Chapter 5

Atheism and Apostasy

Francesco Spiera was a sixteenth-century “apostate” from Padua whose biographical story was widely circulated in Reformation Europe. In England Spiera was anglicized as “Spira” and commonly employed in texts as a powerful trope for apostasy, crises of conscience, religious despair, and suicide. Previous studies have focused on these factors for good reason.\(^1\) Equally important, however, are the ways in which accounts of Spira and analogous Spira stories intertwined with representations of atheists and the confutation of atheism examined in previous chapters. As Spira’s story was retold in various formats over the course of the seventeenth century it continued to express deep anxieties about the early modern Christian order by linking apostates and atheists as symbols of religious, moral, and political dissolution.\(^2\)

(i) Spira’s Apostasy Revived

The history of Spira’s story of religious apostasy began in 1548 when he publicly disavowed Catholicism. Several contemporary authors alleged that Spira heard an inner voice which urged him to give up Catholicism in favour of the reformed religion. On a Protestant reading this led to a conflict between a true inner voice and the worldly voices of Catholic priests, peers, and family members, the result of which was a crisis of conscience leading to Spira’s eventual suicide.\(^3\) Quickly thereafter Spira became the subject of multiple publications translated and transmitted throughout Europe. An English translation of an

---


3 For a more detailed discussion of Spiera’s ordeal see Overall, “Exploitation,” *passim*. 
early Latin account entitled *A Notable and Marveilous Epistle* by Matthew Gribaldi was circulating by 1550; John Foxe included Spira in his *Acts and Monuments*; Thomas Beard repeated Spira's story in his popular *Theatre of Gods Judgement* (1597); and Nathaniel Bacon provided a summary narrative derived from a variety of sources in *A Relation of the Fearfull Estate of Francis Spira* (1638). In religious writings throughout seventeenth-century England Spira served as an archetype of apostasy and crisis of conscience. Bacon's account, by far the most popular, was published dozens of times from the seventeenth through to the nineteenth century and accompanied the dramatic upsurge of anti-atheist confutation texts published from 1650 to 1700.

The representations of atheists and arguments against atheism constructed by early modern religious apologists were directly connected to Francis Spira and Spira stories in the 1690s, when Bacon's *Fearfull Estate of Francis Spira* was republished several times alongside the *The Second Spira* (1692), *The English Spira* (1693), *Spira's Despair Revived* (1694), *Spira Respirans* (1695), and *A True Second Spira* (1697). First and foremost, Spira stories were exemplary. For

---


6 Bacon's work was republished in the following years according to my survey of the British Library, Cambridge University Library, The Huntington Library, William A. Clark Memorial Library, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, Folger Shakespeare Library, and the English Short Title Catalogue: 1638, 1640, 1649, 1653, 1657, 1662, 1668, 1672, 1675, 1678, 1681, 1682, 1683, 1688, 1693, 1695, 1700. As Macdonald has noted in “Fearfull Estate,” even this list may not be fully representative.

7 The full titles of these works are indicative: [R. Sault], *The Second Spira: Being a Fearful Example of an Atheist Who Had Apostatized from the Christian Religion, and Dyed in Despair at Westminster, Decemb. 8. 1692. With an Account of his Sickness, Convictions, Discourses with Friends and Ministers; and of his dreadful Expressions and Blasphemies when he left the world. As also a Letter from an Atheist of his Acquaintance, with his Answer to it. Published for an Example to others, and recommended to all young Persons, to settle them in their Religion*.