



24 JANUARY 2019

HOW TO BE A SHAKESPEAREAN ATHEIST

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During the first two lectures in this series we followed the emotional story of doubt, unbelief and ‘atheism’ in Europe through the Middle Ages and the Reformation. We’ve been gulping down whole centuries at a time, but now we need to slow down a little. For this and the next two lectures we’ll be looking at the seventeenth century, which I think is the real crux of this story, when unbelief in something like the modern sense of the world emerged: and our geographical focus is going to narrow a bit as well. We’re going to be looking chiefly at England: because by the early seventeenth century, it was generally agreed that England was drowning under a rising tide of atheism. One scholar in 1599 lugubriously invited his readers to ‘consider how Atheism doth daily prevail among men, yea, far more then it did amongst either the superstitious papists, or the idolatrous heathen. ... Nowadays, few do make any account of religion or of the worship of God’. The author of England’s first homegrown anti-atheist tract gave a disarmingly simple explanation of why he had written it: because ‘there are many Atheists’. By the mid-seventeenth century, a level-headed commentator could write:

The state of the controversy then is this: which of the parties is in the wisest way? The Atheist thinks that the Religious is a fool; the Religious, that he is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God; the Atheist, that the souls of men are mortal, as the souls of beasts; the Religious, that the Atheist is a beast to say so, etc.¹

Never mind the arguments. Listen to the weary familiarity with which he describes this apparently equal division into two well-established factions.

This testimony is serious, it’s important and it’s wrong. Not in the sense that atheism was impossible in this period. Clearly the word had a much wider range of meanings then than it does now – as we’ve seen, its original meaning is closer to *godless* than *postulating that there is no God*, and insofar as it related to doctrine it tended to include denials of fundamental Christian doctrines such as the immortality of the soul and the inspiration of the Bible as well as the being or nonbeing of God. And atheism in these senses absolutely was a thing in this period, up to and including blank denials that there is a God. But the fact that there was a surge of moral panic about it does not in itself tell us very much. Moral panic, I am afraid, is something to which Christians are rather susceptible; a panic about so-called atheism draws our attention to the issue, but it doesn’t by itself tell us whether it was real.

So what I want to do with you this evening falls into three parts. First, I want to look at the panic. The stereotypical atheist of the period c. 1600 is quite a well-drawn and vividly developed character, and I want to sketch him – it was virtually always a him – out for you. Second, I want to look at the best-known and best-documented case which could be called real atheism during that period and see how it compares to the stereotype. And third and last, I want to dig further into what I think is the most significant divergence between the two. And having enticed you here with an implicit promise, I should say that it is then that we will finally get to Shakespeare, and we will find out that a Shakespearean atheist is not quite the same as a modern atheist.

As we noted in an earlier lecture, the English word *atheist*, whose first recorded use is in 1553, was throughout this period a term of abuse, and a pretty elastic one. I like to compare its use to the use of the word *fascist* in everyday talk nowadays: a usefully vague insult, which can be stretched in many directions but is not simply an obscenity entirely devoid of meaning. In particular, it elided two distinct claims: about a person’s beliefs and their morals.



An atheist may either be someone who believes there is no God, or someone who lives as if he believes there is no God. After all, as one preacher asked in 1643, if people truly believed in God, ‘were it possible for them to live as they live, and to do what they do?’ This is sometimes mere pulpit rhetoric, but the basic logic is sound enough. If people act in ways that flagrantly violate the beliefs they profess, presumably those beliefs are not very deeply held. Hence the core ‘fact’ which everyone ‘knew’ about atheists in the early modern period: that they were moral monsters, enslaved to their lusts, who had either abandoned their faith in order to wallow in sin, or had become so sunk in sin that they had lost hold of their faith. I am not asking you to believe this grotesquely self-serving caricature. Very much not. I just want you to follow its scent with me and see where it leads us.

In 1611, the English playwright Cyril Tourneur published his play *The Atheist’s Tragedy*. It is, I am afraid, not one of the jewels of the age of Shakespeare. It mostly rollicks along merrily enough, helped by a slew of filthy jokes. But the wheels come off in Act IV, as virtually the play’s entire cast converge independently on the same churchyard on the same night, mostly intent on murder, seduction or both, and spend a lengthy scene missing each other, bumping into each other and passing around the same increasingly implausible disguise. If you make it through this with a straight face, the play’s concluding trial scene awaits you. After a convoluted set of claims and counter-claims, the play’s hero decides, for no very good reason, to submit to being beheaded. D’Amville, the eponymous and villainous atheist, takes it on himself to act as executioner. However, the printed stage direction tells us that ‘as he raises up the Axe, [he] strikes out his own brains’. He dies, but not before delivering an improving little speech of repentance in which he confesses to his various crimes and admits that ‘there is a power above ... that hath overthrown the pride of all my projects’. It is one of the less emotionally compelling tragedies of the age.²

But we need to pay attention to it, because D’Amville (the name means ‘evil-spirited’) was a distillation of all the age’s stereotypes about atheism. The play begins with D’Amville and his henchman discussing the nature of humanity. They swiftly decide that we are no different from animals and that death is the end for us. In which case, D’Amville concludes ‘that pleasure only flows / Upon the stream of riches’, and rejects any notion of morality. ‘Let all men lose, so I increase my gain / I have no feeling of another’s pain.’ The rest of the play’s action is driven by his fiendish plots to kill his brother and his nephew, seize their inheritance, and to seduce or rape the virtuous and beautiful Castabella. His designs on Castabella are especially villainous since he has already forced her to marry his own loathsome son. Therefore, when he propositions her, she protests that that would be incest. He replies:

Incest? Tush, these distances affinity observes are articles of bondage cast upon our freedoms by our own subjections. Nature allows a gen’ral liberty of generation to all creatures else.³

Humans ought to be able to copulate as freely as any animal.

Incest would become a hallmark of the imaginary seventeenth-century atheist, and not by accident. Early modern ethicists held that we only know incest is wrong by God’s commandment, not by nature or reason. By that logic atheists will naturally be drawn to incest, and the incestuous will naturally be drawn to atheism. In fact, of course, most human societies loathe incest even if they cannot articulate a reason for doing so, and so associating atheism with incest was more than a logical deduction; it was a powerfully effective scare tactic.⁴ The result was that the incestuous atheist became a stock figure. A bestselling ballad first published around 1600 told the shocking story of how one Jasper Coningham of Aberdeen tried to seduce his sister. When she warned him that Hell’s ‘quenchless flames of fire’ were prepared for anyone who committed such a dreadful sin, he replied that both Heaven and Hell were ‘devised fables / to keep poor fools in fear’:

... These things are nothing so:
No God nor devil is bidding, no Heaven nor Hell I know.
All things are wrought by Nature, the earth, the air, and sky:
There is no joy nor sorrow after that man doth die.
Therefore let me have pleasure, while here I do remain:
I fear not God’s displeasure, nor Hell’s tormenting pain.



No sooner had he spoken than he was struck down by fire from Heaven.⁵ By contrast, in John Ford's 1628 play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a brother and sister willingly give way to their incestuous lusts. In the final scene, as they face death, he declares that he no more believes in Heaven and Hell than he believes that water can burn. She protests, but he insists that it is 'a dream, a dream'.⁶ If you found these literary inventions too fanciful, there was a classical exemplar: the emperor Caligula, 'a notable scorner and condemner of God'. His incest and other notorious crimes followed his atheism like a stench following a corpse.⁷

What made Caligula's story so juicy was another detail: that, for all his blasphemous bluster, he was so terrified of thunder that he hid under his bed during storms. Thunder was as much a part of the cliché of atheism as was incest. It was proverbial in early modern times that thunder and lightning were a 'notorious and terrible' judgement from God. In a generally hushed world, thunder was the loudest noise most people ever heard, unless they were unlucky enough to be close to a cannon. 'Who heareth the thunder, that thinks not of God?' – it was a proverbial question that needed no answer. The pious huddled together during storms, 'full of terror', sublimating their fears with their prayers as they reminded each other that the thunder was 'but as a taste and touch of thy power'.⁸ Even the impious could be shocked into temporary righteousness. 'Doth not every thunderclap constrain you to tremble at the blast of his voice?', one writer asked the godless. He added a cautionary tale of three soldiers out in a thunderstorm, which 'commonly ... maketh the greatest Atheists to tremble': one of them was foolhardy enough to fall to blaspheming, and was promptly killed by a falling tree.⁹

That was how stereotypical atheists dealt with thunderstorms: with brittle and usually short-lived bravado. Inevitably there is a thunderstorm scene in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, in which D'Amville tells his terrified sidekick that it is all 'a mere effect of nature'. In Sir Philip Sidney's *New Arcadia*, a wicked queen tries to corrupt her pious niece by claiming that all religion is merely 'foolish fear'. In ancient times, she explains, 'when they heard it thunder, not knowing the natural cause, they thought there was some angry body above that spake so loud'. In a rather more lowbrow dialogue published in 1608, the despicable Atheos is so panicked by thunder that, like Caligula, he dives under his bed. Then a tremulous voice issues from beneath the covers to explain it all away. It is merely, he explains, that the 'viscous vapours' in a cloud are condensed into a small solid stone, which is then violently expelled from the cloud like a cannonball. His claim that this is all merely natural is rather undermined when, as soon as he finishes speaking, another thunderclap strikes him dead.¹⁰

So now we can start to assemble our identikit early modern atheist. He is almost always male: women's unbelief certainly existed in reality, as we shall see especially in the next lecture, but not in the popular imagination. He is a figure of some wealth and social standing: 'tis nothing but plenty and abundance that maketh men Atheists'. He is educated, at least to some degree: 'a little or superficial taste of *Philosophy*, may perchance incline the Mind of Man to *Atheism*'. He is in good health, perhaps a 'young fool given over to ... pleasure'. This is partly because his atheism is flimsy, a matter of bluster rather than conviction: he doubts his own doubts. 'Many would be *Atheists* if they could,' warned one preacher, 'but a secret whisper haunts and pursues them.'¹¹ Sir Francis Bacon, who was suspected of atheism himself, maintained that

Atheism is rather in the *Lip*, than in the *Heart* of Man. ... Atheists will ever be talking of that their Opinion, as if they fainted in it, within themselves, and would be glad to be strengthened, by the Consent of others.¹²

Another preacher warned that the atheist's 'armoury of arguments' against God are in truth an effort 'to fight against his own conscience'.¹³ John Donne challenged the atheist directly. If there is truly no God, who do you swear by, who do you cry out to in danger, who do you 'tremble at, and sweat under, at midnight'? Donne was impatient with the lugubrious cliché that atheists would eventually discover at first hand that there really is a Hell. He thought he could wrap the question up more quickly. Atheists might blaspheme boldly with their witty friends, but he asked them to wait

but six hours ... till midnight. Wake then; and then, dark and alone ... remember that I asked thee now, Is there a God? and if thou darest, say No.¹⁴

Donne, of course, had no idea what atheists did alone in the dark. But he took it for granted that no-one could be truly convinced that there is no God, and therefore that atheists' consciences must gnaw at them like worms.



These stereotypical ‘atheists’ had surprisingly little to say about whether or not there is a God. Their anti-religious positions were more immediate and pragmatic. They would typically deny the inspiration of the Bible, but above all they denied the immortality of the soul and any notion of eternal reward and punishment. Of course this did not necessarily entail rejecting God, but orthodoxy’s defenders were not wrong: immortality was so central to western Christianity that to deny it really was to tear the heart out of religion. But the question was rarely addressed in doctrinal terms. The stereotypical atheist didn’t find the notion of immortality incredible, he found its moral constraints intolerable. His real reason for rejecting Christianity was to shrug off Christian morals. If you were enslaved by your lusts, you might become ‘ambitious to be like the beasts that perish ... well content to be annihilated’.¹⁵ And if you have despaired of Heaven, you will then be eager to dismiss Hell and damnation as ‘trifles and mere old wives’ tales’, ‘bugbears’ used to frighten children.¹⁶ And the less certain you are that this is true, the more brazenly you will assert it to your comrades, and the more anxiously you will repeat it to yourself.

So, in contemporary eyes, post-Reformation atheism was less a doctrinal error than a form of wishful thinking. Men and (very occasionally) women who wanted to reject any ethical constraints on their behaviour preferred to imagine that there was no eternal judgement to fear and no God to lay bare the secrets of their foolish hearts. ‘Men become first Atheists in their life and conversation,’ argued one preacher, and ‘wallow in their sins and sensuality’. But because they cannot avoid occasional thoughts of God,

they become Atheists in their desire and affection, wishing that there were not a God to be avenged upon them for their wickedness; and in end the Lord giveth them up to Atheism in their judgement and opinion.¹⁷

It was proverbial that atheists ‘could wish there were no God, or devil, as thieves would have no judge nor jailor’. And as one moralist quite correctly pointed out, ‘what we would have to be, we are apt to believe’.¹⁸

This leap from wish to conviction was natural, but also wilful and therefore culpable. One preacher argued that atheists had ‘voluntarily, violently, extinguished to themselves’ the light of divine revelation and natural reason alike, in order that ‘they might prodigally act the works of darkness’.¹⁹ Atheism was therefore an ethical rather than a philosophical stance. As such it did not threaten the moral economy of Christendom: if anything it reinforced it, by lining unbelief up with intolerable antisocial depravity. This convenient conclusion meant that unbelief did not need to be listened to: merely condemned.

Is there any reason to believe a word of this? The atheist of preachers’ and balladeers’ imagination was a caricature. But as with most caricatures, we can catch glimpses of living people beneath them. We have much less direct evidence of real unbelievers, but as we turn to look at them directly, we will see that some of them, at least, seem familiar.

England in 1592 was already facing a daunting series of foreign and domestic dangers when a new scandal erupted: claims of a nest of atheists close to the heart of the state. Sir Walter Raleigh was accused of presiding over a ‘school of atheism’, luring young gentlemen into gatherings at which ‘the Old and New Testament are jested at’ and God himself mocked. The tang of atheism hung around Raleigh for the rest of his life: he was rebutting the charge even on the scaffold in 1618. The reputation of the rest of his supposed ‘school of night’ was even more alarming.²⁰ A whole coven of them were allegedly plotting ‘to draw her majesty’s subjects to be Atheists ... [and] after her majesty’s decease to make a king among themselves and live according to their own laws’.²¹ The scandal eventually provoked a unique event: a full-scale legal enquiry, authorised by the court of High Commission, into atheism in and around Raleigh’s estates. It offers a unprecedented opportunity to see how the atheist of popular fear and rumour looked when dragged out into the cold light of day.

The commissioners knew what they were looking for. The questions drawn up for witnesses asked about anyone who had ‘argued or spoken against ... the being of any God ... or what or where God is’, or denied a whole series of more specific doctrines. Over two days of proceedings in March 1594 they heard from at least sixteen witnesses. But as the testimony mounted, the allegations dissolved into hearsay and contradiction. Plenty of witnesses agreed that ‘Sir Walter Raleigh and his retinue are generally suspected of Atheism’, but getting past rumours to hard evidence proved frustratingly difficult. Juicy second-hand reports kept dissolving into nothing once direct witnesses were called. A promising report of a servant who had spoken ‘in derogation of God and the scriptures’



and had reviled Moses turned out to mean simply that once, when drunk, he had grumbled about an overlong sermon and had become confused between Moses and King Solomon. This was not a threat to Christendom.²²

The most serious reports alleged that, during a dinner at the house of a local knight, Sir Walter Raleigh and his elder brother Carew had denied the immortality of the soul. But it so happened that minister they had been arguing with, Ralph Ironside, was now acting as the commission's secretary, and he informed his colleagues that 'the matter was not as the voice of the country reported'. He explained that one guest at the dinner had gently reproached Carew Raleigh for foul language, and Ironside had sententiously added that the wages of sin is death. What followed was a three-way exchange between Ironside, the hapless clergyman, and the two Raleigh brothers. Carew, who disliked moralising clergymen, retorted that death comes to the good and the bad alike. Ironside replied that of course he meant the death of the soul. 'Soul', said Carew; 'what is that?' Ironside sidestepped that trap, saying that it was more important to save your soul than to define it, but now Sir Walter intervened on his brother's side. He had studied at Oxford with great scholars, he said, but had never found a satisfactory answer to the question, 'what the reasonable soul of man is'. How, for example, did it relate to the brain, or to the heart? Ironside, put on the spot, tried first an Aristotelian definition, which Sir Walter rejected as 'obscure and intricate', and then a theological definition, which Sir Walter dismissed as a circular argument. Spirits, Ironside said at last, are beyond the reach of reason, like God himself. Sir Walter agreed that the two questions are alike, 'for neither could I learn hitherto what God is'. Ironside, now committed, ventured a definition of God: *ens entium*, one 'having being of himself'. 'Yea, but what is this *ens entium*, saith Sir Walter?' Ironside could only reply 'it is God'. Whereupon Sir Walter, growing tired of his game, called for grace to be said to end the meal: 'for that ... is better than this disputation'.²³

The commission was wrapped up without any prosecutions. They had discovered, not a 'school of atheism', but a clique of loose-tongued young men whose soldiers' taste for danger extended to banter and debate. The Raleigh brothers did not deny the existence of the soul or of God. The questions of how to define those terms were real ones, on which scholars disagreed. But the Raleighs, of course, were not holding a metaphysics seminar across the dining table. They were testing the limits of what they dared to say. And they were using a difficult and dangerous question to tease a man who was both their educational and social inferior. They were playing games, and tweaking the noses of the self-important sobersides who disapproved. If there is a unifying note to all of this, it is not rejection of Christian doctrine. It is defiance: of any orthodoxy, magistrate, churchman, monarch or God who might presume to tell these lords of the world how to speak and to live.

One vital witness was by then beyond the commissioners' reach. The playwright Christopher Marlowe is now the most famous supposed atheist in Elizabethan England. One informant said that he had 'read the Atheist lecture to Sir Walter Raleigh and others' and was 'able to show more sound reasons for Atheism than any divine in England is able to give to prove divinity'.²⁴ It is certainly true that Marlowe was part of Raleigh's circle, but his supposed atheism is a hall of mirrors. There is no hard evidence: only rumours, hints and conspiracies, and the texts of his plays and poems, most of them only in copies made after his death in 1593. Without going through all the plays, suffice it to say that Marlowe proved himself very able to give voice to startlingly atheistical and anti-Christian, anti-religious sentiments: he did it in *Tamburlaine*, in *The Massacre at Paris*, in *The Jew of Malta*, which opens with a prologue delivered to the audience in which a self-identified Machiavel says, 'I count Religion but a childish Toy.' And then there is *Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe is of course not Faustus, but Marlowe's Faustus is, at least, a compelling portrait of a particular kind of unbeliever, a man who claims not to believe in Hell while having explicitly made a pact with the devil. The conventional caricature would call that an outrageous example of wishful thinking. In fact it is more like a defiant refusal to submit to reality. When Mephistopheles somberly explains to Faustus that being excluded eternally from God's presence is the sum of all torments, Faustus will have none of it. 'Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude,' he mocks the demon, 'And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess.'²⁵ Hold onto that note of defiance.

Our direct evidence about Marlowe's own supposed unbelief is just as problematic. Rumours and vague allegations aside, the detailed claims come from two hostile documents written in the last month of his life, May 1593, shortly before he was killed in what may simply have been an argument over the dinner bill, and what may not have been. We know he had been a spy at some point; we can rely on almost nothing that was said by or about him during this period. All we can do with these lurid allegations is take them as they are. They do at least they paint a consistent picture. They do not accuse him of openly denying God. The closest we get is the reported statement



‘that if there be any God or any good religion, then it is in the papists, because the service of God is performed with more ceremonies’. Even there, the focus is not on that portentous *if*, but on his contempt for the religion of England. ‘All Protestants are hypocritical asses. ... If he were put to write a new Religion, he would undertake both a more excellent and admirable method.’ But this was not about preferring one form of Christianity to another. He also criticised Christ himself for surrounding himself with ‘fishermen and base fellows, neither of wit nor worth’ and for not having ‘instituted the sacrament with more Ceremonial Reverence’. As befits a member of Raleigh’s circle, Marlowe suggested Christ should have used tobacco rather than bread and wine.²⁶

According to the stereotype, we might expect a hint of incest next, but Marlowe offers a variation on that theme instead: claiming ‘that Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest’ – *dishonest* meaning unchaste. ‘That he was the son of a carpenter, and that if the Jews among whom he was born did crucify him, they best knew him and whence he came.’ He ‘deserved better to die than Barabbas ... though Barabbas were both a thief and a murderer’. Why so? In part because the women who accompanied Christ and his disciples ‘were whores ... Christ knew them dishonestly’. Nor was it only the women. The apostle John ‘was bedfellow to Christ and leaned always in his bosom ... he used him as the sinners of Sodom’.

Assume for a minute all this is true. What kind of atheist would it make Marlowe? Not a sceptical rationalist. His reported statements are not even consistent. Christ might have been the son of a carpenter, or the Angel Gabriel might have pimped the Virgin Mary to the Holy Spirit, but both cannot be true. What holds together Marlowe’s reported statements, and the hints of scepticism in the plays, is not a theory but an emotion: fury. A wild, bitter refusal to submit to authority. Amidst the string of explosive supposed quotations, he famously said ‘that all they that love not Tobacco and Boys were fools’. If you loved tobacco and boys in late Elizabethan England, then your only choices were to renounce them, or to defy the Church, the Christ and the God in whose name you were commanded to do so.

According to one wit writing shortly after this scandal, the name of the devil who chiefly inspired atheism was not Doubt, or Lust, but Derision, whose ‘profession is Atheism’ because what he loves above all ‘to mock at the simplicity of the just’. Marlowe and Raleigh alike were, indeed, mockers. Or to put it more kindly: they were gadflies, jesting about matters that were too serious for jest, playing with unorthodoxies without committing themselves to any of them, consistent only in their refusal to bow to authority. The difference is chiefly one of mood. Marlowe’s mockery and defiance was furious while Raleigh’s was coolly mischievous, and Marlowe was swiftly murdered while Raleigh was beheaded twenty-five years later. They took different routes to the same destination.

Sketchy as all this is, the Raleigh-Marlowe circle gives us an unusually broad and consistent picture of what unbelief could actually mean in this period. And its restless, reckless and insolent ‘atheism’ has echoes elsewhere. On the rare occasions when early modern courts dealt with allegations of atheism, they often turn out to have been more about defiance of moral authority than about doctrine. In 1635, one Brian Walker was sentenced to a year in prison, plus a swingeing fine, for saying that ‘I do not believe there is either God or devil, neither will I believe any thing but what I see’. But while he admitted speaking the words, he was not expressing a metaphysical opinion. He was embroiled in a long, bitter dispute with a neighbouring family, fell to cursing them, and uttered the dread words when one of them said to him, ‘Do you not fear God?’ Walker was in no mood to acknowledge any authority to which his enemies might appeal.²⁷

This sort of thing scarcely deserves to be called unbelief. But defiance of this kind could become more settled, especially if directed at the early modern world’s most everpresent and intrusive moral authority: the Christian churches. One of the side-effects of the Reformation was an arms race between the competing religious parties, as they tried to stymie one another’s missionary efforts and to bolster their own moral authority by asserting control over their own populations. The result was that churches of all stripes began trying to regulate the everyday life of ordinary lay people more, and more consistently, than had ever been the case before. Naturally, some of those people disliked being regulated, and cursed the clergy for officious hypocrites. The clergy, equally naturally, insisted that they were merely messengers: the new moral severity was God’s will. So what was a resentful lay person to do, but shake the fist at God, too? Especially if the clergy in question really *were* hypocrites. One of the more memorable characters in Tourneur’s *Atheist’s Tragedy* is the minister, Languabeau Snuff, whose hypocrisy is so gross that D’Amville reckons he only aims ‘to divert the world from sin, that he / More easily might engross it



to himself. Importantly, D'Amville claims that it is through the minister's behaviour that 'I am confirmed an atheist'.²⁸

Churchmen responded to these charges as institutions always do: by pointing out that the flaws of a few messengers have no bearing on the truthfulness of the message. Which is not quite true. It is not simply that corrupt, grasping and tedious clergy could not invest their preaching with moral authority. D'Amville's point was that Languabeau Snuff was a practical atheist. He demonstrated by his conduct that he did not believe the gospel he preached. Since he was the religious professional who was supposed to know the truth on these points, what was a lay person to do but learn from his example?

For good Christians, the unbelief associated with the Raleigh-Marlowe circle was both appalling and reassuring. It was what unbelief ought to be. This is why the words *libertine* and *atheist* were virtual synonyms throughout the early modern period.²⁹ Atheists of this kind were monsters, but manageable ones, because whatever other appeal they might have, by definition they had no moral authority. One more trope about such men recurs – that they want their wives to stay pious, to keep themselves from being cuckolded.³⁰ This Machiavellian argument – that religion was a lie which it was necessary for all but a small, self-selected group to embrace – was self-limiting if not actively self-defeating. If you believe that religion and morals are inextricably linked, and that social order depends on almost everyone accepting both, then it makes little difference if you yourself contract out of them. It makes you a kind of parasite on Christian society: an annoyance, not an existential threat.

Unfortunately there is not much direct evidence that real unbelievers frankly abandoned ethics in this way. And there are some hints they didn't. For some of the best of these we need to range outside England, and we don't have time for that this evening, so I won't do more than mention Uriel Acosta, a Portuguese Jew turned unbeliever who argued in the 1620s that he based his ethics not on God's commandments, but on 'the law of nature ... the common rule of action to all men ... which distinguishes between right and wrong', and argued that these natural ethics were actually superior to the religious variant; or the great Dutch moralist Dirck Volckerstz Coornhert, who saw himself as standing in succession to Erasmus' ethics-centred vision of Christianity, and who deliberately wrote his *Ethics* (1586) without a single citation from Scripture: he wanted to show that a truly Christian moral code could be reached simply by the use of reason. Let's have an English example instead. In 1606, an Ipswich physician named Eleazar Duncan wrote a tract warning against using unlicensed, untrained healers, even if their religion seemed impeccable. Instead, he urged, a patient should resort only to 'the learned Physician (though he have no religion)'. The medical profession was notorious for atheism, but Duncan's claim was that even an atheist physician could be trusted to care for his patients. The urge to save others' lives, Duncan insisted, is 'naturally implanted in the heart of man'. Why else, he asked, would anyone ever leap into deep water to rescue others from drowning, or run into a burning building to save the occupants? There was nothing specifically Christian about the desire to help and serve others, he argued. It was an instinct as natural as breathing.³¹

That argument was nakedly self-serving, but there is a kind of corroboration from a surprising quarter. Amid the comforting caricatures of Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedy*, one character strikes a discordant note. Sebastian, the younger son of the villainous D'Amville, is an atheist like his father. He is a self-confessed coward and a serial philanderer: 'the love of a woman,' he says, 'is like a mushroom; it grows in one night and will serve somewhat pleasingly next morning to breakfast, but afterwards waxes fulsome and unwholesome.' And yet, unexpectedly, he is also a man of principle. He opposes a forced marriage being plotted by his father as tantamount to rape, standing firm even when he is cut off without an income. Eventually his father relents, and gives him some money – which he promptly gives as bail to free a man whom his father had unjustly imprisoned. At the end of the play, when Sebastian at last manages to arrange an assignation with a lustful noblewoman he has been courting, her vengeful husband and his soldiers track them down and set about breaking down the door of their chamber. 'If you love me, save my honour,' she begs Sebastian: and he does. She flees through another door, and to give her time to escape, he stays, barring the way with sword drawn. When the husband bursts in, he demands that Sebastian stand aside, 'or I will make my passage through thy blood'. 'My blood would make it slippery, my lord,' he replies: 'twere better you would take another way.' And he dies with that quip on his lips, killing the cuckolded husband in the process.³² Neither pious Christian, virtuous pagan or villainous atheist, Sebastian represents a dangerous possibility: that unbelief might discover ethics of its own.



If the Renaissance stage really did foster atheism, as its puritan critics argued, this is how it happened. Not by dealing in reassuring stock villains such as D'Amville, nor by directly attacking the question in plays like *Faustus*: but by the accumulation of hints and examples suggesting that atheism was not a uniquely depraved spectacle of horror, but a tolerable everyday phenomenon, something to be joked about rather than feared. Ben Jonson used the word *atheist* half a dozen times in his plays, usually to refer to the profane and the impious. Preachers had been denouncing commonplace sins as atheism for so long that atheism now seemed commonplace. In Jonson's cowritten play *Eastward Ho!*, the gaoler, Wolf, reels off a list of the different religions he has had in his prison: first various Christian sects, and then, 'Jew, Turk, infidel, atheist, good fellow, etc.' When asked which is the best, he replies, 'Troth, Master Deputy, they that pay fees best. We never examine their consciences farther.' So an *atheist* is halfway between an *infidel* and a *good fellow*, someone over whom no man of the world ought to lose sleep. In Jonson's *The New Inn*, a rake tries to seduce a lady, and she teasingly questions whether there is any such thing as love. Pretending to be shocked, he replies, 'I did not expect / To meet an infidel, much less an atheist.' For Jonson, atheism was a joke. As when Shakespeare's Juliet calls Romeo the 'god of my idolatry', these are lines which would have caused a *frisson* in their audience. But those audiences had come, in part, to witness dramatists playing with fire, and to do so with a thrill rather than a shudder.

As to Shakespeare himself: his personal religion remains hidden from us, and all we need say on that front is that he was not an atheist, at least not in any dogmatic or embittered sense of the word.³³ It is striking, however, that nowhere in any of his surviving works did he use the words *atheist*, *unbeliever* or any of their cognates. He used *infidel*, but only to refer to non-Christian religions. Given how widely used and emotionally charged the word was at the time, and the famous breadth of his vocabulary, that silence suggests that he was consciously avoiding the topic, indulging neither in Tourneur's self-righteousness nor in Jonson's fun and games. But if he side-stepped the word, he was nevertheless capable of putting shockingly atheist sentiments in his characters' mouths. Human life, according to Macbeth's famous nihilist creed, is

a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

Claudio, in *Measure for Measure*, quails at the prospect of death, begging his sister to prostitute herself to save his life (a proposal she calls 'a kind of incest'):

To die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod. ...
... 'Tis too horrible!

Starkest of all is the villainous Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. 'Thou believ'st no god', his captors say at the play's end. 'What if I do not? as, indeed, I do not,' he replies, mocking their piety: 'an idiot holds his bauble for a god.' As he dies, he reviles his enemies, declaring, 'If there be devils, would I were a devil,' proudly claiming that 'I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly.' And yet, unsettlingly, like Tourneur's Sebastian, the audience knows that this defiantly unrepentant death is a ploy. By submitting to it, Aaron hopes to save the life of his bastard son.³⁴

All of these stage atheists are villains, and certainly none of them speak for their creator. Yet if Shakespeare could give voice to atheists, one thing he did not do anywhere in his dramatic works is put earnest and spiritually alive piety on the stage. You could perhaps argue about Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. Whether it's one or none, as the great literary critic George Santayana put it, if the works of Shakespeare were all that some alien civilisation or future age had of humanity, 'they would hardly understand that man had had a religion'. Santayana concluded that 'the silence of Shakespeare' on religion had 'something in [it] that is still heathen', which may be going too far. But it is certainly true that Shakespeare's stage could be a startlingly secular space.³⁵



Shakespeare's *King Lear* is based on a source, the 1605 *True Chronicle History of King Leir*, which tells the story of the elderly king and his three daughters as a moral tale governed by God's providence, which ultimately comes to a happy ending. By the time Shakespeare was finished with it, it was an exceptionally bleak tragedy set in a world with no sign of God's presence, let alone of his justice. Almost the closest the play comes to a religious vision is blind Gloucester's claim that 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport'.³⁶ If there was any meaning or morality to be found on this stage – and the question is open – the characters would have to find it for themselves.

So the popular caricature of the atheist was not entirely wrong. In particular, the mood was right: there really was a vein of unbelief whose emotional register was anger, resentment, mockery and scorn, whose temperature ranged from Jonson's cool amusement through Raleigh's barbed playfulness to Marlowe's fire and fury. But those emotions were lived out in ways that were both better and worse than the preachers feared. Better, because this angry unbelief seems in fact still to have been inchoate, more a matter of scepticism, defiance and the carving out of new secular spaces rather than direct and earnest denials of core Christian doctrines. But also worse, because it was not, as the caricature insisted, a simple cloak for moral bankruptcy. What makes Marlowe's defiance and even D'Amville's anticlerical contempt compelling is that they have a moral edge. And in their very different ways, Acosta, Coornhert, Eleazar Duncan, Tourneur's Sebastian and Shakespeare's secularised ethical vision suggest that it was not only possible, but even natural for atheism to be fired by its own moral code, either implicit or explicit. The preachers wanted the atheist to stick to his role as the villain in Christendom's moral economy. They should have known that the problem with an atheist is that he does not do as he is told.

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¹ Seth Ward, *A philosophical essay towards an evincion of the being and attributes of God* (Oxford: Leonard Lichfield, 1652), p. 11.

² Cyril Tourneur, 'The Atheist's Tragedy', in *The Plays of Cyril Tourneur*, ed. George Parfitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), esp. V.ii.236, 253-5; cf. Cyril Tourneur, *The atheist's tragedie: or The honest man's reuenge As in diners places it hath often beene acted* (London: [Thomas Snodham] for John Stepneth and Richard Redmer, 1611).

³ Tourneur, 'Atheist's Tragedy', I.i.18-19, 29-30, 128-9, IV.iii.117-120.

⁴ One modern outworking of this problem is entertainingly traced in Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, pp. 45-7.

⁵ *The wonderfull example of God shewed upon Jasper Coningham* (London: for Thomas Millington, to be solde at his shop in Cornehill, 1593-1603?). There are eight known editions before 1701 and the ballad became so well-known that its tune became widely known as 'Jasper Coningham'. Professor Christopher Marsh judges it to be amongst the hundred most popular ballads in seventeenth-century England. Cf. a variant of the same story in *The Punish'd Atheist: Or, The Miserable End of a North Country Gentleman, who, to obtain his lewd Desires on a Lady, his own Sister, deny'd that there was either Heaven or Hell, God or Devil* (London: for J. Blare, 1664-1703?). I am grateful to Professor Marsh for his assistance with these ballads.

⁶ John Ford, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore' in *Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays*, ed. Marion Lomax (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), V.v.33-6.

⁷ Henry Smith, *Gods arrowe against atheists* (London: John Danter, 1593), sig. B1v.

⁸ Thomas Nash, *Christs teares ouer Ierusalem* (London: [George Eld] for Thomas Thorp, 1613), p. 125; John Whitgift, *Works*, ed. John Ayre, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1852), p. 483; Samuel Hieron, *A Helpe Vnto Deuotion* (London: H. L[ownes] for Samuel Macham, 1610), pp. 340-2; Samuel Clarke et al., *The Lives of sundry Eminent Persons in this Later Age* (London: Thomas Simmons, 1683), p. 62; cf. John Craig, 'Psalms, groans and dogwhippers: the soundscape of worship in the English parish church, 1547-1642' in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 104-23; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 58.

⁹ Thomas Beard, *The theatre of Gods judgements wherein is represented the admirable justice of God against all notorious sinners* (London: S.I. & M.H., 1642), pp. 88, 133.

¹⁰ Tourneur, 'Atheist's Tragedy', II.iv.146-7; Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The New Arcadia)*, ed. Victor Skretkovicz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 358-9; Henoeh Clapham, *Error on the left hand, through a frozen securitie* (London: N. O[kes] for Nathaniel Butter, 1608), pp. 53-4.

¹¹ Nash, *Christs teares ouer Ierusalem* (1613), p. 124; Francis Bacon, *Of the advancement and proficience of learning; or, The partitions of sciences* (Oxford: Leon. Lichfield for Rob. Young, 1640), p. 9; cf. Bacon, *Essays*, p. 53; Mornay, *A vwoorke concerning the trennesse of the Christian religion*, p. 10; Anthony Farindon, *XXX sermons lately preached at the parish church of Saint Mary Magdalen Milkstreet, London* (London: for Richard Marriot, 1657), p. 186.

¹² Bacon, *Essays*, p. 52.

¹³ Fuller, *The Holy State*, p. 380.



- ¹⁴ Donne, *LXXX sermons*, pp. 227, 486.
- ¹⁵ Robert Pricke, *A verie godlie and learned sermon treating of mans mortalitie* (London: Thomas Creede, 1608), sig. D4r; Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Book V*, p. 23; Farindon, *XXX sermons*, p. 51-2.
- ¹⁶ Christopher Marlowe, 'Doctor Faustus', A-text II.i.135, in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); *The arraignment and tryall with a declaration of the Ranters* ([London]: by B.A., 1650), sig. A4v; Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. III, p. 396; C. J. Betts, *Early Deism in France: from the so-called 'déistes' of Lyon (1564) to Voltaire's 'Lettres philosophiques' (1734)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), pp. 23-6.
- ¹⁷ Henderson, *Sermon preached to the honourable House of Commons*, pp. 28-9.
- ¹⁸ *The Works of the Learned and Pious Author of The Whole Duty of Man* (Oxford and London: Roger Norton for Edward Paulet, 1704), vol. II p. 111; Fuller, *The Holy State*, p. 378; Richard Younge ['Junius'], *The Drunkard's Character* (London: R. Badger for George Latham, 1638), p. 559.
- ¹⁹ Kors, *Atheism in France*, p. 28; Thomas Adams, *The gallants burden. A sermon preached at Paules Crosse* (London: W. W[hite] for Clement Knight, 1612), fo. 16r.
- ²⁰ Robert Persons, *An advertisement written to a secretarie of my L. Treasurers of England* ([Antwerp]: [s.n.], 1592), 18; The National Archives, Kew, SP 14/4 fo. 189r; Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, pp. 149-50; William M. Hamlin, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 49, 53; *Sir Walter Raleigh his lamentation: Who was beheaded in the old Pallace at Westminster the 29. of October. 1618* (London: for Philip Birch, 1618). The traditional label 'school of night' is taken from Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*, IV.iii.201, although the evidence linking that throwaway phrase to Raleigh's group is thin, to say the least.
- ²¹ British Library, Harleian MS 6848 fo. 191r.
- ²² British Library, Harleian MS 6849 fos 183r-190r.
- ²³ British Library, Harleian MS 6849 fos 184v, 187v-188v.
- ²⁴ British Library, Harleian MS 6848 fo. 190r.
- ²⁵ Marlowe, 'Doctor Faustus', A-text, I.i.49, 111; I.iii.86-7; II.i.18-19, 120.
- ²⁶ British Library, Harleian MS 6848 fos 154r, 185r-v.
- ²⁷ W. Hylton Dyer Longstaffe (ed.), *The acts of the High Commission Court within the Diocese of Durham* (Durham: Surtees Society 34, 1858), pp. 115-119.
- ²⁸ Tourneur, 'Atheist's Tragedy', I.ii.221-223.
- ²⁹ See, amongst many others, *The libertine overthrown, or, A mirror for atheists* (London: J. Bradford, 1690?); Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. III, p. 338; John Bruce (ed.), *The Works of Roger Hutchinson* (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1842), pp. 138, 140; Adams, *The gallants burden*, fo. 17r; Vallée, *La Beatitude des Chrestiens*, p. 10.
- ³⁰ Gauna, *Upwellings*, p. 75; Calvin, *Opera*, vol. 11 p. 491.
- ³¹ E[leazar] D[uncan], *The copy of a letter written by E.D. Doctour of Physicke* (London: Melchisedech Bradwood, 1606), pp. 15-16.
- ³² Tourneur, 'Atheist's Tragedy', esp. I.ii.38, I.iv.128, IV.v.36-40, 54-62. Uniquely among the play's highborn characters, Sebastian always speaks in prose, not in verse.
- ³³ See, for example, Sonnet 146.
- ³⁴ *Macbeth* V.v.23-27; *Measure for Measure* III.i.116-119, 127, 145; *Titus Andronicus* V.i.71, 73, 79-80, 141-2, 147.
- ³⁵ George Santayana, 'The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare' in his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. 147-165. A section of *The Tempest*, II.i, is lightly paraphrased from Montaigne's essay 'On the cannibals', as printed in the 1603 English version translated by John Florio. Alongside that hard evidence, the subject's most obsessive textual detective has found 'about a hundred close phrasal correspondences' between Shakespeare and the 1603 text, as well as 'a glossary of about seven hundred and fifty words, selected from Florio's Montaigne, which were used by Shakespeare during and after, but not before 1603': George Coffin Taylor, *Shakspeare's Debt to Montaigne* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), p. 5. Whether or not you swallow that argument whole, it is at least highly plausible that Shakespeare's familiarity with Montaigne extended beyond passing acquaintance with a single essay.
- ³⁶ David Loewenstein, 'Agnostic Shakespeare?: the godless world of *King Lear*' in David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (eds), *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 155-171; *King Lear* IV.i.38-9.