available. Cowper's story of newfound sanity cannot help but raise the specter of *in*sanity. Such is the point made by Felicity Nussbaum, who contends that Cowper's prose, filled as it is with negations and descriptions of potential nonbeing (Cowper's focus on suicide), "gives intimations of persistent madness in the narrator," forcing the reader "into a skeptical stance toward Cowper's rationality." The divisions between what Cowper claims to be—healed, rational—and what his prose actually suggests he is—mad, delusional—effectively undermine Cowper's project of depicting a stable converted "self." In short, *Adelphi* testifies to a "vacuum of authority" that cannot accommodate "the unified self of other spiritual autobiographies," elucidating the ideological, constructed nature of the autobiographical self.[11]

These fissures become all the more interesting when we consider that in Cowper's own reckoning, throughout *Adelphi* and his poetic oeuvre, madness is concomitant with atheism.[12]

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[9] Barrett John Mandel, "Artistry and Psychology in William Cowper's Memoir," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12.3 (1970): 435. Cowper was well aware that readers might attribute his conversion to madness. Writing to his cousin Lady Hesketh on Thursday, July 4, 1765, he reflects: "It gives me some concern, though at the same time it increases my gratitude, to reflect that a convert made in Bedlam is more likely to be a stumbling-block to others, than to advance their faith. But … [h]e who can ascribe an amendment of life and manners, and a reformation of the heart itself, to madness, is guilty of an absurdity that in any other case would fasten the imputation of madness upon himself; for by so doing, he ascribes a reasonable effect to an unreasonable cause, and a positive effect to a negative." Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 1, 100.

[10] Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The Soul's Imaginings: Daniel Defoe, William Cowper," *PMLA* 91.3 (1976): 434.

[11] Nussbaum, "Private Subjects in William Cowper's 'Memoir,'" 308, 310, 323, 308.

According to his memoir, his first great onslaught of suicidal thoughts was attended by one momentous speculation: "Perhaps, thought I, there is no God" (18), he writes. Excited by the possibility of godlessness, Cowper embraces a metaphysical position that he now (at the time of writing) considers extreme egotism: "I considered life as my property and therefore at my own disposal" (18). God's potential nonexistence dissolved existing social mores in Cowper's mind, invalidating all external demands upon his life, whether those demands took the form of God, family, friends, or duty to the state (his rejected position as Clerk of the Journals). Without God, then, Cowper believed himself justified in his desire to end his own life. His "unbelief" (46), which he acerbically describes as "rank Atheism, rottenness of heart, and rebellion against the blessed God" (23), led him to despair and isolation (he refused to dine with others because, as he puts it, "the eyes of men I could not bear" [27]) and created within him a "stupid kind of insensibility" (22).[13] Cowper understands his past "insanity" (34) as an all-encompassing unbelief that prevented him from forging valuable social ties with those around him. In stark contrast, his present "lively faith in Jesus" (30) produces "goodness and sympathy" with

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[12] Cowper was not alone in associating madness and unbelief. Christopher Smart (1722–1771), who also spent several years confined in a mental asylum, claimed in his *Hymn to the Supreme Being on Recovery from a Dangerous Fit of Ilness* (London, 1756) that during the sickness referenced in the poem's title, his "reason" left him and his "sense was lost." As a result, his belief in God was temporarily impaired: "the celestial image sunk, defac'd and maim'd" (9). Even the anonymous deistic editor of Aaron Hill's (1685–1750) *Free Thoughts Upon Faith: Or, The Religion of Nature* (London, 1758) refers to atheism as a "Species of Madness," one that is best understood as "Superstition at full growth" (9).

[13] As one of Cowper's letters to Mrs. Madan (June 11, 1768) indicates, his cousin Lady Hesketh refused to believe he had once been an atheist: "she says she cannot see how such a Life as mine had been could *Merit* such bitter Sufferings at the Hand of a Mercifull God, and bestows all the Honour of the Repentance that follow'd them entirely upon Myself." In an earlier letter (July 4, 1765) written to Lady Hesketh herself, Cowper defended his memoir's claim: "You think I always believed, and I thought so too, but you were deceived, and so was I." See Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 1, 195, 100.

"mankind" (38) and brings Cowper "into the society of Christians" (45). Faith for Cowper produces stability and sociability.[14] Atheism, on the other hand, is a form of agonizing solipsism.

Thus the precarious line *Adelphi* draws between madness and sanity is also a line between belief and unbelief, theism and atheism, and it is a line Cowper will return to over and again in his poetry. As the readings of Cowper's poems that follow make clear, madness, unbelief, and despair are inextricably related in Cowper's mind, and Cowper consciously rejects atheism in favor of a theistic sensibility that unites him with his fellow theists in Britain and beyond. In addition, the fact that Cowper believed atheism to be a form of madness adds another, altogether more sinister tenor to his work when we place this belief alongside his own fragile mental state. Indeed, his poetic musings on damnation and spiritual struggle occasionally betray a sense that God might as well not even exist for the damned. In this regard, Cowper's "The Castaway," to which I turn at the end of this chapter, is as much an exploration of the implications of God's (hypothetical) nonexistence as it is a poem about the poet's sense of spiritual exile. Despite all his misgivings about unbelief, then, the urgency of Cowper's religious art is paradoxically dependent upon the looming possibility of God's absence.

I. Theistic Sensibility in the Moral Satires

Cowper's first volume of poems, *Poems By William Cowper, Esq.* (1782), offers a thoroughgoing critique of late eighteenth-century British politics and culture. As James Newey notes, Cowper wrote the volume's eight moral satires at a time of acute political crisis.[15] To Cowper's chagrin,

[14] Spacks notes that Cowper "describes constantly and painfully his experience of separation from other men," and that "reconciliation with God involves reconciliation with man" for Cowper, but she fails to connect these observations to Cowper's own explicit comments about atheism. See Spacks, "The Soul's Imaginings," 431, 432.

[15] See Newey, "William Cowper and the Condition of England," 120–26.

Britain's ability to quell the Revolution in America was looking more and more doubtful when he began writing in 1781, a situation he refers to in "Table Talk" as the "crisis of a dark decisive hour" (l. 359). Moreover, the "loathsome traffic" of the Atlantic slave trade, which Cowper excoriates in "Charity" (l. 139; ll. 131–95), was in full swing, while the East India Company was busy exporting "slav'ry" and tyranny to "the conquer'd East" ("Expostulation," l. 366). Closer to home, London had just experienced the turmoil of both the 1780 Gordon Riots and the Whig Opposition's various attempts to curtail George III's power and royal prerogative, events that the moderate Whig Cowper attributes to "wild excess" at odds with true "liberty" ("Table Talk," l. 316). It is no wonder, then, that the *Poems* repeatedly denounce the times as "degen'rate days" ("Table Talk," l. 590) and "a self-disgracing age" ("Conversation," l. 735).

Despite these laments, however, it makes little sense to consider Cowper a keen observer of "the uncertainties and anxieties of a modern climate" and to associate those anxieties, as Tobias Menely does, with anthropogenic climate change and the "human-dominated, geological epoch" recently dubbed the Anthropocene. If the Anthropocene is defined as the historical period in which humans began to "radically transform geologic and climatic processes" (sometimes identified with the late eighteenth-century onset of industrialization), then Cowper is a rather odd choice for ecocritics looking to identify emergent awareness of climate change in works of the past. As Anahid Nersessian notes, Cowper's understanding of "why earthquakes and tsunamis happen" has virtually nothing to do with climatology. Instead, Cowper's view of the world depends upon a natural theology that attributes all events to divine providence. While portents and heavenly signs may sometimes appear inscrutable to Cowper, as Menely rightly claims, this has less to do with climate change itself than with humanity's inability to comprehend divine action in a postlapsarian universe. In other words, the Anthropocene did not begin for Cowper

with the invention of the steam engine or the start of industrialization. It began at the Fall in Eden, some 6,000 years ago. Britain's troubles—climactic, political, and military—were all traceable to that fall, and all were the result, in Cowper's thinking, of Britain's obstinate rejection of divine grace in favor of sin and degeneracy.[16]

In fact, Cowper's condemnation of his times is largely informed by John Brown's *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757). Alarmed at what he believes to be Britain's moral degeneration, Brown hopes to rescue the nation from what he famously calls a "*vain*, *luxurious*, and *selfish* EFFEMINACY."[17] Critics have commented extensively on Brown's (misogynistic) denunciation of both "effeminacy" and the "*Self Interest*" (39) with which he associates it.[18] Less remarked upon is the fact that, for Brown, belief in God is absolutely requisite to keep these vices in check. The "*selfish Passions*" that dominate British society can only be stifled by "the Principle of *Religion*, the Principle of *Honour*, and the Principle of *public Spirit*" (53). The first of these principles, which "has the *Deity* for it's Object" (53), is the cornerstone of Brown's argument, and it is the foundation upon which the other two principles rest (62). Without an active belief in God, Brown indicates, societies inevitably succumb to moral decay. The "selfish Effeminacy" (132) Brown's book decries, in fact, is constitutive of atheism: "Civil Times" (selfish, luxurious times, in other words) "are Times of Atheism" (165), as Brown puts it.

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[16] See Tobias Menely, "'The Present Obfuscation': Cowper's Task and the Time of Climate Change," *PMLA* 127.3 (2012): 477–92, 478, 479, 488; and Anahid Nersessian, "Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form," *Modern Language Quarterly* 74.3 (2013): 307–29, 317.

[17] John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, 2nd ed. (London: L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1757), 29. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

[18] See, for instance, Felicity Nussbaum, "Effeminacy and Femininity: Domestic Prose Satire and David Simple," especially 427–29; and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137–205.

Brown worries extensively about the threat posed by unbelief, stating that "Irreligion knows no Bounds, when once let loose" (55). Religion and self-interest are mutually exclusive (85–86). Even worse, the irreligion that produces selfishness is dehumanizing: it "leads to *rascally* and abandoned *Cowardice*. It quenceth [sic] every generous Hope that can enlarge the Soul; and levels Mankind with the Beasts that perish" (90). Atheism offers little consolation for the belief it seeks to upend. It can offer nothing but "Death, Despair, and Annihilation to the human Kind" (169). Because of this, it is to Britain's great detriment that "*speculative* Belief, in this Period, must naturally be lost along with the *practical*" (166). The self-interest that would necessarily attend such godlessness is incapable of maintaining a unified, sociable state ("a *Chain* of *Self-Interest* is indeed no better than a *Rope* of *Sand*: There is no *Cement* nor *Cohesion* between the parts" [111]), leaving the poor to fend for themselves (118) and the tyrannized Native Americans without a protector in the face of shameful colonial violence (143–44).

As Cowper's "Table Talk" reveals, his moral satires are heavily indebted to Brown's *Estimate*, and he agreed with Brown's central thesis. The poem cleverly lauds the "estimate of Brown" as "inestimable," and it concurs with Brown's belief that "effeminacy, folly, lust" will soon overtake Britain "Unless sweet penitence her pow'rs renew" (ll. 384, 394, 398).[19] Indeed, at the root of the political evils Cowper laments throughout the satires lies a more fundamental problem: Britain's emergent lack of belief. Religion, according to Cowper, has become a "hated theme" discredited as mere "fancy" ("Hope," ll. 218, 243). Even its priests disclaim it as a "pernicious dream" ("Expostulation," l. 114). In a claim that resonates with the work of many later theorists of secularization, Cowper insists that such priests have emptied religion of its

[19] Cowper's only disagreement with Brown has to do with the timing of Britain's moral, and thus political, collapse. Brown believed the collapse would occur in the late 1750s, during Britain's involvement in the Seven Years' War. Given Britain's ultimate success in the war, Cowper obviously felt as if Brown's *Estimate* was premature: "Its error, if it err'd, was merely this— / He thought the dying hour already come, / And a complete recov'ry struck him dumb" ("Table Talk," ll. 391–93).

theological content in order to maintain stability and power in an increasingly commercial society. In perhaps the only line of poetry in which Cowper ever openly agrees with atheists, he laments that too many priests have become "what atheists call" them: "designing knave[s]" ("The Progress of Error," l. 108). Cowper deems their sterilized, secularized religion vacuous at best: "As soldiers watch the signal of command, / They learn to bow, to kneel, to sit, to stand; / Happy to fill religion's vacant place / With hollow form, and gesture, and grimace" ("Expostulation," ll. 119–22). Needless to say, gesture and grimace, in Cowper's mind, are poor inducements to virtuous living.

Because the church has failed to "preserve" the "fountain" of pure religious belief ("Expostulation," l. 98), Cowper suggests that it should come as no surprise that atheists and other "infidels" ("Expostulation," l. 380) now refuse to "confess a God" ("Table Talk," l. 374). Cowper would have agreed with Edward T. Oakes's profession that "believers get the enemies they deserve."[20] Because of clerical laxity, according to Cowper, the "deist" and the "atheist" now "rave" openly against "the cross." And while "The Progress of Error" questions whether the "earth" can actually "bear so base a slave" (ll. 613–15) as an atheist, the poem "Hope" is more confident in this regard. Although some "fools" are atheists merely "by art" (that is, they pretend to be unbelievers to appear wiser than they are), some are truly "by nature—atheists, head and heart" (ll. 497–98).[21] Even the "idolatry" of the "blind heathens" is "beyond [the] reach" (ll. 499–

[20] Edward T. Oakes, "T.S. Eliot on Religion Without Humanism," *First Things*, September 9, 2008, online, accessed January 24, 2015, available: http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/09/ts-eliot-on-religion-without-h.

[21] As Cowper's Oxford editors note, the reference here is to the dissolute Greenlanders described in David Crantz's *The History of Greenland* (London, 1767). However, given the fact that some of the vices Cowper ascribes to these "natural" atheists are absent in Crantz's account of the Greenlanders, most notably drunkenness, it is fair to assume that such natural atheists aren't confined solely to Greenland. Indeed, it is to the shame of the English, Cowper's poem implies, that the atheistical Greenlanders

500) of such unbelievers, and Cowper minces no words when assessing their condition: they are sub-human, "Chargeable only with an human shape" (l. 514). Crucially, they have been "suck'd in" by a "dizzy madness" (l. 518). Echoing his own story of melancholy, madness, and unbelief in *Adelphi*, in fact, Cowper maintains in "Truth" that "unbelief" quickly grows "sick of life." Hence, it is a form of "madness" and "lunacy" that only "scripture" can "cure" (ll. 445, 441, 448, 452).

Although Cowper's tendency to associate madness and atheism is rather crude and straightforward, it does raise a series of rather interesting questions. Is the atheist's madness caused by his mistaken beliefs? Or are his mistaken beliefs brought about by his madness? In other words, what is the causal relationship between the two? Similarly, what role does behavior play in the formation of one's beliefs? Is atheism always preceded by "vice," as Cowper suggests in "The Progress of Error" (l. 622), or is immoral behavior brought about by unbelief? Indeed, the relationship between belief and practice, and thus speculative atheism and practical atheism, is nothing if not complex in Cowper. While he does occasionally suggest that belief is merely a way of justifying one's practice, and that true speculative atheism may therefore not actually exist, "Hope's" claim that some atheists are unbelievers in both "head and heart" refutes this. In fact, the most succinct summary of Cowper's complicated position is contained in the following couplet from "The Progress of Error": "Faults in the life breed errors in the brain; / And these, reciprocally, those again" (ll. 564–65). In this circular vein of thinking, it is impossible to separate entirely atheistic beliefs from atheistic behavior. At the same time, the couplet evinces Cowper's awareness that, although inextricably related, belief and behavior are in fact two distinct phenomena. In other words, the couplet attempts to tease out the relationship between

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eventually converted to Christianity and renounced their former godlessness while many of those born in nominally Christian England ("a land of light," as the poem calls it [l. 535]) refuse to turn to God.

belief and behavior without fully subsuming one into the other. Unbelief may sometimes lead to iniquity, and iniquity may sometimes lead to unbelief, but either way Cowper's verdict is the same: the atheist is both immoral and insane.

Aside from madness, the other major metaphor Cowper employs to describe unbelief is that of blindness. It is a metaphor Cowper would turn to again and again in his career—he once called the notoriously skeptical David Hume "the Pope of thousands as blind and as presumptuous as himself,"[22] for instance—and it pops up repeatedly in the 1782 *Poems*. "The Progress of Error" denounces unbelievers as those who have been "blinded" (ll. 619). "Truth" castigates an imagined, pharisaical interlocutor for his "weak sight" (l. 98). "Expostulation" speaks of those who are "Blind to the working of that secret pow'r" known as Providence (l. 320). And, finally, "Hope" asserts that there is no "blinder bigot" (l. 594) than one who disagrees with God on "scripture-ground" (l. 599).

This focus on spiritual blindness is informed, of course, by a long biblical tradition—spanning from the Old Testament prophets' various claims that God will soon "bring the blind by a way that they knew not," making "darkness light before them" (Isaiah 42:16, AV) to Jesus' emphatic assertion, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12, AV)—that portrays God's grace as a miraculous bestowal of sight upon the blind. More immediately, the metaphor indicates Cowper's understanding of himself as a Miltonic poet tasked with instilling spiritual truths and belief in God in the minds of his readers. Milton's understanding of his blindness as a spiritual strength—

[22] Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 2, 263. Cowper is writing to William Unwin about Hume's essays in favor of suicide, which Cowper condemns as "licentiousness." Cowper also agreed with James Milner's critique of Hume's posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), entitled *Gibbon's Account of Christianity Considered: Together with some Strictures on Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: A. Ward, 1781). See Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 2, 52.

a sentiment expressed most forcefully, perhaps, in the invocation to Urania in Book VII of *Paradise Lost* and the sonnet "When I Consider How My Life is Spent"—resonated with Cowper, who, like Milton, dealt with debilitating eye issues for much of his life.[23] Against Samuel Johnson's critique of Miltonic blank verse in his "Life" of Milton, Cowper consistently defended Milton's blank verse, and his editorial work (in the 1790s) on an edition of Milton that never came to fruition was meant in large part to rescue Milton from Johnson's aspersions.[24] Yet while Cowper's poetic identification with Milton would reach its apex in *The Task*, which Cowper saw as a sort of epic continuation of *Paradise Lost*, it was nonetheless already apparent in the moral satires of 1782.[25]

In fact, Poetry's true aim, according to "Table Talk," is "to redeem the modern race / From total night and absolute disgrace" (ll. 664–65). Like Milton, poets should inculcate religious belief by focusing on purely religious themes. Unfortunately, the modern "poetic tribe" (l. 768) is entirely uninterested in religion, and religious poets are few and far between: "Pity religion has so seldom found / A skilful guide into poetic ground!" (ll. 716–17). Modern poets are inspired by "vanity" (l. 757) and the "breath of fame" (l. 746), rather than by God's "word, his works, his ways" (l. 751). Their productions are therefore "trifling" and "worthless" (l. 759).

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[23] See Book VII, lines 24–31 in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007). All references to *Paradise Lost* are to this edition.

[24] In his comments on *Paradise Lost*, Johnson derides blank verse as tedious: "Poetry may subsist without rhyme, but English poetry will not often please; nor can rhyme ever be safely spared but where the subject is able to support itself. Blank verse makes some approach to that which is called the 'lapidary style'; has neither the easiness of prose nor the melody of numbers, and therefore tires by long continuance." Johnson notoriously applied this critique of monotony to the epic itself: "*Paradise Lost* is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure." See Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), 464, 468.

[25] For more on Cowper's poetic debts to Milton, as well as his frustration with Johnson's critiques of *Paradise Lost*, see James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 144–46, 233–48.

Cowper contrasts their "flowing numbers" and "flow'ry style" (l. 741) to the unadorned simplicity of Adam and Eve before the Fall:

> In Eden, ere yet innocence of heart
> Had faded, poetry was not an art;
> Language, above all teaching, or, if taught,
> Only by gratitude and glowing thought,
> Elegant as simplicity, and warm
> As ecstasy, unmanacled by form,
> Not prompted, as in our degen'rate days,
> By low ambition and the thirst of praise,
> Was natural as is the flowing stream,
> And yet magnificent—a God the theme! (ll. 584–93)

The prelapsarian poetics described here notably privileges content ("the theme") over "form," the latter of which is aligned with degeneracy, "ambition," and godlessness. Against the "mere mechanic art" (l. 654) of Alexander Pope's polished heroic couplets and the countless inferior versifiers who have Pope's "tune by heart" (l. 655), Cowper imagines a godly poet whose freedom from sin is indicated by his poetry's formal artlessness ("unmanacled").

Of course, the prelapsarian world Cowper envisions is a far cry from the "degen'rate days" lamented throughout the 1782 *Poems*, and his superficial denigration of Pope's verse is complicated by the volume's most obvious formal characteristic: Cowper's own consistent use of heroic couplets. In a 2000 *MLQ* essay on "Formalism and History," J. Paul Hunter argues that eighteenth-century heroic couplets are far more sophisticated than is sometimes acknowledged. As Hunter notes, heroic couplets typically compare or contrast opposing ideas, abstractions, or categories—whether in a pair of rhyming iambic pentameter lines or in an individual line divided by a caesura—not necessarily to synthesize opposing ideas, but to "suspend opposing viewpoints … without choosing between them." Couplets demand that readers redefine and refine easy oppositions, "merg[ing] categories and complicat[ing] the terms, showing how they overlap, interrelate, and imperfectly represent a reality that is abundant and complex." Eighteenth-century

poems often employ successive couplets, pairs of couplets, and, ultimately, stanzas comprised of couplets to build sophisticated philosophical arguments and to present the world in all its variegated complexity.[26] Consistent with Hunter's argument, Cowper's reliance upon the very couplet form he seemingly denigrates demands that readers keep two competing understandings of reality in play simultaneously: on one hand, the Christian poet belongs to "Heav'n," which is "easy, artless," "Majestic in its own simplicity" ("Truth," ll. 22, 27); on the other, he exists in a fallen world in which such artlessness is no longer available.

In this sense, Cowper's moral satires formally enact the inaugurated eschatology of the Pauline epistles: the Christian poet has already been redeemed from sin, but he nonetheless remains subject to sin's power in the here and now. This is most evident in the volume's fifth poem, "Hope," which repeatedly positions heaven and earth as antitheses that are nonetheless yoked together by the couplet form: "[Hope] crowns the soul, while yet a mourner here, / With wreaths like those triumphant spirits wear" (ll. 165–66). Cowper's use of heroic couplets therefore indicates his poetry's embeddedness in a world of sin ("while yet a mourner here"), while paradoxically pointing to the redemption and reclamation of his formal artistry ("triumphant spirits").

Thus despite his distaste for Pope's "musical finesse" ("Table Talk," l. 652), Cowper finds the couplet form to be a useful tool in the battle against vice. In a post-Edenic world overwhelmed by lascivious epistolary novels and gossip-mongering newspapers (see "The Progress of Error," ll. 307–30, 460–69), well-governed heroic couplets are the poetic equivalents of spiritual discipline:

> Then Pope, as harmony itself exact,
> In verse well disciplin'd, complete, compact,

[26] J. Paul Hunter, "Formalism and History: Binarism and the Anglophone Couplet," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000): 116–17.

Gave virtue and morality a grace,
That, quite eclipsing pleasure's painted face,
Levied a tax of wonder and applause,
Ev'n on the fools that trampled on their laws. ("Table Talk," ll. 646–51)

In Cowper's reckoning, Pope's verse served virtue's cause by making "morality" appealing. More critically, however, Pope's poetic form underscores his poems' virtuous content. Instead of writing merely for "pleasure's" sake, Pope regulated his verse much like Cowper calls on readers to regulate their passions and follow "virtue." Cowper's main gripe with Pope, then, is not that his artifice was godless; it is that the "warblers" (l. 655) who followed in Pope's wake misidentified the "grace" of his poetry. Whereas Cowper views Pope's verse as a poetic instantiation of moral "laws," Pope's modern imitators prize only its superficial, formal aspects (its "painted face"). It is no coincidence, then, that their mechanical versifying (their "mere mechanic art," as line 654 puts it) echoes in a poetic register the "hollow" religious "form[s]" that Cowper excoriates in "Expostulation" (l. 122). In contrast to such petty versifiers, Cowper calls for an entirely different type of poet, one who represents a Christian version of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: "a bard all fire, / Touch'd with a coal from heav'n," who tells "That He, who died below, and reigns above / Inspires the song, and that his name is love" ("Table Talk," ll. 734–35, 738–39).[27]

Cowper rather disingenuously denies his own ability to assume this role: "But no prophetic fires to me belong; / I play with syllables, and sport in song" (ll. 504–5), he declares in "Table Talk." The poem—a Socratic dialogue between two unnamed speakers, A and B—attempts to reinforce Cowper's disclamation on a formal level by dispersing poetic authority

[27] Isaiah's prophetic call occurs in a well-known passage from Isaiah 6: "Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin is purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:6–8, AV).

between its two speakers, presenting B's lengthy observations on aesthetics, religion, and politics not as exercises in self-assertion, but as humble responses to A's various inquiries. Be that as it may, the tactic ultimately proves ineffective. B quite simply dominates the poem, and A does little more than prompt and confirm his interlocutor's numerous comments and assertions (including the claim that he merely "plays with syllables"). Despite his attempts to downplay his abilities and to avoid the appearance of self-promotion, Cowper's poetic voice and ambitions shine forth rather clearly, even in the volume's first poem.

Indeed, Cowper's poetic acumen and complete command of the couplet form—displayed prominently in the passage cited above (ll. 646–51)—are meant to distinguish him from the petty "warblers" who unsuccessfully imitate Pope. From the clever chiasmatic alignment of the diminutive Pope and compactness, to the staccato rhythm that dominates the passage's initial couplet (ll. 646–47), to the pitting of "virtue," "morality," and "grace," on the one hand, against "pleasure" and artifice (a "painted face") on the other, to the multiple caesuras that set apart key terms and isolate individual poetic feet ("complete"), allowing discrete formal units to accumulate slowly into one tightly-constructed line, Cowper subtly insinuates that he is just as qualified as Pope to fashion "well disciplin'd" verse. In fact, Cowper's eschewal of "finesse" in favor of regulated, godly verse evinces a desire not merely to replicate Pope's quality, but to surpass it. If Pope's poetry is marred by a tendency towards "delica[cy]" (l. 653), Cowper champions a fully masculine poetics: "Give me the line, that plows its stately course / Like a proud swan, conq'ring the stream by force; / That, like some cottage beauty, strikes the heart, / Quite unindebted to the tricks of art" (ll. 522–25). Cowper's disavowal of "finesse" is once again compromised, however, by the authorial dexterity so eminently demonstrated here, in the etymological play between "line" and "plows" (the Latin *versus* can refer to either a line of verse

or earth that has been turned by plowing); in the odd juxtapositions between images of power and images of elegance (a "conq'ring" "swan," a "striking" "cottage beauty"); and in the precise syntactical balance sustained across these two couplets. These lines are clearly not lacking in "the tricks of art." Nonetheless, Cowper maintains that his verse is artless; not in the sense that it is without artistic merit, but in the sense that it is not misleading or devious. It subordinates both the poet himself and his reputation, "the breath of fame," as "Table Talk" (l. 746) puts it, to nobler ends. Cowper asks us to read his poetry not as a call for applause or recognition, but as an altar call spoken on behalf of God himself.[28] It is a call to believe: "The remedy you want I freely give: / The book shall teach you—read, believe, and live!" ("Truth," ll. 273–74).

A crucial paradox at the center of Cowper's poetry, then, is that verse is potentially self-assertive, a far cry from the Christian call to take up one's cross and lay down one's life. Such, at least, was the worry of Cowper's friend and spiritual mentor, John Newton, who discouraged Cowper from writing poetry that was not overtly religious.[29] Yet Cowper is strangely well suited for the role of Christian poet. After all, no one has ever accused him of having an inflated sense of self-worth. Nonetheless, Cowper recognizes the danger of self-assertion, and he insulates himself by placing "self" firmly on the side of the atheism he opposes in his role as godly poet. In a move akin to that made by Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, Cowper gains his poetic voice by

[28] Priscilla Gilman has shown that, despite his protestations to the contrary, Cowper was in fact highly concerned with the public's reception of his work: "Far from being only 'more solicitous to please himself than the public,' the self Cowper invents and presents in his correspondence is an emphatically publicized or criticized self." Priscilla Gilman, "William Cowper and the 'Taste of Critic Appetite,'" *ELH* 70.1 (2003): 90.

[29] For this reason, Newton had severe reservations about *The Task* and Cowper's various Homeric translations of the 1780s and 1790s. Thus, after publishing the 1782 *Poems*, Cowper kept his friend almost entirely out of the loop regarding his poetic compositions and plans for publication. See King, *William Cowper*, 147–49, 191–92.

first renouncing his claim to have one.[30] In the poems that follow "Table Talk," all of which abandon that poem's dialogic structure and its half-hearted attempt to deny Cowper's poetic authority, he tellingly refers to himself not as a poet, but as a "monitor"—"Content if, thus sequester'd, I may raise / A monitor's, though not a poet's praise" ("Retirement," ll. 805–6). Moreover, the *Poems* are filled with denunciations of self-interest and self-assertion. As in John Brown's *Estimate*, the degenerate, unbelieving times Cowper's moral satires decry are resolutely "self"-obsessed: Cowper's contemporaries are censured for worshipping the "idol self" ("Table Talk," l. 744); Cowper grieves that they engage in "self-satisfying schemes" ("Truth," l. 7) and "set up self, that idol god within" their hearts ("Expostulation," l. 216); they are consumed by "mean self int'rest" (l. 439) and erringly attempt to place the "foundation" of "virtue" on "self-exalting claims" ("Hope," ll. 529–30); and, finally, while true charity "intends alone / Another's good," the "feign'd" charity of unbelievers centers in their own "self-complacence" ("Charity," ll. 449–50, 468). With this in mind, Cowper's final moral satire, "Retirement," "bid[s] the pleadings of self-love be still" and calls Britons "away from selfish ends and aims" (ll. 129, 19).

The cure Cowper offers for such pervasive selfishness is the "tender sympathy" and "sensibility divine" that is inspired by belief ("Table Talk," ll. 485–86). Indeed, only "True piety" can cause one to "weep … and heave a pitying groan, / For others' woes" ("Truth," ll. 176–78). Cowper rejects both Hume's idea that self-interest produces sympathy and Shaftesbury's belief in

[30] In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, the Knight of Faith gives up his claim to everything finite and temporal in order to gain what is infinite and eternal, and, in the process, he paradoxically manages to gain both the finite and the infinite: "He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, and there is not a second when one has a notion of anything else." See Søren Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 121.

humanity's natural proclivity for virtue.[31] For Cowper, virtue, sensibility, and sociability must spring from "an eternal source" ("Charity," l. 370). All sublunary inducements to sociable living are mere supplements to the miraculous sensibility produced by God's grace. As he writes in "Charity,"

> The ties of nature do but feebly bind,
> And commerce partially reclaims, mankind;
> Philosophy, without his heav'nly guide,
> May blow up self-conceit, and nourish pride;
> But while his province is the reas'ning part,
> Has still a veil of midnight on his heart;
> 'Tis truth divine, exhibited on earth,
> Gives Charity her being and her birth. (ll. 371–78)

To overcome the spiritual blindness ("a veil of midnight") and solipsistic tendencies ("self-conceit") of the age, Britons must abandon their unbelief and rely instead on the theistic sensibility brought about by "truth divine." If atheism and unbelief generate despair and isolation, belief in God allows men and women to go beyond themselves—their hearts will "quit [their] prison[s] in the breast," as Cowper puts it ("Charity," l. 610)—and to display "universal love" (l. 596) to all mankind. In other words, in Cowper's mind the solution to the cultural and political evils of his day is not more "commerce," "nature," or "philosophy." The solution is belief.

II. *The Task*'s Ecumenical Poetics

Cowper's recent biographer, James King, has argued that the 1782 *Poems* "is ultimately a handbook of Evangelical doctrine." At the same time, King interprets Cowper's 1785 *The Task* as

[31] For example, against Pope's Shaftesburian belief in an innate moral sense, a belief most prominent in the *Essay on Man*'s (1734) declaration that "Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, / As, to be hated, needs but to be seen" (ll. 217–18), Cowper submits that morality is only attractive if it is underpinned by proper belief in God: "Religion, if in heav'nly truths attir'd, / Needs only to be seen to be admir'd" ("Expostulation," ll. 492–93). See Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 523.

a sharp break from the *Poems*' evangelical purpose. Because he regards *The Task*'s finest poetic moments as those "brief, intense passages where [Cowper] speaks directly of … himself," King is able to assert that it "is only in *Retirement*, the final moral satire, that the writer of *The Task* begins to emerge." King points to *The Task*'s autobiographical impulses (despite his acknowledgement that such impulses are "brief"), its adoption of "conversational" blank verse, its "forceful, virile diction," and its digressiveness as key deviations from Cowper's earlier poetry, concluding that *The Task*'s success lies in its focus on an individual's attempt "to understand the ambivalences of life and to write about them."[32]

King is certainly correct to point out the stylistic differences between Cowper's *Poems* and *The Task*. At the same time, *The Task*'s formal innovations should be understood not as the abolishment of Cowper's earlier poetic impulses, but as their fulfillment. In fact, the poem's "forceful, virile" blank verse enacts the masculine, heavenly simplicity advocated throughout the 1782 moral satires, and Cowper confidently assumes a role he previously took up only hesitatingly: that of the godly Miltonic poet. Indeed, *The Task*'s "conversational" ease and its abandonment of rhyming couplets make its poetic artifice much less obvious and obtrusive, achieving the sort of formal transparency Cowper theorized (but eschewed in practice) throughout his earlier poems. *The Task* privileges content over form, that is, and this poetic hierarchy is primarily highlighted, paradoxically, by the poem's formal construction.

The Task's treatment of unbelief and sociability likewise demonstrates that the poem's aims are congruent with those of Cowper's earlier poems.[33] In fact, I argue here that *The Task* is

[32] King, *William Cowper*, 110, 115, 113, 155–56, 152.

[33] It should be noted that even the poem's "stricken deer" passage (III: 108–90), often celebrated for its autobiographical impulses, is in fact a paean to Christ (see III: 112–16, in particular). In addition, the deer imagery Cowper employs is thoroughly conventional and Biblical (see, for instance, Psalm 42 and

just as concerned with rooting out unbelief as Cowper's moral satires are. And, as the story of Misagathus cited at the beginning of this chapter makes clear, it is equally insistent that sensibility and sociability are incommensurate with atheism. Moreover, *The Task* demands that British Christians extend their sympathies to believers of all creeds, Christian or otherwise. By doing so, it contributes to an ecumenical project that pervades Cowper's poetry.

The Task begins by reminding us of Cowper's previous poetic endeavor:

> I sing the SOFA. I, who lately sang
> Truth, Hope and Charity, and touch'd with awe
> The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,
> Escap'd with pain from that advent'rous flight,
> Now seek repose upon an humbler theme;
> The theme though humble, yet august and proud
> Th' occasion—for the Fair commands the song. (I: 1–7)

In mock-heroic fashion, Cowper disclaims his ability to grasp the "solemn chords" he pursued in his earlier, explicitly religious poetry. Instead, he will accede to Lady Austen's (the famous "Fair" mentioned here) request and write a poem upon a much more "humble" topic: the sofa of the poem's first line. Cowper's claims are misleading, however, for he shortly returns to the prophetic evangelizing of his moral satires. To be sure, the poem's overarching themes could quite accurately be boiled down to the titles of the three poems he references here: "Truth," "Hope," and "Charity." It is no mere coincidence that, rather early in *The Task*, Cowper regrets the dearth of godly "monitors" in England's church, suggesting that his poetic purpose is once again to assume the mantle of the nation's moral "monitor" (II: 576).

More importantly, as W. Gerald Marshall explains, the focus in *The Task* is not solely—or even primarily—Cowper the poet, but also Christ "the Word," the "efficacious source of all life and meaning." The poem's digressive nature, according to Marshall, is a poetic emulation of

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Habakkuk 3:19), suggesting that the passage is not the decisive move towards Romantic subjectivity that some consider it to be.

the "creative principle inherent in the Word," the *concordia discors* or harmonious variety of divine creation. In addition, the poem's promotion of rural life relies upon Cowper's understanding of the country as a site where "the Word may be experienced as: 1) the fundamental reality, the ground of being for natural creation; 2) the primary aesthetic principle, as symbolized in the art of gardening; [and] 3) intellectual and spiritual nourishment that is discovered in quiet, meditative reading of the Word of Scripture." Following a well-established poetic tradition, Cowper portrays the country as the place where God's presence is most readily discernible. The city, on the other hand, is "a modern Babylon," a place sorely lacking belief in God.[34]

Cowper's London is famously "a crowded coop" (III: 834), a "resort and mart of all the earth" that is "spotted with all crimes" (III: 835, 837). Admitting that London contains "Much that [he] love[s]" and "many righteous" (III: 838, 844), Cowper nonetheless bleakly maintains that the city is home to "all that I abhor" (III: 839). Cowper's main complaint about London is the prevalence of unbelief. The city is filled with "foolish men / That live an atheist life" (II: 179–80) and who deny the "Godhead with a martyr's zeal" because they are "Blind, and in love with darkness" (VI: 883, 885). These men are slaves to their sins and vices, and they are completely unaware of their precarious situation: they are "maniacs dancing in their chains" (II: 663). The "relaxation of religion's hold" (II: 569) has produced numerous such maniacs, and their godless lives are sorely without purpose. They cannot answer life's most pressing questions—"Whence is man? / Why form'd at all? and wherefore as he is?" (II: 512–13)—because for Cowper only God

[34] W. Gerald Marshall, "The Presence of 'The Word' in Cowper's *The Task*," *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 27.3 (1987): 476, 477, 479. In the eighteenth century, this country/city dichotomy was commonly exploited by poets like James Thomson (1700–1741) and Thomas Gray (1716–1771), and it extended back at least as far as John Pomfret's popular poem "The Choice" (1700).

can supply an adequate answer. Questions of purpose are "Knots worthy of solution, which alone / A Deity could solve" (II: 520–21).

The most heinous offenders, in Cowper's mind, are therefore the modern speculative philosophers who attempt to solve these quandaries without resorting to God.[35] In an almost Swiftian diatribe against the hubris of speculative philosophers, *The Task* stringently denounces those who

> Contrive creation; travel nature up
> To the sharp peak of her sublimest height,
> And tell us whence the stars; why some are fix'd,
> And planetary some; what gave them first
> Rotation, from what fountain flow'd their light. (III: 156–60)

These philosophers may discover much "learned dust" (III: 161), but they are "dark in things divine" (III: 235). Because of this, they fail to see that nature is "meant to indicate a God to man" (III: 246). They waste their life chasing smoke, thereby trading "Eternity for bubbles"—a "senseless bargain" (III: 175–76), according to Cowper. Their godless systems, in short, produce "Conclusions retrograde, and mad mistake" (III: 239). "The beauty" (V: 560) of creation is not meant to augment men's pride, but to lead men to God, a point Cowper makes explicitly when he writes that nature is "Form'd for the confutation of the fool, / Whose lyeing heart disputes against a God" (V: 567–68).

This pursuit of "darkness" connects Cowper's thoughts on atheism to his thoughts on empire, as it is equivalent in his mind to a pursuit of "Pleasure and Gain" (VI: 892). This latter

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[35] Harry P. Kroitor notes that Cowper was opposed to speculative thinking of all types, including theological speculation, and that he was not opposed to scientific discoveries so long as they were meant to "expand the map of the natural universe without challenging the role of God in creating, revealing, and maintaining the cosmos." According to Kroitor, Cowper disapproved "of all speculative systems describing the earth's formation, even those with a religious bias, simply because they *are* speculative." See "Cowper, Deism, and the Divinization of Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21.4 (1960): 511–26, 518. I take Kroitor's point, but it is also worth mentioning that the speculative philosophers denounced in *The Task* are overwhelmingly irreligious.

pursuit inevitably, and problematically, leads men to "roam the earth / To prey upon each other" (VI: 896–97). Echoing the emphatic opening of "Expostulation" ("Why weeps the muse for England?" [l. 1]), a poem likewise concerned with Britain's imperial misdeeds, *The Task*'s second book begins by declaring Cowper's outrage at the crimes committed abroad by his countrymen. The Atlantic slave trade is his primary target:

> My soul is sick, with ev'ry day's report
> Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd.
> There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
> It does not feel for man; the nat'ral bond
> Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax
> That falls asunder at the touch of fire.
> He finds his fellow guilty of a skin
> Not colour'd like his own; and, having pow'r
> T' inforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause
> Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey.
> …
> Thus man devotes his brother, and destroys;
> And, worse than all, and most to be deplor'd,
> As human nature's broadest, foulest blot,
> Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat
> With stripes, that mercy, with a bleeding heart,
> Weeps when she sees inflicted on a beast.
> Then what is man? And what man, seeing this,
> And having human feelings, does not blush,
> And hang his head, to think himself a man? (II: 6–15, 20–28)

Crucially, Cowper's cry against slavery ends with the very question—"What is man?"—the godless systematic philosophers are unable to answer. Without a deity in place to provide a meaningful rejoinder, Cowper suggests that the "natural bond" of brotherhood—a bond that, as this chapter's epigraph from "Charity" reminds us, is created by God himself (ll. 15–22)—will always give way to the base self-interest that has marred "human nature" since the Fall. It is with this in mind that Cowper proceeds immediately after this passage to call down God's judgment—his "hot displeasure" (II: 179)—on the "atheist life" that causes such inhumanity. Slavery is not simply a political or humanitarian evil for Cowper. First and foremost, it is an issue of belief.

Cowper considered British rule in India an equally apt example of atheism's colonial ramifications. Cowper had fully supported Fox's India Bill, but he felt that Britain should leave India altogether after the Bill, which passed in the Commons, was put down by George III's royal fiat.[36] He therefore asks longingly at the beginning of *The Task*'s fourth book, "Is India free? and does she wear her plum'd / And jewell'd turban with a smile of peace, / Or do we grind her still?" (IV: 28–30). Colonial violence and injustice are the result of irreligion back home, and Cowper regrets that his nation's "profane and infidel contempt / Of holy writ" (I: 740–41) allows "petty robbers" (I: 733) to travel east only to escape with their "overgorg'd and bloated" purses full of the "wealth of Indian provinces" (I: 737–38). While theists like Cowper confine their sympathy "within / No narrow bounds" (V: 394–95), allowing the Indian the pleasure of his wealth and the political and religious freedom signaled by the wearing of his "jewell'd turban," the atheist cannot help but be "a wolf to man" (IV: 103). Atheism and unbelief, in other words, are part and parcel of an inhumane colonial project that *The Task* is eager to see upended.

At the heart of Cowper's poetics, then, is a call for Christians to accept one another's differences, and to respect, without endorsing of course, the religious positions of other world faiths. In the moral satires, for instance, Cowper rails against both Cromwellian religious intolerance—he describes Cromwell's Puritanical Christianity as "Religion, harsh, intolerant, austere" ("Table Talk," l. 612)— and the Catholic Church's persecution of Muslims: the Pope's "well manag'd pack," he bemoans, "Would hunt a Saracen through fire and flood" only to acquire "a mint of wealth" ("Expostulation," ll. 518, 521, 523). Against such intolerance, Cowper repeatedly calls on Christians to look past their various differences and to focus instead on what they have in common. Thus, in "Charity" Cowper asserts that if divine love truly "warm'd"

[36] For Cowper's position on the India debate, see O'Brien, "Cowper's Domestic Empires," 138.

various Christian churches, Anglicans, Baptists, and other dissenting sects would engage in "free communion": "ev'n the dipt and sprinkled" would "live in peace" (ll. 606, 611, 609). Likewise, in "The Nightingale and Glow-Worm," one of several miscellaneous poems appended to the moral satires in the 1782 *Poems*, Cowper calls on "jarring sectaries" to give up their pointless disputes and to respect "in each other's case / The gifts of nature and of grace" (ll. 27, 33–34). No matter what their respective denominations, Christians should acknowledge that they are all "brothers," and they should, like Christ, "studiously make peace their aim" (ll. 29, 36). This ecumenical impulse is not restricted to Protestant Christians alone. Like John Brown, whose *Estimate* maintains that French Catholicism, though mistaken, is not devoid of all "*generous* Ends" and "Benevolence" (139), Cowper was eager to avoid offending Catholics, even becoming close friends with the recusant Throckmortons of Weston Underwood—Cowper praises John Throckmorton as "Benevolus" in *The Task* (I: 262)—despite the reservations of his Calvinist spiritual mentor, John Newton.[37]

Adherents of non-Christian religions are also worthy of sympathy and fellow feeling, according to Cowper. Again taking a cue from Brown's *Estimate*, which argues that a "*mistaken* Principle of Religion" (91), such as that which drove the ancient Romans to commit suicide upon defeat in battle, is always to be preferred to no religion at all, Cowper extends his sympathies to theists the world over. The poem "Conversation," for example, praises a humble "Persian"—presumably a monotheistic Zoroastrian—in order to castigate blaspheming, godless Britons:

> A Persian, humble servant of the sun,
> Who, though devout, yet bigotry had none,
> Hearing a lawyer, grave in his address,
> With adjurations ev'ry word impress,
> Suppos'd the man a bishop, or at least,
> God's name so much upon his lips, a priest;

[37] For Cowper's relationship with the Throckmortons, see King, *William Cowper*, 172–77.

Bow'd at the close with all his graceful airs,
And begg'd an int'rest in his frequent pray'rs. (ll. 67–74)

The Persian's humility and laudable naivety—his inability to conceive of someone who would use the name of God blithely—sets him above the arrogant, impudent lawyer in Cowper's estimation. In addition, the Persian's request for "an int'rest" in the lawyer's prayers highlights the lawyer's less admirable, wholly pecuniary interests. Cowper ultimately rejects the materialistic British lawyer's "human form" as "false pretence; / A mere disguise, in which a devil lurks" (ll. 78–79), while aligning the "devout" Zoroastrian with the great oath-shunning Apostle of Christianity, St. "Paul" (l. 55).

In "The Love of the World Reproved; Or, Hypocrisy Detected" (1779), on the other hand, Cowper tells an exaggerated tale of Muslims who eat pork, not to insult Islam but to insinuate that Christian hypocrisy is much more grievous than that of the poem's imagined Muslims.[38] In hyperbolic, almost burlesque fashion, Cowper relates how a group of "mussulmans" are commanded by "the prophet" to "abstain from pork" (ll. 1–2). The Muslims almost immediately resort to sophistry, however, insisting that Muhammad only meant to prohibit a particular "sinful part" (l. 9) of the pig, and that they are therefore free to eat their favorite sections of the hog without restraint. The tale deliberately appeals to Britons' worst, most chauvinistic impulses before turning them on their head. The turn comes in the twenty-third line, where Cowper bitingly chastises the sense of superiority he has just helped cultivate in his imagined reader: "You laugh—'tis well.—The tale applied / May make you laugh on t'other side" (ll. 23–24). Muslims and Christians are *equally* hypocritical and in need of grace, the poem suggests. If the Muslims eat pork against "Mahomet's mysterious charge" (l. 7), Christians swallow the world

[38] The poem was originally published in the *Leeds Mercury* (November 9, 1779). In September 1780, it appeared again in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and it was printed a third time as one of the many miscellaneous poems in Cowper's 1782 *Poems*.

"from tail to snout" (l. 38), despite their preacher's exhortation to "Renounce the world" (l. 25). In short, Cowper upends his reader's initial expectations, leveling distinctions between the two groups and effectively calling on Christians to attend to their own failings rather than worrying about the failings of others.

He uses a similar tactic in the poem "Truth," in which a "bramin's" (l. 99) self-immolation is used to critique Christian asceticism. The "bramin," who "kindles on his own bare head / The sacred fire" (ll. 99–100), is for Cowper worthier of respect than the Christian ascetic, although both demonstrate the need for divine grace to conquer human pride. The point is not, however, that the Brahmin should be converted to Christianity, though one can only assume that Cowper would applaud such an act, but that the Christian should fully adhere to his own faith's reliance on God's mercy in Christ. For those, like the Brahmin, who have no knowledge of Christianity's savior, Cowper maintains that they can be saved by simply pursuing virtue and believing in "God," however so conceived. The knowledge of Christian doctrines is, therefore, not necessary for their salvation:

> Is virtue, then, unless of Christian growth,
> Mere fallacy, or foolishness, or both,
> Ten thousand sages lost in endless woe,
> For ignorance of what they could not know?
> That speech betrays at once a bigot's tongue—
> Charge not a God with such outrageous wrong!
> Truly, not I—the partial light men have,
> My creed persuades me, well employ'd, may save;
> While he that scorns the noon-day beam, perverse,
> Shall find the blessing, unimprov'd, a curse.
> Let heathen worthies, whose exalted mind
> Left sensuality and dross behind,
> Possess, for me, their undisputed lot,
> And take, unenvied, the reward they sought:
> But still in virtue of a Saviour's plea,
> Not blind by choice, but destin'd not to see. (ll. 515–30)

The rub, of course, is that Cowper clearly refuses to give up his own "creed," his belief that all humankind needs "a Savior's plea." Again, William Cowper was no pluralist. If God grants "heathen worthies" salvation, he does so only because Jesus' death has atoned for their sins. In some odd way, Cowper perceives the heathens' intentional decision to pursue virtue as evidence that Christ's sacrifice has benefited them as well, despite their complete unawareness of that sacrifice in the first place. It is also worth emphasizing here that Cowper was no universalist. British atheists and, presumably, "heathens" who refuse to leave "sensuality and dross behind" are never conferred salvation in Cowper's oeuvre. Still, his poetic statement is noteworthy for the way it accords virtue and salvation to those beyond the Christian pale.[39] Christians, he contends, should make use of the "light" they have been given, and the same directive applies to "heathen worthies." The objective is not to enlighten the heathens, who are "destin'd" by God to do without the knowledge of Christianity's savior. It is to help British Christians recognize the gospel light they already possess ("the noon-day beam").

It is because Cowper believes in the saving power of the cross, even for those that have never heard the specifics of the Christian gospel, that he can imagine in *The Task* an indiscriminate, eschatological redemption of all people. The poem closes by envisioning a time when God will drive away the "creeping pestilence" of "Error" (VI: 784–85) and bring all nations to the knowledge of his love:

See Salem built, the labour of a God!

[39] He likewise claims in "Expostulation": "[God] will not punish, in one mingled crowd, / Them without light, and thee without a cloud" (ll. 716–17). Jeffrey Bilbro notes that Cowper was "tormented" by the plight of African slaves—and others like them—"who had never heard the gospel." Yet while Bilbro is correct that "the dilemma of … African redemption" is not solved in "Charity" or in Cowper's antislavery ballads, he overlooks the possible solutions offered in both "Truth" and "Expostulation." Still, I find Bilbro's overall reading of Cowper's abolitionism convincing, and I agree with him, contra David Davis, that Cowper never legitimizes slavery or engages in "psychological imperialism." See Bilbro, "Theodicy in Wheatley, Newton, and Cowper," 562–63, 582, 581; and David Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution: 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1975).

…
Thy rams are there,
Nebaioth, and the flocks of Kedar there;
The looms of Ormus, and the mines of Ind,
And Saba's spicy groves, pay tribute there.
Praise is in all her gates: upon her walls,
And in her streets, and in her spacious courts,
Is heard salvation. Eastern Java there
Kneels with the native of the farthest west,
And Æthiopia spreads abroad the hand,
And worships. Her report has travell'd forth
Into all lands. From ev'ry clime they come
To see thy beauty and to share thy joy,
O Sion! an assembly such as earth
Saw never, such as heav'n stoops down to see.
Thus heav'n-ward all things tend. (VI: 799, 804–18)

Cowper here poeticizes the biblical apocalypse of Revelation, in which the "holy city, new Jerusalem" (Revelation 21:2, AV) comes down to earth from heaven. Further, he figures God's heavenly city as diametrically opposed to the earthly, unbelieving city (London) he upbraids throughout *The Task*. Whereas London is central to an imperial project that routinely subjugates Africans, Indians, and Native Americans, God's city provides a space for all people—including Arabs ("Nebaioth" and "Kedar"),[40] Indians ("Ind"), and Ethiopians, among others—to prosper and live harmoniously under "One Lord, one Father" (VI: 784). God's salvation, brought about by Christ's death (the "Lamb … slain for us" [VI: 792]), extends to all cultural, ethnic, and religious groups, so long as these groups make the most of the divine light of truth they have been granted. Cowper is adamant that Christ is the city's king, yet he simultaneously welcomes many who are entirely unaware of that kingship.

The city is noteworthy, then, for both its openness to the foreign and its insistence that Cowper's way of life is truer than others. The city therefore represents a tentative ecumenical

[40] In a note to line 805 written by Cowper himself, Cowper identifies "Nebaioth and Kedar" as "the sons of Ishmael, and progenitors of the Arabs," which he sees "as representatives of Gentiles at large."

impulse.[41] The impulse falters most saliently, of course, in relation to unbelievers. Because they reject God altogether, Cowper excludes atheists from salvation, no matter what the country of their birth. The heavenly city Cowper imagines is a place where the "infidel," who "has shot his bolts away" at the truth until they are no more than "blunted shafts" (VI: 872, 874), finds no place.

Yet Cowper's claim that such infidels will soon be silenced and that all things are tending "heav'n-ward" rings rather hollow given his poem's disproportionate focus on atheism's spread. In fact, Cowper follows his heavenly vision by once again lamenting the preponderance of unbelief. He regrets that religious truths are "insulted and traduc'd, … cast aside / As useless" (VI: 879–80), and he therefore implores Christ to stop "delay[ing]" (VI: 864) his victorious return. It is a cry of desperation that belies the confident assurance of the previous passage. The heavenly city, then, serves not so much to declare victory for believers as it does to highlight the brutal ramifications of their potential loss. A world dominated by atheists would be a world quite unlike the ecumenical, divinely sanctioned world Cowper briefly depicts. It would be one in which no community were possible at all and in which no religious tenet would be left unmolested. *The Task* is itself partially an attempt to imagine such a world, hence its repeated insistence that "England now" is not "What England was" (III: 742, 743). The "virtues of those better days" (III: 744), Cowper avers, are no more. The "age of virtuous politics is past" (V: 493), and Cowper appears ever doubtful of its return.

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[41] This idea is indebted to Margaret Jacob's notion of a "tentative [cosmopolitan] impulse," discussed in *Strangers Nowhere in the World*, 10. I hesitate to use the phrase "cosmopolitan" in relation to Cowper, however, because he clearly holds to a hierarchal understanding of world religions and cultures, in which British Christianity is superior to all others. Even as he attempts to grant respect and sociality to those beyond his Christian pale, there is little evidence that Cowper wished to "*experience* people of different nations, creeds and colors with pleasure, curiosity and interest" (*Strangers Nowhere in the World*, 1, emphasis added). In short, Cowper had little desire to experience life beyond his provincial dwelling in Olney.

The Task is a narrative of cultural and religious change, in other words, a narrative in which Britain has abandoned the religion of its antiquity in favor of the philosophical systems of the atheists, the deists, and the empiricists. It is a narrative, much like those discussed in previous chapters, in which philosophical and cultural materialism rule the roost and religion is the refuge of a select few. It is, consequently, a narrative of rapine and imperial violence. And, most importantly, for Cowper it is a narrative of "madness" (III: 741).

III. "No Voice Divine": Cowper's Hymn of Unbelief

I want to conclude this chapter by reading Cowper's final poem, the posthumously published "The Castaway," as the poet's fullest attempt to explore the ramifications of such a mad, godless world. The poem understandably invites readings that focus on Cowper's own personal sense of religious melancholy and spiritual struggle. Even after his conversion to the Evangelical faith, Cowper experienced multiple bouts of intense depression. In the final years of his life, he believed that God had completely abandoned him and that he was irreparably damned. He claimed to live "a life of infinite despair,"[42] and he bitterly lamented that his previous suicide attempts had been unsuccessful.[43] In early 1773, moreover, Cowper stopped attending church altogether. It is no wonder, then, that critics have consistently read "The Castaway" as an autobiographical poem that bemoans both Cowper's inevitable damnation and the "hostile God"

[42] The phrase appears in a letter Cowper wrote to Lady Hesketh on Saturday, September 26, 1795. See Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 4, 456.

[43] One of the most poignant, and troubling, expressions of Cowper's abiding melancholy is his poem "Hatred and Vengeance" (c. 1774), in which he declares that he is "Damn'd below Judas" and that "Man disavows, and Deity disowns me" (ll. 5, 9).

who brought that damnation about.[44] At the same time, I argue here that the poem is equally concerned with exposing what were, for Cowper, atheism's vital flaws. I certainly agree that Cowper felt as though God had abandoned him, and that "The Castaway" is on some level concerned with this abandonment. However, it is worth pointing out that God is not "hostile" in the poem because, to put it crudely, God never shows up in the first place. The poem's universe, as I will demonstrate, is completely godless. God may as well not even exist for the damned, the poem implies, a sentiment that Cowper expressed explicitly in the spiritual diary he kept from June to July 1795: "Farewell to the remembrance of Thee for ever," he writes to his God before concluding, "I must now suffer thy wrath, but forget I ever heard thy name."[45] Thus in his final years, Cowper believed God was simultaneously vindictive *and* aloof; although God was somehow responsible for each and every one of Cowper's misfortunes, he was paradoxically unconcerned with and untroubled by Cowper's fate. God's wrath took the form of cosmic indifference. In Cowper's thinking, to put it a bit differently, damnation was paramount to God's total absence. "The Castaway" is, therefore, worth reading in light of Cowper's extensive thoughts on atheism.

"The Castaway's" autobiographical register jars with the didacticism I have been tracing throughout both the moral satires and *The Task*. In fact, the poem most closely adheres to the poetic principles on display not in the 1782 and 1785 volumes of Cowper's poetry, but in the highly personal *Olney Hymns* (1779), which Cowper published jointly with his early spiritual mentor, John Newton. "The Castaway," as I will show, employs many of the same tropes, motifs, and formals conventions used throughout the *Hymns*, distinguishing it from its more immediate

[44] James King, for instance, reads the poem as an expression of Cowper's own spiritual isolation. Cowper, according to King, "perceived a hostile God as the force which plotted against him," and he was, quite simply, "the castaway." See King's *William Cowper*, xiii.

[45] Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 4, 470.

predecessors in Cowper's oeuvre and calling into question the confident rejection of atheism expressed in both the satires and *The Task*. Rather than adopting the role of the poetic mentor who rails against the ills of his times and attempts to right the societal wrongs besetting his country, in both the *Olney Hymns* and "The Castaway" Cowper charts his own private dealings with God. The *Hymns*, in fact, stand as some of Cowper's most intensely personal poems. It is worth remembering that, in contrast to the dissenting hymns of Isaac Watts, eighteenth-century hymns written by Anglican evangelicals like John Wesley, John Newton, and Cowper himself were not typically sung by a congregation. Anglican congregations continued singing Psalms, rather than hymns, well into the nineteenth century. Anglican hymns were occasionally read and expounded in evangelical prayer meetings, such as those Newton conducted on Sunday and Tuesday nights, but at the same time these hymns were devotional in character; they were meant first and foremost to edify the reading individual and to instill correct doctrines and desirable spiritual postures. (The Psalms themselves, it should be said, were appreciated not only for their communal utility, but also for their ability to speak to the religious needs of individual men and women.) True to this focus on the private Christian individual, Cowper's *Olney Hymns* detail Cowper's own recurring efforts to buttress his faith and to place his faith in Christ.[46]

To be sure, many of the *Hymns* are preoccupied with the very same issues dealt with in Cowper's poems from the 1780s. Multiple hymns, for instance, warn against self-absorption: "Jehovah Our Righteousness" cautions that "self-applause" is detrimental to effective prayer (l. 8), while "The House of Prayer" indicates that only one who is "self-abas'd" (l. 22) can properly worship God. Others remonstrate against spiritual blindness or praise God for "bring[ing] truth to sight" ("The Light and Glory of the World," l. 2) and turning "darkness into light" ("Lovest Thou

[46] For an overview of eighteenth-century hymnody and the use of hymns in both the dissenting and Anglican traditions, see Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982).

Me?," l. 8). Cowper sometimes adopts a straightforward, sermonizing tone, directly addressing his reader and admonishing him or her to forego the pleasures of this world in order to experience fully the goodness of God. Thus, "The Vanity of the World," perhaps the most patently didactic of the *Hymns*, advises its reader to give up "vain amusements" (l. 9) and to "Delight" instead in "a Saviour's charms" (l. 22). The reader capable of doing so, Cowper confidently asserts, will be more than sufficiently compensated for his or her sacrifice: "GOD shall take you to the skies, / Embrac'd in everlasting arms" (ll. 23–24). In moments like this, Cowper's hymns clearly anticipate the assured didacticism of the moral satires, aiming to cultivate piety and heartfelt belief in an imagined reader (the "you" of line 23) to whom Cowper acts as a personal spiritual guide and mentor.

The *Hymns* are also, like the moral satires, perturbed by unbelief. Both "The Lord My Banner" and "Self-Acquaintance" lament that "unbelief" prevents one from experiencing the joy and assurance of God's grace (ll. 25–28 and 13–14, respectively). Although the former poem laments that Cowper himself is "often" (l. 27) subject to "unbelief, self-will, / Self-righteousness and pride," the poem notably concludes by avowing, in sanguine orthodox fashion, that God will ultimately restore the poet's shaken faith: "Yet David's LORD, and Gideon's friend, / Will help his servant to the end" (ll. 25–26, 29–30). The final verse of Cowper's most famous hymn, "Light Shining out of Darkness," likewise trumpets the triumph of belief: "Blind unbelief is sure to err, / And scan [God's] works in vain; / GOD is his own interpreter, / And he will make it plain" (ll. 21–24). In contrast to blind unbelievers, Cowper announces his belief to his God—"LORD, I believe," he proclaims in "Praise for the Fountain Opened" (l. 21)—and his hymns aim to reinforce that belief when it wavers.

For all that, there is a nagging sense in the *Hymns* that Cowper is more prone to waver than the few instances cited above might suggest. Moreover, the personal register of the *Hymns*' musings on unbelief is quite foreign to Cowper's later moral satires. As does his earlier *Adelphi*, Cowper's *Hymns* testify to the absolute precariousness of Cowper's faith. In fact, his first hymn, "Walking with God," laments that the joy Cowper felt upon conversion has quickly given way to an "aching Void" (l. 11). Thus, Cowper desperately implores God's Spirit to "return" (l. 13) to his "breast" (l. 16). The *Hymns* not only portray Cowper's faith as fleeting, however. They also imply that his faith is *always* attended by unbelief, that the line dividing belief and unbelief is infinitesimal at best. In "Jehovah-Rophi, I Am the Lord that Healeth Thee," for instance, Cowper professes his belief in God yet simultaneously admits that his "faith is feeble" (l. 5). Hence, he alludes to a story in Mark 9, in which the father of a boy possessed by demons requests Jesus' aid, acknowledging both his belief in Jesus' divine power and his paradoxical inability to believe: "Remember him who once apply'd / With trembling for relief; / 'Lord, I believe,' with tears he cry'd, / 'O help my unbelief'" (ll. 9–12). Belief in this case exists comfortably alongside its opposite, and implicit in Cowper's appeal is the Calvinistic idea that one cannot simply remedy a lack of faith by trying harder to believe. True faith is a supernatural gift.

Yet despite this, or perhaps because of it, Cowper works to counter-intuitively convince himself that he *does* believe, even while recognizing that he might not. This tortuous sentiment is captured most completely (and poignantly) in a stanza from "The Shining Light," a hymn that documents Cowper's agonizing sense that he is not one of God's elect: "I see, or think I see, / A glimm'ring from afar; / A beam of day that shines for me, / To save me from despair" (ll. 13–16). Here, Cowper's initial proclamation of faith (he "sees" a light coming to save him) is qualified by the sheer uncertainty of the clause that immediately follows. The hymn writer is, after all, not

entirely sure he *does* see the light. He may "think" he sees it, but he quite simply cannot be sure. In the end, he will choose to believe he has seen (he will "run" [l. 19] towards the light, as he declares in the hymn's final stanza), but there is always the lingering possibility, a possibility of which he is well aware, that he has been deceived. Faith here is not a rejection of unbelief, *per se*; it is the decision to believe despite one's unbelief.

Cowper's position is not necessarily unique. The hymns of Watts, the Wesleys, and Newton (and, for that matter, the Psalms upon which they are often modeled) are full of doubts and confessions of unbelief. Even the most faithful believer is often riddled by persistent misgivings. The devoutly Anglican Samuel Johnson, for instance, was notoriously plagued by his fear of death and the possibility that there might not be an afterlife. He also proudly admitted that he had thought everything the skeptical David Hume had "advanced against Christianity … long before [Hume] wrote" down his thoughts and made them public.[47] Despite this, Johnson simply chose to go on believing, much like the Cowper of "The Shining Light." What makes Cowper's case significant, then, is not that he positioned belief and unbelief so closely, but rather the sheer intensity of his dealings with unbelief and the fact that, unlike Johnson, he was ultimately unable to go on acting as if belief were still an available option. At the end of his life, Cowper could no longer claim that he saw the light. Nor could he even make the less assured claim that he *thought* he saw the light. Cowper died committed to the *Hymns*' idea that belief in God is necessary in this world, but he was no longer able to wrest that belief from the jaws of unbelief. Cowper's final musings on despair are therefore significant not only for what they tell us about Cowper's lasting melancholy, but also for what they tell us about his vision of a world

[47] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 314.

in which God is (at least practically) nonexistent and in which belief is therefore incapable of tempering the pitfalls of its opposite.

It is with this in mind that I want to turn now to Cowper's final work, "The Castaway," a poem that famously poeticizes the drowning of a seaman described in George Anson's nonfiction account of his naval travels, published in 1748 as *A Voyage Round the World*. For Cowper, the drowning man is emblematic of his own isolated spiritual condition—he is "such a destin'd wretch as I" (l. 3), Cowper writes—and Cowper emphasizes the man's pointless attempts to stay afloat alone in the Atlantic in order to articulate the feeling that his own life has become an exercise in futility. Deserted by God, the William Cowper of "The Castaway" inhabits a hostile world that lacks the (imagined?) spiritual light of Cowper's hymns. "The Castaway," that is to say, retains the *Hymns*' decisive verdict that unbelief invites despair, yet it no longer offers Cowper a viable alternative to godlessness.

It is worth noting that the poem mirrors Cowper's hymns in several regards. From tempests blasting the sea ("Contentment," "Temptation," and "Looking Upwards in a Storm," among others), to the poet's need to compare his grief to another's ("Contentment"), to Cowper's explicit fear that he might "prove a cast-away" ("Welcome Cross," l. 20), to "The Castaway's" poetic meter itself (the poem is written in common hymn meter with an additional iambic tetrameter couplet added to each stanza; in other words, it is the formal equivalent of an 868688 hymn), the poem repeatedly echoes the *Hymns*. It is, in effect, a hymn that has been shorn of the *Olney Hymns*' sense that redemption is possible, if not entirely certain. It is, in that sense, a hymn of unbelief.

The major difference, of course, is that "The Castaway" removes all references to divine or satanic agency, references which are conspicuous throughout the *Hymns*. The hymns routinely

credit spiritual struggles to supernatural forces. In "The House of Prayer," for instance, Cowper avers that he is besieged by both "Sin" and "Satan" (l. 10), while "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" pointedly attributes Cowper's "anguish" to "Apollyon" and his "legions" (ll. 10, 3, 2). In "The Castaway," by contrast, only the elements are granted agency, and the poem's descriptions of the universe are almost atomistic: night "involv[es]" the sky, billows "roar," and the "brine," which is described as "whelming," finally overtakes the seaman (ll. 1, 2, 13). The seaman is absolutely helpless in the face of this heartless, naturalistic world. Compounding matters, especially given Cowper's propensity to employ ocular metaphors when describing one's spiritual status, the poem opens by suggesting that an onlooker could not, in reality, have witnessed the scene being described. This particular night is notably "Obscure" (l. 1), and the drowning sailor and his fleeing companions are, for all intents and purposes, blinded by an intense darkness. At the mercy of the waves and unable to discern any saving light, it is no wonder that the sailor is soon "Wash'd headlong" (l. 3) into the waves. In a godless universe, Cowper suggests, salvation simply is not possible.

Cowper's use of the term "headlong" has a particularly Miltonic resonance, further emphasizing "The Castaway's" disavowal of all things supernatural. Indeed, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton crucially provides two competing explanations for the expulsion of Satan's angels from Heaven, both of which are supernatural at root. In the first instance, Satan is described as having been "Hurled *headlong* flaming from the ethereal sky" (I: 45, emphasis added) by God himself. In the second, Milton states that Satan and his followers threw *themselves* out of heaven: "*headlong* themselves they threw / Down from the verge of Heaven" (VI: 864–65, emphasis added). However, neither God nor his satanic enemies propel Cowper's sailor "headlong" from his ship. He simply "washes" passively over the side during the tumultuous storm. By alluding to

and modifying Milton's epic, stripping it of its divine referents, Cowper denies that the sailor (and, by extension, Cowper himself) is responsible for his own doom, as were Milton's devils. At the same time, he removes God's divine agency as well. The sailor's foe is not supernatural; it is merely the relentless, cold ocean.

God's absence is most explicitly apparent, however, in the poem's final stanza:

> No voice divine the storm allay'd,
> No light propitious shone;
> When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
> We perish'd, each alone:
> But I beneath a rougher sea,
> And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he. (ll. 61–66)

God is conspicuously quiet here ("No voice divine"), a silence that is all the more striking when juxtaposed with the continual noise made throughout the poem by both the drowning sailor and the waves that envelop him. The drowning man continually "shout[s]" (l. 19), "Entreat[s] help, or crie[s]—Adieu!" (l. 42), his voice almost indistinguishable from the noise made by "ev'ry blast." Yet his compatriots can soon "catch the sound [of his voice] no more" (ll. 45–46). The storm continues to rage on, and God never shows up to still the waters. The poem thus stands as a despondent riposte to the biblical story (told in Matthew 8:23–27 and Mark 4:35–41) of Jesus calming a tempest by verbally rebuking it. Interestingly, one of John Newton's *Olney Hymns* ("I will trust and not be afraid") that deals with unbelief likewise alludes to Jesus' miraculous authority over wind and waves. Newton writes of his own doubts and his steadfast assurance that God will quell them:

> BEGONE unbelief,
> My Saviour is near,
> And for my relief
> Will surely appear:
>
> By pray'r let me wrestle,
> And he will perform,

With CHRIST in the vessel,
I smile at the storm. (ll. 1–8)[48]

Newton's conviction that Christ is "near" at hand to resolve his "unbelief" is a far cry from the faithlessness of "The Castaway's" William Cowper, who imagines that Christ is not only not present beside him in the boat, but that he is also entirely unmindful of Cowper's fate. The poem's allusion to Christ calming the storm therefore serves only to highlight Christ's absence all the more, pointing to the ways in which "The Castaway" simultaneously mirrors the *Olney Hymns* and departs from their hope in God's saving presence.

Worse still, the poem intimates that the sailor's death and Cowper's abandonment by God cannot be mitigated by the comforts of human sympathy and commiseration. Without God, such comforts are not only cold; they are not rightly obtainable in the first place. In this disenchanted poetic universe, Cowper's speaker and the drowning man he describes are wholly isolated. Their friends desert them, and they are left to uphold themselves, without divine aid, in the remorseless ocean:

Nor, cruel as it seem'd, could he
    Their haste himself condemn,
Aware that flight, in such a sea,
    Alone could rescue them;
Yet bitter felt it still to die
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives, who lives an hour
    In ocean, self-upheld;
And so long he, with unspent pow'r,
    His destiny repell'd … (ll. 31–42)

Although Cowper marvels at the sailor's ability to remain afloat even for a negligible time (he swims for a short "hour" that is paradoxically "long"), this fact does nothing to assuage the bitterness he feels upon being "Deserted." Critically, the sailor is "*self*-upheld," an especially dire

[48] John Newton, *Olney Hymns, in three books* (London, 1779), 353–54.

state of being, considering Cowper's almost ceaseless condemnation of "self" throughout his writing career. It is also significant that the man's companions must *necessarily* flee, that both Cowper and his sailor are "destined" to die alone. By claiming as much, the poem insists that sociability and sympathy are impossible for those without God. As if to drive this point home, Cowper's speaker finds himself, contra Cowper's numerous calls for sensibility and fellow feeling throughout his poetic corpus, delighting in the sufferings of the drowning young man he describes: "But misery still delights to trace / Its 'semblance in another's case" (ll. 59–60). However, lest we imagine that this perverse form of sympathy provides Cowper with any sort of lasting satisfaction, he ends the poem by altogether refusing that there is any "semblance" in the men's cases after all: "We perish'd, each alone: / But I beneath a rougher sea, / And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he" (ll. 64–66). Rejected by a God that isn't present in the poem's universe to begin with, Cowper cannot, in the end, permit himself even the morbid pleasure of "tracing" another's pain. His only viable prospects are bleak: he will wage "with death a lasting strife, / Supported by despair of life" (ll. 17–18). It is a strife, of course, that ultimately proves pointless.

Thus, if the *Olney Hymns* oppose atheism by rejecting it outright, "The Castaway" makes its case against unbelief by proffering readers a relentless portrayal of a world in which God is not. In this sense, Vincent Newey is right to refer to the poem as an "anti-hymn." At the same time, Newey's claim that the poem's drowning sailor is "an existentialist hero, surviving in a spectacular universe" is misleading at best. Indeed, while Newey celebrates the poem's world as the culmination of a poetic career that contributed to the "secularizing … of Evangelical values in the Romantic era," Cowper vehemently laments that neither human sympathy nor fellow feeling are possible in such a godless world.[49] For Cowper, it is not a world to be celebrated, but

[49] Newey, "Cowper Prospects: Self, Nature, Society," 53, 54.

one in which, to borrow a phrase from Camus, life signifies "a never ending defeat."[50] "The Castaway" is undoubtedly one of Cowper's most enduring poetic achievements. Yet its haunting success lies in the fact that it is tellingly devoid of the God that, according to Cowper, makes life worth living.[51]

[50] Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 128.

[51] For a wonderful article on the poem's afterlife, particularly the ways in which it haunts Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), see Roger D. Lund, "We Perished Each Alone: 'The Castaway' and To the Lighthouse," *Journal of Modern Literature* XVI.1 (1989): 75–92. Lund argues that Mr. Ramsay is a more central character in Woolf's work than is typically acknowledged and that his continual references to Cowper's "We perish'd, each, alone" provides the novel an even darker, more pessimistic undertone.

CODA

Shelley, Sympathy, and Unbelief

Oh! to suppose for a moment that we *loved* from selfishness!

Percy Shelley to Ralph Wedgwood (January 13, 1811)[1]

What a hell upon earth would this globe of ours be, if it were peopled by Shelleys!

Rev. George Stanley Faber to Thomas Jefferson Hogg (April 23, 1811)[2]

When Cowper wrote his final poem, atheism's cultural resonance was changing rapidly. While accusations of atheism were common throughout the eighteenth century, and while imaginary atheists were ubiquitous in the period's literature, atheism acquired an unprecedented visibility in the 1790s and early 1800s. As Martin Priestman claims, "positive, unapologetic atheism" was quite simply "a phenomenon of the time."[3] Real-world atheism, in other words, went from being covert to being overt. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Fears in Solitude* (1798) registers this heightened visibility:

> Forth from his dark and lonely hiding-place,
> (Portentous sight!) the owlet, ATHEISM,
> Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,
> Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,
> And hooting at the Glorious Sun in Heaven,
> Cries out, "Where is it?" (ll. 83–87)[4]

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[1] University College (Oxford) MS. 210, 15r. All references to the Wedgwood correspondence are to this collection. Transcriptions are my own.

[2] Bodleian MS. Don c. 180, 42v.

[3] Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism*, 7.

[4] Cited from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, vol. 1 (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001). Also testifying to unbelief's new visibility are the various caricatures of atheism that appear in

If atheism lurked unseen throughout the eighteenth century, thus needing to be detected and snuffed out by vigilant novelists, poets, and social commentators, it was now parading in broad daylight ("athwart the noon"). Works like the anonymous *Answer to Dr Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* (1782), Samuel Francis's *Watson Refuted* (1796), and Scepticus Britannicus' *An Investigation of the Essence of the Deity* (1797), some of the first British publications to avow outright atheism, confirm Coleridge's observation.[5]

Atheism not only became more visible in the century's final decades, however. The French Revolution also politicized unbelief, shifting Britain's focus from atheism at home to atheism abroad. Britain's conservatives consistently labeled supporters of the Revolution atheists. As a result, atheism rather quickly became associated with political radicalism, despite the fact that unbelief had not hitherto been a partisan issue. Edmund Burke, for instance, famously asserted that throughout its history England had repeatedly rejected atheism and that to support the revolution, "which in France is now so furiously boiling," would be to substitute English "reason" and "instinct" for French "atheism."[6] To be English, for Burke, meant being a theist. Being a theist meant being conservative.

Some, like Charlotte Smith in her novel *Desmond* (1792), attempted to dismantle Burke's association of political radicalism with atheism. Others, however, embraced the association. This short coda examines the overt atheism of one such radical, Percy Shelley, whose refusal to

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James Gillray's political cartoons. Two noteworthy depictions occur in Gillray's *Smelling out a Rat; or, the Atheistical-Revolutionist Disturbed in his Midnight Calculations* (1790) and the *Presentation of the Mahometan Credentials; or, The Final Resource of French Atheists* (1793).

[5] For a helpful overview of these texts, see David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*, 110–33. Berman identifies the *Answer*'s authors as the relatively unknown William Hammon and Matthew Turner.

[6] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91.

disavow his 1811 *The Necessity of Atheism* resulted in his infamous expulsion from Oxford's University College. Although numerous Romantic figures—including Wordsworth, Coleridge, William Godwin (1756–1836), Thomas Holcroft (1745–1809), John Thelwall (1764–1834), and Richard Carlile (1790–1843), among others—flirted with, privately espoused, or were suspected of espousing atheism at various points in their respective careers, none courted the mantle of "atheist" as assiduously, and publicly declared his atheism as vociferously, as the young Percy Shelley. In addition, while there is certainly much to be said about Romanticism's multifaceted, often complex engagement with atheism, Shelley provides a wonderful stopping point for this dissertation not only because his unbelief proved so influential to later thinkers like Marx and Engels, but also because his declarations of atheism—"There is no God!"[7] as *Queen Mab*'s (1813) Fairy Queen joyfully exults—forcefully counter dominant eighteenth-century perceptions of unbelievers.

Indeed, Shelley's promotion of atheism relies not only on logical arguments he derived from previous freethinkers and religious radicals. It also depends on his appropriation and rewriting of the various stereotypes of atheism produced throughout the preceding century.[8] If atheists in the eighteenth century were imagined as selfish, unsociable, and incapable of sensibility, Shelley flipped the script by casting such aspersions on theists themselves. The extent

[7] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 214. The phrase occurs in Canto VII, line 14. Subsequent references to Shelley's poetry are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically.

[8] In his account of Shelley's "pretty paganism"—the poet's employment of Grecian models, settings, and characters to express his radical political and religious views—Martin Priestman outlines Shelley's intellectual debts to thinkers as diverse as Lucretius, Erasmus Darwin, Robert Southey, William Godwin, Spinoza, and Hume. While Priestman usefully delineates the roots of Shelley's unbelief, however, he has little to say about Shelley's portrayal of atheism and the cultural narratives of unbelief Shelley explicitly rejects. See Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism*, 219–38.

of this reversal is helpfully illustrated by one particularly striking, and hitherto unremarked, episode in the development of Shelley's unbelief.

I. The Impious Pranksters

In the months leading up to the publication of the *Necessity* in February 1811, Shelley and his undergraduate friend Thomas Hogg, who assisted Shelley in the *Necessity*'s composition, initiated an ongoing correspondence with an inventor named Ralph Wedgwood (1766–1837), of the famous Wedgwood potters. Wedgwood, who initially assumed that his correspondents were Oxford dons, had patented an "othiothograph" in the summer of 1810, a device meant to reduce all languages to a small set of simple symbols. Wedgwood's ultimate goal, it seems, was to bring humankind back to an Edenic state of innocence. Using the biblical account of Babel (Genesis 11) as his touchstone, he believed that humanity's ills could be undone only by recovering the original universal language spoken by Adam and Eve. After reading an advertisement for the device, Shelley and Hogg reached out to Wedgwood, expressing (facetious) admiration for his project. As the correspondence progressed, however, the pair's true purpose became clear: to discredit the religious underpinnings of Wedgwood's project and to stun the inventor by outlining their own atheistic beliefs. The series of letters that make up this intriguing exchange were lost until 2005, at which time they were purchased by Oxford's University College. The eight letters written by Shelley and Hogg remain in good condition and are quite legible, notwithstanding Shelley's rather sloppy penmanship. Although they have now been held in the Bodleian for over a decade, they have received little to no scholarly treatment.[9] Considered alongside many of

[9] My account of this episode is indebted to Robin Darwall-Smith's "The Student Hoaxers: The New Shelley Letters," *University College Record* 14.1 (2005): 78–87. I am grateful to Darwall-Smith both for alerting me to the letters' existence and for his generous email correspondence regarding their

Shelley's more well-known assertions of unbelief—the *Necessity*, *Queen Mab*, and *A Refutation of Deism* (1814), for instance—the Wedgwood letters evince the poet's abiding interest in combating the persistent association of theism with sympathy and sociability.

Thus in addition to demonstrating Shelley and Hogg's propensity for epistolary pranks, this exchange has several implications for Shelley scholars and students of unbelief more generally. Critical opinion has long been divided on the exact nature of Shelley's actual beliefs, particularly in the years (1810–1816) surrounding his expulsion from Oxford. Some, like Carlos Baker, Alister McGrath, and Gavin Hopps, have suggested that the early Shelley was either a deist or an agnostic. For instance, according to these scholars the "central atheistic argument" of the *Necessity* belongs not to Shelley but to Hogg. More importantly, the *Necessity* "doesn't actually give us what it says on the tin" in the first place. The pamphlet may claim to support atheism, but its arguments against the deity do not, in fact, rule out the possibility of the divine. Therefore, Shelley's project "cannot legitimately be described as 'atheistic.'"[10] For his part, David Berman staunchly rejects such arguments, claiming that they effectively reenact Enlightenment Britain's "repressive tendency to deny the existence of atheists." Pointing out the obvious fact that Shelley repeatedly "called himself an atheist," Berman insists that Shelley was "not just an atheist" but was a "strong minded *speculative* atheist" throughout his life.[11] Finally, several critics have followed Earl R. Wasserman in seeing the early Shelley as a skeptical materialist and

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significance. Other than his helpful summary of their contents in the *University College Record*, I am unaware of any critical studies that address the letters.

[10] Gavin Hopps, "Religion and Ethics: *The Necessity of Atheism*, *A Refutation of Deism*, *On Christianity*" in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe, and Madeleine Callaghan, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford, 2012), 118, 124, 131, online, accessed April 22, 2016, available: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199558360.013.0008. See also Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), 29; and Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 122.

[11] Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain*, 143, 150. Emphasis added.

the post-1816 Shelley as some sort of immaterialist or idealist. Hence, Monika Lee refers to the late Shelley's unbelief as "spiritual atheism," while Michael O'Neill provocatively terms it "believing unbelief,"[12] the idea that the universe is potentially numinous despite God's nonexistence.

On one hand, the Wedgwood letters reveal that Shelley's early commitment to materialism may be overstated in the scholarship. As I will show, Shelley's letters to Wedgwood are critical of Christianity, theism, *and* materialism. If these letters are any indication, Shelley was attracted to "spiritual atheism" long before 1816. Even in Shelley's early period, then, he was committed to countering the view that a godless universe is concomitant with disenchantment. For Shelley, the universe is certainly material, but "it is not brutishly or merely material," to borrow a phrase from the modern-day atheist and secularization theorist, Akeel Bilgrami. In other words, Shelley was committed to wholly secular "forms of enchantment," which, according to Bilgrami, find "value to be in the world external to human desire and benevolence, without there being any sacred source for value."[13] This insistence on enchantment despite God's absence is apparent throughout the Wedgwood letters, indicating that even in his undergraduate days Shelley believed "matter … is every bit as astonishing" as the philosophies of "idealists from Plato to Berkeley."[14]

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[12] See Monika Lee, "Shelley's Spiritual Atheism," *The Criterion* 3.3 (2012): 2–13; and Michael O'Neill, "'A Double Face of False and True': Poetry and Religion in Shelley," *Literature and Theology* 25.1 (2011): 39. The standard account of Shelley's 1816 turn to idealism is Earl R. Wasserman's *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[13] Akeel Bilgrami, "What is Enchantment?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 145–65, 162, 159. For an additional argument on behalf of secular enchantment taken from the same volume, see Simon During, "Completing Secularism: The Mundane in the Neoliberal Era," 105–25.

[14] Priestman, *Romantic Atheism*, 234–35. Priestman associates this sentiment with the relatively late poem "Mont Blanc" (1816).

More critically, however, the letters testify that scholarly debates about the exact contours of Shelley's beliefs are somewhat misguided. In the Wedgwood letters, as in later works, Shelley is often much more interested in countering cultural stereotypes of atheism than he is in providing detailed arguments against theism. In fact, when Shelley isn't drolly praising Wedgwood's othiothograph, he spends much of his time casting the theist, and the Christian theist in particular, as selfish, unsocial, and immoral. In this way, the Wedgwood letters represent one of Shelley's first attempts to recuperate the *figure* of the atheist. Even if one rejects the idea that Shelley himself was a full-fledged atheist—a rejection somewhat akin to Byron's famous erasure of Shelley's signature, "Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist," in the hotel register at Chamonix[15]—there can be little denying that the poet did much to alter prevailing perceptions of unbelief. Shelley may or may not have been a full-fledged speculative atheist, as Berman claims. However, he was undeniably committed to cultivating an atheistic persona and, perhaps more importantly, to undoing the persistent stigma attached to unbelief. As the Wedgwood letters demonstrate, one of Shelley's foremost goals in writing about unbelief was to portray atheism as all at once spiritually satisfying, sympathetic, and sociable.

In a brief letter written on December 7, 1810—the first of eight extant letters Shelley and Hogg sent Ralph Wedgwood—Shelley only hints at his hostility towards religion. The letter begins by hyperbolically extolling Wedgwood's "plan of a universal language" as "a scheme which if brought to maturity will render mind omnipotent over matter" (2r). Shelley's one hesitation in supporting Wedgwood, however, regards the "principles on which you [Wedgwood] ground the plan." Shelley's chief target for censure is the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, a doctrine that, according to him, actually inhibits human spirituality by viewing humanity as

[15] See James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 342–44.

incapable of overcoming its basest, most material impulses. Bemoaning Wedgwood's reliance on Christian theology, Shelley writes:

> can ~~that~~ an omnipotence over & consequently a complete superiority to the undue impress of materiality exist whilst we believe what you seem to take for granted, I mean the system of that religion, the advocates of which are so numerous, that the individual who dissents from the received opinion of its authenticity, is almost regarded as a man devoid of principle[?] Whilst we believe there exists in our nature an invincible Propensity to crime, which no human art can eradicate[?] (2r–2v)

In contrast to the degrading view of human nature offered by Christianity's "advocates," Shelley holds that "Liberality must be an inherent principle" (3r). As such, it must reside even in those that "dissent" from the "received opinion." Unbelievers—like, presumably, Shelley himself—are not only *not* "devoid of principle." They are also capable of experiencing spiritual enlightenment. Indeed, as Shelley puts it here, unbelief makes one less subject to the "undue impress of materiality," a point he will return to in later letters to Wedgwood. For the time, however, Shelley quickly retreats from his critique of Christianity by once again cheekily lauding the "grandeur" of Wedgwood's "noble" scheme and by "offer[ing] every assistance" in his power (3v, 3r).

Hogg's first letter to Wedgwood, written on December 8, a day after Shelley's, echoes Shelley's mock-praise for the othiothograph before similarly proceeding to critique the project's religious basis. Almost immediately after stating that Wedgwood's description of "forming an Universal Character" does "equal honor" to his "head & heart," Hogg ridicules the scriptures, which "Moses wrote or is *said* to have written," as a "strange tissue of absurdities" (18r–18v). Nonetheless, Hogg agrees to "grant for a short time" that he "firmly believe[s]" (18v) in Moses' writings in order to demonstrate the multiple contradictions apparent between Wedgwood's veneration of the scriptures and his desire to promote a universal language. With this supposition in place, Hogg points out the absurdity of believing that "the adoption of an Universal Language"

will "tend to the promotion of Morality" while also believing in the biblical dictum that "the confusion of Language at Babel was necessary to refrain the wickedness of human nature" (19r). He then offers several lengthy, and intentionally dizzying, commentaries on biblical Hebrew, referencing passages as various as Zephaniah 3:9, Psalm 81:6, Isaiah 19:18 and 6:5, and Genesis 1:26 and 4:15, demonstrating that the Bible cannot, in fact, offer substantial support for Wedgwood's plan. Because no "language" can be "unintelligible to omniscience" (19v), common translations that suggest God will one day restore a universal language must either be faulty or, as Hogg more openly suggests at the end of his letter, the Bible itself must be inconsistent and contradictory.

Hogg's numerous digressions—on topics as diverse as the "etymology of Adam" (20r), the Hebrew characters Dalet and Aleph, Adam's inability to invent the steam engine, and the ridiculousness of supposing that the first man "exhibited specimens of his Penmanship upon every limb of Eve [and] upon every animal every plant every fish &c." (22r–22v)—are meant both to discredit spurious arguments Wedgwood had put forth in support of his system and, more importantly, to replicate what Hogg considers to be the utter ridiculousness of Biblical exegesis. Creating his own "tissue of absurdities" while ostensibly praising both Wedgwood's knowledge of "the Sacred Language" (22r)[16] and his ability to follow Hogg's abstruse logic, the letter reenacts the very sort of silliness Hogg detects in the scriptures. Hogg's final point, therefore, is that Wedgwood should "Pursue othiothography upon the principles of *reason* not of its opposite *Revelation*, for the *Bible* appears to be the source of all the mistakes contained in your letter" (23v–24r).

[16] In a short letter to Wedgwood dated December 22, 1810, Hogg apologizes for his "pedantic air" and declares, rather disingenuously, "I thought my quotations were simple" (28v).

As Shelley's next letter in the series suggests, Wedgwood was understandably slow to reply. Writing from Lincoln's Inn Fields on December 15, 1810, Shelley opens his second letter by lamenting his correspondent's "silence." Assuming that his strictures against Christianity have offended Wedgwood, Shelley offers a cursory apology, "both in my own name, & that of my friend Mr. Hogg," for expressing "any warmth inconsistent with the subject." All the same, Shelley immediately ups the ante. Adopting a posture of naïve nonchalance, as though he is entirely unaware of his arguments' shocking nature, he unleashes a swift barrage of criticisms leveled at Christian doctrine. Indeed, Shelley vacillates rather rapidly in the letter between an ironic jokiness (meant to avoid offending Wedgwood while also lowering his guard), a desire to scrutinize evidence objectively, and an undergraduate vehemence that displays little regard for Wedgwood's feelings. Claiming to be an "unimpassioned scrutinizer of truth" (4r) whose only concern is the success of Wedgwood's plan, Shelley brazenly states "the impossibility of Christ ever having existed." Pretending for the moment to accept the truth of God's existence, Shelley interrogates the logic of the Incarnation by asserting its incompatibility with the concept of divine mercy: "In the first place where was the necessity of the coming of Christ, if the Goodness of mercy of the Almighty be, as reason would lead us to concede, inexhaustible, why would this mediation be required?" (4v–5r). Briefly pursuing this thread, Shelley asks, "how would one third of this being as coequal with the other two possibly become a *Mediator*; how could *that* bring *man* nearer to the Deity, which itself was the Deity[?]" (5r).

Inverting theists' offhanded dismissals of atheism, which had been the norm in Britain for well over a century, Shelley assumes that no serious rejoinder can be made to his query. Indeed, he discounts the Trinity as a "superstition" "too monstrous to demand a serious refutation" (5v). And, ultimately, if Christ's existence and mediation on humanity's behalf are incoherent ideas,

then so too is the entirety of Christian doctrine: "the prophets who foretold his coming, the fall of man, the whole fabric indeed of superstition which it supports can no longer obtain the credit of Philosophers" (6r). Thus, after beginning his letter by apologizing for his previous "warmth," Shelley discards the entirety of Christian doctrine by his letter's third paragraph.

Echoing claims made in the famous tenth chapter ("On Miracles") of Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Shelley similarly discredits all "accounts of specters & miracles" (6v), insisting that they are "inconsistent with the general laws of nature" (6r) and are thus highly improbable. By siding with Hume, Shelley commits himself to a reading of John Locke's epistemology that wholly excludes the possibility of the divine. Whereas Locke, and many of the moral philosophers who followed in his wake, argued that theism is suitable to "the Principles of common Reason" and is as demonstrable as mathematics,[17] Shelley maintains that "Common sense" (6r) precludes the possibility of the supernatural. Moreover, he is confident that his previous letter "demonstrated almost *mathematically* & I hope satisfactorily to you, that the religion of Christ is incommensurate with reason" (6v, emphasis added). In this way, Shelley's repudiation of Christianity also involves a repudiation of the orthodox reading of Locke and those who, like Lord Kames, claimed that theism was simply common sense.

Another long letter from Hogg, written on January 11, 1811, repeats Shelley's claim that unbelief is common sense.[18] Writing that it is "*impossible* to *believe without proof*" and that there "is no such thing as *voluntary belief*," Hogg states that religious faith "is *as fabulous* as the Chimera" (30v, 31r). As the basis of religious belief is "*Faith*, not *Reason*," and as "Faith or

[17] As I indicated in my chapter on Sarah Fielding, Locke's defense of theism was couched in highly mathematical terms: "'Tis as certain, that there is a God, as that the opposite Angles, made by the intersection of two straight Lines, are equal." See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 90, 94–95.

[18] A copy of this letter, Hogg's fourth to Wedgwood in the University College collection, can also be found in the Bodleian MS. Don c. 180, 7–12.

Religion" is "*above the power of the human mind*," Hogg dismisses belief as nonsensical. What, he asks bitingly, "has the mind to do with it?" (31r–31v). The human mind is quite simply incapable, according to Hogg, of conceiving of "an unseen power" (32v). Thus contra the prevalent eighteenth-century belief that true atheists do not actually exist, Shelley and Hogg ironically retort (as they would go on to do more fully in the *Necessity*) that true *theists* cannot exist. Atheism is necessary for the pair in the sense that it is impossible for them (or anyone else) to believe otherwise.[19] With this in mind, Wedgwood's desire to ground his system in supernatural principles is misguided at best. According to Hogg, it is entirely unnecessary to explain purely natural phenomena like language (and presumably anything else humans can experience) by referring to a "*supreme creator*" (33r).

Against the argument that Hebrew's "artificial" construction, its antiquity, and fulfilled biblical prophecies are proofs of the Bible's divine origins—a claim Wedgwood apparently made in his previous response to Hogg—Hogg notably appeals to other world religions and cultures.[20] Noting that "Chinese is also an artificial language" (33r), Hogg contends that one "might prove in a satisfactory manner the divinity of Confucius from his language" (33v) just as readily as one could prove Hebrew's divinity. In response to the argument from antiquity, Hogg notes that "the Arabian Sheik can boast as high Antiquity as the Jewish Rabbi," as can the "Empire of the Chinese" (35r). Finally, Hogg uses Islam to expose what he believes to be the ludicrous nature of religious prophecy: "What w^{d} you think," he asks Wedgwood, "of some zealous Musselman, who s^{d} declare that some Prophetic Trumpet, horn, candlestick, or veil mentioned in the Alcoran was fulfilled by Bonaparte's professing that he was one of the Faithful[?]" The expectation, of

[19] See *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811) in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1993), 1–5.

[20] By "artificial," Hogg simply means that the language was "formed at once, by one person, or one society" (33r).

course, is that Wedgwood would discount the "Musselman's" claim as nonsense. Yet by rejecting Christianity's status as singular amongst religions, Hogg implies that its prophecies are equally spurious. All religions are, for Hogg, nothing more than "puerile fables" (36v). Rather than "Oriental metaphors, strained to bombastic nonsense," Hogg desires "*real* proofs" and a "firmer basis" for "British freedom" than that offered by religion (39r, 36v, 37r).

Hogg's most noteworthy charge against religion, however, is not that it subsists without proofs. It is that it foments vice and human antipathy. In another allusion to Lockean psychology, Hogg contends that religion distorts human sympathy and morality by teaching Britons from their earliest infancy to believe in fictions and to emulate men of debased characters:

> What a noble education, to spend the morning of life, the most valuable part of our existence, in copying a tissue of impudent falsehoods about rivers of blood, men subsisting forty years on honey-dew, cloathed for that period in the same garments, of the sun standing still, nay, going back, of the Sea drying up, of swarms of Locust, legions of devils &c&c. How proper to write upon the Infant mind all the Obscenity with w^{ch} many parts of the Bible are replete.—Who can transcribe the Bible without becoming a better man, when he finds there men guilty of the most shameful crimes called the express favorites of heaven? (38r–38v)

Hogg follows this complaint with an extended catalogue of vicious biblical patriarchs, which includes Abraham, who "twice attempted to prostitute his wife," Jacob, who "defrauded his brother," and David, "a man after Gods own heart, [who] perpetrated a crime, at w^{ch} human nature recoils" (38v–39r).[21] If Britons followed "human nature," instead of venerating such criminals and adhering to the dictates of an "eccentric" "eternal Spirit" (39v), Hogg intimates that society and human sympathy would certainly not be any worse for wear. Emphasizing the extent of belief's harms, Hogg asserts that to "write for ever upon such a subject w^{d} be easy" (40r).

[21] David's crime is, presumably, his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his decision to send her husband, Uriah, to die on the front lines of battle (see 2 Samuel 11). However, the fact that "nature recoils" at his crime may indicate that Shelley is referencing the potential sexual undertones of David's relationship with his friend, Jonathan, whom he loved "as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1, AV).

However, he quickly concludes by downplaying the gravity of his impious letter, apologizing for wearying his correspondent with "trite observations" (40v).

Shelley's third letter to Wedgwood, dated January 13, 1811, builds upon both his previous re-writing of the Lockean tradition and Hogg's complaints about belief's deleterious effects on human sympathy. Shelley also notably abandons his previous pose as a theist. After apologizing for his own "long silence," he picks up where his former letter left off, once again lamenting the biblical "foundation stone" of Wedgwood's system and bluntly castigating the "universally credited and force-supported superstitions of Xtianity" (10r). Yet following on the heels of this by now standard opening, the letter's second and third paragraphs—perhaps the most interesting in the entire series—take issue with the concept of "God," while simultaneously indicating Shelley's early dissatisfaction with Epicurean materialism. Shelley begins by applying Locke's argument against innate ideas to the deity itself, suggesting that because the divine "mind" is, like human minds, incapable of creating something out of nothing, matter must be eternal:

> The Definition of Chaos, perhaps you will be willing to admit, that matter before it c^{d} be organised so as to constitute the beautiful arrangement of its particles as we now behold them, must notwithstanding have existed from all eternity with the co-extant *mind* which we call *Deity*. The Deity therefore is the mind of the universe and not to recapitulate Locke's unanswerable demonstration, that innate & in consequence coexistent ideas are not possible attributes of intellect, but that there merely exist in it susceptible capabilities, let us proceed to the creation— (10r–10v)

In this formulation, "Deity" begins to mean very little. Although we "call" the eternal "mind" divine, its role in the "creation" is reduced here to the mere "arrangement" of "particles," rather than their creation *ex nihilo*. Moreover, Shelley's insistence that even the divine mind cannot harbor innate ideas effectively counters the standard Lockean line that the human self is somehow evidence for God's existence. For Shelley, if Locke's notions of the self are applicable to the divine mind, all this proves is that the deity could *not* have created all things.

As Shelley proceeds "to the creation," he reduces the idea of deity even further, calling into question the applicability of terms like "mind of the universe" and "God," making their use appear almost preposterous. He also insists that Epicurean materialism offers an equally deficient picture of the cosmos. He writes,

> It is an argument of materialists that the original atoms had been falling thro' infinite space, until one of these indivisible particles *fortuitously* diverged from its' [sic] track. It is possible that something analogous to this was the case, but *not* fortuitously.— We can but reason analogously, and as within our observation, we can never *prove* that any effect can be produced without its correspondent cause[.] this diverging therefore of the atom must have had some cause, as being in itself an effect, in consequence supposing that no *cause* did exist before it must have produced one a parte post.— Another atom & so on in succession are then supposed to follow it[.] Surely all these had their causes for diverging.— It is then a concentration of causations, or a cause, it is a Deity, a *World* is in itself both the creature and creator,— Nature the system as we behold it is the body, its' [sic] regularity of organism, its' *good* principle is the goal of it, is the Deity. (10v–11r)

Ruling out the Epicurean idea of "chance" because it entails an infinite regression of unknowable "causes," Shelley settles for the somewhat murky notion that the universe is a self-sufficient "concentration of causations." The universe, in other words, is its own ongoing "cause." Thus, it is both "creature and creator." It is governed by its own "regularity" and "*good* principle," what Shelley shortly afterwards calls its "eternal immutable Laws" (11v). Crucially, a transcendent "Deity" does not bestow these laws upon the universe. Instead, the laws are themselves "the Deity."

Despite using the language of belief, then, Shelley's refusal to ascribe the universe's benevolence to a cause separate from the universe itself is meant to signal his atheism to Wedgwood. In fact, Shelley follows this point with the letters' frankest admission of unbelief. The universe's "*good* principle," according to him, is a "Spirit of Love, the harmonized intelligence of infinite Creation." At the same time, this "intelligence" is not to be mistaken for a god: "Does it not deprive language of that precision w^{ch} ought to be its' [sic] most distinguishing

characteristic to call this *God*[?]" he asks. "God" is simply a "creature of our imaginations," one that encourages human "*pride*" (11v) by suggesting that nature's "immutable ordinances" (12r) are subject to the whims of a transcendent deity. Christianity, in particular, comes under fire for imagining that a personal deity takes an interest in human affairs. Shelley asserts that Christianity procures humanity "*very slight* advantages" before savaging its doctrines as false:

> Shall the weak, worm man, that most remote almost of divine emanations trace the page of history, shall he mark some canting impostor, excelling Mahomet in nothing but the cunning with which he veiled his unbounded ambition, concealed the fallaciousness of his doctrines; & then shall he say. Nature has become decayed, its' [sic] before immutable ordinances broken through, that *I* may be saved; innocent, precious blood has been offered as the expiation of *my* offences; spotlessness itself incarnate has been immolated at the Altar, of that God; whom nevertheless we call the God of Mercy.— When, when will fond foolish man cease this inconsistency? When will he follow the dictates of that unsophisticated reason w^{ch} the immutable Laws of Nature have annexed to his Existence, as that characteristic mark which alone can distinguish him from the mass of brute creation. (11v–12r)

Christianity is not only false, like the "fallacious" religion instituted by the "canting impostor," "Mahomet." Nor is it merely "inconsistent," with its belief in a God of mercy whose wrath must be appeased by Christ's sacrifice. Most problematically in Shelley's view, it robs "man" of his "reason," eliding the distinction between humans and "the mass of brute creation." If theists throughout the eighteenth century considered atheism degrading and beastly, Shelley avers the exact opposite: theism, and especially Christian theism, portrays nature as "decayed," and it therefore reduces human beings to "foolish" animals.

Shelley's most sustained attack on religion, however, takes on what was perhaps the biggest eighteenth-century complaint about unbelief: that it promoted selfishness and self-interest. Claiming that belief is a "weakness" that would "demand the tribute of a pitying tear" were it not so evidently pernicious, he regrets that Christianity is "attended by the basest most degrading Lawes than even Epicurean selfishness." Shelley goes to great lengths to drive home the selfish motives lurking behind religious belief:

> Yes! I will affirm it that never existed a system of morality, more destructive of the fine drawn sympathies of being to being; more harrowing to the heart which throbs which the highest desire for universal benevolence, yet dares not perhaps to burst the fetters of education which prejudice had imposed than Xtianity — You will start, yes, it is an assertion at variance with every feeling, every motive of action which you ever have encouraged it is at variance with the very sources even from which you desire the most pleasurable sensations which suscitated intellect can excite; but it is not at variance with the *love of truth*, immutable eternal truth.— Is not *self*, self-interest that specious that deceiving sycophantish motive of action the very foundation upon which the fabric of Xtianity is raised — Under what other leader *dared* the forces of Xtianity to advance their banner, what other veil could hide its' [sic] impostures.— None is so thick, so brilliant, none in consequence c[d] succeed so well. Yes—I will allow that self interest as supported (since they universally support each other) by established religions is admirably calculated by its flattering the most predominant sensation incident to our awakened capabilities to support any one doctrine… (12v–13v)

Although his immediate target is obviously Christianity, Shelley's use of "religions," in the plural, is not accidental. All religious "systems of morality" are, for Shelley, the result of the "fetters of education" and "prejudice," and all encourage selfishness and flatter humanity's pride. Christ may excel the "cunning" of "Mahomet," but for Shelley, as also for Hogg, Islam is nonetheless equally false and pernicious. In fact, as his later *Refutation of Deism* suggests, Shelley rejected religious pluralism or syncretism on the grounds that "there is no alternative between Atheism and Christianity."[22] As he puts it in *Queen Mab*, those who worship a god, whether that god is named "Seeva, Buddh, Foh, Jehovah, God, or Lord," are "dupes" who inevitably make "the earth a slaughter-house" (VII: 30, 31, 48). According to Shelley, then, eastern religions are just as corrupt, just as venial, and just as deserving of elimination as the Christianity he so abhorred.[23] Christianity is just one salient example among many of the ways in

[22] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Prose Works*, 94.

[23] This line of thought continues in various strands of modern atheism. Sam Harris, for instance, has recently declared that members of the Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) are not aberrations but are "true believers" in the doctrines of Islam. According to Harris, it is not extremism but Islam itself that is to blame for modern violence and terrorism. Thus, the "problem is not how to correct the lives of religious extremists; [it is figuring] out how to divorce Islam from its actual doctrines." Harris, in other words, wants to do for Islam what Swift's apologist for nominal Christianity wanted to do for the latter religion.

which "*self*, self-interest" allies itself to religion. Indeed, Shelley states shortly afterwards that religious self-interest has not "failed" in "one instance," an all-inclusive declaration indicating that, while Christianity is "*the* religion which [he] condemn[s]" in the paragraph cited above, *all* religions are "impostures" grounded in "self alone" (14r).

Shelley's unbelief, on the other hand, is presented as the antidote to religious self-interest. In Shelley's thinking, freedom from religion allows one to expand his or her "fine drawn sympathies" and to connect with other human beings. Hence, if Wedgwood abandons religious dogma, expands his "intellect," and recognizes that a "universal Spirit of Love" underlies all things, he will experience "Love infinite in duration, Expansion & power." Contra the eighteenth-century tendency to imagine unbelief as the harbinger of society's collapse, Shelley portrays unbelief as the catalyst to universal regeneration and human sympathy:

> But convinced my dear sir as both of us must be of the progressive perfectability of human nature, convinced … as we must must be, that by the constituted organism of the universal Spirit of Love, each individual will in a future state enjoy degrees of happiness proportioned to ~~his~~ the expansion of his intellect in this, that this happiness will consist not in the gratification of any thing either directly or indirectly relating to *self*, but in Love, unsophisticated *infinite* Love infinite in duration, Expansion & power. Is not this at variance with the primary principle of the religion which I condemn. [I]s not self, self alone too, the consideration which is represented as most important to the notice of the creature[?] (13v–14r)

Anticipating *Queen Mab*'s and *Prometheus Unbound*'s (1820) grand poetic depictions of religion's downfall and the subsequent spiritual, ecological, and societal transformation that accompany that downfall, Shelley here imagines a "future state" entirely devoid of religious belief. In belief's absence, Shelley imagines a world in which human "perfectability" is finally allowed to flourish. Tellingly, it is a world in which sympathy and "Love," rather than "self," are paramount.

See Patt Morrison, "No God? No problem, says god-free thinker," latimes.com, accessed October 20, 2014, available: http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-morrison-sam-harris-spirituality-without-religion-20140924-column.html#page=1.

With this connection between unbelief and sympathy in place, Shelley concludes by once more gesturing at his own unbelief: "Oh! to suppose for a moment that we *loved* from selfishness! Well sir, I bid you adieu. & hope that selfishness will not be considered as the motivating principle in my writing to you" (15r). Claiming that his critiques of Wedgwood's system are actuated by love, rather than self-interest, Shelley's "adieu" amounts to a final avowal of unbelief. While religious men all act "for their own private interests," and while religion "appears to have no influence in any concerns of the generality of men but when at Church or on their knees" (16v), as Shelley states in his fourth and final letter to Wedgwood, Shelley claims to be motivated by altogether more laudable motives. In other words, Shelley's self-proclaimed selflessness signals his unbelief, and his unbelief likewise guarantees his selflessness.

The Wedgwood letters represent a transitional phase in the history of unbelief. Having not yet declared their atheism to society at large, Shelley and Hogg's atheistic letters straddle the divide between being covert and being overt. Their private correspondence with Wedgwood amounts to a declaration of unbelief, while also limiting that declaration to a befuddled individual correspondent. Although atheism had become a real possibility by the time of Shelley and Hogg's writing, openly declaring one's unbelief nonetheless remained dangerous, as their dismissal from Oxford would soon demonstrate. Yet even this dismissal provides clues that atheism was slowly becoming more acceptable. Soon after Shelley and Hogg were forced to leave University College, in fact, Hogg informed his father that many of the Oxford dons who participated in the expulsion were actually quite sympathetic to the boys' plight. As Hogg writes, "The conduct of the fellows has been friendly who have politely expressed their private regret for what is their public capacity they considered as inevitable."[24] The Registrar of the College,

[24] Bodleian MS. Don. c. 180, 17r–17v.

George Rowley, confirmed Hogg's claim, writing to Hogg's father, John Hogg, on March 26, 1811, that he regretted the "imperious circumstances" of Hogg's expulsion. Offering to provide private individual testimony for Hogg's conduct in the future, Rowley simultaneously indicated that Hogg could not expect any "*official* testimony in his favor from this place."[25] The young self-declared atheists were thus capable of garnering sympathy in private, and of cultivating sociable (if not largely fake) friendships with random correspondents like Wedgwood, yet atheism's public façade remained unsympathetic.

With this in mind, Shelley's letters to Wedgwood can be read as one of the first salvos in what would become an ongoing project to recuperate unbelief entirely. Atheism, the letters suggest, is capable of fostering both transcendence and, somewhat surprisingly, spiritual fulfillment. More critically, unbelief removes restraints on human sympathy. In the months and years that followed the Wedgwood prank, Shelley would continue rehabilitating atheism's reputation more publicly, whatever the personal costs. Yet from the Wedgwood letters on, one of Shelley's consistent complaints against belief is that it dulls humanity's capacity for love and commiseration. Throughout Shelley's oeuvre, it is always the theists and their atheist-burning priests who are "insensate."[26] Atheists, on the other hand, are both sensible and sympathetic.

II. The Persistence of Theism

Shelley's project was, in the long run, largely successful. Atheism has, of course, become much more mainstream and much more socially acceptable than it was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, atheism's rise is only

[25] Ibid., 19r.

[26] Shelley, *The Complete Poetry*, 2:213. The word is used in *Queen Mab* (VII: 10) to describe a mob that takes pleasure in watching an atheist being burned at the stake.

part of the story. Eighteenth-century perceptions of unbelief persisted, and continue to persist, despite the efforts made to counter them by unbelievers like Shelley. Indeed, eighteenth-century Britons' doubts about atheism were firmly ingrained, and even as Shelley's writings herald the rise of atheism, that rise has always been attended by its discontents.[27] In fact, one particularly discontented clergyman's response to Shelley's unbelief evinces the utter tenacity with which eighteenth-century characterizations of atheism endured beyond the 1700s.

In the aftermath of Shelley and Hogg's expulsion from Oxford, Hogg's father consulted the Reverend George Stanley Faber (1773–1854)—whom Shelley had also recently pranked by writing letters pretending to be a clergyman experiencing a crisis of faith—on how best to address his son's heterodox opinions. In response, Faber, who unsurprisingly decried the *Necessity* as a mere "perversion of Mr. Locke's system" and Shelley as a "completely deranged," "insane," "immoral" individual,[28] wrote young Hogg a lengthy letter on April 23, 1811, in which he outlined all of his foremost gripes against atheism. Faber's letter reads like a compendium of eighteenth-century critiques of unbelief.

First and foremost, Faber claims that atheism is incompatible with the idea of morality. He writes, "upon *atheistical* principles, there can be no such thing as either *morality* or *religion*; for both of these involve the idea of responsibility to God: and, if there be no God, there can be no *morality*, and therefore no *immorality*." Thus in God's absence, even if one "debauched the

[27] In an intriguing essay on Shelley's "Mont Blanc" ("Shelley After Atheism"), Colin Jager argues that atheism is, in some respects, "a very Christian concept" and that its coherence always depends upon on some previous conception of "theism." Thus, atheism and theism are, for Jager, two sides of the same coin; they are tied at the hip, so to speak, so any attempt to discredit theism using its own terms (or its own strategies of representation, as I have been claiming about Shelley) is bound to fail. Jager's point is suggestive, though I remain skeptical of his Foucauldian reading of "Mont Blanc," which implies that Shelley himself became aware of this dilemma and thus ultimately abandoned atheism as a form of "pseudoradicalism." See Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 230, 235, 224–43.

[28] Bodleian MS. Don. c. 180, 27v, 31r, 32v, 23v.

wife of his neighbour, and then cut the husband's throat," he could not be said to have acted immorally. Faber himself derives his moral principles from "Revelation." Yet, he also admits that objective morality is compatible with deism, or "the principles of natural religion," as its adherents must recognize that certain actions are "offensive to a God of truth." Morality may not require Christianity, in other words, but it does require some basic form of theism. Only atheism eliminates morality completely: "In the eyes of all but an *atheist*, [Shelley's recent] conduct has been *shamefully immoral*."[29] A "*consistent* atheist," according to Faber, "can be guided by no principle whatever," as "there is nothing to prevent his committing murder, nothing to prevent his wallowing in every abomination, except the fear of discovery and consequent punishment." In short, if an action promises "*profit* or *pleasure*" and can be perpetrated with impunity, it "*will* be perpetrated." With this in mind, Faber repeats the speculative move made by many theists throughout the preceding century. He asks Hogg to imagine a godless universe inhabited solely by atheists, and he implies that such a universe would be dire indeed: "What a hell upon earth would this globe of ours be, if it were peopled by Shelleys!"[30]

Because for Faber it is impossible for morality to exist in a godless universe, he asks Hogg to consider how godlessness can possibly accord with the notion of friendship and true human sympathy. Atheists, in Faber's thinking, have little to stop them from seeking their own selfish ends. Thus "an atheist perhaps may not steal, lest he should be hanged: but he has nothing to prevent him from lying …, or from cheating and overreaching, or from drunkenness, and fornication; nothing also from adultery, but the fear of a pecuniary price."[31] In other words,

[29] Ibid., 41v.

[30] Ibid., 42v.

[31] Ibid.

atheistic morality is grounded entirely in pure self-interest, with little regard for the wellbeing of others. Hence, Hogg is naïve to trust Shelley as a friend, and Shelley's attachment to Hogg should be understood as transitory and self-seeking: "*Revealed religion* of course does not bind him [to Hogg]; because he is an infidel. As little does *natural religion* bind him; because he is an atheist."[32] According to Faber, it would be better for Hogg if Shelley acknowledged at least some god, even the deistic one Faber himself rejects. In short, without God the pair's friendship is dangerously precarious.

Faber's letter therefore contains all the hallmarks of typical Enlightenment-era representations of unbelief: atheism promotes immorality and self-interest, it is detrimental to both friendship and human sympathy in general, and a world populated by its (insane) adherents would be nothing short of a nightmare. Faber also echoes the ecumenical impulse discussed at length in previous chapters, readily preferring a non-Christian deity to godlessness. It is worth noting that around the same time Faber wrote his letter, another Hogg family friend, Robert Clarke, wrote jubilantly to John Hogg about Thomas's post-expulsion conduct. On August 13, 1811, Clarke happily informed Thomas's father that Thomas "is not a decided atheist; for if he were he would not frequent *any* place of worship. From pride, he chooses not to think the established religion the right one… and he's now rambling among the sectaries to see if he can discover any new light among them. The same Curiosity will carry him to the synagogue when he comes to London."[33] For Clarke, Hogg's rejection of Anglicanism is of course regrettable. Yet the key point here is that Hogg's attendance at various "places of worship," whether among the dissenters or the Jews of London, is welcome evidence that he is not yet "a decided atheist."

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[32] Ibid., 45v.

[33] Ibid., 51r. Emphasis added.

Thus, both Faber and Clarke reflect a sentiment that first gained extensive currency in the eighteenth century and that ultimately contributed to the development of religious pluralism: when given a choice, their letters suggest, any god is better than no god.

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