

Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution

Christopher Grasso

In Wethersfield, Connecticut, on December 11, 1782, William Beadle, a respected merchant known as a doting father and husband, cut the throats of his wife and four young children and then fired two pistols into his head. It was neither a crime of passion nor a fit of delirium, the article in the *Hartford Connecticut Courant* explained: In the previous years, Beadle "betook himself more to books than usual, and was unhappily fond of those esteemed Deistical . . . and (as he expresses himself), 'renounced all the popular religions of the world, he intended to die a proper Deist.'" By early January that initial article had been reprinted in newspapers in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. By the middle of that month, it had reached Virginia. "What a monster of a man was this!" exclaimed the Reverend John Marsh at the funeral for Mrs. Beadle and the children.¹

Before the uproar over Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* and the Federalist attacks on Thomas Jefferson's deism in the 1790s, deism tested Americans' commitment to religious freedom and complicated the connection between religious doctrines and republican virtue.² Encounters with deism in the 1780s uncover contests over the place of religion in emerging conceptions of American citizenship and connect everyday concerns and the cultural imperatives of the revolutionary moment to longer-standing theological and

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¹ *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, Dec. 17, 1782, reprinted in the *Worcester Massachusetts Spy*, Dec. 19, 1782; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, Dec. 19, 1782; *Salem Gazette*, Dec. 19, 1782; *New London Connecticut Gazette*, Dec. 20, 1782; *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Evening Post*, Dec. 21, 1782; *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet*, Dec. 21, 1782; *Albany New York Gazette*, Dec. 30, 1782; *Burlington New-Jersey Gazette*, Jan. 1, 1783; *Philadelphia Independent Gazette*, Jan. 4, 1783; *Providence Rhode Island Gazette*, Jan. 4, 1783; and *Richmond Virginia Gazette*, Jan. 18, 1783. John Marsh, *The Great Sin and Danger* (Hartford, [1783]), 20. On the Beadle case as an inspiration for Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, see Neil King Fitzgerald, "Wieland's Crime: A Source and Analogue Study of the Foremost Novel of the Father of American Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1980), 153–80; and Shirley Samuels, "Wieland: Alien and Infidel," *Early American Literature*, 25 (March 1990), 58–59. The literature on Brown's novel is extensive, but there has been little scholarly work on William Beadle. On the Beadle narratives as early examples of American gothic literature, see Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 51–56, 138–39. For a brief examination, see Daniel A. Cohen, "Homicidal Compulsion and the Conditions of Freedom: The Social and Psychological Origins of Familicide in America's Early Republic," *Journal of Social History*, 28 (Summer 1995), 725–64. For discussion of the case and a collection of Beadle's writings, see James R. Smart, "A Life of William Beadle" (Senior thesis, Princeton University, 1989).

² Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (New York, 1794).

philosophical debates. As one of those encounters, the Beadle affair provides a revealing glimpse of people struggling to understand their religious and political lives in the years immediately following the Revolutionary War. It also sketches an episode in the formation of American religious common sense—a stance assuming that virtuous citizenship presupposed Christianity and that challenging the divine inspiration of the Bible was therefore not just heterodox but un-American and, perhaps, lunacy.

Deism is usually associated with belief in a noninterventionist Creator, reliance on what reason can discern in the natural world, and skepticism about miracles, the scriptures as divine revelation, and the divinity of Christ. It currently has a curious place in the historiography of eighteenth-century Europe and America. In studies focusing on Europe that interpret the Enlightenment as the avatar of secular modernity, deism figures as an important intellectual development in which the West finally began to discard the theological baggage of Christendom. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged that view. One study argues that deism hardly existed in the eighteenth century; it is merely a historiographical mirage derived from a bogeyman invented by Christian propagandists. In studies of America, by contrast, deism has rarely been seen as a powerful force. Perhaps the term is an apt label for the beliefs of a few elite individuals such as Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson, and perhaps it encapsulates a more extreme version of ideas that other liberal, rationalistic (though still Christian) Founding Fathers found congenial in a generational trough of piety between the (so-called) First and Second Great Awakenings. Never broadly popular and rarely publicly defended in late eighteenth-century America, deism is usually mentioned and then quickly dismissed in surveys of early American religion. The focus on evangelicalism in recent years has driven deism even further from view.³

It was not so far from view in the 1780s. As states recast church-state relations in their new constitutions, the public role of religion generally and of Christianity specifically became a subject of intense debate. In Virginia, for example, fears of deism motivated both proponents and some of the opponents of religious taxation.⁴ After the circulation of the initial reports, most of the printed commentary on the Beadle tragedy was published in New England, and it framed the case with that region's distinctive theological concerns. But these New England writers, even if they told the Beadle tale with a regional dialect, knew that the status of deism—barely respectable or beyond the pale?—was a national issue.

Antideist writers, like those responding to Beadle, sometimes invoked "common sense" to battle against it. Doing so was less a call for rational public inquiry into the claims of deism than an attempt to delegitimize deism, making it a position that no virtuous citizen

³ For a review of recent work, see Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review*, 108 (Oct. 2003), 1061–80. For a recent overview, see Roger D. Lund, "Deism," in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan Charles Kors (4 vols., New York, 2003), I, 335–40. On English deism, see Robert E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); and James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists* (Columbia, S.C., 1997). The standard monographs on American deism remain G. Adolf Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason* (New York, 1933); and Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York, 1934). See also Kerry S. Walters, *Rational Infidels: The American Deists* (Durango, 1992); and Kerry S. Walters, "Introduction," in *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic*, ed. Kerry S. Walters (Lawrence, 1992), 1–50. For deism as a historiographical myth, see S. J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity* (Manchester, 2003).

⁴ On Virginia, see Thomas J. Curry, *First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York, 1986), 144, 239.

could defend, even in a land of religious liberty. To mention common sense was to gesture toward a natural capacity for judgment about the practical concerns of daily life or to a fund of basic beliefs and self-evident truths that were—or ought to be—too obvious to require reasoned argument. Rhetorical appeals to common sense were usually attempts to claim incontestable authority and to forestall critical debate—or at least to set the terms of that debate. In late eighteenth-century America, nervous Christians appealed to common sense to try to shove foundational beliefs back outside the arena of public dispute. The North Carolina Presbyterian Henry Pattillo noted in his 1788 “Address to Deists” that most common folks understood no real distinction between denying the Bible and denying God and morality. The success of the American experiment, most Christians believed, depended on perpetuating such religious common sense.⁵

The Beadle affair, then, was embedded both in eighteenth-century New England’s religious and intellectual history and in the ideological contests of the new American nation. Deism’s controversial place in public discussion during the revolutionary era did much to shape the closeted experience of the tortured Wethersfield merchant. The loud insistence of a Christian majority that deism was a pernicious species of atheism rather than a benign nonscriptural faith in God heightened Beadle’s sense of alienation and victimization. The apparent hypocrisy of Christians who thumped their Bibles piously as they spoke of republican virtue and American patriotism while cheating their neighbors in the marketplace stoked the bitterness of an already desperate man. In turn, the opinions left behind by a deist killer offered Christian writers a graphic warning about a threat to the nation. Beadle seemed to demonstrate that subjectivity cut loose from the guidance of the scriptures would lead to madness and bloodshed; the tragedy served to illustrate the need to make the Christian Bible the bedrock of citizenship, governance, and morality in every state. Yet the appeals to a consensual public Christianity were undercut as the Beadle case also provided fodder for deepening theological dispute in New England, with opponents equating each other’s alleged misreading of the Bible with the deist’s disavowal of it.

Many commentators on Beadle wanted to draw simple, commonsensical lessons about the relation between religious doctrines, moral practices, and public policy, even as they interpreted deism, as well as Christianity, variously and gave Beadle’s expressed principles different weight as a motive for his crime. Others—like Beadle’s neighbors in Wethersfield—introduced an even broader array of reactions. Attending to the local response to Beadle’s life and death helps ground the debates in the tangled particularities of social relations and personal experience. Finally, Beadle’s papers themselves offer more than a rare example of the private reflections of a deist, a madman, or a monster; they reveal a desperate man struggling and failing to make moral sense of life in revolutionary America.⁶

⁵ Henry Pattillo, “An Address to the Deists,” in *Sermons*, by Henry Pattillo (Wilmington, Del., 1788), 200. On the rhetorical use of common sense in the eighteenth century, see Sophia A. Rosenfeld, “Before Democracy: The Production and Uses of Common Sense,” *Journal of Modern History*, 80 (March 2008), 1–50; and Sophia A. Rosenfeld, “Tom Paine’s Eighteenth-Century Paradoxes and Our Common Sense,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 65 (forthcoming, Oct. 2008). On the reception of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in America (particularly the sentimentalist ethics of Francis Hutcheson [1694–1746] and the realist epistemology of Thomas Reid [1710–1796] and its relation to American Protestant theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), see Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2002), 93–113. See also D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia, 1972). On the stylistic features of references to common sense as a font of wisdom, see Clifford Geertz, “Common Sense as a Cultural System,” *Anthropological Review*, 33 (Spring 1975), 5–26. Unlike Common Sense philosophers, who stressed the sufficiency of a moral sense common to all mankind, antideist writers in the 1780s insisted that common sense alone, without grounding in the scriptures, was a grossly inadequate foundation for society.

⁶ The Beadle affair also provides an opportunity to see deism from perspectives other than a Founding Father’s

One of the fullest discussions of deism published in America in the 1780s was John Murray's *Bath-Kol* (1783), which looked backward at colonial religious history and assessed America's spiritual condition at the end of the war. Part historical review, part jeremiad against a generation of vipers, and part polemic against the "Principal Errors at This Time"—deism and Universalism—*Bath-Kol* insisted that public bodies, both civil and ecclesiastical, had a duty to testify for Christ and against these suddenly prominent forms of infidelity. Closing an impassioned peroration with a reference to the Beadle murder, Murray concluded that deism was "the grand patron of wickedness and debauchery of the present time."⁷

John Murray was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Local wags called him Damnation Murray to distinguish him from the Universalist John "Salvation" Murray, who preached twenty-five miles down the coast in Gloucester. Damnation Murray's concern about the fate of Christianity in American public life was a common theme for the postrevolutionary ministry. *Bath-Kol* lamented that public officials and civil institutions—grand juries, magistrates, courts, legislative assemblies—were nearly mute about the nation's Christian obligations. The Declaration of Independence castigated Britain's king but made no mention of the King of Kings, Murray complained, and "every following step" in governmental affairs—from the new state constitutions to the confederation of states to treaties with other nations—"spoke the same language." The cause was the general moral declension of the times and, more specifically, the inroads made by deism and Universalism. People seemed to blame eight years of war on the sins of Britain and the Tories alone; they excused their own moral lapses by pointing to the extreme conditions created by "war times." More significant, important governmental posts in some provinces had been filled by deists. Officers in some of the forts bragged of having read deist tracts and found them persuasive. In principal towns, Murray claimed, many leading lawyers were deists, and physicians brought the contagion to the sickbeds of their patients. In polite society, a false gentility reigned, with the better sort scoffing at revelation, joking about Christianity, and passing around Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son as a perverse guide to moral life.⁸

Bath-Kol, then, was an attempt to counter the decay of piety and the rise of deism by asserting a religious interpretation of the American Revolution. As such, it followed other notable publications from Murray's Newburyport. Nathaniel Whitaker, for example, blasted Tories from the pulpit in 1777 and 1783, arguing that those who did not actively support the sacred cause of liberty had blood on their hands and deserved to be stripped of their property and banished. Murray himself, who had raised volunteers for the Continental army and helped effect prisoner exchanges, discussed the "near and necessary connection" between civil and religious liberty. He also reminded citizens who were framing new state constitutions that "if men are christians while in a state of nature, they will not cease to be such when they enter into the connections of members of society—their re-

biography or a foray into the history of ideas. The scant historiographical attention to deism has rarely answered the call to examine the lives of ordinary people (the only thing extraordinary about Beadle was his crime). Nor has that scholarship answered the call within religious studies to move beyond doctrine and institutions to the lived religion of daily practice and experience.

⁷ [John Murray], *Bath-Kol. A Voice from the Wilderness* (Boston, 1783), 164. *Bath kol* is a biblical term meaning divine voice, first appearing in Dan. 4:31 (Authorized Version).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87, ix, 99. Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, *Letters* (London, 1774).

ligion is a portable thing—they must carry it with them into every relation they sustain in the world.”⁹

Murray's *Bath-Kol* placed the Revolution in moral and historical context. It reviewed the story of English colonial settlement, but it devoted more attention to the wars with France beginning in 1744 and the backsliding of an ungrateful people. The “heathen Orgyes” celebrating the fall of New France in 1760 marked the beginning of twenty years of ungodliness. Despite the threats to liberty signaled by Anglican schemes to impose bishops on the colonies and the Quebec Act's promise to allow the free practice of Catholicism in that province, most British North Americans were preoccupied by land fever and were busy aping English fashions, while colonial legislatures fought over boundary disputes. Wallowing in worldliness, most people failed to confront the “leprosy” of heterodoxy and heresy that infected even colleges and pulpits and paved the way for deism.¹⁰

Focusing on his own region, Murray pointed a finger at the Universalist John Murray, who first preached in Newburyport in early November 1773. His “scheme” of universal salvation “was pleasing to the libertine heart; and his manners being found easy enough for the loosest company, he soon became the idol of rakes and the oracle of deists.” To Calvinists, the Universalist's argument that all people, and not merely the elect, would eventually be saved was not just a different interpretation of the New Testament's message of salvation; it undercut entirely the authority of the Bible and destroyed Christ's plan of redemption; it emasculated God the Father, attributing to him “a feminine sort of goodness” that “constrains him . . . to keep all sinners from pain,” so “we must turn and caress the offender” instead. Though adopting the name of Christianity and preaching from the scripture, Universalists, Damnation Murray argued, were in fact a short slide away from deism and ultimately atheism.¹¹

In *Bath-Kol* deism was no attempt to understand God's will and man's duty through reason and an investigation of the natural world; it was atheism in thin disguise. Murray did nod toward a tradition of philosophical skepticism, beginning with Pyrrho and stretching through Baruch Spinoza and René Descartes to eighteenth-century freethinkers. But the true beginnings of the modern movement, Murray claimed, were in Italy and France in the mid-sixteenth century, when libertine atheists simply adopted a new name to avoid “popular odium.” Edward Herbert, first Baron Herbert of Cherbury, “the father of deism in England,” gave their tenets systematic form in 1624, and he was followed by a parade of thinkers including Thomas Hobbes, John Toland, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, Henry St. John, first Viscount Bolingbroke, and David Hume. After being decisively refuted, according to Murray, by Christian luminaries including John Locke, deists changed tactics. Unable to defeat Christianity on the open field of debate, they set aside the heavy artillery of argument after 1750 and adopted a “stratagem in secret ambuscades”: satiric sneers, low puns, and malicious innuendos dropped casually in private clubs while the deists themselves conformed publicly to the Christian forms of their society. There were differences among them: some believed in God's providential intervention, while others did not; some argued for the immortality of the soul, while

⁹ Nathaniel Whitaker, *An Antidote against Toryism; or, The curse of Meroz, in a discourse on Judges 5th 23* (Newbury-Port, 1777); Nathaniel Whitaker, *The Reward of Toryism. A discourse on Judges V. 23* (Newbury-Port, 1783); John Murray, *Nehemiah; or, The Struggle for Liberty Never in Vain* (Newbury, 1779), esp. 21, 43–44.

¹⁰ [Murray], *Bath-Kol*, 79, 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67–68, 349. On Salvation Murray in Newburyport, see John J. Currier, *History of Newburyport, Massachusetts, 1764–1905* (2 vols., Newburyport, 1906–1909), II, 457–60.

others denied it. Yet they all united behind the goal of toppling Christianity. Because deists did not gather in meetinghouses as Universalists did, it was hard for Christians to scout the strength of the enemy. Like the secret Tories still plotting in dark corners that Nathaniel Whitaker warned about in 1783, Murray's private deists were dangerous subversives.¹²

Deism, its Christian opponents believed, was an effect, and would be a further cause, of the uncertainty and moral disorder ushered in by the Revolution. Christian writers such as Damnation Murray considered Jefferson's famous defense of religious liberty in *Notes on the State of Virginia* anathema: "it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." Monstrous principles, the preachers believed, would sooner or later lead to monstrous practices. The neighbor's merely professing such heterodox beliefs also had its dangers, aside from the divine punishments that unchecked blasphemies might incur on the whole corporate body. The communities that such preachers as Murray had in mind were rooted in a communion of sentiment and a consensus of basic beliefs; they were not merely pragmatic organizations designed to protect person and property. The open profession of unchristian beliefs therefore weakened the bonds of union. Liberty of conscience might have to be stretched far to contain the sectarian diversity of America, but not beyond the bounds of what many considered common sense. Morality rested on belief in a God who would punish bad behavior even where the state could not; that belief relied on the recognition that the Bible was God's revealed word and that its warnings were true. Religion and morality were divinely connected, Murray argued. The deist, by denying the Bible, and the Universalist, by grossly distorting its teaching on future punishment, were not only sinners on the road to hell, they were dangerous neighbors and a threat to society.¹³

William Beadle, Murray concluded, made this logic clear to any who had eyes to see. He did not have to mention Beadle by name; in 1783 his readers would have caught the reference. Deism, Murray wrote, was

the arch-murderer that, having made its votaries the pests of society, while they lived, hurries them on to be their own butchers at last. To the spreading of this principle we may ascribe the overgrown wickedness of AMERICA at this unhappy period. This is the monster that threatens to extirpate all the remains of virtue and piety from among us: And has already actually hardened so great a part of this generation at once, to cast off the fear of God and the regard of man; that we are now habituated to the news of self-murders, committed in the shade of these principles with the greatest deliberation, yea, of the husband and the father imbruing his hands in the blood of the beloved wife and all the tender offspring, to give a sanction to their scheme.¹⁴

On Tuesday, December 10, 1782, William Beadle passed a pleasant evening with family and friends. He awoke before sunrise the next morning, sent his maid on an errand, and then murdered his family. He took an ax to the heads of his wife and four young chil-

¹² [Murray], *Bath-Kol*, 97, 98. See also *ibid.*, 101–2.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1788), 169; [Murray], *Bath-Kol*, x.

¹⁴ [Murray], *Bath-Kol*, 164–65. For a similar paragraph in an anti-Universalist tract that mentions Beadle by name, see *An Answer to a piece, entitled "An appeal to the impartial publick, by an association," calling themselves "Christian independents, in Gloucester"* (Salem, Mass., 1785), 22. It was probably written by Samuel Whittemore, a member of Damnation Murray's church.

dren, whom he had probably drugged with an opiate the night before, and then used a knife to slit their throats from ear to ear. The horrified neighbors found the bloody steps on the stairs leading to a Windsor chair by the kitchen fireplace, where Beadle had sat, placed the carving knife on the table in front of him, and shot himself in the head. Near the end of the following day, December 12, a crowd gathered in front of Beadle's house and "grew almost frantic with rage," demanding the body of the murderer. Some insisted that it be dragged to a place where four roads met and "perforated by a stake." But none wanted Beadle's corpse buried near his or her property. Finally, they stuffed the body out a window, tied the bloody knife to Beadle's chest with cords, took the corpse to the banks of the Connecticut River by a horse-drawn sled, and dumped it into a hole by the water's edge, "like the carcass of a beast." The funeral for Lydia Beadle, thirty-two years old, and the children—Ansell, Elizabeth, Lydia, and Mary, aged six to eleven—was held the next day.¹⁵

The first newspaper article, printed in both the *Hartford Connecticut Courant* and the *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, appeared on December 17. The opening paragraph described Beadle as a Briton who had lived in Wethersfield for about ten years and in America for about twenty. He had an "amiable" wife and "four lovely and promising children." A merchant whose business had been in decline for some years, he had immersed himself in "Deistical books." Papers he left behind, the article explained, showed that he had discarded common ideas of morality and came to consider human beings as "mere machines." Letters written shortly before his death contained his declaration that he "*intended to die a proper Deist*" and that he believed he had the right to take his family with him. He acted "with all imaginable deliberation and composure of mind," the article reported. "The Jury of inquest, were of the opinion, that he was of sound mind, and returned their verdict accordingly. 'Tis very difficult to determine where distraction begins. 'Tis evident he was rational on every other subject; on this no one conversed with him." Beadle had been alone in his closet with his thoughts and his deistical books. He developed a "new theoretic system" that on December 11 he "put in practice." The article closed by encouraging readers to weep for the victims and "detest the direful principles productive of such effects."¹⁶

Newspapers throughout the country reprinted the initial article. It circulated as a broadside in Providence. In Boston a second broadside was published, pairing the article with eight stanzas of verse and two illustrations: a crude woodcut of three men apparently butchering babies with swords and a skull and crossbones beneath six black coffins. (See figure 1.) The poem urged readers to "Detest the errors" that led Beadle to the deed, though it did not specify what those errors were, and also introduced the idea of the devil's influence, praying that "Satan may be bound, / Since to deceive so many he is found."¹⁷

¹⁵ [Stephen Mix Mitchell], *A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle, of Wethersfield, in the state of Connecticut*. . . (Hartford, 1783), esp. 11. That Hartford edition of Mitchell's *Narrative* included extracts from the 1783 funeral sermon for the Beadle family: Marsh, *Great Sin and Danger*. The *Narrative* was also published as "A Letter, From a Gentleman in Wethersfield," appended to Marsh's sermon, *ibid.* It was republished with "A True Account of the House on the Morning after the Dreadful Catastrophe," almost certainly by Dr. John Farnsworth, in Bennington, Vermont, in 1794. The *Narrative* was also published in Windsor, Vermont, 1795; in Greenfield, Massachusetts, 1805; and in a German translation: *William Beadles Lebens-Beschreibung* (Biography of William Beadle) (Ephrata, Pa., 1796).

¹⁶ *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, Dec. 17, 1782; *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, Dec. 17, 1782.

¹⁷ *Providence, Jan. 1, 1783. The following is the most particular Account we have been able to obtain of the late cruel Murders*. . . (Providence, 1783); *Poem, Occasioned by the most shocking and Cruel Murder*. . . [Boston, 1783].

William Woots A

POEM,

CRUEL MURDER

Occasioned by the most shocking and

That ever was represented on the Stage; or the most deliberate MURDER that ever was perpetrated in human Life.—“He violated Nature’s great original Law, defy’d eternal Justice, and seal’d his own Perdition.”

I.

A BLOODY scene I’ll now relate,
Which lately happen’d in a neighbour’g state,
A murder of the deepest dye, I say,
O be amaz’d! for surely well you may.

II.

A man, (unworthy of the name) who flew
Himself, his comfort, and his offspring too;
An amiable wife, with four children dear,
Into one grave was put—Oh drop a tear!

III.

Soon in the morning on that fatal day,
BEADLE, the murderer, sent his maid away,
To tell the awful deed he had in view;
To their assistance the kind neighbours flew.

IV.

It truly gives me pain for to pen down,
A deed so black, and yet his mind was found.
Say he, “I mean to close fix persons eyes;
“I thro’ perfect fondness, and the read rest ties.”

V.

Detest the errors, to this deed him drew,
And mourn the helpless victims whom he flew;
And pray to God that Satan may be found,
Since to deceive fo many he is bound.

VI.

Come pure religion, of heav’nly birth,
Dispel these glooms, and brighten all the earth;
Drive these destructive errors from the land,
And grant that truth as a fire guard may stand.

VII.

Hasten, our God, the glorious times,
When thou thyself shall reign;
And virtue and peace thro’ all our climes,
Their triumph shall maintain.

VIII.

Fly swiftly round ye circling years,
—Hail the auspicious day!
When love shall dwell in ev’ry heart—
Nor men their offspring slay!

IX.

As a proper Dignity. Having discarded all
himself. Some circumstances render it prob-
able that he had given an ostate to the fa-
mily before they retired to rest.
Speaking of this catastrophe in one of his let-
ters, he says, “I mean to close the eyes of my
persons, through perfect humanity and the
most endearing fondness and friendship; fo
never mortal father felt more of these tender
ties than myself.” Having become reduc-
ed in some degree to his circumstances, he reject-
ed his former ideas of divine Revelation and
belief of a future state of misery: He adopted
his new theoretic system which he now pu-
sues in practice.

The Jury of inquir, were of opinion, that
the was of sound mind, and returned their
verdict accordingly. It is difficult to deter-
mine where diffidence begins. It is very
evident he was rational on every other sub-
ject; on this no one conversed with him.

The corpse of the murderer was laid on
two barrels and exposed to flame, with the
bloody knife fastened on his breast, after
which it was placed on a horse sled, dragged to
an obscure place and buried with every mark of
secrecy.

On Friday the unfortunate woman, with
her children by her side were interred in one
grave, with every mark of respect: When the
ceremony was practised suitable to the occasion,
to a large concourse of people, and grief mingled
with pity, displayed itself in every countenance.
On the funeral and melancholy occasion.

HARTFORD, December 17, 1782.

On the morning of the 11th inst, about four
o’clock, at Wethersfield, a deed was perpetrated,
of the most extraordinary and shocking na-
ture.—WILLIAM BEADLE, a native of South Brit-
ain, who has resided in that town nearly ten, and in
America, about twenty years, who having acquired
wealth, and married (at Fairfield in this State, about
14 years since) an amiable woman, of a reputable fa-
mily, by whom he had four lovely and promising
children, one son and three daughters, whose educa-
tion he superintended with great care and seeming
solicitude, and was apparently an affectionate hus-
band.—His business, which was that of a trader, de-
clining some years since, he betook himself more to
books than usual, and was unobscurely fond of chaste
and esteemed Didactical; of late he rejected all Revela-
tion’s imposition, and (as he expresses himself) “reassum-
ing all the vulgar reliques of the world, intended to

SOLD near LIBERTY-STUMP and next the SWAN-TAVERN, South-End. (See page single.)—The sermon refer’d to above
will be immediately printed as soon as it comes to Hand.

Figure 1. William Beadle's murder of his wife, Lydia, and their four young children in Wethersfield, Connecticut, on December 11, 1782, inspired numerous commentaries, including this broadside, *A Poem, Occasioned by the most shocking and Cruel Murder*. Circulating in Boston shortly after the killings, the poem urged readers to "Detest the errors" that led to Beadle's crimes. *Courtesy Connecticut Historical Society.*

Letters to the editor and essays by moralists and polemicists began appearing right after the New Year. Some writers expected, and others demanded, the publication of more of Beadle's writings. A correspondent signing as "A humble Professor of Christianity"

linked the public exposure of Beadle's literary remains to the public display of his corpse, arguing that his papers should be published to reinforce a sense of the "fatal tendency" of his false doctrines and that his body should be exhumed and left to rot on a public gibbet to be devoured by birds of prey, as "an example for all atheists and deists." Calling on the town, the state, or the U.S. Congress to act, he declared that no authority had "a right in this case to retain the body from this just resentment of the public, nor to suppress or conceal his writings." "A Friend to Justice" also called for Beadle's body to be exhumed and hung on a gibbet to "make him a spectacle of horror to infidels." He argued that "thousands are uneasy in this State; our sister States hear of the execrable deed with horror, and are amazed that such a wretch should be suffered to be put in a grave." After two brief excerpts circulated, no more of Beadle's letters appeared in print, but his body kept reappearing like the return of the repressed. The land chosen for Beadle's grave happened to belong to the neighboring town of Glastonbury, whose townspeople, according to one account, felt themselves "insulted by the burying of such a monster" within their town limits and asked the Wethersfield selectmen to move the body. It was exhumed and reburied at night in a secret spot nearby, but the second grave was soon discovered by some children. When spring came, water exposed Beadle's skeleton, but before it could be moved and reburied again, the curious came and some of "the bones were broken off and scattered through the country."¹⁸

Clergymen had been among the first to draw larger lessons from the tragedy as they attacked Beadle's principles from the pulpit.¹⁹ Yet there are important differences even among the New England clergy who responded to the Beadle affair. The Reverend John Marsh of Wethersfield, a moderate and genteel Calvinist with a crippled hand, a large salary, and a meticulously arranged white wig, argued that none should find it astonishing that a man of Beadle's principles would slaughter his family. Anyone who could reject the "infallible evidences" of Christian truth could as easily reject the conscious mind's awareness of its own free agency, pervert the natural affections for his family, and extinguish natural conscience and reason. It was obvious that men of such principles were unfit "to be intrusted either with private or public important affairs, whatever their accomplishments may be in other respects." In Lyme, Connecticut, the Old Calvinist pastor, George Beckwith, nearly eighty, mounted the pulpit and, like the New Light Presbyterian Damnation Murray in Newburyport, tarred the Universalists with Beadle's brush. James Dana, the Wallingford, Connecticut, "heretick" who was too theologically liberal for Calvinists and too conservative for Harvard Arminians, discerned a rather different set of intellectual affinities. He had long detected and condemned a counterintuitive but dangerous link between the teachings of certain hyper-Calvinist New England divines and the fatalism of European deists. Beadle, he suggested, represented a pernicious theological malady that had far more influence in America than the writings of deists like Voltaire: the argu-

¹⁸ "A humble Professor of Christianity," *New London Connecticut Gazette*, Jan. 3, 1783; "A Friend to Justice," *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, Jan. 21, 1783. For a published fragment of Beadle's will and his brief note to neighbors on the morning of the murder, see "The Will of William Beadle," *Boston Continental Journal*, Jan. 16, 1783; and "A letter from a Gentleman in Wethersfield," *ibid.* The account of the burial is by Col. Thomas Belden of Wethersfield, in Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York* (1821–1822; 4 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1969), I, 166. See also [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 12.

¹⁹ Marsh's *Great Sin and Danger* was preached on December 13, 1782, and advertised as "Just Published," *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, May 20, 1783. For a sermon on the Beadle affair preached on December 22, 1782, and advertised as "Just Published" in the *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, March 6, 1783, see James Dana, *Men's Sins Not Chargeable on God* (New Haven, [1783]).

ments propagated by Jonathan Edwards and his New Divinity followers denying a true freedom of the will.²⁰

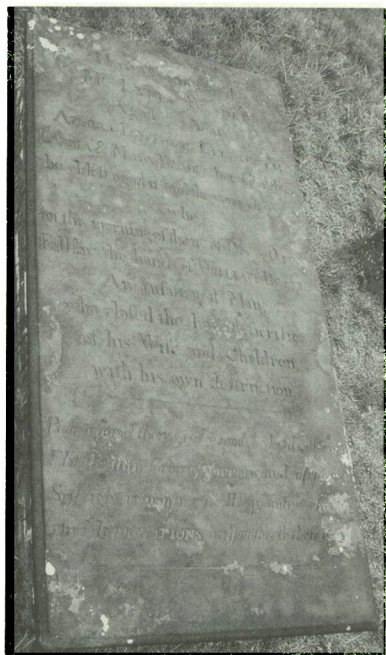
The pastor and poet Timothy Dwight, a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, agreed with Dana in considering what Dwight called "infidel philosophy" a dangerous social and political threat. But not only did he think it absurd to see any resemblance between deism and Edwardsean theology, he also believed it a waste of time to take deists seriously intellectually. Infidel philosophy, he believed, was an incoherent jumble. Deism was just another pathetically thin rationalization for sin. Years later, Dwight confessed that as a young man he himself had been "strongly tempted" by deism and skepticism. But such temptation was irrational, Dwight insisted; it was not the product of cool deliberation but of sinful inclinations and prejudices, the natural bias of an unregenerate heart. The writings of deists, skeptics, and atheists drew attention only by "novelty, fashion . . . ingenuity and celebrity," not "truth and evidence" or "serious and permanent conviction." Those views enabled him blithely to gather thinkers as diverse as Voltaire, Ethan Allen, and such liberal clergymen as Charles Chauncy and James Dana under Satan's banner in his 1787 poem, *The Triumph of Infidelity*. In an allusion surely understood by readers in the late eighteenth century but apparently forgotten since, Dwight's *Triumph* references Beadle in an eighteen-line passage.²¹

Later in his life Dwight again reflected on the Beadle affair. He claimed that he had known the family "intimately" and concluded that "Pride was unquestionably the ruin of Beadle." It was Beadle's prideful "passion"—not, in Dwight's view, a set of philosophical principles—that induced the Wethersfield merchant to "sit down in a sullen hostility against God and man." A preference for seeing Beadle's deism as an effect rather than a cause and thus for blaming the tragedy on unreasoning passion rather than perverse philosophical principle also seems to be expressed in the inscription on the gravestone Wethersfield erected for Lydia and the children, "Who . . . Fell by the hands of William Beadle. An Infatuated Man." (See figure 2.)²²

²⁰ Marsh, *Great Sin and Danger*, 24, 26; George Beckwith, *An Attempt to Shew and Maintain, the Wisdom . . . of God's Annexing Eternal Rewards and Punishments to His Righteous Laws* (Norwich, [Conn.], 1783), esp. 22. On George Beckwith, see Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College* (6 vols., New York, 1885–1912), I, 366–68. On John Marsh, see Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, vol. XV (Boston, 1970), 73–78. On James Dana, see Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, vol. XIII (Boston, 1965), 305–22. For the description of Dana as a "heretic," attributed to Jonathan Edwards Jr., see *ibid.*, 316. See also Allen C. Guelzo, "From Calvinist Metaphysics to Republican Theory: Jonathan Edwards and James Dana on Freedom of the Will," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56 (July 1995), 399–418. A link between Beadle's fatalism and Edwardsean and New Divinity teachings is also implied in Marsh, *Great Sin and Danger*, 23. This link was explicit in "A Friend to pure Scriptural Orthodoxy," *Boston Continental Journal*, June 26, 1783; and in Israel Holly, *Old Divinity Preferable to Modern Novelty* (Litchfield, Conn., 1795), esp. 32.

²¹ Timothy Dwight, *The Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy* (New Haven, 1798), 66, 83. On the incoherence and contradictions of infidel philosophy, see *ibid.*, 35. Timothy Dwight, *The Triumph of Infidelity* ([Hartford, Conn.], 1788), 20–21, lines 585–603. The verses refer to details of the Beadle tragedy that had become public and had circulated widely. Lines 585–88 allude to the last supper of oysters that Beadle prepared for his family. Cf. [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 8. The poem continues: "There ----- grinn'd, his conscience sear'd anew, / And scarcely wish'd the doctrine false or true" (589–90). The dashes correspond to the number of letters in Beadle's name (a pattern Dwight used throughout the poem). Line 590 seems to refer to a passage from Beadle's papers about his uncertainty about the truth of Christianity that is quoted in Marsh, *Great Sin and Danger*, 20–21. Dwight then alluded to the murder: "Scarce smil'd, himself secure from God to know, / So poor the triumph over so weak a foe" (592). Lines 593–98 reference a passage quoted by Marsh where Beadle, contemplating the murders, studies his countenance in a mirror. The final lines in this section reference Beadle's being "Fix'd in cold death" (603). The Beadle affair is not mentioned in Colin Wells, *The Devil and Dr. Dwight: Satire and Theology in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2002); nor in the chapter on Dwight in Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 327–85.

²² Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, I, 165, 167. Timothy Dwight argued that all men's actions



Here lie interred
 Mrs. LYDIA BEADLE
 Aged 32 Years
 ANSELL LOTHROP ELIZABETH
 LYDIA & MARY BEADLE
 her Children / the eldest aged 11 and the
 youngest 6 years
 who
 on the morning of the 11th of Decr AD 1782
 Fell by the hands of William Beadle
 An infatuated Man
 who closed the horrid sacrifice
 of his Wife and Children
 with his own destruction

*Pale round their grassy tomb bedewed with tears
 Flit the thin forms of sorrows and of fears
 Soft sighs responsive swell to plaintive chords
 And INDIGNATIONS half unsheathe their swords*

Figure 2. After they were murdered in December 1782, Lydia Beadle and her four children, Ansell, Elizabeth, Lydia, and Mary, were laid to rest at the First Church of Christ cemetery in Wethersfield, Connecticut. The gravestone inscription, which called William Beadle "An infatuated Man," suggested that unreasoned passion, rather than the perverse principles of deism, had caused him to kill his family. *Photo by Karin Wulf. Courtesy Karin Wulf.*

Writers in the newspapers also pondered the relation between Beadle's beliefs and his monstrous acts. While some mentioned natural depravity, the passions of the heart, and pride, and four were sure that the devil had his hand in the tragedy, all decried Beadle's principles, though they differed in their assessment of what those principles were, the role they played in the murder/suicide, and how the public should respond to them. One writer blamed Beadle's turn away from the Bible; another indicated that the slaughter was the "natural fruit" of Beadle's alternative philosophy. One correspondent focused on

spring from their volitions and that their volitions are in accord with "the prevailing dictates of the understanding." But opinions were more an effect (of a sinful heart) than a cause (of sinful actions). See Dwight, *Nature and Danger of Infidel Philosophy*, 44. For an account of the Beadle tragedy that misreads the tombstone inscription's as calling Beadle an "Infuriated," rather than "Infatuated," man. see *Cincinnati Mirror*, Dec. 22, 1832, p. 52.



Figure 3. The cover of Stephen Mix Mitchell's *A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle*, published in 1783 in Hartford, Connecticut, bore this woodcut of coffins marked with hearts, which represented Lydia Beadle and her children; below, William Beadle lay beside the knife, hatchet, and pistols he had used to slay his family and himself. Mitchell, who served as a judge, a representative to the Connecticut General Assembly, and a delegate to the Continental Congress, penned the fullest account of William Beadle's life and death, in which he emphasized Beadle's business troubles. *Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.*

Beadle's fatalism; another defined his speculative malady as atheism; a third insisted that his tenets had nothing to do with Universalism.²³

In trying to assess the relation of principle to practice and to determine what the public's response to either should be, two writers battled over the meaning of "common sense." A writer calling himself "A Friend to Common Sense" argued that all men were naturally sinful but that when they denied eternal punishment, they also parted company with the common sense that ordinarily set some limit on sinful behavior. He appealed to common sense as a nod to a commonly shared prudence, to presuppositions that should not need to be argued. Aiming at deists as well as Universalists, he contended that they all ought to be "punished for entertaining and publishing [their] sentiments." Indeed, though he acknowledged that some would call it religious persecution, he urged

²³ The commentators ascribed Beadle's actions to multiple causes. His giving up the Bible as well as pride and the devil figure in "A humble Professor of Christianity," *New London Connecticut Gazette*, Jan. 3, 1783. The tragedy is described as the "natural fruit of infidelity" in "Benevolens," *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, Jan. 14, 1783. Infidel principles and pride are blamed in "A Friend to Justice," *ibid.*, Jan. 21, 1783. Despair, depravity, and the devil are mentioned but the connection to Universalism is denied in "A Letter to a Friend," *New London Connecticut Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1783. Beadle's denial of the doctrine of future punishment is pointed to in "A Friend to Common Sense," *Boston Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 30, 1783. Beadle is called an atheist in "A Friend to Moderation and Free Inquiry," *ibid.*, March 20, 1783. The devil and corrupt principles figure in "A Friend to Truth," *Worcester Massachusetts Spy*, Feb. 6, 1783. Passions of the heart and satanic suggestions are blamed in "An Essay on Self Murder," *ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1783.

that people who denied the reality of eternal suffering in hell be imprisoned for adhering to “this stupid, this detestable doctrine, which annihilates all restraints, insults common sense, and introduces a kind of insanity. . . . Ought not such persons be confined? Ought not such sentiments be guarded against? Common sense says yes.” “A Friend to Moderation and Free Inquiry” responded and, while also appealing to “common sense,” charged that the first writer had blended disparate ideas and schemes—Universalism, deism, atheism, skepticism—into a “strange jumble.” The first writer had presupposed an extreme Calvinism that declares man naturally inclined to every evil and thus makes God the author of sin—a warped version of Christianity that itself, according to the “Friend to Moderation,” encourages people to renounce the scriptures and drives many to a dangerous spiritual despair. But, the “Friend to Moderation” continued, this effort of modern inquisitors to castigate and punish heterodox religious opinion was only the most recent that he had seen in his nearly sixty years. Common sense dictated that civil authority stay out of such disputes.²⁴

The fullest account of Beadle’s life and death was appended to Marsh’s funeral sermon as “A Letter from a Gentleman in Wethersfield.” The anonymous author was Stephen Mix Mitchell, a county court judge, representative in the Connecticut General Assembly, and delegate to the Continental Congress. The letter was republished in July 1783 as *A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle*; its cover had a crude woodcut illustration bearing black coffins with hearts on them (for Lydia and the children), and Beadle’s corpse lying next to his knife, hatchet, and pistols. (See figure 3.) Mitchell was the first commentator to pay much attention to the trader’s business troubles. Since coming to Wethersfield, he explained, Beadle had refused to sell on credit. When the war began, he had accumulated “a very handsome assortment of goods for a country store,” which he sold for cash at the Continental currency’s face value. Rather than investing in real estate, he kept the money, “intending to keep his property within his own reach, believing it always secure while his eye was upon it.” But the paper currency dropped in value during the war and was officially depreciated by Congress. “Continental currency taught him that wealth could take to itself wings and fly away: Notwithstanding his vigilance.” As for the merchant’s religious opinions, Mitchell learned that Beadle had made an offhand remark to a neighbor once, indicating that “he very early became acquainted with a club in London who were Deists.” Yet in Wethersfield, at least, “he claim’d to be a Christian, and offered two of his children for baptism.”²⁵

Mitchell, like the Reverend Marsh, quoted from Beadle’s papers for his narrative. But he supported the decision not to publish the papers themselves. “Much has been said in favour of publishing his writings by those who have not seen them; those who have seen them have doubted the propriety of such a measure.” The decision was made by a committee of three clergymen: James Dana, Chauncey Whittelsey of New Haven’s First Church, and President Ezra Stiles of Yale College. Stiles received copies of the papers from Beadle’s former friend Col. John Chester on Christmas Day 1782. The bundle contained

²⁴ “A Friend to Common Sense,” *Boston Independent Chronicle*, Jan. 30, 1783; “A Friend to Moderation and Free Inquiry,” *ibid.*, March 20, 1783. Anti-Universalist writers continued to use Beadle as a bogeyman for decades. See John Kelly, *Solemn and Important Reasons against Becoming a Universalist* (Haverhill, Mass., 1815), 20; and, on references to Beadle in the anti-Universalist literature of the 1820s, Richard James Bell, “Do Not Despair: The Cultural Significance of Suicide in America” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006), 341.

²⁵ [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 7, 6, 16. On deist networks in Europe, see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London, 1981); and Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York, 1991).

four letters intended for Chester, two for Mitchell, and Beadle's will, all written between the first week of November 1782 and the evening before his death, the total amounting to about twenty-six folio pages. Stiles made long extracts in his literary diary.²⁶

In his letters, Beadle tried to explain his beliefs to his friends. He denied that deism could be equated with atheism. "That there is some wonderful Power or Powers that makes me and all," he wrote, "I have no doubt." Yet human beings remained ignorant of the specific nature and intentions of God because no credible evidence demonstrated that there had ever been any direct communication between Creator and creature: "I also believe that he never personated Man, nor ever condescended to talk to him." Beadle had studied the scriptures and found much to admire there; clearly they were written by wise and good men who meant well, "But that there is any more real Inspiration in them than in any man that thinks and speaks as he passes along the street, I rather deny than doubt." The moral elements of Christianity would be a benevolent system if they were ever put into practice, but the religion as a whole was filled with inconsistencies, impenetrable mysteries, and absurd claims to the miraculous. Like the other religions of the world it was "foisted on ignorant mortals," and it took "a real reasonable Creature" to discover the "Trick." Reason, he argued, expressing the standard sentiment of radical Enlightenment demystification, allows the scales of fantasy and superstition to drop from our eyes. Only the "Deist truly sees God through that Book of Nature and is contented for Himself and rejoices that he can discover the springs of all other Religions which the Populace tumble about just as Babies do their play things." He believed that there was a future state of existence after death, or "perhaps a thousand different future states for man (and it may be for Brutes)."²⁷

But he had no confidence that reason could press much beyond those bare suppositions of a creative power and an afterlife. He did not look to the heavens and the earth and find God's character and intentions in the regular laws of the natural world. Although the critical rationality of the discerning deist could see through the foolishness of traditional religions, it could not fill the void left by the loss of faith. Beadle professed a profound epistemological skepticism: "I choose to leave this World as I found it, honestly confessing that I know not what to make of it nor never did, nor never will any man that thinks, know what to make of it while he stays in it."²⁸

Terse statements Beadle left behind echoed skeptical sentiments in his favorite books. In his will, he left prized volumes to friends. To Thaddeus Burr, Esq., of Fairfield, Connecticut, he bequeathed the *Miscellanies* by Sir William Temple, "an author I dearly love." Temple acknowledged that reason gave man a great advantage over the rest of creation, but it also subjected him to trouble and misery; he conceded that moral philosophy was intended to help people achieve happiness, but he derided most of modern philosophy as a vain and empty pursuit. The skepticism ran deeper in the two volumes of Michel de

²⁶ [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 16. For Ezra Stiles's first mention of the murder (December 12, 1782), receiving the packet of Beadle's writings (December 25, 1782), and his extracts (January 7, 1783), see Ezra Stiles, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (3 vols., New York, 1901) III, 49–54. Dexter prints only a portion of Stiles's extracts. All quotations are from the manuscript version of the *Literary Diary*. See "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," in *Ezra Stiles Papers at Yale University*, ed. Harold E. Selesky (microfilm, 22 reels, Yale University, 1976), reel 9, 172–89. (The numbers are those of manuscript pages.) I have spelled out what Stiles abbreviated and have not reproduced underlines, which may not have been in Beadle's original papers (no longer extant).

²⁷ "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 173, 183–84, 185, 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

Montaigne's *Essays* that Beadle willed to his friend John Chester. Although Montaigne was "the greatest Egotist on Earth," Beadle thought that "the whole town of Weathersfield is not worth half the Wisdom in that book." Montaigne famously criticized the limitations of human reason when it was not aided by supernatural grace. The early pages of Montaigne's longest essay, where he humbles human pretensions to knowledge and likens us in dozens of ways to animals, might be aptly, if crudely, summarized by Beadle's conclusion: "The Wisdom of Philosophers, the Trophies of Conquerors and the Squabbles of Divines, appear in reality more ridiculous than the droll faces and tricks of Baboons and Monkeys."²⁹

To work out the relation of skepticism and faith and to discover a way to live and die well, Beadle drew selectively from authors like Montaigne and Temple, but the crucial use he made of such favorite writers was in sacralizing the process of sympathetic reading. Montaigne concluded that "philosophy in general agrees that there is an ultimate remedy to be prescribed for every kind of trouble: namely, ending our life if we find it intolerable." He was not championing that position, as Beadle would, but criticizing the ultimate powerlessness of philosophy. Yet Montaigne himself was drawn to classical tales of noble suicide and the Stoic virtues of dying well. Beadle assured Colonel Chester that no one needs to "kill himself that reads [Montaigne], for he is a merry old Wag and speaks as much of living as dying." Montaigne had the consoling guidance of "the changeless foundation of [God's] holy Word." Beadle, by contrast, "discovered ten thousand Beauties" in the Bible but ultimately concluded that it was a text like any other, an amalgam of human wisdom and foolishness. From those texts—the Bible as well as the works of such writers as Montaigne, Temple, William Shakespeare, and Alexander Pope—he gathered "opinions," if not divine truths, and made them his own: that the creative power in the universe was God, "my father and not my Enemy"; that there was no devil; that to fear death was cowardice. Yet just as Christians claimed that reading the Word not only provided knowledge, but could transform the soul, Beadle felt that his reading had molded who he was: "The Wisdom and Discernment of many noble fools that have thought and wrote in almost every age and nation I have incorporated into my very frame and almost adore them." His private reading was important not just for what he read but also for how he read. "Men in general read the best of Writers, as Clowns eat a delicate Dish, swallow it quick but never taste it nor think of it more." Beadle tasted good writing and became a man of good taste.³⁰

The sympathetic correspondence between Beadle's "frame" and the "noble fools" who had thought and felt more deeply than most was a key to his quest for a higher truth. In the dead of winter he read James Thomson's "Summer," a hymn to the bounteous pleasures of a green and pleasant land, and he felt his spirits lift. "Serene and even joyful have I passed this pleasant day," he wrote. He recommended that Colonel Chester read the "exalted" passages in Thomson or "in a thousand other Books and when you find the highest strains, then you will find the Soul of William Beadle." He reflected on the power of language and art to cross time and space to create "kindred Spirits" from "Sons of Science" with similar sensibilities. "When a fine voice, man or Woman, judiciously turn their

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182, 181, 179. Sir William Temple, *Miscellanies, in Four Essays* (Glasgow, 1761), esp. 53, 58; Michel de Montaigne, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond," in *The Complete Essays*, by Michel de Montaigne, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (London, 1991), 489–683. It is not clear which editions of Temple and Montaigne Beadle owned.

³⁰ Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. Screech, 552, 653; "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 181, 183, 176, 177, 182. For Beadle's borrowing of a Shakespearean phrase, see Marsh, *Great Sin and Danger*, 22.

strains to you, do you not cleave to and love them? Or if you hum a fine piece of Music to yourself, composed by one you never saw or heard, is there not a force of sympathy that binds your soul to his[?]" Beadle's imagined community of kindred spirits was composed mostly of personalities he encountered in books. "There are but few men capable of Deism. They are when found like a Diamond among a million pebbles." Although his own "circumstances were always rather narrow, which were great disadvantages in this world," he had "great reason to think that my soul is above the common mould." On earth, certainly in late eighteenth-century Christian America, such a soul could commune with like-minded men only when alone with his books; in heaven, as he tried to imagine it, "What then must be the Glee when every Discord is removed, and men that lived a thousand years ago shall hand us to our seats?"³¹

Beadle certainly found few kindred spirits in his actual community of Wethersfield, and his philosophical alienation had a parallel in his failed economic strategy. He had a circle of friends and was a member of the highest society in that prosperous river town. But the facade that the respected merchant showed to neighbors was not the inner man. Beadle masked his deism from everyone, including, apparently, the wife he professed to love dearly. It is impossible to know if his final disillusionment with Christianity preceded or followed his economic troubles; perhaps his despair merely strengthened convictions he had had for years. In his mind, though, the two were intertwined. In a 1775 verse advertisement, Beadle had invoked the values of the moral economy and had rooted marketplace exchanges, at least rhetorically and through the abstracted medium of print, in the relations of virtuous citizens and neighborly families. He asked "Fair Ladies" to buy his stock of tea before the boycott took effect; he had a wife, after all, he noted, who might find the "noxious Herb," like Eve's apple, too hard to resist. So to "help us keep our virtue sound," he urged his readers to "quickly purchase 'tother pound." However, by demanding cash and denying credit to the customers who came into his shop, Beadle placed his trust in a Continental cash economy over day-to-day commercial exchanges with his neighbors. He felt that he had done the lawful, patriotic, and honorable thing by selling goods for Continental currency according to its legal value; others cheated, speculated, abused credit, and then benefited when Congress devalued the currency, ruining honest fools like Beadle who had taken the government at its word. Beadle was "greatly incensed with the public for Depreciation," according to Stiles's summary of Beadle's writings. The merchant obsessed over the "parcel of Continental trash" that had cost him twelve hundred pounds and cursed the legislators who voted for depreciation. He condemned the "monstrous Conduct" of all who called themselves Christ's disciples yet by their actions stabbed their supposed savior in the heart every day.³²

The lesson was clear: the world did not reward virtue; it crushed the good along with the naïve, the weak, and the poor. Inferior wretches "laughed at and despised and trampled on" noble souls who had been thrown down by bad luck. For Beadle, this cruel turn of the marketplace and the upside down social world it created had a broader philosophical and theological resonance. Christianity described human beings as "free agents," Bea-

³¹ "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 187. The line missing from this passage in Stiles's transcript, about Beadle's narrow circumstances, is supplied by Marsh, *Great Sin and Danger*, 22.

³² [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 5; "Advertisement Addressed to the Ladies," *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, Feb. 13, 1775; Ezra Stiles, commentary, in "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 180; "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 184. Beadle announced his "new Plan" of selling for cash only when he first opened his Wethersfield store in 1773; see *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, May 4, 1773.

dle thought, and Christians claimed to perceive God's will in his acts of Providence, acts that, it was supposed, to some extent rewarded virtue and punished vice in this world as well as the next. But Beadle saw no moral logic to experience. In "Summer" Thomson taught as much, in a dark passage telling the tale of blameless Amelia, inexplicably struck down by a lightning bolt in an afternoon storm. For Beadle the deadly storm had been the heartless realities of revolutionary commerce. Though he seems to have fallen only from the ranks of the wealthiest in Wethersfield to the middling sort, he felt he was enduring a hell on earth, claiming that "I am in such a situation that I cannot procure food, raiment nor fuel for myself and family." It made no sense that he should suffer so. He pointed to his "sincere prayers and desires both to know and do the will of the great creator." He mentioned his "continued efforts to promote the Happiness of my fellow men, even to the Emancipation of every slave on Earth" and his "Charity [that] has extended even to the Brutes and to the Insects." He stressed all his "strenuous Exertions for that system of Government I thought best for mankind." Benevolence, patriotism, and even piety of a sort: he had "lived well, meant well, and done well." And yet the world had crushed him. Where was the moral logic in that?³³

Still, he insisted that only a creature puffed up with his own pride and vanity would conclude that there was no logic just because "the great Creator has not thought proper to let him know for what Purpose he conducts matters as he does on Earth." Shunning the atheist's universe of blind chance, Beadle determined that all of creation must be "directed by the Hand of Heaven" and that therefore man was "a perfect Machine who can do nothing but as he is operated upon by Some Superior Power." If that were the case, he reasoned, "we are all impelled to say and act all that we Say and act," and therefore "there is no Such Thing as Sin."³⁴

Such convictions, however, did not free him to do whatever he wanted; they impelled him to somehow find out what God intended. Referring to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, he agreed "that the Will of God should only be done and nothing of mine." It was a surrender of self, a surrender of agency, an attempt to become a more perfect machine for the frictionless enactment of divine intentions. In the face of God's continuing silence, the question remained: What to do? The Stoic logic of suicide was persuasive; he had been convinced and had even contemplated killing himself twenty years before. But what of his children? Beadle seems to be a caricature of both eighteenth-century patriarchal power and paternal sentimentalism. Because he had a "hand in bringing [them] into the World," he felt that his responsibility for his children and his power over them were absolute. As it is "a fathers duty to provide well for his Flock, I chose to consign them over to better hands," he wrote, at once acknowledging his failure and asserting his right to transfer his proprietorship. His family was an extension of self: "how to divide my-

³³ "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 177, 179, 174-75; James Thomson, "Summer," in *The Seasons*, by James Thomson (London, [1760?]). Dr. Farnsworth concluded that Beadle's main problem had been an irrational fear of poverty. See "A True Account of the House on the Morning after the Dreadful Catastrophe," in [Stephen Mix Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (Bennington, 1794), 40. In the early nineteenth century, Timothy Dwight scoffed that Beadle "died worth three hundred pounds sterling. The farmers in Connecticut were, at an average, probably not worth more at the same period." See Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, I, 168. Tax abstracts from the First Society of Wethersfield are reproduced in Smart, "Life of William Beadle," 141-47. (They are from the Wethersfield Tax Abstracts Collection, 1772-1783, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.) Smart notes that from 1773 to 1781, Beadle fell from 79th of 322 (75th percentile) to 213th of 339 (38th percentile). See *ibid.* See also Beadle Estate Inventory, March 26, 1783, Estates of Deceased Persons (Connecticut State Library, Hartford).

³⁴ "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 179, 176.

self from myself that is my family, has been my only Disturbance." It was not his right, however, but his compassion that finally compelled him to act. He planned "to close the Eyes" of his children "through perfect Humanity, and the most endearing fondness and Friendship. For never did mortal father feel more of these tender Ties than myself." Deciding about his wife was more difficult. He acknowledged that he had no right to take her life. But she would be financially adrift without a husband, socially stigmatized after the "Shocking Disaster" that was about to take place, and psychologically broken after the loss of her beloved children. "I concluded it would be unmerciful in me to leave her behind." Beadle was indeed a man of feeling.³⁵

He did not come to his final solution quickly. He had deliberated about the murders, he wrote, for three years. But reason was not—and never could be—enough. So he sought for signs of divine intention in daily life. "I was determined not to hasten the matter, but kept hoping that still providence would turn up something to prevent it if the Intent was wrong." Mitchell would later report that Beadle had removed the cover of a well on his property: Would God choose to have one of his children fall in? During the previous summer, the merchant had encouraged his son to swim out into the deep waters of the Connecticut River: Would God use the currents to claim the boy? Beadle sent his wife to her relatives in Fairfield in November, but God returned her to Wethersfield ten days sooner than Beadle expected: Was that a sign that she should come with Beadle and the children to heaven? God, as always, was silent. On the morning of December 6, Beadle went into the bedroom where his children lay sound asleep. He had his weapons with him. "I stood over them, and asked my God, whether it was right or not now to strike, but no answer came. Nor I believe ever does to man while on earth."³⁶

Yet perhaps Beadle's inner experience might allow him to sense God's inclinations. Perhaps the answer could be found, not by trying to discern divine truths through reason or a close observation of daily life, but by establishing a sympathetic connection to the author of the book of nature. To read that book, Beadle looked to his own heart rather than to the world. Perhaps his own sentiments, his own sensibilities, his own refined moral sense, could serve as a sensorium of the divine will. Hearing no answer from God as he stood over his sleeping children, "I then examined myself." He did not tremble; he felt neither fear nor horror. Walking into the next room, he looked at his face in the mirror, "but I could discover no Alteration in my Countenance or feelings." Who but God "has power to give a Mortal strength like this?" The experience of writing his final letters seemed to be another test and another confirmation: "I really believe that the true God supports me! For while I am writing these very words, and meditating this intended Deed, no singular Anguish of Mind affects me, and why should it? For my Intentions are of the purest kind." His wife told him about nightmares she had been having, which seemed to him like premonitions; yet when she described seeing his papers spotted with blood and a dying man bleeding from several wounds, he felt "unappalled," and that feeling helped support his conviction that "the hand of Heaven is really with us." When she dreamed of her daughters lying dead and frozen, "even yet I am little affected," he wrote. "O my God! Wonderful indeed are thy Works." His reaction to the dreams, rather than the dreams themselves, seemed to him to be the surest disclosure of divine will. In a letter to Mitchell, he wondered if he was becoming superstitious. He alluded to "Sundry Inti-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 185, 175, 174, 178.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 178, 186; [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 13.

mations," which he did not describe, but which he thought came from God to persuade him that he was right. "I seem to be convinced in a steady calm and reasonable way, that it is appointed for me to do it, that it is my duty and that it must be done. That it is God himself that prompts and directs me in all my Reflexions and Circumspection, I really believe." Aside from the valorization of calmness and reason, this was not Enlightenment rationality. Like those called antinomians in the seventeenth century, he was searching for immediate revelations in experience; like those called enthusiasts in the Great Awakening, he was trying to read God's will in the sensations of his body.³⁷

He had, it was true, some lingering doubts. Like Descartes, who considered the possibility that an evil spirit rather than God was leading him out of the labyrinth of skepticism, Beadle sometimes wondered if the power that moved him was the devil's after all. But his intentions felt too pure, his inner light too clear, the elevation of his soul too sublime for that to be the case. "I and my family shall go off this stage Martyrs to that Cause that I fondly believed to be the Cause of Justice, Virtue and freedom." On December 10 he felt "serene and even joyful" reading Thomson's "Summer." "Thank Heaven," he wrote to Colonel Chester, "for I believe the day is now come, this a glorious one, and Providence seems to smile on the deed." The next morning the neighbors found the bodies.³⁸

Beadle's religious experiences in the last weeks of his life certainly went beyond what either his contemporaries or historians have associated with deism. Commentators *could* have denounced him as an enthusiast or a deluded mystic and considered his deism irrelevant. The polemical point of the antideist writers was, however, that Beadle's self-proclaimed and apparently long-standing deism had eventually led to further extravagances and ultimately to his monstrous acts. In the 1780s many Christians found deism, the initial turn away from the scriptures for moral guidance, more threatening than evangelical enthusiasm, and it seemed to them the top of a very slippery slope. Yet a second public face of deism—that of Ethan Allen, leader of the Green Mountain Boys and hero of Ticonderoga—soon challenged these assumptions. The deist hero became a telling counterpoint to the deist monster.

The timing of Allen's proposal for publishing a deist tract in Hartford could not have been worse, since the Beadle tragedy had occurred in neighboring Wethersfield only a few months earlier. Allen cursed the printers' moral cowardice in declining his offer and eventually borrowed money to get *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* published in Vermont in fall 1785. Instead of arguing that deism destroyed a proper notion of moral agency and made men into machines in a fatalistic universe, as some of Beadle's commentators had contended, Allen's critics derided what they took to be the deist's arrogant celebration of the sovereign self. With class disdain, conservative Connecticut wits mocked the "great Clodhopping oracle of man" who presumed "to tell the world, *the bible lies*." One attack published in Vermont and Connecticut newspapers castigated Allen's overweening ambition for singularity, a vice that made deists "ready to contradict the reason and sense of all men." The major published response, *A Sermon to Swine* by "Common Sense, A. M." (the clergyman Josiah Sherman, brother of the Connecticut politician Roger Sherman), could not simply draw a straight line between deist principles and monstrous practices, as the

³⁷ "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 188, 174, 182, 186.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 181, 187.

commentary on Beadle had attempted to do. Allen was both deist and hero; to attack his reputation was to assault the character of the man who had taken Ticonderoga and defied British tyranny even while in chains.³⁹

Kicked out of Salisbury, Connecticut, for brawling and warned out of Northampton, Massachusetts, for disputing about religion in the taverns, Allen had moved to the Green Mountains in 1770 and there became a leader of the settlers resisting New York's claims to the vast tracts of land west of the Connecticut River. His role in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in the early days of the war with Britain is vividly described in his *Narrative*. Most of that small book, however, recounts not further exploits on the battlefield but his two-and-a-half years as a prisoner of war. Allen wrote *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* in the early 1780s, after he had withdrawn from the battles of war and politics, developing the treatise from notes begun two decades earlier after discussions with his deist friend Thomas Young. He presumed the book would "turn to money," as he wrote one correspondent early in 1785, but his primary goal, he declared to another, was to rescue "the human species" from "Priestcraft." *Reason*, he hoped, would be "fatal to the ministerial Damnation Salvation, and their merchandise thereof."⁴⁰

Allen concluded in *Reason* "that if the human race in general, could be prevailed upon to exercise common sense in religious concerns, those spiritual fictions"—like the necessity for regeneration by supernatural grace—"would cease, and be succeeded by reason and truth." Common Sense Sherman admitted that he "once" gave *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* a "cursory reading," but he did not have the text by his side as he wrote his reply. No matter—the book was patently absurd and deserved a response only because it might "strengthen the prejudices of *weak* and *wicked* minds" against the Bible. Despite an advertised promise of a "demonstrative argument" for the divine inspiration of the scriptures, no such argument appeared in the sermon because the author thought that none was needed: the Bible's divine origin was "self evident." Any person of common sense could see that "the principal truths contained in divine revelation, speak for themselves; and it must appear to all that understand them, that they are not corrupted, but afford clear evidence that they are from God."⁴¹

Sherman took particular aim at Allen's critique of the doctrine of atonement, the belief that Christ made reparation for man's sins by suffering and dying on the cross. Allen had found the notion that Christ could have the sins of the world imputed to him "repugnant to the first perceptions of common-sense." A person's virtues and vices were his or hers

³⁹ Ethan Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Bennington, 1784 [actually published 1785]). On Ethan Allen's cursing the moral cowardice of the printers, see unsigned introduction to Ethan Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (New York, 1836). The author of the introduction, probably John Fellows, claimed to have heard the tale from Allen himself. On Allen, see especially Michael A. Bellesiles, *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier* (Charlottesville, 1993). For the description of Allen as a "Clodhopping oracle," see Dwight, *Triumph of Infidelity*, 23. [Lemuel Hopkins], "On Ethan Allen's Oracles of Reason," *Hartford American Mercury*, July 24, 1786; "The following is said to be a genuine copy of a letter from Mr. Woolston, of London, to General Ethan Allen," *Bennington Vermont Gazette*, May 5, 1788, reprinted in the *Norwich (Conn.) Packet*, July 3, 1788. See also a letter purported to be from Lord George Gordon to Ethan Allen, *Hartford American Mercury*, July 3, 1786; and a letter dated Litchfield, Feb. 28, 1786, *Bennington Vermont Gazette*, March 20, 1786. [Josiah Sherman], *A Sermon to Swine* (Litchfield, [1787?]). It is reprinted with a longer preface as [Josiah Sherman], *Oracles of Reason, as Formed by the Deists, are Husks for Deistical and Heathen Swine* (Litchfield, [1787?]).

⁴⁰ Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (Philadelphia, 1779); Ethan Allen to James Caldwell, Feb. 7, 1785, in *Ethan Allen and His Kin: Correspondence, 1772–1819*, ed. John J. Duffy (2 vols., Hanover, 1998), I, 169; Allen to Stephen R. Bradley, Sept. 7, 1785, *ibid.*, 182.

⁴¹ Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (1784), 472. See also *ibid.*, 469. Advertisement for Josiah Sherman's *Sermon to Swine*, *New Haven Gazette*, April 19, 1787, p. 71; [Sherman], *Oracles of Reason*, 12, iii; [Sherman], *Sermon to Swine*, 38, 22 (marked 21).

alone. "For mankind, considered as individuals, may as well be said to have a property in their personal actions or habits, virtues or vices, as in lands and chattels." The difference was that unlike a hundred acres in Vermont, moral acts could not be transferred or alienated. Considered as a question of law, the comparison of Christ to a person who could "pay, satisfy and discharge a cash debt for another" could not work, Allen argued, because the offense in question—sins against God—"being of a criminal nature could not be discharged or satisfied by cash or produce, as debts of a civil contract." Sherman answered that Allen had utterly misunderstood the scriptural doctrine of atonement, which was perfectly consonant with "reason, justice, common sense, or the usages of nations."⁴²

Sherman's discussion of atonement, however, not only silently agreed with Allen that commercial exchange was no proper model for the forgiveness of sins but also departed from what had been the orthodox Christian position since at least the eleventh century. Sherman summarized an innovative understanding of the atonement that had been developed by the New Divinity followers of Jonathan Edwards, especially Sherman's mentor, Joseph Bellamy. Christ could not have sins imputed to him, and like any other innocent person, he could not serve as a substitute, suffering a penalty for someone else's crime. Nor could Christ "purchase" forgiveness; as one of Sherman's New Divinity colleagues put it, the language of buying and selling, of debt and credit, was appropriate for commerce but not for maxims of sin, duty, and justice. Sherman did not go quite so far: he still found a roundabout way to speak of "discharging a debt." But like his fellow Edwardsean innovators, he swept away John Calvin's and the Puritans' understanding of the atonement; he instead described the Crucifixion as an occasion allowing the Moral Governor to pardon undeserving sinners even while enforcing his laws against sin, at once demonstrating both his hatred of sin and his benevolence. This was a controversial view, and Sherman admitted that it was unorthodox. So much for the principal truths of the Bible being unproblematically transparent to common sense.⁴³

Although Sherman, who had been a chaplain at Valley Forge, was utterly contemptuous of Allen, his discussion of atonement conceded Allen's reputation as a virtuous revolutionary hero. To explain how Christ's suffering could atone for unworthy sinners, Sherman created a hypothetical example in which a patriotic General Allen who had sacrificed everything for the sake of his country could justly ask Congress to pardon traitorous sons. "We will suppose, in the time of the late contest, that Gen. Allen was a great and worthy friend of his country," Sherman began. He imagined Allen's sons joining Britain to conquer the United States. In Sherman's extended analogy, Allen is appointed by Congress to engage the enemy. The general is captured, and the British "sacrifice, for a time, his liberty, his ease and honour, and all his wealth, and he faces death in all its formidable shapes—and his sufferings are extremely great." After the war, Allen's sons still deserve to be executed for treason. But the old general appears before Congress as their mediator and advocate. He asks that his penitent sons be pardoned, and Congress grants his request "freely of their own grace, on account of the merit that is in their father." The story was fiction, but the reference to Allen's wartime experience and public character was not. To admit, however grudgingly, that a deist could be a patriotic leader or a virtuous republi-

⁴² Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (1784), 395, 396, 414; [Sherman], *Sermon to Swine*, 20.

⁴³ [Sherman], *Sermon to Swine*, 20, 18. On the New Divinity view of atonement, see Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middleton, 1989), 129–35. For the comment by Sherman's colleague John Smalley, see *ibid.*, 131. See also Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York, 1994), 123–25.

can citizen contradicted the axiom that many like Common Sense Sherman continued to hold: that there was a necessary connection between deism and depravity.⁴⁴

There were personal, intellectual, and ideological dimensions to the deist threat. None recognized this more clearly than President Ezra Stiles of Yale, whose response to deism was considerably more complex than Sherman's. When he delivered his election day sermon on May 8, 1783, his main purpose was to celebrate America's rising glory at the end of the Revolutionary War. But he also confessed that as a young man in the late 1740s and early 1750s, he too had "passed thro the cloudy darksome valley of skepticism, and stood on the precipice . . . of deism." His doubt was his secret shame, kept hidden from his closest friends and family. Because Christianity was the foundation of the regime of the normal, Stiles could be a skeptic or a deist only in the closet. In the 1760s, after he had wrestled his way back to orthodoxy, he called for Christian scholars to engage deism in open debate. This call—repeated in his 1783 election sermon—was a fantasy of an open republic of letters without the deformations of prejudice and political distortion. Yet the 1783 sermon as a whole argued that the Christian character of the United States would continue in future generations because of demography, support from the state, Christians' control of public institutions, and the persuasive abilities of the Protestant leadership. In the wake of the American Revolution, as citizens argued about foundational principles, questioned what had been basic presuppositions of society, and debated the proper relations of church and state, deism had become an ideological problem—a threat to Christian hegemony—that needed to be answered by assertions of power and authority.⁴⁵

Stiles knew that deism could not be dismissed as merely madness. Remembering his own struggle, he pitied those caught in the "vortex" of deistical arguments, tempted by the hope of "ascend[ing] aloft above the clouds of prejudices" to "a superior discernment in morals, with high sensibility, sentimental and liberal ideas." Turning from the personal to the political, Stiles then conducted an elaborate thought experiment, imagining the establishment of three polities—one idolatrous, the second deistic, and the third Christian. Let us imagine, he began, three contiguous empires beginning with the same "social virtues, laws of justice, benevolence and morals of civil society." Nations rooted in either idolatry or deism would never be able to sustain virtue and morality. Idolaters, who transfer worship from the Creator to the creature, would, like the Israelites who had kissed the golden calf, quickly descend into "the most impure obscenities and libidinous revellings." The deists would be able to say nothing about "pardoning mercy" for sins, holding as they do such an exorbitantly high opinion of the "excellency and dignity of man." But there was no need to stay with these hypothetical polities. Much of the globe was still populated by idolaters, Stiles wrote, pointing to the lewd pagodas of the East Indies. As for the morality of modern deism, his American audience did not need to imagine a nation full of corrupt British aristocrats to conceive of its flaws. The development of modern deism

⁴⁴ [Sherman], *Sermon to Swine*, 19–20.

⁴⁵ Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven, 1783). The phrases "regime of the normal" and the notion of "closeted" identities are drawn from queer theory. For the former see Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis, 1993), vii–xxii; for the latter, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990).

could be represented by a figure much closer to home: "that sublime genius, that deistical madman," William Beadle.⁴⁶

Stiles's comparison of politics was no mere intellectual exercise. His aim was to focus on the relations of church and state in the new United States. The country, he admitted, was "in no danger of idolatry." But though "Deists are very thinly sown," the early 1780s could nonetheless be called a "period of deism and skeptical indifference in religion." As the states formed new constitutions, he lamented, there was a general political sentiment against even "the most liberal" establishment of Christianity. Government, many Americans were beginning to say, ought to have no more to do with religion than to "keep the civil peace among contending sects." Moreover, the idea was gaining ground that a political candidate's religious convictions were irrelevant to his fitness for office, or, even worse, that deists or men indifferent to religion were actually the most suited for government because they would not favor their own denomination. The political danger was obvious and the solution equally so: Government needed to patronize the "principles of our common Christianity."⁴⁷

Legislatures struggled to affirm a Christian culture but safeguard religious liberty; politicians wanted to inculcate civic virtue but differed over its relation to sectarian forms of piety. In Massachusetts, the 1780 constitution continued tax support for the Protestant churches (which they would receive until 1833). Connecticut's 1784 revision of laws also perpetuated state funding for churches. New Hampshire's 1784 constitution continued the colonial-era practice of limiting the protections of the law to Christians and restricting office holding to Protestants. Vermont in 1786 extended rights to non-Protestants but insisted that officeholders swear to a belief in God and the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testaments. Other states also limited office holding to Protestants (North Carolina and Georgia), to Christians (Maryland and Pennsylvania), or to Trinitarian Christians (Delaware). Georgia, however, dropped its restriction in 1789, and Pennsylvania in 1786 broadened its requirement to permit all believers in God and a future state of reward and punishment to hold office. There were other countervailing trends, too. Supporters of a 1784 bill for a tax to support the Christian churches in Virginia were motivated in part by their perception of a worrisome spread of deism; petitioners against the measure shared this worry (most were evangelicals) but agreed with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison that the proposed cure would be worse than the disease. Instead, the Act for Establishing Religious Freedom passed in 1786, and Virginia joined Rhode Island in its prohibition of religious taxes and religious tests for civil service. The double declaration of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution (adopted in 1791) prohibiting the establishment of religion and protecting its free exercise applied only to the federal level, leaving the states to continue to work out the meaning of religious liberty on their own.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Stiles, *United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, 85, 76, 80, 78, 83. On Ezra Stiles's religious and intellectual development, see Grasso, *Speaking Aristocracy*, 230–78; and Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727–1795* (New Haven, 1962).

⁴⁷ Stiles, *United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, 72, 70, 74.

⁴⁸ Curry, *First Freedoms*. See also Leonard W. Levy, *The Establishment Clause: Religion and the First Amendment* (Chapel Hill, 1994); and Edwin S. Gaustad, "Religious Tests, Constitutions, and 'Christian Nation,'" in *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1994), 218–35. No one—not even Stiles—commenting on the Beadle affair mentioned that in Connecticut deism was not only outside the boundaries of constitutional toleration, but illegal. Colonial statutes often defined blasphemy and profanity to include disparagement of the Trinity or the scriptures, and such laws continued into the early national era. Since 1750 Connecticut had made denying ("by Writing, Printing, Teaching, or advised Speaking") that the scriptures were divine and Jesus was God a felony; to qualify as the crime of "Deism" the denial need not involve reproachful language

Stiles focused on the character of American leadership rather than on constitutional provisions or specific legislation. In his own state he saw "deistical or dubious characters" who were "intriguing themselves into political popularity"; of the 85 men who received the most votes for statewide offices in 1794, he counted only 30 "religious characters"; of the 40 lawyers in the group, there were "about one third decided Revelationists, one third said to be decided Deists, [and] the other third doubtful." He still had faith that the clergy could persuade voters to elect Christian magistrates. But his national scorecard was less precise and less optimistic. By the early 1790s he felt that the cause might already be lost "in Congress and the Legislatures of the Southern States." He grudgingly admitted that deism and civic virtue were not always impossible to combine, writing admiringly of Gov. Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, who, though a deist, was "a glorious Patriot!" When he heard of Ethan Allen's death in February 1789, though, he could think only of his "scurrilous Reflexions on Revelation" and imagine Allen suffering in hell. After reading George Washington's reference to the "providential Agency" that had been "conspicuous in establishing these United States as an Independent nation," Stiles could happily conclude that Washington was "a Revelationist."⁴⁹

The response of his old friend Benjamin Franklin to Stiles's 1790 inquiry about religious opinions was less cheering, although it illustrated the important distinction between private disbelief and public denial. Franklin, asking that his opinions be kept confidential, said he believed in God, providence, and immortality but doubted the divinity of Christ. But because that last belief helped promote morality—because the supernatural warrant of the scriptures seemed to enforce, for most people, the excellent moral precepts they contained—skeptics in a Christian society ought to keep their doubts to themselves. William Beadle, in contrast to Ethan Allen, had agreed. The merchant had believed that the religions of the world, however warped by superstition and falsehood, tried to promote the honor of the Deity. Christianity seemed suited to the people who embraced it, and they ought not to be disturbed in their faith. Beadle had no urge to demystify the masses; also unlike Allen, he seems to have had no fantasy of publicly debating the learned. The merchant wrote that his literary remains could be shared with as few or as many people as his executor wished. Although Beadle hoped that there might be some sympathetic reader out there for him—his writing might "someday give some new Ideas to a new Speculative Genius like myself that may prove beneficial to him, though it appears like the worst of poison to others"—he did not ask that his letters be published. Stiles and the other ministers prevented publication because they worried about those other sympathetic readers. Stephen Mix Mitchell explained that Beadle's writings remained unpublished "not because his reasonings against revelation were in any degree unanswerable, but lest they might have some effect on weak and melancholy minds." That was the flipside of Franklinian prudence. The cautious deist was content to enjoy his beliefs and doubts privately. The cautious Christian would rather that deists stayed in the closet—

or malicious intent. See *Acts and Laws of His Majesty's English Colony of Connecticut* (New London, 1750), 69. The condemnation remained in place in 1796, with the crime labeled "Atheism and Deism." See *Acts and Laws of the State of Connecticut* (Hartford, 1796), 183. A colonial Virginia law had language almost identical to Connecticut's. See *The Acts of Assembly, Now in Force, in the Colony of Virginia* (Williamsburg, 1769), 26. In 1795 a Connecticut jurist explained that "to prohibit the open, public, and explicit denial of the popular religion of a country, is a necessary measure to preserve the tranquility of a government." Not even infidels ought to complain, since they benefited from the moral society that Christianity created. See Zephaniah Swift, *A System of Laws of the State of Connecticut* (6 vols., Windham, 1795–1796), I, 320–25, esp. 323.

⁴⁹ Stiles, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Dexter, III, 465, 546, 172, 345, 397.

not because Christian apologists in the early American republic lacked confidence in the reasonableness of Christianity, but because they lacked confidence in the reasonableness of the American people.⁵⁰

Some Christians were not so cautious. Henry Pattillo of North Carolina, writing in 1788, expected Christian writers in America, unlike their more genteel European brethren, to go after infidels with hammer and tongs. But others found trying to argue with deists exasperating. "It is very difficult to converse with men of this description with any prospect of advantage," complained a Massachusetts writer who summoned the "horrid memory" of William Beadle against a deistical opponent in 1791. "They directly deny most of those fundamental propositions, that are self-evident, and which admit not of demonstration, and upon which all argumentation is founded." The essential presupposition this writer had in mind was the divine inspiration of the scriptures. Just as true liberty meant obedience to divine law and not licentiousness, the only commonsensical position, many Christians believed, was to realize that common sense alone was not enough to keep men and women from madness and society from chaos.⁵¹

Beadle had raised troubling questions that could not be easily brushed aside, shouted down, or answered simply with a "thus saith the Lord." Without the guidance of the scriptures, did deism collapse the relation between God and man into fatalism—turning a moral agent into merely God's machine? That may have been true for Beadle, but the same was being said of Calvinism. Did deism instead encourage man to overemphasize his free will, divinize the self, and supplant God? Even those who derided Ethan Allen's arrogance did not misread him to such an extent. Without the Bible, was sanity itself threatened? Yet Beadle had seemed to his neighbors a reasonable and virtuous man until that final morning. What, then, was the relation between religious belief and public virtue?

The deist provocations of Ethan Allen and William Beadle expose the cultural politics involved in the making of American religious common sense. Public champions of Christianity realized that given the social, cultural, and economic disruptions the Revolutionary War had caused, and in the new political environment the Revolution had created, making the United States a Christian nation would require more than the simple perpetuation of a religious heritage. To maintain Christianity as the foundation of a nation that had rejected traditional authority by appealing to self-evident truths, many American Protestants felt compelled to defend scripture by invoking common sense, insisting that the Bible's divine origin was obvious to any sensible person. Most invocations of common sense by antideist writers in the 1780s were not yet intentional references toward the logical edifice of Scottish philosophy; they were rhetorical attempts to claim that the divine inspiration of the scriptures was a fact that could not be contested by reasonable American citizens. Mentioning common sense, though, could be a double-edged sword. The philosophy that readers might associate with that term (whatever the writer's intentions) grounded ethical reasoning on universal moral instinct or on the epistemologically trustworthy faculties of normal human perception; it could therefore be seen as threat-

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 386–87; Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, March 9, 1790, in *The Portable Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York, 2005), 468–70. See also Franklin to —, Dec. 13, 1757, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (30 vols., New Haven, 1959–), VII, 293. "Extracts from Mr Beadles Letters," 185, 179; [Mitchell], *Narrative of the Life of William Beadle* (1783), 16.

⁵¹ Pattillo, *Sermons*, v; "Philologus," *Stockbridge Western Star*, Jan. 4, 1791. For a sermon that named Beadle along with Thomas Paine while castigating deism and arguing that the punishments Christianity threatened in the hereafter were essential to ensuring a moral citizenry, see Perez Fobes, *A sermon, preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams* (Boston, 1795), esp. 31–32.

ening to scriptural authority. Common Sense philosophy had been embraced by some political thinkers, especially those who had been influenced by John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey. But before the last years of the eighteenth century, most orthodox Christians and evangelicals avoided resting too much weight on this mode of thinking because doing so seemed to flatter sinful human nature and to render God's revelation in the scriptures unnecessary. In short, Common Sense philosophy could seem more deist than Christian. So while defending Christianity against deism in a new political climate pushed apologists toward the rhetoric of common sense, for theological reasons many in the 1780s were still wary of the philosophy being attached to that term.⁵²

In for a rhetorical penny, however, the defenders of a Christian America were soon in for a philosophical pound. America's Protestant theologians and educators would draw from Scottish thought and learn to finesse the problem, showing, to their satisfaction at least, how Common Sense philosophy and the Bible were mutually reinforcing. The subsequent dominance of Common Sense philosophy in American intellectual history from the 1790s to the Civil War grew out of the broader cultural strains and conflicts laid bare in the 1780s. The deist monster helped bring to the surface fundamental concerns that this christianized common sense would eventually (if temporarily) answer—concerns about the moral nature of the new American citizen and about how the newly united states could secure religious liberty and yet create a society still beholden not just to Nature's God but to the God of the Old and New Testaments.

⁵² See especially Noll, *America's God*, 93–113.

Previews

Thomas Jefferson has long been characterized as a Francophile. But, as **Brian Steele** shows, Jefferson's experience in France led him to articulate a full-blown American exceptionalism that was rooted in a domestic order unencumbered by the multiple artificialities that kept European men and women from practicing what Jefferson viewed as their natural gender roles. Jefferson's liberal critique of foreign cultures and political systems that oppressed women and effeminized men translated into an affirmation of America's natural gender practices. His embrace of republican womanhood is unsurprising. What is notable, though, is the centrality of gender and domesticity to Jefferson's conception of America's uniqueness and superiority.

Christopher Grasso examines the broad cultural context of the tragedy of William Beadle, a Connecticut merchant who in the early 1780s murdered his wife and four young children and then killed himself—a crime newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides attributed to his deistic beliefs. Deism has usually been considered important in American history only to a few Founding Fathers who kept their beliefs to themselves. But the encounters with deism Grasso discusses uncover contests over the place of religion in the emerging conceptions of American citizenship. These encounters reveal a people struggling to understand their religious and political lives in the new and unsettled society created by revolution and war and sketch an episode in the formation of American religious common sense.

How did urban Americans deal with the nation's first major energy crisis? Replacing dwindling stocks of firewood with coal seemed to be an easy solution, but endemic poverty and popular perceptions of coal made the transition difficult for most residents of northern cities in antebellum America. **Sean Patrick Adams** demonstrates that the campaign to promote coal during that crisis targeted both affluent and poor consumers. Adams finds that exploring the transition between firewood and coal raises some thorny questions about our own energy concerns. If we are to experience a "green" revolution in energy use in our world, we would do well to understand how both the early nineteenth-century poor and their wealthy contemporaries came to enlist in coal's "black" revolution.

Examining the choices that confronted the American South during the cotton revolution, **Lacy Ford** outlines the internal tensions that appeared as both the upper and the lower South attempted reconfigurations of slavery after the foreign slave trade ended in 1808. Upper South politicians sought a demographic reconfiguration, or a "whitening"