

Anne Berkeley's *Contrast*: A Note

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Abstract: This essay provides some historical background for, and considers the philosophical importance of, the collection of Anne Berkeley's (George Berkeley's wife) letters to Adam Gordon. The primary philosophical significance of the letters is her arguments against the so-called "free thinkers." She discusses the philosophical view and the behavior of five prominent free-thinkers: Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Hume. Her discussion of Shaftesbury is particularly illuminating and can be read as a commentary on *Alciphron* III.13-14. Because the work of the other four were published mainly after the Bishop's death, the letters also show Anne's independent lifelong interest in matters theological, philosophical, and moral.

I. The *Contrast*

It is a little known fact that there is a book spanning two volumes whose main author is George Berkeley's wife, Anne. The full title of the work is *The contrast; or, an antidote against the pernicious principles disseminated in the letters of the late Earl of Chesterfield; Being The Correspondence of an eminent Person, deceased, with the Editor, during a Course of Years. To which are added anniversary addresses from a father to his son. By the Rev. Sir Adam Gordon, Bart. M. A. Rector of Hinxworth, Herts.* It was published in London in 1791. To my knowledge the existence of the book has not been noted by any Berkeley scholar. This is surprising, as use have been made of both Anne's unpublished correspondence with William Samuel Johnson (Stratford)¹ and her fairly trivial notes in the Chapman MS.²

In the *Contrast* Anne discusses the free-thinkers that Berkeley attacked in his essays in the *Guardian* (1713) and in *Alciphron* (1732). Of particular interest to Berkeley scholars is Anne's discussion of Shaftesbury in her 12th letter. There she gives a kind of commentary on *Alciphron* III.13-14, which will be considered below. By discussing other free-thinkers whose work appeared after the Bishop's death, the *Contrast* also shows Anne's strong independent interest in theological and philosophical matters.

The work consists of four parts: (1) a *Preface* by the editor and publisher of the book, Adam Gordon (I, 4-14); (2) the most comprehensive part of the work, 41 letters all written by Anne Berkeley to Adam Gordon (I, 15-271, II, 3-90); (3) the *Anniversary Addresses from a father to his son, on his birthday* by Adam Gordon (II, 91-199); and (4) *Six letters to a Lady of Quality* by the historian and Christian mystic, Nathaniel Hooke (II, 200-259).³ The letters and the addresses have the common theme of the piousness of the authors and the Christian educational tone in which it aims to guide the young recipients. The letters of Philip Stanhope, the Earl of Chesterfield, to which the *Contrast* is offered as reply or "contrast," are the famous *Letters to his*

¹ As I refer to two different Samuel Johnson's, I will disambiguate between them by referring to their place of birth.

² A. A. Luce *The Life of George Berkeley* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), 111; and I. C. Tipton and E. J. Furlong, "Mrs George Berkeley and her washing machine," *Hermathena* 101 (1965), 38-47.

³ Presumably Anne gave him the manuscript. In a letter to Johnson (Stratford) from 21 June 1770, she refers to Hooke's *Letter to a Lady*, saying that Hooke gave her the manuscript for it. See *The Yale University Library Gazette* 8 (1933), 34.

son published in 1774. Criticized early on for their lack of religious zeal, Gordon described them as “subtle poison” (I.9) and “superficial and licentious maxims” (10). Samuel Johnson (Lichfield) expressed his view in harsher terms, claiming that they taught “the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master.”⁴

The editor and recipient of Anne’s letter was Rev. Sir Adam Gordon, Bart., M.A. (1745?-1817), an Anglican clergyman, rector of Hinxworth and later rector of West Tilbury.⁵ In the preface Adam Gordon offers a short sketch of Anne, though “for reasons immaterial to be mentioned, her name at present must be suppressed” (I: 5). It sheds great light on her character and I will therefore quote a sizable portion of it here:

The original writer of these letters was a lady of elevated rank, and the most brilliant, and general accomplishments; allied to one of the finest geniuses of his day (who was no less eminent for *every virtue*,⁶ than sound and universal learning). She could not fail of improving the talents, with which nature had endowed her to shine as an ornament to her sex. To the strenuous friend, the most pleasing companion, and the benevolent patroness of indigence and merit, she united the exalted and qualifying virtues of the humble and pious Christian. She was remarkable for never starting serious subjects abruptly, or unreasonably; yet none of her discourse was without a tincture of the *one thing needful*: and she possessed the rare talent of introducing these subjects in such a pleasing manner, blended with such variety of entertaining and valuable anecdote, that the whole company seemed interested in her leading the conversation: her eloquence was so flowing, and at the same time so rapid, assisted by a retentive and copious memory, replete with happy allusion, and the most pertinent quotation, that she never tired her audience — I have often seen the most gay, and those little qualified (through a worldly education) to relish the truths she recommended, so penetrated by her reasoning, and so captivated by the sweetness and vivacity of her manner, as to listen with profound attention and to feel regret when she concluded her friendly admonitions. — In short, sterling sense, improved ability, just politeness, universal benevolence, and great Christian progress, combined to grace the character of this amiable and excellent woman. (I: 5-7)

II. Anne’s Letters

The published letters from Anne Berkeley to Gordon are not dated. Gordon states that the correspondence was more extensive than the published letters in the *Contrast*, “many of the

⁴ Ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (6 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1: 266.

⁵ Gordon was instituted and installed as canon of the fifth prebend of Bristol in 1797. J. M. Horn, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae 1541-1857. Vol. VIII, Bristol, Gloucester, Oxford and Peterborough Dioceses*, 1996, 29. His obituary is in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 87 (1817), 556-67. He is the author of two books: *Discourses on Several Subjects: Being the Substance of Some Select Homilies of the Church of England, Rendered in a modern Style, and Fitted for the General Use, and Christian Instruction of the Community at Large, In Two Volumes* (London: John Stockdale, 1795), and *A Collection of Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions, Particularly on the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England* (London: John Stockdale, 1796). The former lists Bishop Berkeley’s son as a subscriber.

⁶ A reference to Alexander Pope’s Epilogue to the *Satires*, Dialogue II, line 72: “To Berkeley ev’ry virtue under heav’n.”

original letters necessary to fill up the order of time, having been unfortunately lost, from the casualties attending a variety of situations” (I: 10). We can therefore expect some significant gaps in time between letters. Gordon states that he became acquainted with Anne Berkeley when he was 15 years old (I: 8). In her first letter Anne makes reference to Gordon’s forthcoming confirmation (I: 15), which suggests that the letters began shortly after they met. In other words the correspondence started approximately 1764 when Anne was in her sixties.

I will not offer a commentary on all or most of Anne’s letters. The majority of them concern moral and religious education with anecdotes about young men losing their health, wealth and soul by not practicing the teachings of Christianity. She also writes about her time in France as a youth (I: 84). But some letters touch on arguments for the truth of Christianity and, connected to this, arguments against the teaching and character of a host of “free-thinkers.” Starting on letter no. 2 she draws extensively on Charles Leslie’s *A short and easy method with the deists; wherein the certainty of the Christian religion is demonstrated by Infallible Proof, from Four Rules, which are incompatible to any Imposture that ever yet has been, or can possibly be* (1694). This work is concerned to show that the miracles recounted in the Old and New Testament are historical facts, and this is her main line of reasoning against the free-thinkers.

Of most significance for Berkeley scholarship is Anne’s letter no. 12, on the views of free-thinkers. She claims that these opinions at least partly come from discussions she had with her husband:

as I have had frequently an opportunity, few can boast, of hearing the *true* character of most of the infidel authors of my time, from a very eminent person who was acquainted with some of the most celebrated of these profane wits, and with all their works, I do not know that I can do any thing more advantageous for you, than to transcribe some anecdotes relating to a few of the most famous men of this stamp. (I: 110-11)

Anne goes on to discuss a number of such “profane wits.” Here I will consider two of them: Henry St John, first Viscount Bolingbroke (“Lord B-”) and Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (Lord “S-y”). Other thinkers she puts in this category are Voltaire, “that arch-enemy of sacred history” (I: 121) and, with some qualification, Rousseau and Hume (I: 258-59). The latter two are discussed in reference to Rousseau’s *Julia*, a book Anne gives a detailed criticism of in letter no. 30. Warning Gordon about “authors but a little removed from Atheism” (I: 258), she remarks,

I am no longer at a loss why Hume patronized him [Rousseau]; he was as a refiner to recommend by the attraction of beautiful colour, that same work which Hume attempted in a more downright and disgusting manner. But as the old proverb says, as two of a trade, and especially *such* a trade, can never agree, the pride of R- could not bear favours conferred by Hume his inferior. (I: 259)

On her view Bolingbroke “is the chief of their [free-thinkers] writers in our language” (I: 111). Bolingbroke’s philosophical writings were published posthumously in 1754.⁷ After its

⁷ Bolingbroke, *The Philosophical Works of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (5 vols.; London: David Mallet, 1754).

publication it was received as an important work and Anne accurately shows the general estimate of its importance at the time (though its fame did not last). As the works were published after Bishop Berkeley's death, he presumably knew little of them. But it seems he was acquainted with Bolingbroke and certainly knew of him through their mutual friends Swift and Pope.⁸ Anne claims that some of Bolingbroke's arguments in fact work in promoting a sound Christian system. In this way "my Lord's [Bolingbroke's] *head* was Christian" (I: 112). She refers Gordon to a book that systematically attempts to show this feature of Bolingbroke's writings, presumably John Leland's *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers* (2 vols.; London, 1754-55). She also mentions Bolingbroke's criticism of the Old Testament and his attack on revelation and states that Leslie's works contains the proper antidote (I: 112). This shows that Anne was up to date on the major philosophical and religious disputes of the time, at least those concerning free-thinking. Further, Anne dwells significantly on Bolingbroke's behavior and his painful last years.⁹

Lord B- was also a vicious man, and none such can be a Christian; for unless you deny yourself you cannot be Christ's disciple. Now this nobleman would not deny himself, and therefore he sometimes denied Christ, though the force of reason rendered it impossible that he could support his error; and by not denying himself, he suffered tortures which equalled those the primitive Christians bore, without their hopes to sweeten them. He lived some time during the latter part of his days in the most wretched state, from the consequence of a dissolute course of life. Thus we may observe the folly and infatuation of those counted among the wisest of the sons of men. This celebrated genius lived a great while in agonies, and it is said his end was truly shocking: but every day furnishes such examples; the martyrs to Satan infinitely exceed those who die to God. All abandoned debauchees choose him for their master whose ways are death, and refuse him whose gift is *eternal* life. (I: 112-13)

While Bolingbroke's debaucheries were well known, Anne might have been better informed than most through anecdotes from her husband.¹⁰

Next Anne turns to Shaftesbury who the Bishop had severely criticized in *Alciphron* III and the *New Theory of Vision Vindicated*, sections 3-5.

The next right honourable infidel is Lord S-y, a man far inferior to the former in intellects, knowledge, or merit as an author. You must excuse this assertion, which in *me*, I own, sounds very pedantic and presuming; but I am only an echo of one of the best judges, perhaps, this or any former age has produced: it is the opinion of the distinguished personage before alluded to, who for the present must remain nameless.—You must know, that the *vices* of this author were also of a different kind from those of the other Peer: they were confined to *pride* and *conceit*, *peevishness*, *passion*, narrow mindedness, and violent prejudice against those who opposed him.¹¹ *His* vices were those of the spiritual part, the

⁸ Luce, *The Life of George Berkeley*, 106, 232.

⁹ Bolingbroke was in extreme physical pain due to a vicious cancer growth that started on his cheekbone and rapidly spread. See H. T. Dickinson, *Bolingbroke* (London: Constable, 1970), 295.

¹⁰ For the common perception of Bolingbroke's as a "man of pleasure," see Dickinson, *Bolingbroke*, 5-7.

¹¹ Compare the Bishop's assessment of Shaftesbury's vices in Alc. III.13, W 3: 132, "Cratylus [Shaftesbury], a man prejudiced against the Christian religion, of a crazy constitution, of a rank above most

other's those of the animal conjointly, but either will damn both man and angels - Lucifer fell by pride, and Adam by a desire to know by experience the good and evil of this world. (I: 114-15)

Anne claims that she is recounting this opinion of Shaftesbury as an “echo of one of the best judges, perhaps, this or any former age has produced,” and surely she has her husband in mind here. She begins by paraphrasing a line from *Alciphron* concerning Shaftesbury’s use of Ancient authorities.¹² She then moves to her own opinions by contrasting Shaftesbury’s method of ridicule with Leslie’s method for establishing the truth of revealed religion:¹³

Lord S- was, comparatively with the former person [Lord Bolingbroke], a superficial writer; he was a vain, angry, party man, who stole fine brilliant sentiments from the ancient philosophers, and patched them together with shreds of modern infidelity. Such are his works, wherein he gives *ridicule* as the test of *truth*; and wisely concludes, that had the Jews acted such plays in *derision*, as Roman Catholics do in *honour* of Christianity, they would have rendered racks and other torments useless, in extirpating our blessed religion in its birth. this (without one word of truth in it, for Christianity was not, nor *could* be extirpated, being the work of God) is the most plausible thing I can recollect from his sayings on this subject in all his rhapsody, in which he only *hints* and *winks* a reputation down; serving religion as ladies too often do each other’s character, when they have nothing really bad to say. And certainly the forgeries and superstition of Roman Catholics bid fairer to bring Christianity into disrepute, than any thing else in the world can possibly effect. But his Lordship most unfortunately forgot, that the primitive Christians died for facts which were *recent*, and had been performed *before their eyes*. - A farce, for example, which in Bethany had represented the resurrection of Lazarus - or at Nain, the resurrection of the widow’s son, would *not* have supplanted the use of racks and torments in those towns. The persons who had seen these mighty works of God would not have slackened in their faith through my Lord’s supposed infallible device. Had there been no *truth* in the report of these facts, his project would have been a good one, but as they were real, and had been just performed in *public*, before men’s eyes, the populace would never have borne such miracles to be profaned - it never could have been attempted. Mr. Leslie’s four unanswerable marks are much more to be relied on than Lord S-y’s single test.

I scarce remember any thing in his fine affected books, but what are too flimsy to be worth your attention. He sets himself forth as a benign being, filled with that love which Christianity alone inspires, and which no one can have but from the *author* of Christianity, who is love itself. But it is very easy for a gentleman with a pen and ink in his hand to describe himself in the most lovely colours, as a lady who painted might draw a picture of

men’s ambition, and a fortune equal to his rank, had little capacity for sensual vices, or temptation to dishonest ones.”

¹² “But he who shall borrow this splendid patch from the Stoics, and hope to make a figure by inserting it in a piece of modern composition, seasoned with the wit and notion of these times, will indeed make a figure, but perhaps it may not be in the eyes of a wise man the figure he intended.” *Alc.*, III.14, W 3: 136.

¹³ Shaftesbury, *A Letter concerning Enthusiasm, Characteristics of men, manners, opinions, times, with a collection of letters*. By the Right Honorable Antony Earl of Shaftesbury, 3 volumes, (Basil, 1790), vol.1, 8ff. For the Bishop’s criticism of ridicule as a test of truth see *Alc.* III.15 and VI.32, W 3: 137, 284.

herself, beautiful as Helen. It is certain that in *life*, he was very unlike his own picture, which I could prove to you by many well authenticated anecdotes that would convince you abundantly how different his disposition was from a generous love of truth and universal philanthropy; but there is no necessity for them here. (I. 115-18)

One wishes that Anne would have told Gordon about these “well authenticated anecdotes” and again one wonders what her husband knew about such stories and to what extent that shaped his opinion of Shaftesbury.

From these quotations we see that Anne shared the central moral and religious concerns of the day with her husband and that after his death she kept up to date on his opponent’s views. She shared the Bishop’s dislike for free-thinkers and had some knowledge of both the free-thinkers’ and their opponents arguments. It seems almost certain that during their twenty five years together they must have discussed this and related issues extensively, exchanging ideas and arguments. It seems to me that if we could learn more about Anne, then more could also be learnt about George Berkeley’s philosophical and personal development. Most of her letters that are known today are from after the Bishop’s death. It would be particularly useful if we could learn more about her views while George was still alive.¹⁴

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¹⁴ I would like to thank David Berman for helpful comments on an early version of this paper.