

Hell upon Earth or the Language of the Playhouse

In 1719 the Reverend Arthur Bedford, rector of Newton St Loe in Somerset, published a book running to 400 pages, entitled, *A Serious Remonstrance in Behalf of the Christian Religion, against the Horrid Blasphemies and Impieties which are still Used in the English Playhouses, to the Great Dishonour of Almighty God and in Contempt of the Statutes of this Realm. Shewing their Plain Tendency to Overthrow all Piety, and Advance the Interest and Honour of the Devil in the World; from almost Seven Thousand Instances, Taken out of the Plays of the Present Century, and especially of the Last Five Years, in Defiance of all Methods hitherto Used for their Reformation.*¹ As the title suggests, this offered an exhaustive analysis of the language used in the texts of the plays recently performed and published, intended to demonstrate that such language amounted to a conspiracy to invert the religious order of England, replacing the authorised language of the Bible and Protestant Christianity with diabolic and pagan language, such that participation in the theatre was, in effect, the worship of the Devil.

Stuart Clark's work has recently reminded us, not only of the general importance of reading demonologies in their appropriate intellectual and linguistic context, but of the specific need to consider the full range of writings of demonologists and, equally, the demonological content of many writings of the early modern period that were not, formally speaking, demonologies.² This essay offers such a reading of the demonological ideas contained in the anti-theatrical writings of Arthur Bedford, seen in the context of his publications as a whole and his participation in various movements. His writings, in turn, offer us a distinctive reading of the use of demonological and witchcraft imagery in the plays of the early eighteenth century. The word "reading" is doubly significant here, because Bedford's study of these plays was entirely based on the written texts of the plays concerned, since his religious views

prevented him from attending any plays in person, as to do so would have been to engage in devil-worship.

The Reverend Arthur Bedford is not, it must be admitted, a name to be conjured with in the history of literary criticism or cultural analysis. He figures as a footnote in the debate over the stage led by Jeremy Collier around 1700. He is given rather more attention by William Weber as a pioneer of the ancient music movement. Weber recognises the ideological dimensions of this and offers the best sketch in print of Bedford's thought.³ As a demonologist, Bedford has been ignored until very recently, when Ian Bostridge briefly noted his attacks on the stage.⁴ My own work on Bristol has highlighted Bedford's place in the local campaigns for the reformation of manners, during his time as vicar of Temple parish between 1689 and 1713.⁵

During his Bristol years, Bedford was already in close contact with various London organisations such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Society for Propagating the Gospel, as well as the Society for the Reformation of Manners, and by the 1720s he became an important figure in these and related bodies from his base at Hoxton in north London where he was chaplain to the Haberdasher's Hospital founded by Aske, an almshouse and charity school. During his career (he was born in 1668 and died in 1745), Bedford was successively chaplain to the second Duke of Bedford and Frederick Prince of Wales, but he never achieved church promotion. He died an embittered man who felt that his services and intellectual achievements had not been properly recognised.⁶

Bedford's lack of preferment, despite impeccable Whig credentials and excellent connections, may suggest that he was seen, even by his friends and allies, as rather an obsessive and unreliable personality, although Thomas Hearne's dismissal of him as 'looked upon as a crazed man' may say more about his Jacobite distaste for Bedford's politics (and the supposed Presbyterianism of

Bedford's younger brother, an Oxford tradesman) than about Bedford's personality.⁷ Hearne's comments came in connection with Bedford's publications attacking Newton's version of Scripture chronology.⁸ Though it is tempting now to see an attack on Newton as proof of insanity, we should recall that Bedford was, in his eyes and those of many, perhaps most, contemporaries, upholding Anglican orthodoxy against the dangerous radicalism of Newton's theology. The central thread of Bedford's whole career, indeed, could be said to be the restatement of Trinitarian orthodoxy in the face of various new movements of thought, be they Arianism, Hutchinsonianism or Wesley's new doctrine of assurance.⁹ Underlying this was a conviction that this Anglican orthodoxy represented the doctrine and practice of the Bible and of primitive Christianity, as found in the Church Fathers. To Bedford the mission of the Church of England was to bring about the conversion of the world through making available the original texts of primitive Christianity (such as the translation of the Psalter and New Testament into Arabic, which he oversaw), which in turn would prove the true Christianity of the Church of England.¹⁰

In supporting this mission, Bedford was a tireless promoter of good causes within the penumbra of voluntary societies which emerged to forward the aims of the Church of England after 1689. Since Gary Bennett's pioneering analysis, there has been a great revival of interest in these societies and what they reveal about post-Revolutionary England.¹¹ Bedford's case fully substantiates recent accounts which stress the centrality of a providentialist vision of the Church and state of England as a God-given bastion against Popery, divinely rescued in 1688 in order to fulfil a world-mission, which was endangered by the sins and divisions that had flourished in England since 1688, which might lead God to punish the nation, not least by judging them unworthy of their missionary role. Bedford's thought, including his demonology, must be seen in the context of the godly state. It reinforces the case for emphasising this context for the nourishing of demonological views, as argued by Stuart Clark for intellectual history and Christine Lerner and others explaining witch-hunting. Clark,

however, identifies the pursuit of the godly state solely with the tradition of Bodinian absolutism, while Larner regards the ideology of the godly state, in Scotland at least, as largely defunct by 1700.¹² Bedford's case illustrates the longevity and flexibility of the godly state and how firmly it could be applied into the eighteenth century by a strongly Whig defender of the Glorious Revolution and parliamentary monarchy. This accords with recent work by Peter Elmer and Ian Bostridge on English demonology between the Civil War and the mid-eighteenth century, but even Bostridge implies that, by 1712 at least, in England (unlike Scotland) demonology was a Tory ideology.¹³ Yet in 1719 Bedford's *Serious Remonstrance*, the culmination of his publications, appeared, and in 1729 he was still repeating the same case in another sermon attacking the stage in London.

How then can we understand a prominent Whig clergyman publishing such a work in 1719? The simple explanation for this has been to regard Bedford as a man born in the wrong age, marginal and aberrant, even mad. This was the response of the two literary critics who have examined his works on the stage. J.W. Krutch regards Bedford as 'a curious example of fanaticism', an 'industrious pedant ... completely out of touch with the world' and his works as 'foolish', 'appalling', 'ponderous and unreadable'. Bedford's providentialism is so alien to Krutch that he cannot understand why Bedford should find the attribution of power to chance more reprehensible than mere profanity, although he stumbles near to the truth when he observes 'Bedford had simply pushed other-worldliness to a point where any phrase not saturated with an immediate sense of the presence of the Hebraic God must be ranked as blasphemous'. Only to a non-providentialist, of course, is this attitude 'otherworldly', though Bedford might have rejoiced in the attribution of 'unworldliness'. Krutch is left baffled by the evident fact that 'Bedford was not recognized as a fool by his contemporaries. Defoe read him with approval', falling back on the cliché that 'Bedford represented merely the extreme of the spirit generally widespread - the spirit of the once dominant Puritan'.¹⁴ Even less sympathetic is Jonah Barish, who wrongly assumes Bedford

to be a 'dissenting parson', presumably because as 'a hard-shelled fundamentalist, he reverts with crashing emphasis to the old Puritan charge of idolatry', displaying 'a truly horrendous grimness and humourlessness'.¹⁵

The use of the term Puritan here, in good seventeenth-century style, as a marker of disapprobation and distancing, is significant, not least because the association of providentialism and the reformation of manners with 'puritanism' has been one of the chief barriers, now largely dismantled, to the recovery of the importance of these movements within the post-Restoration and post-Revolutionary Church of England.¹⁶ During that period, of course, the charge was itself part of a struggle over the identity of the Church, not least because of its political overtones during the strife of party (Whigs as puritans) and the debate over the chief source of danger to the Church (popery or Protestant dissenters, labelled puritans). Bedford himself felt the adverse consequences of such labelling.

In 1710 Bedford decided not to vote in the Bristol election, but cast his vote for the Whigs instead as a Gloucestershire freeholder. He was then reproached by fellow clergymen and others for joining with dissenters and other enemies of the Church. Edward Colston, who had been elected one of Bristol's two Tory MPs (ousting the Whigs for the first time since 1695), wrote a bitter letter of criticism to the trustees of the charity school in Temple parish which he and Bedford had collaborated in founding two years before (Colston putting up most of the money).

In his two letters of response, Bedford explained that his vote had been motivated largely by the question of the playhouse. 'When the play house was set up in this city, I appeared against it both in preaching and printing. And therefore when the patriots of the play house were set up both in city [Bristol] and county [Gloucestershire] to be pillars of the Church, I thought I could do no less than vote in the one place and be neuter in the other. And as by voting

I suffer the censure of being against the Church, so neutrality in this case would have exposed me to the censure of being lukewarm or turning about and being for the playhouse ... Should dissenters prevail (which God forbid) there will be some religion, but should the profaneness of the play house succeed there can be none at all. And therefore if I apprehend a greater danger to all revealed religion, the ruin of souls, the increase of atheism, debauchery, and the pulling down of God's most dreadful judgments from that quarter which others do not mind, I must be excused for voting differently from others ... When men vote for such as are of violent turbulent tempers, and especially when the clergymen shall vote for men of atheistical principles, such who seldom come to Church, promoters of the playhouse, common swearers, cursers, drunkards, whoremongers, profane and lewd in their conversations, because, to serve a turn, they style themselves pillars of the Church (for this has been the case in some elections) I am afraid it will give too great an occasion of scandal and cause the new converts to return to their old ways... For that which happened at the election, was but the reviving of the old calumnies, which I find I must expect as long as I live.'¹⁷ These calumnies, he explained, related to his earlier collaboration with some dissenters in Bristol's Society for the Reformation of Manners, active between 1699 and 1705. On both occasions, he argued, he had collaborated with a mixture of Anglicans and dissenters to promote a common programme of moral reformation and thus to reinforce the Church of England, by showing its leading role in promoting reformation.

When Bedford referred to the 'patriot of the playhouse' standing in 1710 for Bristol he was not referring to Colston, but to his fellow candidate, Joseph Earle. Earle's later career and reputation certainly explains Bedford's suspicions. In 1710 and 1713 he appears to have been a candidate acceptable to both parties, but in 1714 Earle broke with the Tory Loyal Society, who bitterly denounced his behaviour, accusing him of being scandalously loose in his principles, ridiculing and profaning the Sabbath and querying miracles, as well as railing against the established Church. The accusations against Earle were

repeated in 1715, when Earle stood on the Whig ticket. Earle was re-elected in 1722 but was apparently not chosen by the Whigs as a candidate in 1727. Nevertheless, he joined the contest at the last moment and when `asked who he chose to manage his election, he answered `The Devil by G-d', polled 2 men and went off'.¹⁸ A more succinct statement of the attitude which Arthur Bedford considered the diabolical fruits of the theatre, can hardly be imagined. In 1730 the Common Council (referring to a 1728 grand jury presentment against Bristol's two playhouses) declared the actors at the playhouse on St Augustine's Back to be in `open defiance of authority'. The chief constable ordered to apprehend the actors as common players of interludes was apparently abused and assaulted in this task by one Joseph Earle of Bristol esquire, who then died before he could be prosecuted. This suggests that Earle may have been the unnamed `gentlemen' who had promoted the building of a theatre at Bristol in 1705-7, since this was the same theatre.¹⁹ If so, Bedford's epithet of `the patriot of the playhouse' to describe Earle in 1710 is understandable.

As Earle's complex political position illustrates, it would be dangerous to read into Bedford's remarks of 1710 the idea that Bristol was simply divided between Whig puritans and Tory cavaliers, but this was a language deployed by both sides during the years 1710-15, when the Whigs portrayed the Tories as debauched Jacobites and the Tories the Whigs as roundheads and Cromwellians. Take, for example, the literature surrounding the trials that followed the Bristol coronation riot of 1714 in which a Quaker was killed during an attack on a Presbyterian meeting house in Tucker Street Bristol (a building which may once have been a theatre, ironically!). The Whig pamphlets describing the trial, notably that ascribed to John Oldmixon, present the Whigs as the party of decent Protestants, challenged by a hard core of ungodly, drunken and profane crypto-Jacobites, who used the dregs of the city and the notoriously uncivilized Kingswood colliers to overawe the `sober, honest, thriving part'. Bristol had `several learned and pious divines, who adorn the doctrine they profess, particularly the Reverend Mr Bedford of Temple church, who wrote against the

stage, but these are, forsooth, Presbyterians in their hearts. And if a man has any sobriety of manners and sweetness of temper, damn him, say the leaders of the mob, he's a fanatic, as if it was inconsistent with a good churchman to be either charitable or sober'. Clearly the writer was unaware that Bedford had left Temple parish two years before.²⁰

Throughout the discourse and practice of 'the reformation of manners' in Bristol, three vices - begging, swearing and cursing - recur as a way of understanding the common questions underlying apparently diverse issues, such as workhouses to manage poor relief, the education of the poor, the enforcement of oaths of loyalty, the status and support of the Anglican clergy, the effect of the theatre, and the 'rage of party'. The threats posed to 'manners' - that is to say to the fabric of urban society, which was assumed to depend on a common culture based on household, religion and public order - by the tensions caused by revolution, war and religious difference were the common currency of urban politics. They found their focus in recurrent debates about how to rid the town of 'beggars' - those whose dependence and idleness challenged the model of independent and industrious householders - and of the vices of swearing and cursing. Yet, at the same time, begging, swearing and cursing all appeared the inevitable counterparts of ideological division and party politics. Political and religious leaders became dependent on the people for support, while seeking to buy or coerce their votes, while recurrent use of oaths to consolidate political support and exclude opponents made oath-taking a central issue; the bitterness of partisan politics made opponents seem damnable. To many contemporaries the closest parallel to this state of affairs was the turbulence of civil war and republic when, indeed, many of the same issues had been fought out, and recourse to the language of that earlier period both expressed and reinforced this viewpoint.²¹

But, as in the 1640-60 period, such issues also lent themselves to portrayal in the language of witchcraft. Not only were begging, swearing and cursing the

central motifs of popular concern about maleficial witchcraft, but strife within a godly state was naturally seen as the work of the Devil, working directly and through his agents. To Arthur Bedford, at least, the theatre came to comprehend all these other problems, forming a diabolical anti-church that threatened to destroy the reformation. The theatre not only symbolised all the evils that needed reform, but its influence, as that of the devil, explained the apparently inexplicable, namely why God's agents, the reformers, were not succeeding in their battle against vice. The campaign for reform became centred on the struggle between playhouse and church, Devil and God, for hegemony.

Bedford's writings on this subject arose from his efforts to stop the performance of plays in Bristol. These began with plays performed at the two annual fairs, St Paul's Fair in January, in Bedford's own Temple parish, and St James' Fair in late July and early August, in and around St James churchyard. In October 1694 the Bristol Grand Jury complained of 'the great inconveniences yearly at St Paul's fair occasioned by plays at the end of Tucker Street' and in December 1704 it again attacked 'the acting of plays and interludes', which would 'exceedingly eclipse the good order and government of this city, corrupt and debauch our youth, and utterly ruin many apprentices and servants'. The magistrates were urged to suppress them totally since 'all the methods to correct and keep them within modest bounds (where they are tolerated) have proved ineffectual'. Such action would further 'the work of reformation', 'so earnestly pressed by Her Majesty's proclamation, whose pious endeavours God hath so signally owned in the great victories with which he hath blessed her arms'.²² The foreman responsible for this presentment was Walter Chapman, a leading activist alongside Bedford in the Bristol Society for the Reformation of Manners, and in January 1705 Bedford preached against the theatre as part of a series of lectures by Anglican clergy for the reformation of manners, which the Society had helped to establish, persuaded by Bedford. This sermon was published later that year as *Serious Reflections on the Scandalous Abuse and Effects of the Stage*.

Action against the St James' fair centred around the profits received by the sheriffs and Corporation for letting booths in the Horsefair and Broadmead. From 1699 to 1703 the sheriffs were recompensed by the Corporation for not letting out these booths, although plays were certainly performed at the fair in 1699 and in 1701 the sheriffs only received part of their money because one booth had been authorised. The Corporation advertised in the *London Gazette* of 2 July 1702 that no plays, interludes or puppets were to be shown at the Fair. The Society pressured the Corporation to take such action and succeeded in getting plays suppressed in 1700 and 1702. However no recompense was made to the sheriffs in 1703-4 or 1704-5 and both 'comedies and tragedies' were performed in 1704 and 1705. It took two grand jury presentments in August 1706 and a series of Common Council discussions to re-establish payment to the sheriffs for not allowing booths, applied retrospectively for 1706; payment was then given for 1707 and onwards, at least until 1775.²³

By 1704 any early Society success against playgoing was being eclipsed by the danger that the theatre would move from an occasional problem at fairtime to a more permanent presence. By 1703 the actor-manager John Power, who ran a travelling company based at Norwich called the Duke of Grafton's Servants, had established a theatre in Bath and was trying to create a twin theatre in Bristol.²⁴ On 19 July 1704 the Common Council urged the mayor and aldermen 'by reason of the ill consequences by the introduction of lewdness and idle debauchery by the acting of stage plays, That no stage players be admitted by Mr Mayor and Aldermen to act at any time in the jurisdiction of this city in any public manner'. When he published his sermon later in 1705 no playhouse had been built and Bedford was hopeful that his preaching had 'had its desired effect in some measure at that time'. But by October 1705 a playhouse had been set up on St Augustine's Back.²⁵

In response to their critics the Bristol actors presented themselves as friends to a reformed stage and the reformation of manners, as is revealed in the printed prologue and epilogue to a performance of *Timon of Athens*, written by John Froude and spoken in 1705. Bedford noted 'When Mr Power and his company came to Bristol he urged this plea, That he would act nothing, but what should be sober and modest, etc. and expressed a great esteem which he had for Mr Collier's works, and design to reform the stage; and that he only selected the best plays, and most inoffensive'.²⁶ That this playhouse had received some kind of official sanction is suggested by the 1704 presentment's reference to 'the late permission given to the public stage in the liberties of this city, from whence some have conceived hopes it shall be tolerated always, and countenance (or at least connivance) given to acting of plays and interludes within this city'. The grand jury presentment of 15 August 1706 urged the magistrates to show 'utmost care and unanimous zeal, to search out and pursue the most effectual and lawful methods for crushing the newly erected play-house, that school of debauchery and nursery of profaneness, where vice and lewdness appear bare-faced and impudent, swearing notoriously practised and recommended: the danger and growth of which, we have been seasonably warned against by our Right Reverend the Lord Bishop and other reverend divines from the pulpit'.²⁷ In 1705-6 a city employee was recompensed for his efforts against Power's stage players. In October 1706 Bedford reported plans for a petition to the House of Commons against the stage, to be signed by the chief inhabitants of Bristol, and he recorded acting visits until late 1707.²⁸ A publication in 1715 gives a dubious version of why the Bristol players were expelled, for satirising the mayor and charter, reporting that the gentleman at the charge of building the new fabric of a playhouse (probably Joseph Earle) had been forced to let it out as a warehouse.²⁹ The St Augustine's Back site was again referred to as a theatre in 1714, used once more as a theatre in the 1725-31 period, then became an Assembly Room before finally being converted into Lady Huntingdon's Chapel.

Meanwhile, on 13 September 1708 Bedford reported to the SPCK that the players driven out of the liberties of the city had resorted to Stokes Croft (just beyond the city boundaries in Gloucestershire) in the time of the fair, whereupon the Gloucestershire JPs had made a sessions order that no plays should be acted in the county.³⁰ In December 1709 Bristol's Common Council established a committee to act with the Gloucestershire JPs to ensure that the players had no reception within 5 miles of Bristol and in 1710-11 both Nathaniel Wade and the Town Clerk were paid for legal advice on how to suppress the playhouse.³¹ By 1715, however, if not before, plays by the Duke of Grafton's Servants were regularly advertised at the 'Great Booth in Stoke's Croft' during July and August.³² This theatre continue to operate intermittently until the 1740s, though it was overshadowed by the opening of the Jacob's Well theatre in 1729. The establishment of the latter also followed a series of skirmishes between theatre companies and the city authorities. In a 1728 farce, when the Bristol merchant's wife asks liberty to go to plays, the merchant calls them 'the devil and all his works' and 'a nursery for the devil'. In 1730 the dying Presbyterian pastor Samuel Bury urged his Lewin's Mead congregation (including many of the Whig Corporation) to keep themselves free from the infection of evil company and haunting playhouses, which he considered the Devil's chapels and a school and nursery of lewdness and vice. ³³ Although the grand jury in 1728 had presented both playhouses, it was the one within the city, at St Augustine's Back, which was acted against, not that in Stokes Croft. The Jacob's Well theatre, established with funding from a number of leading Bristol citizens, seems to have been an effort to regularize the position, once again by compromise. It was also beyond city boundaries, halfway between the city and the Hotwells, where it could expect a considerable leisured audience for its summer-based season. In 1732 the grand jury returned ignoramus verdicts on a number of presentments against actors as 'common players of interludes' indictable under the vagrancy acts.³⁴ A modus vivendi had emerged in which Bristol had its theatre, but only as an unofficial presence excluded from the city proper. It was not until 1764 that a licensed theatre, the present Theatre Royal, was built within Bristol's

jurisdiction. Those who fought long and hard against that proposal, forcing it to seek statutory protection and delaying this until 1778, looked back consciously to the earlier struggle over the theatre in the 1700s, praising the civic patriots who had defeated the threat. Once again the issue was one that brought together dissenters and Anglicans, although the leading controversialists then were Methodists and in particular Quakers.³⁵

Bedford's writings, therefore, were part of a campaign linked to the reformation of manners, which clearly had considerable backing, but ultimately failed to prevent the establishment of a theatrical presence in Bristol, perhaps because most people were not prepared to regard the theatre as a crucial threat to the civic community. Bedford's 1705 sermon was, by his own account, deeply controversial. His lengthy preface is spent defending his arguments against those who had apparently condemned it as both irrelevant and offensive to civic order. In 1706 he published a fuller version of his arguments in a two-hundred-page work, *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays: Shewing their Natural Tendency to Destroy Religion and Introduce a General Corruption of Manners; in almost Two Thousand Instances, Taken from the Plays of the Last Two Years, against all the Methods Used for their Reformation*. Both these books were noted by the SPCK, which had first taken up the campaign against the playhouses after the storm of November 1703 when the lawyer William Melmoth brought in playbills for *The Tempest*, describing them, as Bedford did, as a flouting of God's judgement and in 1706 Melmoth sent Daniel Defoe a copy of Bedford's *Evil and Danger*. In 1706 the SPCK had to retreat when its call on the bishops to speak out further against the stage was regarded as tantamount to ordering them about, but their interest continued.³⁶ Bedford described his *Serious Remonstrance* to the SPCK secretary as a work 'against the playhouse which gives a dismal account of their impiety and profaneness sufficient without infinite mercy to rout out all the knowledge of God in the land'. A charity schoolmaster in Bath asked if the SPCK could help him to obtain copies of Bedford's book as he was informed that 'the Society for Reformation have bought several hundreds of Mr Bedford's late book

against playhouses to disperse'.³⁷ In 1729 Bedford recycled the themes of his 1705 sermon for a London congregation faced with the threat of another new theatre.³⁸

For Bedford the theatre and reformation were inseparable issues. The theatre corrupted manners and, despite all its claims to the contrary, the theatre of the early eighteenth century was not reformed. Instead, it opposed at every step the agencies of reformation, holding to ridicule the magistrates, clergy, informers and societies for reformation, and itself propagated all the sins that reforming societies targeted.³⁹ 'In vain may we pretend to a reformation of manners and a regulation of our youth, when such temptations lie in their way, which, if frequented, will certainly debauch them.... In this case we expect that youth will follow that which is most agreeable to their corrupt inclinations; and whilst the temptations are equally strong on either side, and the heart of man is fully set in him to do evil, we cannot but expect that the consequences hereof will be fatal to some, and the Devil will not be wanting to make use of such opportunities to tempt men to sin, until they are involved in eternal destruction.'⁴⁰

In describing the 'misbehaviour of the stage', Bedford initially focused on 'their lewd and filthy communication; their swearing, cursing, blasphemy, profaneness, and lewd application of scripture; their abuse of the clergy, in order to make the religion (which they profess) become vile and contemptible; and also their giving great characters to libertines, or persons who scruple no vice or immorality, and bringing them off with honour and success'. In detailing the harmful effects he begins with 'profaning of God's name by swearing, cursing and blasphemy', and then, after considering murders, adulteries and 'whoredoms', turns to 'idleness', focussing, like the 1704 grand jury, on the temptations to youth.⁴¹ His extended text of 1706 offers a similar focus, for alongside chapters on the direct threat to Christian religion, his chapters concentrate on swearing, blasphemy, cursing, 'virtue exposed' and 'vice encouraged', as well as

the abuse offered to those in authority. Systematically, therefore, Bedford is establishing the same evils as the consequences of the stage as those against which the reformation of manners had been aimed, with a particular emphasis on the affront to both God and authority offered by swearing and cursing.

Equally systematically, Bedford undermines the claims of the stage to act as a reformer of manners itself, concluding sarcastically 'if the reformation of manners, which they pretend to aim at should succeed accordingly, God must be dethroned, the Devil adored, virtue suppressed, vice encouraged, the churches destroyed, and then the play-houses will be frequented. In short, hell is broken loose among us, and we have schools erected in several cities of this nation, to teach the language of the damned.'⁴² One edition of the work contains an alternative opening page suggesting that it might have been entitled, *Hell upon Earth or the Language of the Playhouse*.⁴³ Bedford presents the struggle for reformation as nothing less than a battle against the Devil. Throughout his works there is the effort to establish a clear polarity between good and evil, God and Devil, schools of virtue and schools of vice, church and theatre: 'The Church and play-house are as contrary to each other as Christ and Belial, light and darkness, heaven and hell'.⁴⁴

But, as his writings proceed, there is a shift away from the moral issue of reformation towards the issue of whether the stage was not an anti-Church, a place of devil-worship.⁴⁵ In 1705-6 Bedford hoped to invoke a consensus by displaying across a broad range of issues the incompatibility of the theatre with a virtuous and cohesive civic order. By 1719, he felt it necessary to display it as nothing less than an anti-Christian conspiracy, which all Christians must surely recognise as their most deadly enemy. *Serious Remonstrance* subordinates the arguments of Bedford's earlier works to an effort to demonstrate that the plays of the period involve a systematic invocation of the Devil and his powers, at the expense of the true worship of God. This was, surely, Bedford's ultimate effort to present an argument which should bring all

Christians together in condemnation of the stage, regardless of the complex debates that had frustrated the campaigns for the reformation of manners.

It would be simplistic to present this as simply a polemical strategy, let alone a successful one, though it is interesting that Bedford might have regarded such a strategy as worth pursuing as late as 1719. There is no doubt that Bedford himself believed in the Devil. He had written to Edward Fowler, Bishop of Gloucester, another reformer of manners and believer in spirits,⁴⁶ in 1703, recording how he had counselled a man who had raised spirits by conjuration, a letter published anonymously in 1704 and much reprinted thereafter.⁴⁷ Thus, for Bedford, the invocation of the Devil was much more than a metaphor for evil and many of his readers would have shared his literal belief in this respect. Equally, there is little sign that the emphasis on the Devil in *Serious Remonstrance* bore fruit for Bedford. His own judgement was that he had 'fully shown the respect paid to the Devil there in direct opposition to the true God but it had no visible effect at that time'.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, Bedford's excursion into demonology offers other insights into the power of demonological language in the early eighteenth century, and perhaps at other periods. The first point to note is the nature of Bedford's own understanding of the demonic. Despite his account of Perks' invocation, 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. While Bedford certainly believed in the possibility of witchcraft and contracts with the devil, he shows little concern with the power and activities of witches, let alone their prosecution (just as he makes no suggestion that Perks, whom he presents sympathetically, might have been prosecuted for his conjurations) focusing all his attention instead on the playwrights and actors as the really dangerous servants of Satan. Discussing the play *The British Enchanters*, which displayed the nation, in his words, 'wholly addicted to diabolical practices', he comments 'the design I think is to

recommend the study of magick, and he who can patiently see and hear the one, hath made a great step towards the practice of the other'. Lest people 'should not know how to make a compact with the Devil and ruin their souls to all eternity', blasphemous sentences were spoken for imitation, all 'in a playhouse built (as they tell us) for Reformation'.⁴⁹ But the real sin here was of blasphemy, making a jest of the sacred story and of Hell, and inviting God to see the British nation collectively as guilty of mocking God's judgements. There was a very real danger that the stage's representations of devils and magical practices would bring about real effects for this was 'apt to fill the heads of raw and ignorant persons with false and dangerous notions as if the Devil's power and knowledge was much greater than it is, insomuch that they may come in time to think it in their interest to be upon good terms with him, as we hear of many in our own country who hath been so wicked as to make compacts with him'.⁵⁰ But this theme is not pursued.

Indeed, it is clear that for Bedford the Devil has no real power, being above all the father of lies, and that the sin of witchcraft is its denial of the actual omnipotence of God and his providence. In *Serious Remonstrance* he explicitly focusses on two particular vices, 'the respect and esteem which they pay to and express for the Devil and their exposing and vilifying the great God, the creator of Heaven and Earth', above all in 'the veracity which they ascribe and the reverence which they show to the oracles of Satan and in their contradicting, blaspheming and burlesquing the sacred scriptures, the oracles of the living God'.⁵¹ The danger posed by the Devil is not that he will himself cause harm, but that humans will believe that he has power, whether to do good or evil, and so empower him by becoming his servants and acting his will and, above all, that God will react to this false worship and evil by punishing the nation. Throughout his works it is this theme, of the need to avert God's judgement, which recurs endlessly. Hence for Bedford the language and images of the stage, in granting to the Devil (and other false gods) the powers to which he pretended, are undermining the epistemological foundations of that true

understanding of God without which fallen man, naturally prone to evil, would be bound to err and force God to abandon his mercy for his justice.

Secondly, while I have stressed the shift in emphasis from the harmful social effects of the theatre to its diabolic character, it is clear that, at all times, Bedford was acutely aware of both aspects of the problem. Historians of witchcraft and demonology have frequently sought to contrast popular fears of maleficia - acts of harm - as wrought by witches and devils, with learned concern with devil-worshipping and other spiritual issues. The validity of this dichotomy has always been questionable, not least because, within a providentialist view of the world, acts of harm of various kinds were bound to follow from spiritual sins, by the hand of God if not by the hands of human sinners or evil spirits. As noted above, there is no sign that Bedford was concerned with the maleficial acts of witches, nor wished to stir up legal action against them. But he was clearly keen, in all his writings, to demonstrate the maleficent effects of players and playgoers and stir up legal action against them, even though his ultimate priority was clearly the souls, rather than the bodies, of the nation.

Finally, we need to consider seriously Bedford's contention that the theatre of his period was saturated with the language of witchcraft and depended upon it for many of its dramatic effects. Compared to the attention paid to this issue for the Shakespearean period, there is little work on these later plays.⁵² Modern critics have been appalled at Bedford's temerity in attacking the masterpieces of the English theatre, such as *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*: ironically, they seem to find his criticisms almost blasphemous. We should remember that the versions of these plays he attacked were those then current, which offered much cruder and more sensational versions of the magical and witchcraft elements than the originals. To conventional humanist scholars, Bedford's apparent inability to allow for the metaphorical use of language, or to distinguish the views of the dramatist from those put into the mouths of his

characters, renders his critique worthless. But Bedford's credentials as a critic might be rather stronger in the current age of deconstruction and cultural studies. Bedford's sense of the independent power of language and its subversive capacity might be appreciated, even if his conspiratorial understanding of the authors' intentions as satanic might be less acceptable.

Above all, Bedford's work illustrates, by its obsessive quotation (7000 instances in 1719, from the plays published in the previous five years alone), the centrality of the Devil and witchcraft as metaphor and language in the plays of this period. In part, as Bedford acknowledges, this was an ironic consequence of the pressure to rid the stage of blasphemy and swearing, since curses and invocations of the Devil were not illegal whereas taking God's name in vain was, under the act of 1606, and had been successfully prosecuted several times around 1700. But Bedford's analysis also shows, by constant juxtaposition of scriptural texts and play passages, how much of the literature of this period proceeded by inversion of Biblical passages. While some of his examples seem strained, with Bedford assuming that any use of a scriptural phrase was a deliberate burlesque or inversion of the scriptural original, in many cases the allusion seems inescapable since, without the intertextual force, the language would lose its power. As Bedford argued, 'All the wit consists in the profane allusion and without this there would be no diversion for the audience' or again, 'without the profane allusion all the wit, and frequently the very sense, is lost'.⁵³ But equally, the endless repetition and reapplication of words away from their scriptural meaning threatened to rob them of their original force. As he notes of the endless use of the word 'damned', 'what such a familiarity with this word upon the stage should mean is unaccountable, unless it is to bring it into contempt'.⁵⁴

Alternatively, playwrights sought to maintain the aura of the sacred and mysterious but avoid the problem of blasphemy by turning to the classical world and using pagan deities, ceremonies and theology to make their points. To

Bedford, of course, such paganism was an equal affront to Christianity, but it underlines the point (forcefully made by Justin Champion) that even the critics of 'priestcraft' in this period found themselves fashioning a counter-religion of primitive virtue and worship. To legitimate itself and to speak to its audience, the theatre of this period had to approximate to a church, even an anti-Church.⁵⁵ It had to sell itself as a reformer of manners and a teacher of virtue. Players and playwrights could not help comparing themselves, favourably, to the clergy: the new Haymarket theatre of 1705, opened under Vanbrugh and Congreve with royal approval as a new start for the theatre, trumpeted in its prologue: 'In the good age of ghostly ignorance, How did cathedrals rise, and zeal advance ... But now that pious pageantry's no more, And the stages thrive, as churches did before'.⁵⁶ Presumably this was intended to contrast enlightened morality with medieval superstition, but its identification of the churches *per se* with the past and of the theatres as the teachers of the future understandably convinced Bedford and his like that there was a deadly competition underway for the minds and souls of the people.

In short, the intertwining of witchcraft and demonology with the struggles to reform culture after the Reformation was still very much a live issue in the early eighteenth century.⁵⁷ For Bedford, indeed, 'reformation', in every sense, was the key concept which held all these concerns together. Even for those he criticised, the image of the reformation was one which they could not ignore, but found themselves bound to imitate or invert, or both. In doing so, all concerned found it hard not to invoke hell upon earth as a way of dramatising the conflicts around them.

1. London, 1719, facsimile edition, ed. Arthur Freeman, New York and London, 1974.
2. S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford, 1997).
3. W. Weber, *The Rise of the Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 25, 47-56, 69-71, 73, 86, 151, 200-1. See also J. Barry,

- `Cultural Patronage and the Anglican Crisis: Bristol c.1689-1775', in J.D. Walsh et al., ed., *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 191-208. Bedford's works on music are: *Temple Musick* (London, 1706), *The Great Abuse of Musick* (London, 1711) and *The Excellency of Divine Music* (London, 1733).
4. I. Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations c.1650-1750* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 177-8.
 5. J. Barry, ed., `The Society for the Reformation of Manners 1700-5', in J. Barry and K. Morgan, ed., *Reformation and Revival in Eighteenth-Century Bristol* (Bristol Record Society, 45, 1994), pp. 1-62; J. Barry, `The "Great Projector": John Cary and the Legacy of Puritan Reform in Bristol, 1640-1720' in M. Pelling and S. Mandelbrote (eds), *The Practice of Reform in Health, Medicine and Science 1500-2000* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 185-206.
 6. `Case of Mr Arthur Bedford', copies in Bristol Record Office and in Wiltshire Record Office, ref. 1178/631; H. Ellis, *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of St Leonard Shoreditch* (London, 1798), pp. 138-46; S. Mandelbrote, `Arthur Bedford', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
 7. T. Hearne, *Remains and Collections*, vol. X, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford Historical Society, LXVII, 1915), pp. 7 and 305.
 8. A. Bedford, *Animadversions on Sir Isaac Newton's Doctrine* (London, 1728); idem, *Scripture Chronology Demonstrated* (London, 1730).
 9. Bedford, `Case'; idem, *Observations on a Sermon* (London, 1736); idem, *The Doctrine of Assurance* (London, 1738).
 10. See, in particular, A. Bedford, *A Sermon at St Mary Redcliffe 21 October 1717 in Celebration of King George's Happy Coronation* (Bristol, 1717). I am grateful to Scott Mandelbrote for discussion of Bedford's Anglican providentialism.
 11. G.V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State 1688-1730* (Oxford, 1975); J. Spurr, `The Church, the Societies and the Moral Revolution of 1688', in Walsh et al., ed., *Church of England*, pp. 127-42; C. Rose, `The Origins and Ideals of the SPCK 1699-1716', in *ibid.*, pp. 172-90; idem,

'Providence, Protestant Union and Godly Reformation in the 1690s',
Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th series 3 (1993), 151-69;
idem, *England in the 1690s* (Oxford, 1999); S. Burtt, 'The Societies for the
Reformation of Manners' in R. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy*
(Cambridge, 1995), pp. 149-69; T. Claydon, *William III and the Godly
Revolution* (Cambridge, 1996).

12. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*; C. Lerner, *Enemies of God* (London, 1981). See also now N. Johnston, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2006)
13. Bostridge, *Witchcraft*; idem, 'Witchcraft Repealed', in J. Barry et al., ed., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 309-34; P. Elmer, '"Saints or Sorcerers": Quakerism, Demonology and the Decline of Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century England', in *ibid.*, pp. 145-79; M. Novak, 'Defoe, the occult, and the deist offensive during the reign of George I' in J. LeMay (ed), *Deism, masonry and the Enlightenment* (Newark, NJ, 1987), pp. 93-108; A. Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs : the life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1660-1739* (Manchester, 2008).
14. J.W. Krutch, *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration* (new edn, New York, 1949), pp. 127-131.
15. J. Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 232-3. Bedford is also cited frequently in D. Manning, 'Anti-Providentialism as Blasphemy in Late Stuart England: A Case Study of the "Stage Debate"', *Journal of Religious History* 32:4 (2008), 422-38, but unfortunately Manning mistakenly identifies Bedford as a 'nonjuring clergyman' (p.428).
16. J. Spurr, '"Virtue, Religion and Government": the Anglican Uses of Providence' in T. Harris et al (eds), *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 29-47; A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); W.E. Burns, *Age of Wonders: Politics, Prodiges and Providence in England 1657-1727* (Manchester, 2002); J.C.D. Clark, 'Providentialism, Predestination and Progress', *Albion* 35 (2003), 559-89; D. Nash, '"To Prostitute Morality, Libel Religion and Undermine Government":

Blasphemy and the Strange Persistence of Providence in Britain since the Seventeenth Century' *Journal of Religious History* 32:4 (2008), 439-56.

17. Barry, ed., 'Society', pp. 53-5.
18. *A Few Short and True Reasons why a Late Member was Expelled the Loyal Society* (Bristol, 1714); R. Grassby, *An English Gentleman in Trade* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 226-7; J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (n.p., 1893), p. 102; E. Cruickshanks et al. (eds), *The House of Commons 1690-1715* (London, 2002), vol. 3, pp. 953-4; R. Sedgwick, ed., *The House of Commons 1715-54* (London, 1970), vol. 2, p. 2.
19. Bristol Record Office, 04264, Common Council Proceedings, Feb. 1731; K. Barker, 'Churches and Stages in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Bristol', *Theatre Notebook*, 45 (1991), 84-93.
20. *The Bristol Riot* (London, 1714), pp. 4-5, 10-11. Authorship of this is discussed in P. Rogers, 'Daniel Defoe, John Oldmixon and the Bristol Riots of 1714', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 92 (1973), 145-56. See also, *A Full and Impartial Account of the Late Disorders in Bristol and a Compleat Tryall of the Rioters* (London, 1714); J. Oldmixon, *A History of England* (London, 1735), pp. 611-12.
21. Barry, 'The "Great Projector"'.
22. Bristol Record Office, 04452(1), presentments 1676-1700; A. Bedford, *Serious Reflections on the Scandalous Abuse and Effects of the Stage: in a Sermon preached at the Parish-Church of St Nicolas in the City of Bristol, on Sunday the 7th Day of January, 1704/5* (Bristol, 1705, facsimile edition, ed. A. Freeman, New York and London, 1974), pp. 39-44, reprinted in Barry, ed., 'Society', pp. 49-51.
23. Bristol Record Office, 04026, Corporation accounts, 1699-1775, and 04264, Aug. and Oct. 1706; Latimer, *Annals*, p. 21; Barry, ed., 'Society', pp. 22, 38; SPCK Minute Books (held in Cambridge University Library), vol. 1, 15 Nov. 1705; A. Bedford, *A Second Advertisement concerning the Profaneness of the Play-House* (Bristol, 1705, facsimile edition, ed. A. Freeman, New York and London, 1974), p. 3; idem, *The Evil and Danger of Stage-Plays* (Bristol, 1706,

facsimile edition, ed. A. Freeman, New York and London, 1974), pp. 13, 150, 226-7. Since this essay was first published, Judith Milhous and Robert Hume have published the text of *A Serious Advertisement concerning the Profaneness of the Play-House* (Bristol: printed by W. Bonny, 1705), which was produced after the first performance of the players on 16 July 1705 (Cibber's *The Careless Husband*), offering 'a catalogue of such profane and atheistical expressions as are to be found in the comedy' to show that there had been no 'late Reformation' in the Playhouse. Unfortunately they were unaware of my article or the evidence it contains, so they make some errors about the Bristol position, notably their claim that, after this playhouse was closed down in 1706, 'the anti-theatricalists remained victorious in Bristol for some twenty years': 'Arthur Bedford's (?) *A Serious Advertisement* and the Early History of the Theatre in Bristol' *Theatre Notebook* 57:1 (2003), pp. 2-10.

24. S. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players: Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 45 ff; Bedford, *Serious Reflections*, p. 18.
25. *Ibid*, preface; SPCK Minute Books, vol. 1, 25 Oct. 1705. Barker, 'Churches and Stages', correctly identifies the location of the theatre but is unaware of the SPCK evidence.
26. Bristol Central Library, Bristol collection, items 10633 and 7976, partly reprinted in G.T. Watts, *Theatrical Bristol* (Bristol, 1915), p. 24; Bedford, *Evil and Danger*, p. 12.
27. Barry, ed., 'Society', pp. 50, 52. Manning, 'Anti-Providentialism', p. 428 states the SPCK bought 151 copies of the book.
28. Bristol Record Office, Corporation Vouchers, 1706-7, bill of William Danby; SPCK Minute Books vol. 1, 3 Oct. 1706 and vol. 2, 9 Nov. 1707.
29. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, p. 171.
30. SPCK, CR1/1B no. 1394; J.A. Chartres, 'The Place of Inns in Commercial Life of London and West of England 1660-1760' (unpublished Oxford D. Phil thesis, 1973), p. 68.
31. Bristol Record Office, 04264 and Corporation Vouchers.

32. *Bristol Post-Boy*, 2 July to 27 August 1715.
33. J. Hippiisley, *The Journey to Bristol* (London, 1728) p. 7; J. Murch, *History of the Presbyterian and General Baptist Churches in the West of England* (London, 1835), p. 110.
34. Bristol Record Office: 04026, Dec. 1731; Corporation Vouchers 1731-2; 04450(3) May and Sept. 1732.
35. *The Consequences of a New Theatre to the City of Bristol Considered* (Bristol, 1765), pp. 6-8; J. Gough, *Bristol Theatre: a Poem* (Bristol, 1766), p. 6; Bristol Central Library, Bristol collection, item 4531, fo. 259; P.T. Underdown, 'Religious Opposition to Licensing the Bristol and Birmingham Theatres', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 6 (1958), 149-60.
36. O.B. Allen and E. McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of the SPCK 1698-1898* (London, 1898), p. 20; W.A. and R.W. Bultmann, 'The Roots of Anglican Humanitarianism', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 33 (1964), 36-7.
37. SPCK, CR1/9 nos 5952 and 5979.
38. A. Bedford, *A Sermon preached in the Parish-Church of St Botolph's Aldgate* (London, 1730, facsimile edition, ed. A. Freeman, New York and London, 1974).
39. Bedford, *Evil and Danger*, chs 1 and 9.
40. Idem, *Serious Reflections*, pp. 21-2.
41. Ibid., pp. 3, 23-5, 39-30.
42. Idem, *Evil and Danger*, p. 219.
43. See Freeman's preface (p. 11) and appendix to 1974 edition of *Evil and Danger*.
44. Bedford, *Second Advertisement*, p. 14.
45. Compare, for example, *Serious Reflections*, pp. 30-2, with the parallel passage in the 1729 *Sermon*, pp. 17-22 and pp. 31-9 on Macbeth.
46. A.G. Craig, 'The Movement for the Reformation of Manners 1688-1715' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1980), pp. 51, 266.

47. A Copy of a Letter sent to the Bishop of Gloucester from a Clergyman of the Church of England living in Bristol (Bristol, 1704). Bedford's copy of the original letter is in Bristol Record Office P/Tem Le 7; its later publication history is traced in J. Barry, 'Public Infidelity and Private Belief?', n.11, later in this book.
48. Bedford, 'Case'.
49. Bedford, *Evil and Danger*, pp. 6-8.
50. Bedford, *Serious Remonstrance*, p. 9.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
52. A. Harris, *Night's Black Agents* (Manchester, 1980), devotes only one chapter to the post-1640 period, emphasising the 'trivialising of the supernatural elements' in post-Restoration adaptations of earlier plays. For the historiography of the earlier period see D. Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London, 1996), part III 'The Witch on Stage'.
53. Bedford, *Serious Remonstrance*, pp. 16, 346.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
55. J. Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge, 1992); A. Williams, 'No Cloistered Virtue: or Playwright versus Priest in 1698', *Proceedings Modern Language Association*, 90 (1975), 234-46; J. Hopes, 'Politics and Morality in the Writings of Jeremy Collier', *Literature and History*, 8 (1978), 159-74.
56. Cited in Krutch, *Comedy and Conscience*, pp. 188-9 and discussed in Bedford, *Evil and Danger*, pp. 20-3.
57. J. Barry, 'Bristol as a "Reformation City" c.1640-1780', in N. Tyacke, ed., *England's Long Reformation* (London, 1997), pp. 261-84.