DAVID MANNING

Anti-Providentialism as Blasphemy in Late Stuart England: A Case Study of “the Stage Debate”*

This article develops a cultural history of blasphemy as representation by exploring the nexus between conceptions and perceived manifestations of blasphemy in a theological context. Specifically it uses a case study of “the stage debate”, a controversy about the viability of the theatre in England at the turn of the eighteenth century, to argue that contemporary perceptions of anti-providentialism informed a sense of practical blasphemy that was commensurate with the Thomistic conception of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief. This interpretation illuminates the theological sensitivity of contemporary godly critics to perceived instances of anti-providentialism and their belief in the actual diabolism of the theatre.

In one sense it is perhaps axiomatic that an attack on the notion of providence was considered to be blasphemy by pious critics in late Stuart England. In much of the historiography of early modern religion, the term blasphemy has been interpreted and applied hitherto rather uncontentiously as a label for damaging religious belief and feelings.¹ Thus, to puncture someone’s belief in a divine economy of mercies and judgements with darts of either scepticism or abuse might have been considered an act of blasphemy by an injured party. Such a view appears to be heavily based upon a conception of blasphemy that is reliant upon an analysis of offence between human beings in legal, cultural, and socio-political contexts. Indeed, the topic of blasphemy is all too often distilled to cases between intentionally licentious agents and censorious authorities. In this article I want to consider an alternative approach that will explore blasphemy as theological representation. Moving away from a secular


David Manning is in the final stages of his PhD in History at Clare College, Cambridge.

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critique, and its foci on authority and deviance, I want to suggest that the contemporary perception of anti-providentialism (an explicit or implicit denial of God’s providence) as blasphemy is worthy of deeper investigation because scholars have yet to fully engage with blasphemy as a sin in the context of theological polemic.²

My concern here is with one aspect of what is often referred to as “common blasphemy.” In the context of contemporary religious culture, however, I want to suggest that this category should be re-interpreted as “practical blasphemy,” encompassing those impious words and actions that were perceived as blasphemy but which did not amount to substantial theological, exegetical, or epistemological claims. This is crucial for two main reasons. One, it allows supposed blasphemous words and actions to be juxtaposed with “speculative blasphemy”: “that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed” (1 Tm 6:1). Two, it situates accusations of blasphemy within a discourse that was structured by the dichotomy between practical and speculative theology. One contemporary Nonconformist minister and Doctor of Divinity, Thomas Manton (bap. 1620, d. 1677), stated that,

Hypocrisy is practical Blasphemy; Rev. 2.9. I Know the Blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and are not, but are the Synagogue of Satan. Men pretend to obey God, yet blaspheme him in their Heart, and refuse the Power of that to which they pretend.³

Similarly, in citing the proclamation of Saint Paul that, “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you” (Rom 2:23–4), the Church of England clergyman and well-known religious writer Richard Allestree (1622–81) reminded his readers that, “there is also a blasphemy of actions, that is, when men who profess to be the servants of God, live so wickedly that they bring an evil report on him.”⁴ The concept of practical blasphemy was firmly rooted in theology which focused on the nexus between outward expressions and belief; however the realisation of practical blasphemy was inherently a matter of representation. What I want to explore, therefore, is a very specific discourse within the contemporary plea for moral reform that was distinct from both the temporal (i.e., legal) attempts to censure vice and from the 1698 Blasphemy Act, which principally sought to suppress the speculative blasphemy of antitrinitarianism.⁵

In this article I shall investigate how those who perceived themselves to be the defenders of Christian truth and piety represented certain words as blasphemous on the grounds that they were anti-providential. I shall argue

². For other attempts to see blasphemy in relation to providence see David Nash, “Placing Blasphemy in Social History. Analyzing Theoretical Approaches to the History of Religious Crime.” Journal of Social History 41, no. 1 (September 2007): 5–29. See also the article by David Nash in this volume.
³. Thomas Manton, A Fourth Volume, Containing One Hundred and Fifty Sermons on Several Texts of Scripture . . . (London, 1693), 39.
⁴. [Richard Allestree], The Practice of Christian Graces, or, the Whole Duty of Man . . . (London, 1658), 98–99.
⁵. For a discussion of the formation of the 1698 Blasphemy Act and legal approaches to an investigation of blasphemy, see my “Blasphemy in England,” 16–38.
that this perception of blasphemy was part of a spiritual critique of human behaviour that was heightened by zealous piety and circumstance, and which was commensurate with the Thomistic conception of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief. Thus, I shall illuminate a sense of blasphemy that was part of a rich and terrifying belief in the depths of human wickedness vis-à-vis God.

Saint Thomas Aquinas provided one of the most comprehensive theological treatments of blasphemy in his *Summa Theologica*. He suggested that blasphemy was aggravated unbelief, the very antithesis of holy worship, and was generally understood via a threefold description: when something was attributed to God which was not His; or when God was denied something that was His; or when an attribute of God was bestowed upon a creature. Aquinas did not actually own this view, although he was one of the first theologians to give such an exposition, for he preferred to conceive blasphemy more abstractly as denying God via the two processes of (erroneous) affirmation or negation. This substantial description of blasphemy was intertwined with inferences of a more modal account of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief. In all, Aquinas understood blasphemy to be the worst mortal sin “foreasmuch as it made any sin greater.”

Thomistic theology conceived blasphemy as a sin which was, substantially or modally, made manifest through other more tangible transgressions such that the specific nature of blasphemy was a matter of interpretation.

God’s providence was understood as His governance of the world, drawing upon His omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, and infinite goodness. For John Calvin, God’s general providence constituted an overriding plan for the world and its creatures, whilst His particular providence concerned divine intervention in the form of mercies and judgements. Even though God’s providential disposition was ultimately unknowable, Calvinist theology acknowledged that providence was intimately connected with predestination. General providence provided an explanation for earthly suffering, whilst particular providences formed God’s communication with the predestined elite. Alexandra Walsham has shown that this view was somewhat diluted by early seventeenth-century print culture to the point where Protestants made apparently self-evident interpretations of providences to judge the relative pleasure and displeasure of God with respect to personal and national sin. This shift in interpretation was facilitated by Thomas Beard’s hugely influential pseudo-historical anthology of God’s vengeances, *The Theatre of


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God’s Judgements (1597), and subsequent chapbook narratives about how sinful individuals met with untimely deaths. John Spurr has shown how the Restoration Church of England became successful at politicising the interpretation of providential events to censure disunity and immorality. Cataclysmic events such as the plague of 1665–66 and the fire of 1666 were seen as signs of God’s anger in a way that precipitated national fast days as a means of public penance. Pious clergy were also adept at producing soul searching sermons and pamphlets which emphasised the need to reform on account of divine punishments, however, given that there was a strong belief throughout English society that God controlled the causes of human happiness and misery well into the eighteenth century, there is still much work to be done to understand the relationship between contemporary Protestant ethics and providionalism.

Divine providence was essential to practical theology, for it kept “sin in general under such shame.” As the theologian Henry More (1614–87) stated, “the measure of God’s Providence is his Goodness . . . what-ever designed or permitted Evil there seems in Providence, it is for a far greater good.” A tentative hypothesis, to be developed in future work, would be that much of the discourse on providentialism, and hence anti-providentialism, in the late Stuart period was particular to the time; for it may be suggested that it was largely a product of the specific theological and cultural developments and preoccupations of post-Restoration Protestant ethics. The abject wickedness of anti-providentialism was certainly a particular concern for contemporary religious writers. For example, the Church of England clergyman William Sherlock (1640–1707) made clear that,

Divine Providence is not justly chargeable with any thing, that is utterly inconsistent and irreconcilable with the Holiness of Government . . . the least thought and imagination of this is a very great Blasphemy, and the greater and more unpardonable Blasphemy, because there is no temptation to suspect any such thing of God.

Here, anxiety lay not with direct attacks on providence, but with the perception that blasphemy was manifest in expressions that did not correspond with the pious life of a God-fearing Christian. Yet it is relatively difficult for scholars to discern accusations of blasphemy on the grounds of anti-providentialism from other spiritual anxieties because the relevant polemic was often too vague or too intertwined with other arguments. The following case study, however,

14. [Henry More], Divine Dialogues Containing Sundry Disquisitions & Instructions Concerning the Attributes and Providence of God (London, 1668), 179. See, also: [Richard Allestree], The Art of Contentment (Oxford, 1675), 120.
which will focus on the years between 1698 and 1708, provides a rare opportunity to investigate the representation of anti-providentialism as blasphemy.

I

At the height of the “moral panic” about vice in England during the 1690s, the nonjuring clergyman Jeremy Collier (1650–1726) published *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* in 1698. With this work, Collier, almost single-handedly, turned what had hitherto been a series of pious snipes against the theatre into a full scale controversy about the very existence of the playhouse in society. *A Short View* and the controversy it sparked, known to literary scholars as “the stage debate,” ranged across drama, politics, culture, and religion. Yet Collier’s most stinging criticisms lay firmly with the last of these, for he asserted that certain plays were not only immoral and profane, but blasphemous; and that appreciation of such plays was tantamount to worshipping the Devil. I want to suggest that this view was neither rhetorical hyperbole nor an overzealous response to profane swearing, but primarily due to a complex representation of anti-providentialism.

Studies into the stage debate have hitherto been dominated by literary and socio-political approaches which have focused overwhelmingly on Collier and the published replies he provoked up until 1702. Since the early twentieth century scholars have debated the influence of *A Short View* on contemporary playwrights, dramatic genre, and moral sensibilities. Such work has been fruitful; however, the historiography has tended to portray Collier rather narrowly as a dogmatic Christian moraliser. Mark Dawson has suggested that a failure to seek a more rounded context has perpetuated a view that the “debate over the stage was one of ‘morality’; that explanation of opposition to the theatre can be found in ethical-religious scruple of a vaguely defined (because seldom questioned) sort.” Dawson argued that Collier and other critics, such as the journalist George Ridpath (d. 1726), were principally concerned with the threat the theatre posed as a socio-political “leveller,” stressing its iconoclastic potential and tendency to subvert order. Yet such a

18. In the following eighteen months the work went through four editions; a fifth and final edition appeared in 1728.
view still avoids placing moral consternation in its theological context. To be clear, it is not my intention to challenge existing work on the stage debate or to provide a rounded assessment of contemporary critiques of the theatre, but to focus on how anti-stage critics represented blasphemy. Thus, hereafter when I refer to anti-stage critics I mean only those individuals who were specifically incensed by the profanity and blasphemy of the stage.

In the five years immediately after the publication of *A Short View* there was significant support for Collier’s call to reform the stage, but few commentators gave much attention to his charges of blasphemy. Most contemporaries would probably have forgotten all about them had it not been for a supposed act of providence and an astonishing historical accident. On 26 and 27 November 1703, a great storm hit England causing widespread damage and thousands of deaths.24 The event was widely acknowledged by the nation’s Protestants as a sign of God’s wrath and to mark of the severity of the situation Queen Anne declared that a general fast be observed as public penance on 19 January 1704.25 It was a nervous time for pious folk who had witnessed a frightening series of providential warnings against public and private sin since the 1692 earthquake.26 Amidst the national distress, it was reported that a group of actors had, only days after the storm, performed versions of both Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *The Tempest.*27 On 10 December 1703, Collier completed a summation of *A Short View* which highlighted how such “Incorrigibleness of the Stage” exposed its “Blasphemy.”28 The theatre was a reprobate manufacturer of blasphemous “Sins of Defyance,” which risked inducing unprecedented divine punishment equal to that against the biblical city of Sodom.29 The prominent Nonconformist, Whig journalist John Tutchin (ca. 1660–1707) complained that the production of *Macbeth* had been “design’d to mock the Almighty Power of God” and that the players were “Impious and Blasphemous Wretches” who had “Ridicule[d] that Amazing and Stupendous Judgment.”30 When the day of national penance arrived, the Bishop of Oxford told the Lords gathered at Westminster Abbey that the playing of a “mock tempest” so soon after a real, divinely sanctioned tempest was an “unprecedented piece of Profaneness” that was an “affront to God, unparalleled by any civilized nation.”31 In reaction to the widespread condemnation, the Lord Chamberlain

24. For details, see: [Daniel Defoe], *The Storm: Or a Collection of the Most Remarkable Casualties and Disasters which Happen’d in the Late Dreadful Tempest...* (London, 1704).
28. [Jeremy Collier], *Mr. Collier’s Dissuasive from the Play-House; in a Letter to a Person of Quality, Occasion’d by the Late calamity of the Tempest* (London, 1703), 9.
29. [Collier], *Dissuasive*, 15. See, also: [Josiah Woodward], *Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage in a Letter to a Lady* (London, 1704), 7, 13.
30. *The Observator* 2, no. 77, 29 December–1 January 1704.
ordered the Master of Revels to be more careful in granting play licences.\(^32\) As far as the Privy Council was concerned, this action seemed to put an end to the matter;\(^33\) but it quickly transpired that the storm had provided the catalyst and context for a renewed campaign against the blasphemy of the theatre which was to last for a further four years.

A plethora of anti-stage writings were quickly published and then distributed by the newly formed Society for Promoting of Christian Knowledge (SPCK).\(^34\) They included: a sermon against the stage by the late archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson (1630–94); and essays by Sir John Philipps (ca. 1666–1737), a leading lay member of the SPCK and a Whig MP, and the Church of England clergyman Josiah Woodward (1657–1712).\(^35\) Furthermore, John Tutchin continued to attack the stage in his newspaper *The Observer*. In 1706, Arthur Bedford (bap. 1668, d.1745), a fervent moraliser and nonjuring clergyman from Bristol, capitalised on the momentum of the campaign by publishing *The Evil and Danger of Stage-Plays* (1706), which claimed to list approximately 1,400 examples of “Swearing, Cursing and Blasphemy” in the play scripts published in the years 1704 and 1705 alone.\(^36\) The SPCK promptly bought and distributed 151 copies of the book,\(^37\) which was the most zealous attack on the stage since William Prynne’s *Histrio-Mastix* of 1633.\(^38\) Despite the significant ideological gap that would have existed between these men, they were united in their view that the stage was profane and blasphemous: a conviction forced into the public domain largely in response to the failure of the theatre to pay attention to God’s providence.

When one turns to assess the substance of many of these anti-stage writings, it transpires that a fear of anti-provendentialism lay much deeper than the bluster that surrounded the notorious productions of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. For Collier, swearing and “making bold with the Name of God . . . [was] the least part of the Charge” against the stage as the players and playwrights had also “attempted as it were to scale the sky, and attack the seat of omnipotence: they have blasphemed the attributes of God, ridiculed his providence.”\(^39\) Bedford’s treatment of the impiety of the theatre was very similar to that of Collier, in so far as he covered the issue of profane swearing quickly to give


\(^33\) Queen Anne went to a production of John Dryden’s *All for Love* at St. James’s Palace to celebrate her birthday little more than two months after the storm. See: *The Daily Courant*, no. 566, 4 February 1704.

\(^34\) Edmund McClure, ed., *A Chapter in English Church History: Being the Minutes of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge for the Years 1698–1704 . . .* (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1888), 251–60.

\(^35\) John Tillotson, *Fifteen Sermons on Several Subjects . . .* (London, 1702), 289–323; [John Philipps], *A Short Account of the Impiety and Immorality of the Stage . . .* (London, 1703 i.e. 1704), three subsequent editions of this work were published in 1704 as *A Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the English Stage*; [Woodward], *Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage*.

\(^36\) Arthur Bedford, *The Evil and Danger of Stage-Plays . . .* (Bristol, 1706), 81.

\(^37\) Cambridge University Library, SPCK.MS A1/1, 409.


\(^39\) [Collier], *Mr Collier’s Dissuasive*, 6.
prominence to those passages which he perceived to be blasphemously anti-providential. In exposing the wickedness of the stage, Tutchin and Philips tended to cite many different quotations together and describe all of them as profane, blasphemous, or both; but they too showed a preoccupation with anti-providential themes.

Pious critics obviously never went to the theatre. Moreover, it would appear that they held a flagrant disregard for dramatic context. A whole play could be denounced as blasphemous on the account of a few words. Robert Hume has claimed that Collier was “a fundamentalist zealot and a literalist,” who was “grossly insensitive to satire and context.” It is plausible that zealous observers treated plays as texts, imputing them with a quasi-philosophical quality which exacerbated the extent to which they were viewed as serious attacks upon God. That being said, the likes of Collier were primarily concerned with convincing their readers that certain plays were fundamentally evil. To this end, anti-stage works largely comprised of examples of supposedly guilty passages glued together with fiery polemic rather than theological analysis.

To explain why individuals such as Collier overlooked context in such an unapologetic way, most literary scholars have concurred with Aubrey Williams that the clash between Collier and the playwrights was principally the result of opposing philosophical theories concerning the separation between life and art. According to Williams, Collier viewed the world through a Platonic lens, whereby all artistic representation was a copy of reality, whilst the playwrights held the Aristotelian position that artistic depiction was merely a symbol of mental states that had no direct connection with reality. Collier’s treatment of dramatic quotations as literal assertions certainly corresponds with a Platonic view; but it would be somewhat naïve to gloss over the extent to which this philosophical interpretation would have been suffused with Christian theology.

Before *A Short View* was published, Archbishop Tillotson had delivered a sermon against the stage based upon the words of Saint Paul, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Eph 4:29). By reading this decree in the context of Augustinian theology, “corrupt communication was evidence of a corrupt and impure heart.” I would suggest that whilst the approach of anti-stage writers shows the signs of Platonic theory, their methodology was principally driven by a theological critique that understood language via an uncompromising dichotomy between good and evil. Collier acknowledged as much in *A Short View*, whilst Bedford stated that, “whatever is a Sin when spoken in another Place, is as much a Sin when spoken in the Play-House.” In short, words could be legitimately censured, no matter what the context, if the accuser could convincingly argue that they were evil.

44. Collier, *Short View*, 118; Bedford, *Evil and Danger*, 188.
With an interpretative framework in place, I shall now turn to an analysis of some key examples of dramatic texts that were identified as blasphemous. Despite the apparent wealth of source material noted above, only a handful of writers endeavoured to specify which plays and which passages were blasphemous. For this reason the vast majority of the analysis is conducted with respect to the work of Collier, Bedford, Tutchin, and Philipps.

II

In Sir John Vanbrugh’s play The Relapse (1697), the character Young Fashion schemes to seduce his brother’s fiancée in order to secure her substantial dowry. Upon devising a workable ploy with his accomplice, Fashion declares, “providence thou see’st at last, takes care of men of merit.” Collier was so incensed by this passage he singled it out as “plain blasphemy” and “an eruption of hell with a witness.” In an incredulous reply Vanbrugh defended his work by arguing: “every body knows the word providence in common discourse goes for fortune and yet no one ever thought it blasphemy to say, fortune’s blind, or fortune favours fools.” Michael Cordner has suggested that Collier’s allegations were levelled in reaction to the playwright’s failure to construct pious sentences from a common religious vocabulary. Whilst such an argument might appear persuasive, it implies that Vanbrugh actually knew that his words would be deemed blasphemous and that he manipulated religious language to evoke controversy. Vanbrugh was hardly an irreligious polemicist; but whilst there is a difference between exploring providential themes in drama and producing a targeted anti-providential work, I hope it is now clear that Collier did not critique drama in a way that would have been familiar to most contemporary playwrights, players, and audiences (or for that matter to many modern scholars). In the years immediately after the publication of the play, no one but Collier had the inclination to censure Vanbrugh for blasphemy. It may therefore be suggested that what informed Collier’s perception of blasphemy was his acute sensitivity to the words in a theological context.

Towards the end of The Relapse the character Berintha says, “Now consider of what has been said, and Heaven give you grace to put it in practice.” Collier interpreted this to be a brazen claim that God sanctioned the wicked sentiments in the play; for he stated, “Berinthia concludes in Blasphemy, . . . These words would be always upon the Stage, but the Application of them here, is flamingly Blasphemous.” Again, Vanbrugh pleaded ignorance: “There’s nothing serious in’t, as if she wou’d perswade . . . the Audience that Heaven approv’d what she was doing.” Collier dismissed this defence as, “somewhat doubtful” and lamented that Vanbrugh “may as well Blaspheme as let it

45. [John Vanbrugh], The Relapse . . . (London, 1697), 19; cited in Collier, Short View, 84.
46. Collier, Short View, 84.
47. [John Vanbrugh], A Short Vindication of the Relapse and the Provok’d Wife . . . (London, 1698), 25.
49. [Vanbrugh], Relapse, 69; cited in Collier, Short View, 84.
alone.”52 For Collier, the slightest suggestion that God could smile upon wicked people was a subversion of God’s providential goodness and a scandalous attack on His very nature.53

If one way of subverting providence was to suggest that God rewarded the wicked, the notion that He wilfully punished the good caused similar outrage. For example, Philipps condemned even the most subtle expression of such a view in another of Vanbrugh’s plays, The False Friend (1702). In the play, the character Don Guzman discovers that his lover is already married. In a rage he confronts his deceitful mistress and appealing to Heaven cries out: “Why does it then permit us Life and Thought? Are we deceiv’d in its Omnipotence? Is it reduc’d to find its Pleasure in its Creature’s Pain?”54 The suggestion that God enjoyed inflicting His punishments had the potential to destabilize the notion that divine chastisement was corrective and for the greater good. It also posited the perverse idea that such acts were instigated arbitrarily to suit God’s pleasure, presenting the view that God might actually be evil. Taking the alleged transgressions of Young Fashion, Berintha, and Don Guzman together demonstrates the critics’ apparent preoccupation with theodicy, the vindication of God from evil.

Straightforward theodicy was essential to maintaining a strong belief in a providential God, and vice versa. Theodicean doubt was arguably the most common form of anti-providentialism, readily manifest in any discontent of human sufferings.55 Consequently, quite aside from philosophical discussions,56 theodicy was a matter for practical theology. Any “Ignorance or misunderstanding” in “How far the holy and righteous God is, or may be concerned in, or make the use of the evil Actions or wicked Men and Devils, without any Impeachment of his Righteousness and Holiness,” was tantamount to atheism.57 Moreover, I would argue that theodicy was considered necessary to deliver humanity from blasphemy. In the theological polemic of anti-stage criticism, even the faintest insinuation that God was evil was represented as blasphemy. Here was an example of Thomistic blasphemy: an aggravated denial of God by means of attributing erroneous characteristics upon Him. To impute God with qualities He did not have was clear evidence that one neither knew God nor feared Him. To ascribe divinity with the nomenclature of the Devil was seen as an act of such shocking perversity that it affirmed the blasphemy to be entrenched and of the very worst kind. In judging play scripts to be riddled with this type of blasphemy, the claims of Collier and his fellow critics are filled with terrible urgency and depth of meaning.

52. Collier, Defence of the Short View, 116.
53. See the article by David Nash in this volume for how the quaker and Socinian doctrines of God’s changeability was a source of blasphemy accusations against them.
57. George Gifford, The Great Mystery of Providence . . . (London, 1695), unpaginated note to the reader, [i].
Anti-stage writers were also particularly vexed by passages that they construed as demonstrating God's providence to be deficient, or even totally bogus. In such cases representations of blasphemous anti-providentialism can be shown to correspond with the Thomistic notion of detracting from God what was rightly His. For example, in Thomas D'Urfey's version of *Don Quixote* (1694), a song is sung which contains the following words:

Providence that form'd the Fair  
In such a charm Skin,  
Their Outside made his only Care,  
And never look'd within.\(^{58}\)

"Here the Poet tells us," explained Collier, "that Providence makes Mankind by halves... This is direct blaspheming the Creation and a Satyr upon God Almighty."\(^{59}\) By presenting the view that God was only half interested in human affairs, or, more subversive still, only half capable of affecting them, the extract was judged to exude a form of anti-providentialism which constituted blasphemy. D'Urfey's text was seen as nothing but an abomination which degraded God to the character of a lacklustre and inept human being: a preposterous suggestion which only served as proof of an active denial of God. For Collier, this conviction was confirmed by a line in the play that read, "When the World first knew Creation, A Rogue was a top Profession."\(^{60}\) This was seen as an unequivocal assertion that Adam's fall from grace was the result of God's incompetence.

It was only one step further to disregard providence altogether. Bedford lamented that, "in the worst Times of Paganism... they made Fortune a Goddess... And yet Christians are now sunk into these very Dregs."\(^{61}\) Here the word "fortune" was taken as a synonym for "fate." The notion of fate was widely regarded as a pagan, Stoic construction,\(^{62}\) which "blasphemously invades the Cardinal Prerogative of Divinity, Omnipotence, by denying him a reserved power, of infringing, or altering any one of those Laws, which Himself ordained."\(^{63}\) It was most probably within this context that Bedford charged the following passage from Granville George Lansdowne's *The British Enchanters* (1706) with blasphemy.

To Fortune give immortal Praise,  
Fortune deposes and can raise.  
All is Fortune shall bestow, 'Tis Fortune governs all below...\(^{64}\)

To suggest that fortune or fate governed the world was to strip God of one of His most fundamental functions. Such a position was blasphemous because it degraded God in a way that made it possible to deny what He actually was. Bedford was convinced that the stage was rife with plays that denounced God in this way. It seemed to him most galling that artists were willing to flaunt such views with total abandonment of godly principle, shutting out the divine in favour of profane revelry. At the opening of a new theatre at the Haymarket in 1705, such a view was seemingly confirmed by a rather bullish commemorative speech, which included the following words:

Such was our Builder’s Art, that soon as nam’d
This Fabrick, like the Infant World, was fram’d
The Architect must on dull Order wait;
But ‘tis the Poet only can create . . .

Bedford denounced this passage as, “Horrid Blasphemy,” a sin “greater than Luciferian Pride.” It was so inflammatory that the clergyman Francis Atterbury (1663–1732) saw fit to censure it alongside excerpts from deistical works like Charles Blount’s The Oracles of Reason (1693) in his exposé The Axe Laid to the Root of Christianity (1706). The perception was that the last line of the extract degraded the majesty of God by attributing His providential power of creation to human beings, a pride riddled delusion that was shockingly blasphemous. It was sheer impertinence to assume that “so finite a Creature as Man [could] be so bold to Instruct infinite God to govern the World.” To be clear, I am seeking to argue that this notion of blasphemy was not merely about the subversive quality of inverting the roles of God and humankind, but about the spiritual implications of such a suggestion: the Thomistic view that blasphemy was manifest in those humans who openly taunted God through their conviction that they were autonomous, with no need to believe in Him, or fear Him.

Pious critics were also particularly vexed by plays that appeared to belligerently deny God by ascribing providential powers to a pagan god. The Observator exclaimed: “Can there be anything more Prophan than to appropriate that to a Heathen Goddess, which is the peculiar Attribute of the Almighty God.” The paper even suggested that passages such as “O Ceres. Can thy All-seeing Eye Behold this Object,” from The Fickle Shepherdess (1703), should be brought before the courts for blasphemy. Philipps similarly censured the passages “Ceres, to whom we all things owe” and “Almighty Ceres,” from the

67. [Francis Atterbury], The Axe Laid to the Root of Christianity: Or, a Specimen of the Prophaneness and Blasphemy that Abounds in some Late Writings (London, 1706), 7.
69. The Observator 2, no. 31, 21–24 July 1703; [Anon.], The Fickle Shepherdess (London, 1703), 17.
same play. Here, I want to suggest that critics perceived such references to be a symptom of wickedness that teetered on the brink of demonic imprecation.

In *A Short View*, Collier attacked John Dryden’s version of *Amphitryon* for furnishing Jupiter with the omnipotence of God. To Collier, this was “blasphemy on the top of the letter, without any trouble of inference, or construction.”

Bedford reminded his readers that the primitive Christian Origen (185–232) “assures us, That the Christians in his Time contended even to Death, rather than they would call Jupiter a God.” The representation of ancient gods on stage could have been seen as idolatrous and a violation of God’s First Commandment. Yet in stating that the “cover of an idol is too thin a pretence to screen the blasphemy,” Collier hinted that the sin of blasphemy was of an even greater magnitude. It may be suggested that Collier perceived the character of Jupiter as a devil. For many early eighteenth-century Christians, the idea that pagan gods, and dramatic depictions of them at that, should seriously be considered as malignant forces of evil would have seemed as far-fetched as it does today. For pious critics informed by primitive Christianity, however, the idea was much more plausible.

In *A Short View*, Collier reminded his readers that the primitive Christian Tertullian (b. ca. 160) had, in his critique of the Roman theatre, claimed that Bacchus and Venus were “two confederate Devils.” More generally, Tertullian had suggested that blaspheming players lent their tongue to the devil, whilst the audience gave him their ears. Both early Christians and early eighteenth-century critics appear to have believed that the stage was a place of actual demonism, a house of ungoverned devils. Collier noted that the Third Council of Carthage (397 C.E. Canon 11) had forbidden Christians to attend the playhouse on account of its demonic blasphemies; whilst clergymen such as William Bisset (1670–1747) attested that heathen gods were demons. It is, therefore, possible that attributing the omnipotent powers of the one true God to Jupiter was seen as owning a devil as God. I now finally want to consider how invoking devils may have been understood as an acute form of anti-providentialism to help understand the nexus between devilry and blasphemy.

Jonathan Barry has stated that “Bedford’s devil and devils do not feature in his writings on the stage as anything other than spiritual tempters of man to false worship and vice of every description”; and that, “the real sin [of the theatre] was of blasphemy, making a jest of the sacred story and of Hell.”

70. [Anon.], *The Fickle Shepherdess*, 42, 46; cited in [Philipps], *Representation*, 14, 17.
75. Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, ch. 10; cited in Collier, *Short View*, 255.
I would argue, however, that Bedford’s representation of devils and blasphemy were more complex and interrelated than Barry suggests. Alexandra Walsham, amongst others, has highlighted the inherent tension in Protestant demonology between the view that devils were spiritual tempters and the claim that they were administers of God’s providential judgements.\(^80\) I want to argue that when the former was critiqued in a way that was blurred with the latter, a sinister, and hitherto largely unexplored, interpretation emerges, whereby temptation was a mere staging post to diabolism free from God’s providential control.

The notion that devils were ultimately authorised by God to enact His punishments upon the wicked was keenly publicised in contemporary religious literature. Many Protestants were convinced that: devils were the instruments of God’s providential “Justice”; Hell was the holding place of wicked souls; and both were “preserv’d by the Co-operation of the Divine Power.”\(^81\) According to Saint Paul, “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the Day of Judgment to be punished” (2 Pt 2:9).

As Nathan Johnstone has shown, protection from Satan was assured through spiritual knowledge and faith in God; whilst those who gave into the devil became part of his “composite kingdom” in Hell.\(^82\) There was, however, considerable slippage between an image of enslaved devils carefully choreographed in the art of divinely sanctioned retribution and a wandering prince of darkness able to draw corrupted souls into his empire.

The problem was that a pessimistic view of the level of evil in the world could lead to a paranoid perception that the underworld might burst forth into the world of the living, and that devilry might overcome humankind and place the godly in the minority. Indeed, the threat of “the satanic subversion of the commonplace” remained a real and frightening possibility into early eighteenth century.\(^83\) Fear and the representation of vice had the potential to undo soteriological assurances and posit in the minds of anxious Protestants the idea that the devil was close to ruling the earth. According to Daniel Defoe (1660?–1731),

> Satan is call’ d the God of the World, as Men too much prostrate and prostitute themselves to him, yet he is not the Governor of this World; and therefore the Homage and Worship he has from the World is an Usurpation; and this will have an End.\(^84\)

Here a divine providential system of rewards and punishments had been replaced by a battle between good and evil. There was no doubt that God would eventually be victorious, but devils were represented as unbridled from

83. Johnstone, *Devil and Demonism*, 293.
divine providence, in open rebellion against God. In this context, it may be suggested that humans who invoked devils might have appeared to be resolutely of Satan’s party. Imprecation may therefore be cast as the very antithesis of repentance: an act of aggravated unbelief which not only denied the redemptive power of God, but also implicitly demonstrated a denial of His providential ability to punish sinners. In other words, imprecation was a manifestation of blasphemous anti-providentialism.

Anti-stage writers certainly censured as blasphemous those plays that explicitly referred to devils, Hell, and damnation. Devilish language was not uncommon in plays of the period, being used readily as an alternative mode of exclamation to taking God’s name in vain, which had been illegal upon the stage since 1605. Yet the plays in question rarely contained patently anti-religious themes and most contemporaries would have deemed the language fairly innocuous once set in the context of the play. Nevertheless, phrases such as “death and the Devil” were plucked out of scripts by commentators such as Bedford and denounced with vitriol as instances of “unparalleled blasphemy.” Such harsh condemnation was not indiscriminate. Bedford explained in detail how such blasphemies could be set into five categories: one, to own the Devil as God; two, to swear by the Devil; three, to call upon the Devil; four, to exclaim the Devil; five, to praise the Devil. By detailing the functions of imprecation, Bedford affirmed Collier’s position that “Curses may be Blasphemy.” To call upon a devil was to pre-empt the blasphemy of those trapped in Hell, it was an act which simultaneously denied God’s goodness and power and cast Him as a sworn enemy, rendering the sinner “incapable of recovery.”

Critics were at pains to denounce almost any example of imprecation as blasphemous. In the play The British Enchanters (1706), the character Arcalaus contracts his attendant to wreak vengeance upon his brother’s murderer. Finalising the plans Arcalaus says: “See it perform’d — And thou shalt be, Dire Instrument of Hell, a God to me.” Bedford attacked such demonic praise as the “highest Blasphemy that Mortals can invent.” The Observator similarly censured phrases such as “hail powers beneath!” from John Corny’s version of Metamorphosis (1704). Philipps attacked lines like, “The Devil fetch him” from The Modish Husband (1702) and “The Devil take me” from Marry or Do Worse (1704). Scores, if not hundreds, of similar

87. Bedford, Evil and Danger, 40.
89. Collier, Defence of the Short View, 102.
90. Bedford, Evil and Danger, 27.
92. Bedford, Evil and Danger, 41.
expressions were condemned as blasphemous. In most cases, I would argue that the critics believed such statements to be evidence that: earthly wickedness was sanctioned by an autonomous demonic force, that is to say Satan was no longer considered to be God’s prison guard but an unbridled patron of evil, and that, in a terrible perversion of the godly worship, demonism was praised as if God and goodness did not exist. Many anti-stage writers were genuinely convinced that the theatre was the Devil’s citadel. Indeed, the initial title of Bedford’s *The Evil and Danger of Stage-Plays* was actually “Hell upon Earth or the Language of the Play-House.” Collier concluded that the profanity of the stage was “the language of the damned” and that to pay to watch such sin was to “make a contribution for blasphemy, and raise a tax for the government below.” Imprecation was represented as blasphemy in a way which affirmed a sense of anti-providential diabolism and, in this sense, blasphemy and demonism were believed to be symbiotic elements of the theatre.

IV

By 1708 the SPCK anti-stage campaign was in rapid decline. There is little evidence to suggest there had been a paradigm shift in the general belief in providence, but this was arguably the problem: following the tumultuous years of 1703–4, anti-stage critics struggled to point to further divine confirmation that the nation’s fate actually depended upon reforming the playhouse. In addition, subsequent anti-stage writers seemed unwilling to critique plays with the same method, detail, or fervour as the likes of Collier and Bedford, which meant that the sustained argument for the supposed blasphemy of the theatre all but dried up. Resolute critics noted that,

> Clemency is weakness with some People . . . Because there is a Space between Blasphemy and Vengeance; and they don’t perish in the Act of defiance . . . they think there’s no such matter a day of Reckoning.  

The harsh reality was, however, that once the initial panic had subsided, supposedly blasphemous plays continued to be popular. In a sermon commemorating the tenth anniversary of the storm, the Nonconformist minister Benjamin Stinton (1676–1718) reminded his congregation of the terrible “Folly and ingratitude” of those involved in the notorious 1703 productions of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, although he stopped short of charging the stage with blasphemy. Whilst Christian moralisers continued to attack the stage, criticism of the theatre had become largely unhinged from the notion of blasphemous anti-providentialism.

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In drawing to a conclusion, this article has sought to draw attention to some of the complexities inherent in theological conceptions and perceptions of blasphemy. There is much more work to be done in this area, but I hope this article has demonstrated that the stage debate provides a vivid account of the nexus between the Thomistic conception of blasphemy and a pious perception of anti-providentialism in late Stuart England. Set against the backdrop of an acute providential crisis, the representation of the stage as blasphemously anti-providential formed a sustained and powerful spiritual critique of the words spoken and heard at the theatre, as well as the words written and later read in published play scripts. Such criticism was partly grounded in a formulation of the epitome of ungodliness; yet the fear, paranoia, and polemic surrounding this type of blasphemy found legitimacy in theology. Thus, cries of blasphemy were not merely part of a response to deviance; they crystallised a belief in the theological means and consequences of reneging upon one’s belief in God through supposedly wicked words. It was undoubtedly the case that many contemporary Protestants, particularly those who were either playwrights, players, or members of a theatre audience, were unwilling to accept that the stage was fundamentally evil. Nevertheless, a notably diverse group of zealous critics was terrified that English men and women were actively renouncing God in droves by attending the playhouse, shattering the most fundamental soteriological and eschatological aspects of Christianity. Indeed, they believed a nightmarish vision was being realised: anti-providential blasphemy was destroying the bond between God and humankind and establishing Hell upon earth.