

Religious Reformation and the Crisis of Providentialism in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611): A Cultural Materialist Reading

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ABSTRACT

The early modern period in England is characterised by philosophical and moral debates over the meaning and pertinence of Christian beliefs and teachings. One of the most controversial topics in this epoch is God's providence and its supposed impacts on man's daily life. In the wake of the Reformation and emerging philosophical schools, particularly in the second half of the sixteenth century, Providentialism was seriously put into question and the meaning and influences of God's providence were, therefore, investigated. Epicureans and Calvinists were two prominent groups of religious reformists who cast doubt upon the validity and pertinence of Christian Providentialism as it was taught during the medieval period. These intellectual and philosophical debates were reflected in the literary productions of the age in general, and in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in particular. Cyril Tourneur is one of the early modern English playwrights who inquired into the meaning and relevance of Providentialism in his last play, *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611). Adhering to a cultural materialist mode of criticism, I will show in this paper that Tourneur is a dissident dramatist who separates the realm of God's divinity from man's rational capacity in his tragedy and anticipates, hence, the emergence and development of new religious and philosophical visions in the Renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

The early modern period was an era of intellectual and political turmoil in England. The idea of divine order underlay the Tudor and early Stuart consciousness of politics and society. Yet, there is no denying that a concern for change, in this epoch, on religious and political levels characterised the works of a number of dissident English politicians and intellectuals such as Sir Thomas Smith or Thomas Starkey.

The early modern episteme is marked by a heated intellectual debate over the meaning and pertinence of Christian Providentialism as it was propagated in the medieval period. On the one hand, the religious skeptics, who adhered to the revived principles of Epicurean philosophy and the popular medieval philosophical schools such as Averroism, advocated that God's providence hardly exercised any influence over the specific affairs of an individual's life. On the other hand, the reformists and, particularly, Calvinists insisted that the workings of divine providence and its impacts on men's daily lives remain opaque to human beings and could not be conceived through man's reason. Calvinism, which dominated the religious stage of a large portion of the Elizabethan

and Jacobean eras, painted a picture of an incomprehensible, unappealable *Deus absconditus* whose apparent unconventional judgments and retributions are already predetermined and remain beyond the reach of man's intellect and his temporal experience. These emerging philosophical and religious visions, in the second half of the sixteenth century, shed a great amount of new light over man's perception and appreciation of the traditional metaphysical doxa, shaking the grounds upon which the divinely-ordained stability and security of the middle ages rested.

I am of the opinion that this epistemological conflict was reflected in the works of many early modern English poets and playwrights. Adhering to the principles of cultural materialism, I show in this paper that in *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611), Cyril Tourneur puts forth, perhaps, one of the most radical critiques of the Christian doctrine of early modern England and the moral and providential values it was associated with. Tourneur dramatises, in this tragedy, the philosophical and intellectual tensions between Christian believers on the one hand, and the champions of Epicureanism and Reformation on the other. In the closing scene of the play, the

naturalist Epicurean, D'Amville, accepts God's divinity as a superior power which remains beyond the reach of man's rational capacity. He, accordingly, presents the premises of emerging religious schools and refutes the basic principles of Christian Providentialism.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cultural materialist criticism established itself permanently in the field of literary studies in the mid-1980s, with the publication of Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (1984), and *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985) edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield.

With their roots in new historicism and Marxism, cultural materialists believe that subjects cannot transcend their own time but live and work within the horizon of a culture constructed by ideological discourses. The ideological constructions that authors live in, and have internalised, inevitably become part of their work, which is therefore deeply political and whose interaction with the power structures need to be taken into consideration. As Dollimore and Sinfield put it in their introduction to *Political Shakespeare*: "[...] a play by Shakespeare is related to the context of its production—to the economic and political system of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the church, patronage, theatre, education)" (Dollimore, Sinfield, viii). Because it plays an active role in the creation and consolidation of power relations, literature actively contributes to history. Like the new historicism, cultural materialism brings to light how ideology—and thus the existing socio-economic and religious order—tries to maintain itself or, as the case may be, adjust itself to new circumstances without losing its grip. Ideology should be understood in terms of Louis Althusser's definition as "the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group. Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence [...] it is thus coercive in the workings of its power and unites various institutions of the state" (Wolfreys, Robbins, Womack, 54). Finally, since the status of literature is thought to be not essentially different from that of other texts (religious, political, economic, legal, and so on) in the sense that it has no special access to genuine, transcendent truth, literary productions are read alongside a wide variety of non-literary texts.

New historicists are particularly interested in powerful institutions which favor certain discourses consolidating the dominant ideology. By the same token, cultural materialists agree that literary texts will at first sight seem supportive of contemporary ideology, but they see that ideology as less pervasive than their new historicist colleagues. Although Foucault is an obvious influence in their work—especially with regard to their interest in the insane, the criminal, the exploited, and all those who over the course of history have been marginalised—cultural materialism follows Raymond Williams in his adaptation of Gramsci's view of hegemony. For Williams, the dominant culture is never more than

one player in the cultural field, even if it is by far the most powerful. There are always residual and emergent strains within a culture that offer alternatives to the hegemony. In other words, the dominant culture is always under pressure from alternative views and beliefs. So, while cultural materialist analyses of literary texts bring to light how these texts are inevitably conservative instruments of a dominant socio-cultural order, they also demonstrate how the apparent coherence of that order is threatened from the inside, by inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide.

Since such tensions are to be found in all cultures, it is only natural that they should turn up in literary texts, because literature offers a place where, with ideology still firmly in control, contradictions and conflicts can be addressed and worked through. Focusing on the cracks in the ideological facade that texts offer, cultural materialism reads even the most reactionary texts against the grain, offering prospects of dissidence that allow us to hear the socially marginalised and expose the ideological machinery that is responsible for their marginalisation and exclusion. Accordingly, cultural materialism insists on the importance of the historicisation of concepts and notions which form the ideological substratum of the world presented in a work of literature. Hence, in the following section, I present the emergence of new philosophical thoughts which cast doubt on Christian Providentialism in the early modern era.

THE CRISIS OF PROVIDENTIALISM IN THE RENAISSANCE

Epicurean philosophy was mainly concerned with the terrestrial pleasures, concluding from Epicurus' assumptions that a prosperous life of joy is impossible without eradicating the sources of man's fear and anxiety:

[...] the happy life of pleasure which is the final end of man is impossible without the elimination of the most serious hindrances to human joy, namely, superstitious fears and the dread of death. To destroy the former, he [Epicurus] does not annihilate the gods but makes them absolutely indifferent to human concerns. To abolish the latter, he proves that the soul is not immortal, and thus removes the fear of a shadowy, perhaps wretched, future existence (Surtz, 93-4).

According to Epicurus, those people who are obsessed with religious dread are impious. He holds that piety is a true belief in the happiness and perpetuity of the divine and that the Gods, being endowed with wisdom, do not interfere with the particular affairs of the sinners in this world. Although there is little doubt that Epicurus was a believer who testified to the existence of the Gods, he showed them to be *rois fainéants* whose state of supremacy hindered their meddling in human affairs or a feeling of anger, fatigue or benevolence towards their creatures. As a consequence, Festugière cites Epicurus who argues that "[...] from their indestructibility (i.e. the gods') it follows that they are strangers to all suffering; nothing can cause them any joy or inflict on them any suffering from outside" (Festugière, 58).

In continental Europe, many thinkers and historians cast doubt upon the medieval role of divine providence in man's

life. Many Renaissance Italians tended to repudiate the medieval idea of divine power and, at the same time, humanist historians were convinced that the study of the pertinence and feasibility of miracles or supernatural causations should be restricted to theology departments (Martin, 19). In France likewise, new ideas on Providentialism were commonly in circulation; a fact that we can infer not from subversive writings which were subject to a severe censorship, but from the copious answers conservative writers gave to the precursors of religious scepticism. The theologian Charles de Sainte-Marthe complains that "[...] these impious epicureans make use of the natural reasons as a protest device to dethrone God, eliminating his Providence" (Sainte-Marthe, 95). Pierre de la Primaudaye also insists, in *Académie Française* (1577), on the fact that man's intellectual capacity and his scientific exploration of the natural elements led many scientists to lose their belief in God and his Providence. He further argues that the emerging natural philosophy seems to be extraneous as it evokes the curiosity of profane scholars instead of helping them to become more righteous, leading them to search for other causes, rather than God, as the origin of the creation (Primaudaye, 19-20). To certain theologians these learned epicureans who undermine the celestial power of God are equal to atheists. Pierre Viret, for instance, warns, in his preface to the second volume of *Instruction Chrétienne*, that the number of the followers of Epicureanism as well as atheists is radically growing and he regrets that many of them are intellectual, learned people who are infected by this poison and intoxicate others (Viret, preface).

In England, although we have to wait until the second half of the seventeenth century to witness an unconcealed statement in favor of the Epicurean standpoint on divine providence, expressions of religious scepticism were occasionally heard in the Tudor period. From the existing legal documents about Justice William Gardiner's convictions we do elicit his dissident religious beliefs when he blatantly acknowledges, in response to charges of fraud, that "[...] God hath nothing to do with the world since He created it, and that the world was not governed by Him"; or, while he advocates, in another document from 1558, that "[...] there was no God and [He] had no government of the world" (Hotson, 55 and 228).

Another source of menace to the traditional notion of divine providence was the Aristotelian theory of movement which became popular in the sixteenth century:

No one in the sixteenth century could write about the physics or mathematics of moving bodies without reflecting the ideas of Aristotle. Aristotle had related all motion to the medium in which a body moved, and also to its position in the universe. [...] "natural" motion, including the motion of falling bodies, had for Aristotle required no cause other than previous displacement; for natural motion was the result of a body's intrinsic tendency to seek its natural place in the universe. A "heavy" body was one which tended to fall "down" (towards the centre); a light body one which tended to rise "up"; both down and up being determined absolutely with respect to the centre of the universe (Hall, 216).

According to this theory, God remains the ultimate cause of incidents in the natural world and his will is deemed to be

no more relevant to the physical occurrences in this world. This scientific outlook provoked objections from many conservative writers who found Aristotelian reasoning dangerous because if God does not interfere with the natural motion of objects, his providence is definitely put into question:

[...] God medleth not under the Moone [...] it makes God to be the finall cause onely of motions [...] and by this doctrine it must needs follow, that because the world is eternall without beginning & ending, and incorruptible, therefore it needeth not thy providence, [concluding that] God ruleth under the Moone onely with a common influence and usuall course of second causes (Bostocke, sig. 6).

Richard Bostocke was not the only Elizabethan writer to defend Providentialism against the threats of Epicureanism and atheism. Many English theologians and authors in this period warned about the unrestrained growth of sacrilegious beliefs in the society. Bishop Thomas Cooper's acknowledgement that "[...] there are an infinite number of *Epicures* and *Atheists*, which hate the Bishops and speake euil of them, and wish them to be taken away" is indicative of deep anxieties about religious unorthodoxy and of "[...] the griefe of all good mens hearts: For the school of *Epicure*, and the *Atheists*, is mightily increased in these daies" (Cooper, 15 and 93-4). Likewise, the physician and author Thomas Lodge, regrets, in *Wits Miserie and the World's Madness* (1596), that the blasphemous Epicurean philosophy "[...] is continually clamorous [and] haunts ordinaries, and places of exercise, schools and houses of learning. [...] if you talke of Divine justice, he saith there is no God" (Lodge, IV. 71).

Together with the followers of Epicurean philosophy and agnostics, devout religious reformists formed a second group of nonconformists who put into question the medieval principle of divine Providentialism in their writings. An influential figure whose novel standpoints is to be examined in this respect is Montaigne, notwithstanding the fact that not every critic agrees to call him a supporter of the religious Reformation. The zeal for religious demystification and secularism marks the intellectual development in the early modern era, a process which leads to the separation of the realms of God's divinity and worldly, physical entities. Christopher Hill observes accordingly that "[...] Bacon separated science from theology by pushing God upstairs after he had established the laws of motion for the universe [...] Raleigh secularised history not by denying God the first cause, but by concentrating on secondary causes and insisting that they are sufficient in themselves for historical explanation" (Hill, 162).

Likewise, Montaigne puts forth, in 'Apology for Raymond Sebond' in the second book of his essays, a secular attack on the medieval notions of *analogia entis* (analogy between man and God)—which St. Thomas Aquinas referred to as a method to know God through His own creation—as well as the whole notion of correspondence and hierarchy in the great chain of being. Challenging Sebond's efforts to reconcile human reason and faith, philosophy and theology, in *Theologia Naturalis* (1436), Montaigne insists upon the fallen man's intellectual and rational incapacity to know

God's nature and providence through a correspondence between His divinity and the physical phenomena:

[...] how could we defend such great inconsistency, variety and vanity in the opinions that we see were produced by these admirable and excellent souls? For what is there, for example, more vain than to try to divine God by our analogies and conjectures, to regulate him and the world by our capacity and our laws, and to use at the expense of the Deity this little shred of ability that he was pleased to allot to our natural condition? And because we cannot stretch our vision as far as his glorious throne, to have brought him here below to our corruption and our miseries? (Montaigne, II. 12. 380).

"The insistence upon the inconceivable and incomprehensible in God", acknowledges Rudolph Otto, "[...] can be seen now and then in Luther in his notion of the *deus absconditus*—the thought, namely, that God Himself is not only *above* every human grasp but in *antagonism* to it" (Otto, 189). Jan Miernowski argues that theologically speaking, Montaigne makes God unconceivable for man:

[Montaigne] reduces reason to the status of speech deprived of any theological [...] foundations. God evades not only human understanding, but also remains, properly speaking, unthinkable. Thus, God cannot play the role of guarantor of truth, as he does for Descartes. A human being is not a thinking subject but rather a "believing thing" (*chose croyante*) (Miernowski, 556).

With that being said, one can claim that Montaigne promotes, at least in 'Apology for Raymond Sebond', Melanchthon's doctrine of *adiaphora* of which the basic principle is a belief in the general distinction between divine and human law. Referring back to Luther's Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness (1518)—according to which the realm of man's relationship with God through faith on account of Christ is to be separated from the domain of his relationships with the rest of God's creation—Melanchthon proposes that we can conceive "[...] a twofold definition of justice: one kind which the Christian attains in the realm of Christ, and a civil justice which is not part of salvation but is needed for the government of worldly affairs" (Heitsch, 141). Accordingly, one can conclude that the religious skeptic Montaigne demarcates the boundaries of man's intellectual capacity with respect to the apprehension of the essence of God and his providence prompting, inevitably, a secular, experimental vision which exhorts a distinction between the realm of metaphysics and the world of physical substances.

Not dissimilar to Montaigne, Calvin is also highly skeptical of man's rational capacity in conceiving the essence of God's existence and his providence. Attributing the cause of man's corruption to his self-conscious deeds, Calvin argues that the fallen man's limited reason should not be adhered to in order to comprehend God's predestination:

[...] man's own wickedness corrupted the pure nature which he had received from God, and his ruin brought with it the destruction of all his posterity. Wherefore, let us in the corruption of human nature contemplate the evident cause of condemnation (a cause which comes more closely home to us), rather than inquire into a cause

hidden and almost incomprehensible in the predestination of God. Nor let us decline to submit our judgment to the boundless wisdom of God, so far as to confess its insufficiency to comprehend many of his secrets. Ignorance of things which we are not able, or which is not lawful to know, is learning, while the desire to know them is a species of madness (Calvin, III. xxiii. 630-1).

Elsewhere, he testifies to the limitation of human rational capacities as well as the unreachable, hidden nature of God to man, acknowledging that anthropomorphist descriptions of God is nothing but a heresy which will not designate God's essence but instead apply man's postlapsarian deficient reason to his existence and qualities (Calvin, I. xiii. 66).

Calvin shares with both Montaigne and Luther a deterministic religious view point which puts God's divinity far from man's scope of rational perception. In both Calvin and Luther divine providence works, like a tyrant, arbitrarily to save certain human beings while it damns others without any clear, logical reason. Calvin believes that law resides in God's divinity and this eternal law remains unconditional and out of man's intellectual reach. Providence is ordained in this way as God wills it to be so and it is irrelevant and wrong to investigate, through reason, the grounds upon which God's predestination lies:

We say, then, the Scripture clearly proves [...] that God by his eternal and immutable counsel determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction. We maintain that this counsel, as regards the elect, is founded on his free mercy, without any respect to human worth, while those whom he dooms to destruction are excluded from access to life by a just and blameless, but at the same time, incomprehensible judgment. [Hence] I will here omit many of the fictions which foolish men have devised to overthrow predestination (Calvin, III. xxi. 613).

Accordingly, man seems to be eternally perplexed before a divinity which Calvin and other skeptics argue to be totally independent of and inconsistent with human rational norms. Casting doubt upon the traditional notion of *analgia entis*, an emerging philosophical trend became popular in the Renaissance which focused on the second cause of occurrences in the world of physical phenomena, reckoning the first cause to be extraneous to the human logical inquiry.

PROVIDENTIALISM IN *THE ATHEIST'S TRAGEDY*

The Atheist's Tragedy puts on stage a deep concern about the validity and pertinence of providentialist thought that Elizabethans inherited from the medieval Christian tradition. On the one side of the stage, Tourneur presents to his audience the basic tenets of Providentialism through the visions and deeds of Prince Charlemont and his betrothed lady, Castabella, while he dedicates the other side of the stage to the camp of Epicureans who adhere to the pure natural causes of occurrences in this world in order to predict the outcome of their actions and achieve their terrestrial goals. It is through such a philosophical clash between

these two camps that Tourneur explores the validity of a traditional system of beliefs and anticipates an emerging mode of thought which is inevitably congruous with the new theoretical and scientific findings in the early modern period.

In the opening scene of the play, we see Prince Charlemont who gets ready to set forward to the war for the honour of his royal blood despite his father's reluctance as Charlemont is his single remaining son to promise a succession to his house and kingdom. Along with his father, Charlemont's fiancée is also terribly sorrowful and skeptical about her own fate as well as the political stability in the realm after Charlemont's departure. A pious Christian, Castabella refers to chaos in the macrocosm through the corresponding mantic elements which are indicative of the forthcoming turmoil in Charlemont's absence:

CASTABELLA. O the sad trouble of my fearful soul!
My faithful servant, did you never hear
That when a certain great man went to the war
The lovely face of heaven was masked with sorrow,
The sighing winds did move the breast of earth,
The heavy clouds hung down their mourning heads
And wept sad showers the day that he went hence,
[...] methinks my eyes
(Sweet heaven forbid) are like those weeping clouds,
And as their showers presaged so do my tears.
Some sad event will follow my sad fears.
(I, ii, 105-111, 114-117)

Castabella's anxieties turn out to be true on both private and political spheres. As soon as Charlemont leaves, Castabella is coerced to marry the sick Rousard for political reasons and shortly afterwards, Borachio, disguised as an envoy, brings the news of Charlemont's murder in the battlefield.

Dissimilar to Vindice's beloved, Gloriana, who resists the old duke's lecherous temptations in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Castabella shows no serious resistance to the decision made by the upholders of patriarchal order for her marriage. Instead, she remains principally passive and submits to God's predestination in this respect. She acknowledges that if it is her fate to be separated from her noble lover, she cannot do anything more and thus unwillingly conforms to God's providence:

CASTABELLA. [...] Heaven, is't my fate
For loving that thou lov'st to get thy hate?
Or was my Charlemont thy chosen love,
And therefore hast received him to thyself?
Then I confess thy anger's not unjust:
I was thy rival. Yet to be divorced
From love has been a punishment enough,
Sweet heaven, without being married unto hate,
Hadst thou been pleased. O double misery!
Yet since thy pleasure hath inflicted it,
If not my heart, my duty shall submit.
(II, iii, 4-14)

In this monologue spoken by Castabella, one can witness the illogical nature of God's providence as argued by Calvin. It is divinity, according to Calvin, which has once for ever

ordained human beings' destinations independent from their virtues and rational capacity. Accordingly, Castabella does not apprehend why she is condemned to marry an evil person nor does she inquire into this nemesis. Instead, she just decides to remain faithful to the will of Heaven.

In the realm of politics likewise, chaos ensues in the wake of Charlemont's departure for the battlefield. As soon as he is away, his ambitious uncle, D'Amville, murders his father, Montferrers, disinherits Charlemont and seizes his kingdom to establish a new dynasty. It is only after D'Amville's act of treason that Charlemont sees, in a dream, his assassinated father's ghost who urges his son to return to France due to a political turmoil and warns him to "attend with patience the success of things/ But leave revenge unto the king of kings" (II, vi, 21-22). So, Charlemont returns to the court to find his father and himself being declared dead and buried. Not dissimilar to Shakespeare's Hamlet, Charlemont has at least three uncontested reasons to seek revenge upon his wicked uncle; D'Amville has murdered Charlemont's father, it is a rebellion against the monarch, an act which promotes chaos in the realm and is considered as the most heinous sin in the Elizabethan political doctrine as it endangers natural order. Moreover, D'Amville has disinherited the legitimate successor to the throne, that is to say Charlemont, to create his own illegitimate dynasty and ultimately, he has forced Charlemont's betrothed lady to marry his own son to win the support of Castabella's father who is an influential nobleman. If in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet is famously paralyzed by his moral doubts about his revenge upon his uncle, Claudius, in Tourneur's play, the revenger remains completely inactive when he has an opportunity to kill the assassinator and complies with the instructions of his father's ghost who exhorts "Let him revenge my murder and thy wrongs/ To whom the justice of revenge belongs" (III, ii, 36-37). Thus, Charlemont is arrested and imprisoned.

In the prison, Charlemont reflects upon his own sufferings and the arbitrariness of God's judgment and justice. Like Castabella, he is also perplexed by the irrational nature of God's providence which does not necessarily correspond to an individual's virtues or sins:

CHARLEMONT. I grant thee, heaven, thy goodness
doth command
Our punishments, but yet no further than
The measure of our sins. How should they else
Be just? Or how should that good purpose of
Thy justice take effect by bounding men
Within the confines of humanity
When our afflictions do exceed our crimes?
Then they do rather teach the barb'rous world
Examples that extend her cruelties
Beyond their own dimensions.
(III, iii, 1-10)

Nevertheless, he immediately confesses that divine providence remains beyond the reach of man's rational interpretation advocating that an investigation of God's justice through man's postlapsarian reason leads to nothing but blasphemy:

CHARLEMONT. O my afflicted soul! How torment swells

Thy apprehension with profane conceit
Against the sacred justice of my God!
Our own constructions are the authors of
Our misery.

(III, iii, 12-16)

It is therefore due to his providentialist belief that Charlemont accepts his cousin's proposition of help to set him free from prison and make peace between him and his villain uncle:

CHARLEMONT. Since I must submit myself to fate I
Never will neglect the offer of one benefit but entertain them

As her favours and th' inductions to some
End of better fortune.

(III, iv, 56-59)

Yet, despite their reconciliation, D'Amville hires Borachio to murder his nephew in the churchyard at midnight. The only real action Charlemont takes in the whole play is in this battle between him and Borachio during which the prince kills Borachio in self-defence; a deed that Castabella attributes to God's providence as she believes that "[...] the hand of heaven directed thy defence" (IV, iii, 175). Eventually, at the end of the churchyard scene, Charlemont saves his own life as well as his beloved's chastity and honour against D'Amville's plotted incest. I believe that the churchyard scene is a turning point in the course of the action as in the aftermath of this episode, the incidents are arranged by the playwright in such a way that the providentialist's opponents are, one after the other, slaughtered without the least interference or effort on the revenger's part. Firstly, D'Amville's younger son Sebastian is slain in a duel with baron Belforest due to his adulterous relationship with Levidulcia. Afterwards, D'Amville's elder son and successor to the newly established dynasty dies of a hard sickness; an occurrence which D'Amville describes as the fall of the great building of his own fame and lofty office. Ultimately, the villain D'Amville also kills himself in the court before being executed and consequently paves the way for the freedom of the prince Charlemont and his joyful union with the pious Christian beloved, Castabella:

2 JUDGE. [...] With the hands
Of joy and justice I thus set you free.

The power of that eternal providence
Which overthrew his projects in their pride
Hath made your griefs th' instruments to raise
Your blessings to a greater height than ever.

CHARLEMONT. Only to heaven I attribute the work,
Whose gracious motives made me still forbear
To be mine own revenger. now I see
That patience is the honest man's revenge.

(V, ii, 262-271)

In the closing scene of *The Atheist's Tragedy*, Tourneur apparently endorses the Christian orthodoxy as well as the ultimate justice of God's eternal providence and restores divine order in the realm with the enthronement of the legitimate heir to the crown.

Yet, one should bear in mind that this approbation of Christian ideology is only one side of the coin in Tourneur's exploration of the validity and pertinence of Providentialism. The other side of the coin is his subversive staging of the emerging philosophical standpoints which increasingly tended to dissociate the realm of metaphysics from the domain of empirical investigation of the terrestrial phenomena in the early modern era. Thus, a camp of religious skeptics does appear on the stage as opposed to the coterie of the Christian providentialists. This camp of religious unorthodoxy is mainly composed of D'Amville and the members of his household.

D'Amville is a true Epicurean atheist and a Machiavellian secular politician. Contrary to the modern signification attributed to the term 'atheism', in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, an Epicurean atheist was not necessarily an unbeliever who denied the existence of the Deity. Instead, anyone who repudiated the dominant religious ideology and its transcendental tenets was considered as an atheist by church authorities. Accordingly, those who adhered to pure human reason and the physical laws of cause and effect to analyze God's creation from a materialist point of view without taking into account God's divinity and predestination in the physical phenomena were very often vilified by contemporary theologians and church fathers. Too much obsession with nature and natural causes of worldly phenomena was very often regarded as a threat to religious beliefs.

Right at the beginning of the play, D'Amville unveils, in a dialogue with his philosopher instrument Borachio, his religious unorthodoxy which inevitably entails the deification of nature. According to D'Amville, man has to look into nature and discover its laws if he wants to obtain boundless pleasure in his life:

D'AMVILLE. Borachio, thou art read
In nature and her large philosophy.
Observ'st thou not the very self-same course
Of revolution both in man and beast?

BORACHIO. The same. For birth, growth, state, decay
And death:

Only, a man's beholding to his nature
For th' better composition o' the two.

D'AMVILLE. But where that favour of his nature is
Not full and free you see a man becomes
A fool, as little-knowing as a beast.

BORACHIO. That shows there's nothing in a man above
His nature:

[...] D'AMVILLE. Then if death casts up
Our total sum of joy and happiness
Let me have all my senses feasted in
The' abundant fullness of delight at once.

(I, i, 3-19)

The materialist atheists then conclude that prosperity in this worldly life means wealth and riches, acknowledging that an honest man without wealth is nothing but a miserable and contemptible creature. It is upon this natural, materialistic philosophy that D'Amville builds his quest for political power. He advocates that in the absence of the legitimate heir to the throne, who is leaving for the battlefield, he has

a golden opportunity to murder his brother and seize his kingdom to establish a new dynasty and in this way he and his household will be prosperous and wealthy. D'Amville never speculates about the divine order in the commonwealth nor does he believe that the legitimacy of a government resides in the divinely ordained creeds of Christianity.

His first initiative to obtain political power is to unite his elder son, Rousard, and Castabella since he strongly believes that this marriage would foster his long-term personal plan to achieve power as it "join[s] the houses of Belforest and D'Amville into a noble alliance" (I, ii, 186-187). To do so, D'Amville bribes the chaplain Languebeau Snuff to persuade baron Belforest and his daughter Castabella. It is in the wake of this bribery affair that D'Amville expresses his religious skepticism, advocating that religious ideology is a poison for the government of the state as the religious authorities look for their own private benefits:

D'AMVILLE. Borachio, didst precisely note this man?
BORACHIO. His own profession would report him pure.
D'AMVILLE. And seems to know if any benefit
Arises of religion after death.
Yet but compare's profession with his life,
They so directly contradict themselves
As if the end of his instructions were
But to divert the world from sin, that he
More easily might engross it to himself:
By that I am confirmed an atheist.
(I, ii, 214-223)

Having settled the marriage affairs, D'Amville turns to his second plot which is assassination of the ruler to grasp his kingdom. To do so, he employs several inebriated servants after the marriage banquet and they turn their torches off while fighting each other. The deceitful Machiavellian politician makes use of the darkness and thrusts his brother down into the gravel pit and assassinates him.

This heinous act of treason imperils the divine order of the state and anticipates chaos in the realm; a turmoil that not only plagues the microcosm, but also perturbs the macrocosm. Consequently, thunder and lightning strike to forebode an imminent political disorder in the commonwealth. But D'Amville interprets these heavenly signs from a naturalist standpoint:

D'AMVILLE. What, dost start at thunder? Credit my belief,
'Tis a mere effect of nature; an exhalation
Hot and dry involved within a wat'ry vapour
I'the middle region of the air, whose
Coldness congealing that thick moisture to
A cloud, the angry exhalation shut shut
Within a prison of contrary quality
Strives to be free, and with the violent
Eruption through the grossness of that
Cloud makes this noise we hear.
(II, iv, 146-155)

Casting doubt upon the traditional signification of mantic elements and the influences they could exercise over human affairs, D'Amville adheres to the newly proposed principles of scientific observation in studying physical phenomena.

Instead of taking into account God's providence as the final cause of such phenomena, he reflects upon the second cause of physical occurrences through the law of cause and effect. Accordingly, D'Amville accredits the new cosmological findings of the Renaissance period which put into serious question traditional astronomy. Elsewhere also he refutes the impact of heavenly bodies on worldly affairs and promotes, hence, a pragmatic, scientific outlook in investigating natural entities:

(He handles the gold)
D'AMVILLE. Behold thou ignorant astronomer,
Whose wand'ring speculation seeks among
The planets for men's fortunes, with amazement
Behold thine error and be planet-struck.
These [*i.e. golden coins*] are the stars whose
operations make
The fortunes and the destinies of men.
[...] these are the stars, the ministers of fate,
And man's high wisdom the superior power
To which their forces are subordinate.
(V, i, 10-15, 24-26)

D'Amville's appreciation of the growing scientific school of thought in the age of Renaissance, mainly based upon man's intellectual capacities, poses a serious challenge to traditional Providentialism. This theoretical confrontation between the emerging scientific outlooks and the medieval religious modes of thought, which was inevitably a source of deep concern in the early modern epoch, is also echoed in John Donne's poem:

And new Philosophy call all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent,
When in the planets, and the Firmament
They seek so many new; then see that this
Is crumbled out again to his Atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone...
So, of the Stars, which boast that they do run
In Circle still, none ends where he begun.
All their proportions lame, it sinks, it swells
(Donne, 162).

Exploring the confrontation between traditional astronomy and new scientific findings in the Renaissance, Steven Shapin states that these lines by Donne present perhaps the most eloquent expression of "[...] unease in the face of infinity, of shaken systems of traditional cosmological knowledge and of the decentering of the earth" (Shapin, 28).

D'Amville's rational scheme for obtaining political power is on the right track after the assassination of ruler. He also declares the legitimate heir to the throne, Prince Charlemont, murdered and holds their funerals. Moreover, when he comes back from the battlefield, the providentialist Charlemont does not wish to interfere with God's predestination, refusing to impede his uncle's plots and, thus, D'Amville arrests the prince and sends him to prison. D'Amville's sole anxiety about his established dynasty is the sickness and impotency of his elder son who is unable to

produce a male heir to the crown. Hence, the Machiavellian politician decides to beget an illegitimate heir by impregnating his own daughter-in-law. In response to pious Castabella who does not consent to this denigrating act of incest, D'Amville reasons that "[...] all the purpose of man/ aim but at one of these two ends, pleasure or profit" (V, iii, 106-107), and further advocates that nature devised sexual intercourse for pleasure and procreation:

D'AVILLE. 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. Shall man,
To whose command and use all creatures were made
Subject, be less free than they?
(IV, iii, 117-122)

D'Amville blatantly refutes all restrictions imposed, in the name of religion or ideology, on the rational workings of nature. To him, the purpose of life and instruments to achieve that purpose lie within the realm of physical entities that have their own logical, exploratory laws and there is no need, therefore, to go beyond nature to investigate transcendent causes of natural occurrences.

D'Amville achieves all his schemed political goals until the churchyard scene. In this scene, his instrument, Borachio, is not able to assassinate Charlemont to pave the way for D'Amville's crowning. At the same time, D'Amville himself, fails to rape Castabella to produce an heir to his throne and Charlemont saves his beloved at the end of this scene. In the wake of this incident, God's justice suddenly and brutally strikes and D'Amville's palace of hopes and ambitions falls. First, his two sons and successors die one after the other and then, he himself is arrested and brought before the court of law to be put on trial for his acts of treason. While he seems to be mad due to his afflictions, D'Amville ultimately commits suicide in the closing scene of the play and the pious Christian couple join to celebrate their marriage and also the restoration of order in the realm.

Although the Epicurean atheist is defeated at the end of Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, I think that his downfall remains utterly controversial. There is little doubt that D'Amville embodies all types of depravity imaginable to the Elizabethan and Jacobean mind, yet I am of the opinion that Tourneur shows more sympathy for him in comparison to the triumphant providentialists. D'Amville is an extraordinarily active and enthusiastic Renaissance politician and philosopher whose audacity to express his radical thoughts and visions captivates the audience. He is a dynamic Machiavellian who shows a deep self-consciousness towards the ideological and philosophical debates in his world. Tourneur had, perhaps, no other choice than to refute the atheist's natural philosophy, defeat him, and ultimately crown the champions of the dominant religious ideology at the end of his play if he really wished his tragedy to be in circulation without censorship in early modern England. However, he does reflect upon the heated religious and philosophical contentions of his epoch through the beliefs and actions of the evil antagonist.

After losing all his prosperity and wealth in a sudden, unexpected manner, D'Amville is no more an atheist in the

closing scene of the play as his philosophical beliefs have changed due to his bitter experience. While he was once convinced that exclusively his natural philosophy would best explain causes and effects of physical phenomena, he seems to accept, near the end of the action, that a God exists and He interferes with natural occurrences. Accordingly, I am of the opinion that in this final scene, D'Amville puts on stage the quintessential tenets of the religious Reformation about, at least, the unpredictability and inconceivability of God's divinity vis-à-vis temporal phenomena with the help of man's intellectual power:

D'AMVILLE. Can nature be so simple or malicious to
destroy the
Reputation of her proper memory? She cannot. Sure
There is some power above her that controls her force.
[...] there was the strength of natural understanding.
But nature is a fool: there is a power above
Her that hath overthrown the pride of all my projects
And posterity.
(V, i, 105-107, and V, ii, 252-155)

In this dialogue, he refers, for the first time in the course of action, to 'some power' above nature. After striking out his own brains with an ax also he interrogates the relationship between the first cause of physical occurrences and the second, natural causes of incidents in this world:

D'AMVILLE. What murder was he that lifted up my
Hand against my head?
I JUDGE. None but yourself, my lord
[...] D'AMVILLE. You lie, judge. He commanded it,
To tell thee that man's wisdom is a fool.
(V, ii, 238-241, 243-244)

We can observe that D'Amville's natural philosophy undergoes an evolution throughout the play and towards the end, he testifies to God's divine providence although he is totally convinced that God's divinity cannot be perceived via human reason. Like religious reformists, D'Amville portrays an omnipotent Creator who governs the universe and all its physical phenomena through his primordial predestination but who remains, at the same time, beyond the reach of man's postlapsarian rational capacity.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the medieval concept of Christian Providentialism underwent a substantial crisis with the emergence and development of religious Reformation in the early modern era. Hence, "the *Deus absconditus* concept", as it was approached by the precursors of the Reformation, "by distancing God from man, encouraged the empiricist of the Renaissance, in effect, to substitute a visible second cause for the concealed First Cause, while maintaining at least the appearances of piety. [This approach] tend[ed] to shift 'nature' from theology to empiricism" (Elton, 33). The evolution of D'Amville's philosophical visions in *The Atheist's Tragedy* anticipates this intellectual shift in the Renaissance episteme. Dissociating nature and its rationally observable rules from the realm of God's providence, Tourneur delineates, in this play, two separate worlds; a presumption which lies at the heart of the Baconian empirical

outlook. This emerging scientific perspective promoted a novel reconciliation between experimentalism and religious faith. Rather than refuting the principles of either of these domains, Renaissance thinkers and writers increasingly felt the necessity of studying both realms, assuming that God's divinity and his providence existed above the natural laws of cause and effect that governed the physical phenomena (See Ornstein, 207). To them, nature does not embody a divine, transcendental order any longer. Instead, they argue that it has its own rules and conventions. Yet this does not necessarily negate divinity which remains, according to them, beyond the reach of empirical investigations. Hence, one can claim that from a cultural materialist perspective, Tourneur's work shows how the residual Christian traditions and beliefs such as Providentialism, are under pressure and put into doubt vis-à-vis the emerging religious schools in the early modern period.

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