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Believing 18th-Century Fiction: Reading Novelism and Theology in Thomas Amory's *The Life of John Bunce, Esq* (1756)

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Review

**Believing eighteenth-century fiction: reading novelism and theology in Thomas Amory’s
*The Life of John Bunclie, Esq (1756)***

Contemporary readers of Thomas Amory’s *The Life of John Bunclie, Esq (1756)* were understandably not quite sure what kind of text they were actually reading. Library and sale catalogues from the period list the book under categories such as ‘Lives and Memoirs’, ‘History and Antiquities of Great-Britain and Ireland’, ‘History, Antiquities, Biography, Geography’. In only one instance is the work listed under ‘Romances and other Books of Entertainment’.¹ Although the book has recently been edited as part of the ‘Early Irish Fiction’ series, it might just as readily be described as a work of theological controversy, albeit one which is framed within the contours of a novel.² For much of the narrative, Bunclie is ostensibly searching for a college friend, but the search is as much for like-minded anti-trinitarians, a quest in which Bunclie could hardly be said to be disappointed, despite the seemingly unpromising character of the remote wilds of Westmorland. Bunclie encounters, among other anti-trinitarians, an old Dublin schoolfriend and his wife, a ‘little female republic’ of one hundred women, and a community of twenty male philosophers. Thus Amory chose to give his religious debates the character of novelistic encounters by having his eccentric hero meet and discourse freely on current theological issues with a range of characters. This essay considers the implications of that particular conjunction – of fictionality and theology – for Thomas Amory’s *Bunclie* and also for the wider issues of belief and rationality raised by this combination.

Theology and comic fiction

The novel’s first recorded readers, Thomas Francklin and Ralph Griffiths, reviewers for *The Critical Review* and *The Monthly Review* respectively, engaged primarily with the theology of

Amory's 1756 novel, with the more orthodox Francklin judging the book more harshly than Griffiths, who came from a dissenting background. Much of what might now seem obscure or even arcane was, in the context of the 1750s, sharply relevant and topical. Elizabeth Carter, for example, in her anonymously published *Remarks on the Athanasian Creed* (1753?), had publicly defended her father's refusal to read the Athanasian Creed aloud at Sunday services, the very act for which Buncle is punished by being expelled by his father from his home in the west of Ireland. Among other topical issues of the 1750s was the question of Hutchinsonianism. In the 1720s, John Hutchinson had proposed a theory of the Hebrew language by which the true understanding of the Bible could be reached, and his work was continuing to attract a considerable amount of attention, both sympathetic and adversarial, in the mid-eighteenth century.³ *Buncle* includes a discussion of Hutchinsonian ideas but, unlike the vast number of pamphlets on these topics, it does so both comically and novelistically. Amory makes his hero initially a naïve supporter of Hutchinson's arguments, but he is firmly persuaded against his original position by the instruction of Harriot Noel, the first of the many learned ladies whom Buncle will encounter in the course of his travels. High comedy is created when Buncle attempts to make love to Harriot, but is rebuffed by her desire to discuss the finer points of Hutchinsonian theology (pp.69-72). While their courtship clearly belongs in the realm of domestic fiction, the discussion itself conveys the tenor of a work of serious theology. This interweaving of fiction and theology suggests the importance of religion to everyday life, to everyday encounters. It also mixes the gravity of learned theology with a degree of gaiety. It was this compound of serious learning with joviality which made *Buncle* so appealing to readers in the Romantic period, William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt in particular.⁴

This interweaving of the fictional and the theological is a feature of Amory's other works: *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1755) ostensibly narrates the travels and adventures of Buncle with a group of female friends, but includes extensive passages of

theological debate and quite a few conversion narratives, in addition to a concluding 'Postilla' which defends notable deists from the charge of heresy; and the second volume of *The Life of John Bunce, Esq* (1766) continues the life of John Bunce which, in portraying a protagonist who marries seven times within the course of the novel, also includes many polemical defences of marriage and procreation as religiously sanctioned. One late work, attributed to Amory for the first time here, is an anonymously-published pamphlet attack on compulsory subscription. Although this is an almost entirely unregarded text, it is particularly significant for this essay's interest in the symbiotic relationship between fiction and theology in Amory's writings. Entitled *The Antiquarian Doctor's Sermon* (1768), the pamphlet consists predominantly of a 'sermon' on the theme of sincerity, but it is preceded by an 'Advertisement' in which the editor, a nephew of the 'antiquarian doctor', explains how he came to publish it:

My uncle was an Antiquarian of the first magnitude as to body and mind. He lost *one* eye in his youth at *Eaton school* by an explosion of gunpowder, and the *other* he pored totally out in microscopical observations on insects and reptiles. The worthy man (rest his soul!) once had genius, but he lived to extinguish every spark of it, and absolutely to annihilate his very *sense* and *soul* by an everlasting attention to mites, and lice, and every species of *littleness* in the creation. *Littleness* was his *Dulcinea*, his *Venus*, his *beatific vision*. He was one of the *honestest*, but one of the most *slovenly* saints I ever knew. He left me all his *books* and all his *things*. But when I went to reconnoitre them, and to inspect the state of his study, such an heterogeneous chaos of dirt, and papers, and snuff, and spittle, and old wigs, and woollen night-caps, and dead flies, and starved spiders, and hoary cobwebs

presented themselves, that in my conscience I do not believe it had been brushed or swept since the *rebellion*.⁵

The editor's maid tidies and re-orders the study by burning the papers in the kitchen, a fire which is seen as rivalling the burning of the library at Alexandria. The editor, struck by a particularly 'splendid cover', boldly retrieves one pamphlet from the flames and publishes it as *The Antiquarian Doctor's Sermon, on an Antiquated Subject, Lately found among the Sweepings of his Study*. There are several reasons why we might attribute this anonymously published pamphlet to Thomas Amory but chief among these is the pamphlet's style: its particular combination of serious religious reasoning and whimsical fictionality.⁶ The framing of the sermon – the account of its rescue from a maid's Alexandrian pyre – serves no apparent function for the argument of the sermon itself, but it does introduce the argument light-heartedly. The relatively peripheral use of fiction here marks a diminution of Amory's more thorough integration of theology and fiction in his earlier novels and suggests a point of transition before the exclusively theological works which were shortly to be published in Priestley's *Theological Repository*, albeit under Amory's fictional alias of 'Buncle'.⁷

To an extent, the comic tone introduced by the opening 'novelistic' frame is consistent with the particular theology of Amory's Buncle fictions. Committed to freedom of conscience, to the idea of man's right and ability to determine and judge of faith for himself, within a broadly optimistic theology which denies the ideas of original sin, atonement and necessary grace, Buncle's theology is certainly comparatively cheerful, although it is argued and defended with absolute conviction and earnest gravitas. All of these views either stem from or are underpinned by Buncle's anti-trinitarianism. Buncle cannot assent to a belief in the divine Trinity, that there are three Gods in one, because he sees such a belief as being contrary both to Scripture and to reason. God would never have endowed man with the glory

of rationality, he reasons, only to frustrate it in expecting him to accept ‘mysteries’ or impossibilities unquestionably. But because the Established Church does not only profess a belief in the Trinity, but also makes the public articulation of such a belief compulsory – in the recitation of the Athanasian creed and in the necessary subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles – Buncle’s theology is also a form of resistance. Professing unitarianism, and opposing the orthodoxy of the Trinity, which is held by Anglicans, Dissenters and Roman Catholics alike, are thus matters of grave concern. For all *Buncle*’s light-heartedness and benevolence, then, the novel and its hero are also deeply serious.⁸

Belief and credulity

Among the most apparently earnest dimensions of the book are Buncle’s strenuous assertions of the reality of his fictions, anticipating that his reader will disbelieve him and countering their incredulity in advance. He goes so far as to offer several rhetorical pre-emptive strikes against both critics and other sceptical readers. In two articles in *The Monthly Review* (1755), the reviewer had questioned the reality of several of the women in his first novel, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, also purportedly written by ‘Buncle’. In his second novel, Buncle offered a robust defence of the veracity of his account

The critics, I remember, had some doubts as to the reality of [Miss Chawcer and Miss Janson in *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* ...]; but to this I answer, that they may as well doubt the truth of my own story; and from thence proceed to deny the reality of my existence; because several incidents in my life are strange, and such as they have not heard of before. It is not, however, in the power of criticism to invalidate what I deliver as facts. (p.263 n.33)⁹

At the same time, *The Life of John Bunce, Esq* consists of extraordinary, wonderful episodes and escapades, of seemingly obvious exaggerations of the height of mountains and waterfalls, the depth of caves, the dangers of precipitous descents. One waterfall, probably 'High Force' in upper Teesdale, is described as being higher than Niagara (p.174), for example.¹⁰ Yet the narration is presented not as something which might be plausible, or even, believable, but that which is absolutely true. Like Lemuel Gulliver, Bunce dares us to disbelieve him, but in this case the implication of our belief clearly has a religious significance.

That this constant dynamic – of unbelievable adventures narrated as matters of fact – plays a significant role in the theology of the book is evident in the following conversation between Bunce and Miss Turner, when Bunce first tumbles out of a mountain before her:

But tell me, Sir, [...] how have you lived for several days among these rocks and desert places, as there are no inns in this country, nor a house, except this here, that we know? are you the favorite of the fairies and genies — or does the wise man of the hills bring you every night in a cloud to his home?

It looks something like it, madam, (I answering said) and the thing to be sure must appear very strange: but it is like other strange things: when the nature of them is known, they appear easy and plain. (p.224)

Bunce's subsequent reasoning argues that things beyond our existing knowledge are not therefore beyond being true: 'Things thought prodigious or incredible by ignorance and weakness, will appear to right knowledge and a due judgment very natural and accountable to the thoughts' (p.226).

In such passages, *Bunce* reminds us that its own context is one of intense theological debate, in which proponents of rational belief, such as Bunce, or Amory, had to meet the

challenge of deist views, with which they had much in common. The most famous proponent that 'there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, nor above it', to quote the subtitle of his most famous book, *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), was the deist John Toland. Amory had defended Toland on the basis of his personal morality in *Memoirs*, while arguing that his own position was that of 'Christian deism'.¹¹ Unlike Toland, Amory did not deny the reality of miracles nor the importance of revelation. In that regard, his theology was closer to that of John Locke: both distinguished between that which is contrary to reason (which cannot be true) and that which is above reason (which can be). While critics of deist thought argued that it both explained and denied mysteries, for Locke and Amory, a rational theology might 'explain' but it did not 'deny'.¹²

In passages like the one quoted above, Bunce clearly dramatises ideas concerning belief and credulity. A central interpretative crux within the novel is thus that of the question and function of belief. While Bunce's theology is that of rational Dissent, in which nothing of faith is contrary to reason, he continues to seek out the unknown, to court what is mysterious to others, so as to evidence their plausibility and demonstrate their possibility. From the very first, however, reviewers were sceptical. The *Monthly Review* suspected that Bunce had chosen remote, out of the way places for his settings, only to dupe gullible readers:

That part of the country, in the north of England, called Stanmore-hills, is so rude and uncultivated, that it is very little visited by travellers, or even the inhabitants of the circumjacent parts. Our Author seems to have taken advantage of the circumstance, in his lavish descriptions; as well knowing, that few of his Readers would be able to question, or disprove, their reality. We have no doubt, however, that many things, seemingly very extraordinary, may be as he describes them;

while others are too improbable, too romantic, for any to believe, but those who have seen very little of the world, have, moreover, an uncommon share of native credulity, and, into the bargain, an imagination tinctured with the marvellous, and the extravagant, by too much reading of fabulous poetry, fictitious travels, and romantic adventures: among the number of which, we must undoubtedly reckon the greatest part of what Mr. Buncle relates of his journey through Stanmore.¹³

Despite the decorous, sober tenor of the novel, this reader was disposed to treat it as a form of comedy, in which Buncle is read as a Quixote-figure. This was to be one of the most consistent aspects of reviews of *Buncle*: that it should be discussed as a kind of Cervantic imitation.¹⁴ Brean Hammond and Paul Goring have both discussed how easily the figure of Quixote could be used as a type of the religious enthusiast. In 1738 *The Gentleman's Magazine* had described enthusiasm as 'Religious Knight-Errantry'; Shaftesbury's 'Letter concerning Enthusiasm' had also called enthusiasm a form of 'Saint-Errantry'.¹⁵ And Amory himself had used the figure of Don Quixote to characterise a theological opponent in *Memoirs*. Writing of Jeremiah Seed, he notes: 'Exclusive of his zeal for *tritheism*, which made him in this article as mad as the *hero of La Mancha*, he was in every thing else an excellent clergyman, and an admirable scholar' (1755, p.495n).

Three 'spiritual Quixote' imitations published in England in the eighteenth century indicate how the target of satire could be drawn from any number of Christian denominations. First of these was an attack on the High Churchman Henry Sacheverell, *Quixote redivivus; or, the spiritual knight errant* (1710).¹⁶ Published shortly before Amory's first fictions was *The Spiritual Quixote* (1754). Claiming to be the biography of the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola (c.1491-1556), the novel uses the frame of the story of the foolish Knight-errant to satirise Catholicism and the priesthood. Loyola is 'as famous by his

extravagancies in spiritual knight-errantry, as his illustrious countryman *Don Quixote* was afterwards in temporal'.¹⁷ The most famous English satire of this kind was that by Richard Graves, also entitled *The Spiritual Quixote* (first published in 1773, but drafted as early as 1758). This is the most affectionate of these satires, in gently mocking what it saw to be the excessive fervour of Methodism in the figure of Geoffrey Wildgoose.¹⁸ Although Amory never explicitly identifies Buncle as a 'spiritual Quixote' of this kind, his hobby-horsical endorsement of anti-trinitarianism at every turn makes him comparable to these figures. William Beckford's later comment that Buncle's 'holy rhapsodies' suggest a tincture of 'enthusiasm' repeats the initial response of the *Monthly Review* and reminds us of one of the oddnesses of Amory's work: that Buncle's theology should be so thoroughly opposed to religious enthusiasm in its commitment to a rational theology, yet share so obviously in its characteristic zeal.¹⁹ Susan Staves has neatly summarised the interpretative crux of *Don Quixote*: 'Is Don Quixote a buffoon whose delusion reveals only his insane pride and the total absurdity of the literature which has provoked his quest? Or is he an exemplary figure who refuses to be sullied by the filthy reality of a fallen world?'²⁰ We might loosely adapt this to ask: is Buncle a hypocrite, who berates others for their religious intolerance, but is himself obsessively, intolerantly intent on refuting religious orthodoxy, especially in relation to the Trinity?²¹ Or is he an exemplary figure, respectful towards the intelligent women he meets, committed to learning and its dissemination in a world in which fashionable, dissipated life is more usually courted, and unswerving in the religious principles which govern his life? That we might even consider the first of these as a possibility of reading – that Amory's works are elaborately ironic – is largely because we know so little of Amory himself. His three volumes of fiction were published anonymously, later essays in Joseph Priestley's *The Theological Repository* were published under the pseudonym of 'John Buncle', two pamphlets in reply to

the *Monthly Review* were published under female pseudonyms (1755). Given the theological views so openly espoused in these works, this is hardly surprising.²²

Irony and Interpretation

Buncle's emphatic anti-trinitarianism, his insistence on the factuality of his account, the repetition of particular theories (such as the formation of the abyss): all of these might suggest that they are satiric depictions of obsessions, of personal hobby-horses, especially because they are so earnestly, straight-facedly pronounced. Could Amory have intended his hero as a comic protagonist, an ambivalent Don Quixote? If so, the texts which surround *Buncle* (1756) – two newspaper advertisements for the works of one of the book's characters, Harriot Harcourt (which appeared in 1739 and 1740); the 'prequel' fiction, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1755); and two pamphlets ostensibly by anonymous lady writers writing in defence of the veracity of *Memoirs* (1755) – become remarkably sustained performances, sustained not just over a number of works, but also across decades.²³ Buncle's own apparent lack of irony seems to mitigate against such a reading. For example, in ventriloquising his father's style of orthodox preaching, his own commitments cannot help breaking through: 'In matters of faith, we must renounce our reason, even tho' it be the only thing that distinguishes us from the beasts, and makes us capable of any religion at all' (p.378).²⁴ Amory's publication, under the pseudonym of John Buncle, of several anti-trinitarian essays in Priestley's *Theological Repository* in 1768 and 1769 also appears to confirm that the theology of the early works is genuine.²⁵

Yet Amory seems to have known that the fervency of his beliefs and the intensity of their articulation might always lead him to be misinterpreted. In *Memoirs* (1755), for example, there is an intriguing reference to his opponents, who have accused him of religious infidelity

(although, since the *Memoirs* is the first known publication by Amory, who these critics might be is far from clear):

There are several passages likewise in my letter in favour of revelation, and nothing written, as I remember, that can be construed, with equity into the service of infidelity. This ought to be sufficient to justify me as to my Christianity. It will do with the reasonable. But as it is my misfortune to have enemies, who blacken me without mercy, and without justice; and that even some orthodox friends ... are pleased to think the late Dr *Morgan* made me an *almost-christian*, if he did not convert me to his own confession of faith; and *of consequence, I suppose, that my declarations for revelation are affected; a disguise assumed, the better to destroy while we exalt; as has been said of others* [my emphasis]; it is therefore necessary, in regard to truth, and to myself, to proceed a little farther, and offer a few things more upon this subject. (pp.509-10)

Amory is at pains here to point out that his narrator's defences of revelation are genuine, not parodic, necessary, perhaps, given his declared support for prominent deists and the explicit unitarianism of his works. Throughout both *Memoirs* and *The Life*, Buncle is identified as someone sympathetic towards, but not identical to, the most famous deists of his time. In both works, for example, Buncle recalls attending a club of free-thinkers in London in which his attempts to defend revelation were met with laughter (*Memoirs*, pp.16-17; *Buncle*, p.46).

Tracing the precise theology of the work can be difficult in a context in which subtle shades of difference between various kinds of religious scepticism existed at this time: anti-trinitarianism (itself inflected by differences between and among Socinians, Arians, Sabellians, and Unitarians), Latitudinarianism, deism, free-thinking. The distinctions between

these is often far from clear especially as different positions were often collapsed into one category by their critics.²⁶

What evidence we have, both biographical and textual, suggests that Amory probably intended the book to be read as a credo of anti-trinitarianism, but that, from the first, readers were tempted to interpret it as comedy, in which Bunce is a 'traveller-errant', driven by his own delusions. Such readings were possible because the discourse of religious polemics frequently admitted elaborate hoaxes: here we might recall the satiric personae of Defoe's *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), with its High Churchman's extreme attack on Dissenters; of Swift's *An Argument against Abolishing Christianity* (1708), ostensibly voiced by a deist or Socinian and his *Reasons Humbly offered to the Parliament of Ireland, for repealing the Sacramental Test* (1733), as argued by a Jacobite Catholic; Philip Skelton's ironic parodies of deist and Socinian argument in support of the established Church (1736); or Edmund Burke's ventriloquism of the deist philosophy of Lord Bolingbroke in *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756).²⁷ Most 'successful' of all there had been the example of Henry Dodwell's *Christianity not Founded on Argument* (1741), a deist tract masquerading as a work of faith. Dodwell ventriloquised the argument that faith should strike the believer with immediate conviction, irrespective of his reason, only in order to ridicule it, but many contemporary readers missed this irony. The text's ability to wrong-foot the reader made it, in the words of Jeremy Goring, the 'most important single Deistic book' of this period, 'particularly disturbing in that not everyone was quite sure on whose side the author was writing'.²⁸

In opposition to readings which would simply dismiss Amory's fictions as 'odd' or 'crazed', this essay has assumed throughout that the theology of these works is worth taking seriously, particularly in terms of what it suggests about the inter-relationship of fiction and explorations of faith. Where Laurence Sterne's more famous *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767)

might be seen to explore the limits of human reason, Amory’s *The Life of John Buncle, Esq* (1756) appears to stretch and thus test the faculty of reason against the practice of fiction. Amory’s novel continually circulates around accounts of that which appears to be highly improbable but not, necessarily, impossible.

Amory’s fiction, then, contributed to the defence of faith against scepticism by meeting the debate in the seemingly precarious form of fiction. In *The Rule of Faith* (1676), John Tillotson had acknowledged that it was possible to doubt the existence of a country such as America if one had never been there but, like the certainties of the Bible, ‘we have no demonstration for these things, and we expect none, because we know the things are not capable of it’.²⁹ Amory’s own view may have been similar, seeking a ‘middle way’ between deism and revealed religion, between reason and revelation as sources of religious faith. In *Memoirs* (1755), Buncle had exhorted his readers to ‘Neither crawl with the infidel on the slime of the earth; nor *soar* with the *monk*, till you lose sight of *reason*’ (pp.16-17). Like Locke and Sterne then, as Tim Parnell has argued, Amory may have believed that ‘God-given reason is sufficient to our needs, but its reach in terms of absolute knowledge is circumscribed’.³⁰ When Amory wanted to dramatise how one might question only what one does not, yet, know, he thus turned to fiction as the mode within which the seemingly fantastical could be ‘proved’ to be real.

Truth and the novel

Relatively little consideration has been given to questions of faith and fictionality as critical studies of religion and fiction in the eighteenth century have tended to centre either on the relationship between the major novelists and the contemporary currents of deism or latitudinarianism or on the ways in which the novel came to rival the pamphlet and the sermon as a testing-ground for questions of morality and virtue.³¹ However, recent books by

Jesse Molesworth (*Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 2010) and Sarah Kareem (*Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 2014), and critical accounts of the rise of the Gothic genre offer important attempts to re-orient studies of the novel away from an exclusive focus on realism to the ways in which fictional plots of this period offered a suture between magical and rational ways of thinking and invited both belief and disbelief. For Kareem, for example, a key characteristic of fiction in this period is the conscious attempt at ‘fostering wonder while respecting readers’ skepticism’, at revealing ‘the marvellous in life’ as both credible and unexpected.³² For Deidre Lynch, gothic narrative ‘both tells the story of the deleterious effects of credulity on its characters and plays on its readers’ readiness to believe’.³³ These concerns remind us again of Bunce’s famous precursor, Lemuel Gulliver, who insists on the reality of highly improbable worlds and who is rescued, in each of his four return journeys, by sea-captains and sailors who display highly contrasting responses of belief and scepticism. Swift himself wrote bemusedly of the real life sea captain who consulted his maps to verify the position of Brobdingnag.

Both Swift and Amory drew upon the common metaphor within Irish Anglican theology in which the blind man is a figure of the Christian in relation to revealed religion, an analogy which had originally been inspired by the famous philosophical query of William Molyneux: whether a blind man suddenly able to see would recognize, by sight alone, a sphere and a cube that formerly he had known only by touch. This philosophical query, debated throughout the eighteenth century by writers as diverse as Locke, Berkeley, Edward Synge II, Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Priestley, Leibniz, Voltaire and Diderot, offers a parallel within epistemology to the theological debates concerning natural and revealed religion.³⁴ How might we believe in the occurrence of miracles, or the existence of a Trinitarian God if we have no empirical proof or reasoning of such things? Swift’s sermon on the Trinity and his satirical response to Socinianism, *An Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, point to a

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3 safely orthodox view. For Swift (as for Locke), the doctrine of the Trinity is above, rather
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5 than contrary to, reason, one granted to us through faith rather than knowledge, revealed
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7 rather than natural religion.³⁵ For Bunce, revelation is a gift but not a necessary one. Reason
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9 is a sufficient guide to truth, and the doctrine of the Trinity is false, not only because it is
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11 contrary to rational explanation but also because it is not Scriptural, but rather a corruption of
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13 the church, diverging from the primitive Christianity of the apostles. In demonstrating this,
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15 Bunce encounters a range of fictional characters and experiences which are improbable but
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17 not impossible, in such a way as to link the truth-claims of the emerging genre of the novel
18
19 with the most urgent theological controversies of his time.
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21

22 Amory's first volume of *Bunce* was published at a moment when belief in the
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24 veracity of literary fiction was becoming broadly unsustainable. No longer did fictions
25
26 promote themselves as historical accounts, as Defoe's had once done.³⁶ Amory appears to
27
28 have recognised the incredulity with which his fictions would be received, not least in his
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30 protestations to the contrary (the claim that he is as real as his fictional characters, for
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32 example, which was noted above). The novel as a vehicle for theological debate thus raises
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34 particular interpretative issues because the call to believe in fiction can seem to be a form of
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36 deliberate strategy, even disingenuousness. However, the kind of temporary 'suspension of
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38 disbelief' which fiction invites is always experimental or provisional. Fiction is neither fact
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40 nor deception and its adoption of hypothesis as method links it as much with scientific,
41
42 theological and philosophical debates as with history.³⁷ Arguably, it is fiction – whether
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44 novelistic or scientific – which is the perfect vehicle in which to explore that which is
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46 improbable but not impossible, that which cannot be proven to be contrary to reason. The
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48 genre of the novel permits the most strenuous outworking of these issues, as exemplified in
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50 Amory's rhetoric of audacity which insists on the authenticity of its account, willing the
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52 reader to believe – or, at least, to half-believe – Bunce. Amory puts into his ladies' mouths
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the words of other, published sources, which postdate their fictional speeches, but it is not impossible that learned women of the early eighteenth century might comprehend and discourse on theology or mathematics. With the publication of her translation of Epictetus (1758), for example, Elizabeth Carter would be widely recognised for her considerable learning, although her anti-trinitarianism, articulated in *Remarks on the Athanasian Creed* (c.1753), would remain in the shadows. What might happen, the art of the possible, belongs neither to empirical knowledge nor to recorded history. In inhabiting a space between knowledge and faith, between, in theological terms, reason and revelation, fiction can articulate the claims and experience of both.³⁸

Buncle's principled view that faith and reason are not inimical, but one and the same did not lead him to disbelieve in miracles, the immateriality of the soul, or that Christ was an 'appointed Mediator, Advocate and Judge' (p.61). Like Isaac Newton or William Whiston, he believed that the advancements of the new experimental science could be harnessed to prove the existence of God, that 'physico-theology' could ratify, rather than to question, Biblical accounts. Thus when Buncle encounters basalt columns which resemble the rocks of the Giant's Causeway, for example, these provide proof of God's power and existence (pp.138-9). And such assertions are underpinned by both faith and knowledge. The universal flood of the Book of Genesis, Buncle argues, could be proven to have arisen from the waters of the abyss: 'as to the *supernatural ascent of them, natural and supernatural* are nothing at all different with respect to God. They are distinctions merely in our conceptions of things' (p.136).³⁹ Buncle's rational theology thus leads to a world which is neither secular nor disenchanted. The extraordinary and the marvellous surround us on every turn, and demonstrate God's existence. The one religious principle which Buncle will not accede to – the Trinity – becomes then the exceptional case. It is the doctrine which, whether tested through empirical or imaginative means, cannot be demonstrated. Thus while apparently

wondrous or seemingly exaggerated things can prove to be true, that is not the case with the Trinity. Amory uses the form of the novel to demonstrate that that which might appear to be contrary to reason is not; while that which is above reason (and not, in Buncle’s view, revealed to us through Scripture), cannot be shown to be in accordance with reason.

Amory’s first fictions were published shortly before the emergence of two related phenomena in cultural history: the literary hoax (in the form of the writings of the pseudo-third-century Celtic bard, Ossian, and those of the fake medieval monk, Thomas Rowley), and the emergence of the Gothic novel (with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, 1764). For Deidre Lynch, early gothic fiction foregrounds the way in which the novel calls intrinsically upon the belief of its readers and in so doing does not ‘interrupt’ the rise of the novel, but ‘completes’ it.⁴⁰ Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* was originally published with a Preface which claimed that the text, like the poetry of Ossian and Rowley, was a much older text (dated 1529) which had recently been rediscovered. The seemingly improbable events it recounted (such as the fatal and inexplicable descent of a huge helmet in the opening scene) were, it is claimed, thoroughly believed by the text’s first author and readers, in late medieval Naples. As Lynch notes: ‘This tricky passage holds out the incredible as the very hallmark of authentic historicity’.⁴¹ The second edition of the novel (1765), in contrast, announced the novel as newly written, as a ‘new species of romance’ which was entirely imaginative. Subsequent editions, significantly, retained the prefaces of both editions. In this way, gothic fiction both encourages and debunks belief in improbable fictions. As this essay has demonstrated, however, such effects are not restricted to the workings of the supernatural, but also occur in the ‘realist’, experimental fictions of Amory.

Ultimately, within the creative freedom which the novel permits, the complex entanglements of faith and knowledge, fiction and plausibility, evidence and imagination can be explored. Such entanglements are not always entirely resolved: we know from Swift’s

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3 non-fictional prose that he was almost certainly orthodox in his views of the Trinity, for
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5 example, but readings of *A Tale of a Tub* continue to debate the extent of that work's
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7 religious heterodoxy. In Amory's novels, the apparent incompatibility between his open and
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9 defiant anti-trinitarianism and his obvious creation of fictions remains as a critical crux, one
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11 which, though explicable in terms of Amory's resistance to the Trinity as non-Scriptural,
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13 retains the force of contradiction, in which Enlightenment claims to knowledge collide
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15 against continuing enchantment to that which is extraordinary.
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18 To date, the theological implications of a broader range of mid-century fiction have
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20 yet to be probed. It is the argument of this essay that the 'wondrous' improbable fictions of
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22 the early to mid-eighteenth century – of the kind written by Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne,
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24 Thomas Amory or Horace Walpole, for example, and explored in recent studies by
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26 Molesworth and Kareem and Lynch – became a crucial testing ground for questions of faith
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28 and knowledge. Amory's fictions make these theological issues particularly overt in linking
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30 the extraordinary events and experiences of his fictional hero with considerations of the role
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32 of reason in religious belief. Debates concerning natural and revealed religion and the threat
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34 of deism had long articulated fears concerning the working of the imagination. In an attack
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36 against Toland, for example, Peter Browne had argued against knowledge by analogy, fearing
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38 that revealed religion could be exposed as 'a Creature only of the Imagination'.⁴² Amory's
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40 fiction, in contrast, suggests that the Imagination can present fictions in such a way as to
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42 invite our belief, within the frame of scepticism. In this way, the theological debates of
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44 natural versus revealed religion could be explored more creatively in the whimsical
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46 playfulness of fiction than in the more strictly denotative requirements of the sermon.
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48 Amory's eccentric and little-known novel, *The Life of John Buncl, Esq* (1756), thus suggests
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50 what might be gained by thinking about theology through the prism of fiction.
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¹ See *A new catalogue of Lownds's circulating library ...* ([London, 1758?]) and *A new catalogue of the curious and valuable collection of books (both English and French) ...* ([London, 1767?]; *A catalogue of a very choice and curious collection of books in all arts, sciences, and languages* ([London, 1762]); *Lackington, Allen, & Co.'s catalogue, volume the first, Michaelmas, 1798, to Michaelmas, 1799* ([London, 1798]); and, the only eighteenth-century catalogue to list the book under 'romance', *A catalogue of the libraries of the Rev. Zachary Grey, L.L.D. ... Malachy Postlethwayte, Esq ...* ([London, 1768]).

² See Thomas Amory, *The Life of John Buncl, Esq*, ed. Moyra Haslett (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011). Subsequent references to *Buncl* will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically.

³ After Hutchinson's death in 1737, the 'Hutchinsonians' continued his work in publications of their own and in a twelve-volume edition of Hutchinson's *Philosophical and Theological Works* (1748-9). The continuing significance of these debates in the mid-1750s can be seen in Thomas Sharp's *Two Dissertations Concerning the Meaning of the Hebrew Words Elohim and Berith* (1751), which is directly referred to in *Buncl*, and which argues that the Hutchinsonians had failed to demonstrate an Old Testament authority for a trinitarian theology. See also Robert Spearman's attack on Newton in *An Enquiry after Philosophy and Theology* (1755) and Benjamin Kenicott's criticism of Hutchinson's Hebrew linguistics in *A Word to the Hutchinsonians* (1756).

⁴ See William Hazlitt, 'On John Buncl' (1815) in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, Toronto: Dent, 1930-34), IV, p.51; Leigh Hunt, *A Book for a Corner*, 2 vols (London: Chapman & Hall, 1849), I, p.151.

⁵ *The Antiquarian Doctor's Sermon, on an antiquated subject; lately found among the Sweepings of his Study* (London, 1768), p.v.

⁶ The theology of the sermon is also consistent with works openly published by Amory, including its celebration of Whiston and its form as a 'lay' sermon, delivered, not in church, but to Whiston's society of gentlemen. The *Sermon* was published by Joseph Johnson in 1768: Johnson had published the second edition of *Buncle* in 1766 and would shortly publish a second edition of *Memoirs*, in 1769. Robert Amory's biographical notice of his father referred to the 'many political and religious Tracts, Poems, and Songs' which he had published (*St James's Chronicle*, 20 November, 1788). There is also a relatively unusual use, for this period, of the word 'odiferous', found in both the Preface to *Buncle* (1756) and in the *Sermon*.

⁷ See *The Theological Repository* 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1769) 236-47 and 2 (London: J. Johnson, 1770) 22-37.

⁸ There is some evidence that the articulation of anti-trinitarian views was becoming less controversial in the 1750s. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, had cautiously kept his views on the Trinity private, but anti-trinitarian works were published posthumously: *Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel* (1733) and *Two Letters to Mr Le Clerc* (1754). And, at a meeting of the Exeter Assembly in 1753, a motion was passed which permitted Presbyterian ministers to be ordained without having to declare their faith in the Divinity of Christ or of the Holy Ghost. However, that anti-trinitarianism could still cause a furore in the 1750s is evident in the career of the Irish cleric Robert Clayton: only his death in February 1758 prevented him from appearing before a summons on the charge of heresy for his anti-trinitarian views.

Unitarianism remained illegal until the Trinity Act of 1813.

⁹ See *The Monthly Review* (August 1755) 128-38 and (September 1755) 202-25. In addition to the footnote quoted here, Amory had earlier responded to these criticisms by writing *Two Letters to the Reviewers, occasioned by their account of a book called Memoirs. By two*

Ladies (London, 1755); and this pamphlet was in turn replied to with a short piece in the *Monthly Review* (October 1755) 319-20.

¹⁰ Lest it be thought that Amory was unaware of the height of Niagara, there are many further examples of conscious exaggerations. For example, in borrowing from a 1682 account of Penpark-hole, Amory exaggerates the depth of water in the cavern (changing '5½ feet' to 'generally 16 feet'); see *Buncle*, p.319, note to p.207.

¹¹ John Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious: or, A Treatise shewing, That there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, nor above it: and that no Christian doctrine can be properly call'd A Mystery* (London, 1696). There were no fewer than fifty-four replies to this book before 1761: see J.M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought Ancient and Modern to the Period of the French Revolution*, 2 vols (London: Watts, 1936), II p.715. See [Thomas Amory], *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (London: J. Noon, 1755), pp.75-77, 330-31, 419, 509, 515-527 for outspoken defences of writers often identified as deist, including Lord Bolingbroke, Thomas Chubb, Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Morgan, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and John Toland; and pp.9, 61, 267, 420, 517 for positive uses of 'Christian deism' (or of 'Gospel-deism', p.106), particularly as a synonym for anti-trinitarianism. See also Buncle's claim that he left London the day after the trial of 'my intimate acquaintance, the unhappy Tom Woolston' (p.405). Further references to Amory's *Memoirs* will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

¹² See, for example, Francis Atterbury, *Letter to a Convocation-Man* (London, 1697) which refers to a 'universal Conspiracy ... under the Style of Deists, Socinians, Latitudinarians, Deniers of Mysteries, and pretending Explainers of them' (p.6). For Locke on the Trinity, see G.A.J. Rogers, 'John Locke: conservative radical' in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 97-116

¹³ *Monthly Review* (December 1756) 590.

¹⁴ For specific references to Buncle as Don Quixote or a knight-errant, see *Monthly Review* (November 1756) 502, 600 and 602. The same journal's review of *Memoirs* concluded with a quotation from *Don Quixote*, which the magazine had reviewed (in the form of Smollett's translation) in its previous issue: *Monthly Review* (September 1755) 224-25.

¹⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine* 8 (February 1738) 'A Letter concerning Enthusiasm', 89. See Brean Hammond, 'Mid-Century English Quixotism and the Defence of the Novel', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 10 (1997-98) 247-68; Paul Goring, 'Anglicanism, Enthusiasm and Quixotism: Preaching and Politeness in Mid-Eighteenth-century Literature', *Literature and Theology* 15.4 (December 2001) 326-41; and Oliver Lovesey, 'Divine Enthusiasm and Love Melancholy: *Tristram Shandy* and Eighteenth-century Narratives of Saint Errantry', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16.3 (April 2004) 373-99. For more on this, see *Buncle*, p.34 n.58.

¹⁶ Jack Touchwood, *Quixote redivivus: or, the spiritual knight errant, in a letter to Isaack Bickerstaff, Esq, censor of Great Britain* (London, 1710).

¹⁷ *The Spiritual Quixote; or the entertaining history of Don Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Order of Jesuits ... Translated from the French ...*, 2 vols (London, 1755), 1 p. 1. ESTC suggests there was an earlier (1754) edition, copies of which have not survived. The work is an English translation of Pierre Quesnel (1699-1774), *Histoire de l'admirable dom Inigo de Guispuscoa, chevalier de la Vierge, et fondateur de la monarchie des Inighistes* (The Hague, 1736).

¹⁸ [Richard Graves,] *The Spiritual Quixote: or, the Summer's Ramble of Mr Geoffry Wildgoose. A Comic Romance*, 3 vols (London, 1773). See Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

and Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain, 1787-1788*, ed. Boyd Alexander (London: Hart-Davis, 1954), pp.285-6.

²⁰ Susan Staves, ‘Don Quixote in 18th-century England’, *Comparative Literature* 24 (1972) 193-215 (p.194).

²¹ Leigh Hunt discusses the novel in these terms in reading it as a comic work; see note 4 above.

²² Francis Blackburne and Charles Bulkley were thought to be the author of *Buncle* by some readers: see *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (June 1798) 490 and *The Olio; or, Museum of Entertainment*, I (January-August 1831) 279, quoting Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins. And the author of *Memoirs* and of *Buncle* continues to be occasionally confused with the Presbyterian minister of Arian views, Thomas Amory (1701-1774). However, one early book catalogue named Amory as the author of *Memoirs of Several Ladies*: see *A catalogue of the libraries of the Rev. Dr. Burton ... and the Rev. Mr. Colson* (London, 1761). For further details, see the ‘Introduction’ to *Buncle*, pp.16-23.

²³ See the *London Evening Post* (22 Dec 1739) [n.p.] and *Common Sense; or the Englishman’s Journal* (23 Feb 1740) [n.p.]; and *A Letter to the Reviewers, Occasioned by their Account of a Book called Memoirs: By a Lady and Remarks on the Reviewers: In Relation to the Account they have given of a Book called Memoirs* (London: John Noon, 1755). The 1739 and 1740 advertisements may have been authored by Amory, as the name of the editor and biographer of Harriot Harcourt – Charles Hawkins Herbert – is also given as the author of *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* in the first of Amory’s *Two Letters to the Reviewers* (1755), p.2. Amory draws our attention to these advertisements in his discussion of Miss Harcourt in *Memoirs*, p.345.

²⁴ See also the following, comparable examples: Buncke appears not to recognise Swift's irony in quoting from *A Tale of a Tub* (p.88) and takes what is ironic in Morgan's *A Defence of the Two Letters* (1723) and inflects it literally (p.214). See also the following essay which notes how a discussion by 'Buncke' of Voltaire's views in the *Hibernian Review* (August 1776) omits the irony of Voltaire's views: Graham Gargett, 'Voltaire's "Lettres Philosophiques"', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* 14 (1999) 77-98 (pp.92-5).

²⁵ See note 7 above.

²⁶ Amory is closer to Locke and Samuel Clarke on the importance, and the advantages, of revelation in arguing that revelation is God's gift to humankind, than to those deists who minimised its significance. Henry Fielding dramatised something of the debate between natural and revealed religion, between deist and divine, when he portrayed the philosopher Square in debate with the Anglican clergyman Thwackum in *Tom Jones* (1749). In *Buncke* Volume I, Bob Berrisfort articulates a number of deist arguments against revelation, in places tacitly quoting from Thomas Morgan's *Physico-Theology* (1741), before being persuaded by Buncke's arguments for the truth of Christianity.

²⁷ Skelton's pamphlets include, *Some Proposals for the Revival of Christianity* (Dublin, 1736) and *A Vindication of the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Winchester* (Dublin, 1736). Both texts were reprinted in London in the same year.

²⁸ Jeremy Goring in *The English Presbyterians: from Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism*, ed. C.G. Bolam et al. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968), p.189. Buncke's description of the work as being 'a bad book, finely written' (*Buncke*, p.469n) makes it difficult to determine whether he recognised its irony. Compare also the debate among Sterne scholars of whether the 'cattle-plague psalm' might be a burlesque. See Tim Parnell, 'Laurence Sterne and the Problem of Belief (I)', *The Shandean* 17 (2006) 121-39 (pp.130-1).

²⁹ John Tillotson, *The Rule of Faith* (1666; London, 1676), p.118. I am indebted for this reference to Carol Stewart's discussion of Sterne in relation to Latitudinarianism in *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.139.

³⁰ Tim Parnell, 'Laurence Sterne and the Problem of Belief (II)' *The Shandean* 19 (2008) 9-26 (p.23). See Buncke's responses to the deist position of Bob Berrisfort (pp.241-61).

³¹ See, for example, J. Paul Hunter, *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Leo Damrosch, *God's Plot and Man's Stories* (University of Chicago Press, 1985); Ronald Paulson, *The Beautiful, Novel and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Richard A. Rosengarten, *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence* (Palgrave, 2000); Martin C. Battestin, 'The Critique of Freethinking from Swift to Sterne' in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15.3-4, special issue 'Fiction and Religion' (April-July 2003) 341-420; Thomas Woodman, 'Tom Jones and Christian Comedy' in *Biblical religion and the novel, 1700-2000*, eds Mark Knight and Thomas M. Woodman (Ashgate, 2006), pp.59-68; Scott Robertson, 'The Eighteenth-Century Novel', in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, eds Hass, Jasper, and Jay (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.431-447; and Stewart, *The Secularization of Ethics* (2010).

³² Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.1 and 3.

³³ Deidre Lynch, 'Early Gothic Novels and the Belief in Fiction', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume 2: English and British Fiction 1750-1820*, ed. Peter Garside and Karen O'Brien (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.182-198 (p.196).

³⁴ See, for example, Edward Synge II, *An Appendix to a Gentleman's Religion* (London, 1698), pp. 11-21; Peter Browne, *Things Divine and Supernatural Conceived by Analogy with Things Natural and Human* (London, 1733), pp. 216-21. For a full discussion of the

Molyneux problem and the analogies which it inspired, see Darrell Jones, 'The Molyneux Problem and Irish Enlightenment', in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1700-1780*, ed. Moyra Haslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For allusions by Swift and Amory to these motifs, see *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. David Womersley (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.213; Amory, *Memoirs*, p.100; and *Buncle*, pp. 57, 263 n.44, 241.

³⁵ For Swift on the Trinity, see Ian Higgins, 'An Argument against Abolishing Christianity and its Contexts' in *Reading Swift: papers from The Fifth Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), pp.203-224.

³⁶ See Catherine Gallagher, 'Rise of Fictionality' in *The Novel: Volume 1 History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton University Press, 2006), pp.336-363 and Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, pp.109-10.

³⁷ For important essays relevant to these points, see Gallagher 'Rise of Fictionality' and John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2012), particularly chapters 1 and 2.

³⁸ In this regard, the imaginative force of fiction might be seen to be comparable to the 'prophetic imagination' identified by the Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, as an alternative way of seeing and imagining the world that is more theologically real than the world we inhabit: see, for example, *The Prophetic Imagination* (1978; 2nd edn: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of the journal for drawing this work to my attention.

³⁹ The phrasing here is taken from a letter from Samuel Clarke to Leibniz (1717): see *Buncle*, p.296 (note to p.135).

⁴⁰ Lynch, 'Early Gothic Novels and the Belief in Fiction', p.185.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.186.

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⁴² Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding* (London, 1728), p.41.

For Peer Review