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‘The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Defence of Humane Learning’

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The Author

I took my BA (2008) in Oriental Studies and English at Cambridge, and an MSt (2009) in English at Oxford, where I am also finishing my DPhil. My doctoral thesis, ‘Shaftesbury and Learned Culture’ places this writer in some neglected intellectual contexts, both English and European. It investigates his antipathetic relationship to English learned culture and his more productive relationship with the work of contemporaries in francophone Europe. My research interests are mainly in the scholarly cultures of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, including biblical criticism. I am preparing book chapters on Shaftesbury and on the Hebrew books of the King James Bible translator Miles Smith.

The Paper

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), was a vernacular moralist and interpreter of ancient Stoicism. Like his humanist predecessors, he was committed to the value of studying ancient pagan philosophy, particularly works he identified as part of a Stoic tradition of moral philosophy. He set out to defend this study at a time when it was being both marginalised and attacked.

Shaftesbury asserted the unity of humane and divine learning. He considered that the study of ancient pagan texts was necessary to the study of the Christian religion, and he set out to provide a coherent rationale for this assertion. This brought him into contention and agreement with a sometimes surprising cast of predecessors and contemporaries in the English universities and the European republic of letters.

This paper attempts to explain how Shaftesbury’s criticisms of the universities and Church relate to his defence of humanistic learning. A significance of its argument is to show that in making his criticisms of the university and Church, he wrote primarily as a humanist, rather than as an enlightened philosopher, deist or radical Whig. Its broadest significance is to show that confessional and European contexts can make better sense of English intellectual and literary culture than domestic or political ones.

Recommended Reading

Allen G. Debus, *Science and Education in the Seventeenth Century: The Webster-Ward Debate*. London: Macdonald, 1970.

Feingold, Mordechai, 'Aristotle and the English Universities in the Seventeenth Century: a re-evaluation', in *European Universities in the Age of Reformation and Counter Reformation*. Edited by H. Robinson-Hammerstein. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998.

-----, 'The Humanities', in *The History of the University of Oxford*. General editor: T.H. Aston. Vol. IV: *Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, Edited by N. Tyacke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

-----, 'The Mathematical Sciences and New Philosophies', in *The History of the University of Oxford*. General editor: T.H. Aston. Vol. IV: *Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, Edited by N. Tyacke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Lawrence Klein, 'Shaftesbury, politeness and the politics of religion', in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*. Edited by Quentin Skinner and Nicholas Phillipson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

-----, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Mandelbrote, Scott, 'The Uses of Natural Theology in Seventeenth-Century England', *Science in Context*, 20:3 (2007), 451-480.