

# The publication of Shaftesbury's 'Letter Concerning Design'

by KERRY DOWNES

The 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury's *Letter Concerning the Art, or Science of Design* was finished early in 1712; Shaftesbury, abroad in Naples and already ailing, sent the manuscript to London, addressed to Lord Somers. Within a year the author was dead. In his last two years of life, Shaftesbury had been able not only to prepare for the press the second edition (London, John Darby, 1714) of his *Characteristicks*, first published in 1711, but also to put together a sequel which he entitled *Second Characters*. This new work was to consist of four essays, the first being the *Letter Concerning Design* and the second the *Judgment of Hercules*.

The *Hercules* first appeared in French, and then in English as a pamphlet in 1713.<sup>1</sup> It was then incorporated in the 1714 edition of *Characteristicks* and all subsequent ones. The treatment of the *Letter Concerning Design* was not so simple. Ultimately it appeared as the last paper in volume III of *Characteristicks*; according to Benjamin Rand that was not until the fifth (1732) edition,<sup>2</sup> and this is also stated in the 4th Earl's life of his father, in which we are told that the *Letter* was 'till then unaccountably suppressed by his executors, though it was his express direction to have it printed'.<sup>3</sup> The 4th Earl, who was only three when his father died, seems not to have been aware of the projected *Second Characters*.<sup>4</sup> The date of publication of the *Letter* is of some importance for architectural historians in view of the part it is believed to have played in the early eighteenth-century reaction against Wren and the Baroque in favour of neo-Palladianism;<sup>5</sup> the date of 1732 has remained in general acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

How then was this presumed influential diatribe made known to its intended British public? It would not be the first or the last document of controversy to be circulated in manuscript, though this explanation was apparently not made in print until 1966.<sup>7</sup> More recently it has been challenged as needless, on the grounds that the British Library has a copy dated 1714 that contains the *Letter*. So it has, and so it does.<sup>8</sup> But copies of books as evidence can be as equivocal as buildings; the kind of examination that is routine for an early eighteenth-century building reveals some peculiarities, which are not resolved by copies in other libraries.<sup>9</sup> It now appears that (i) some copies of the 1714 edition contain the *Letter*; (ii) most of them do not; (iii) in no copy is the *Letter* mentioned in the Contents or title-page; (iv) it has been inserted into the inclusive copies with some skill but by a detectable process of surgery; (v) the inclusive copies are not all identical.

For this enquiry twenty-seven copies were traced and some simple questions asked about each.<sup>10</sup> Of these, twenty-three have a consistent and relatively normal collation

and do not include the *Letter*; the other four include it and their abnormal collation shows that they have been altered.<sup>11</sup> The key to this is in the signatures, the letters or groups of letters that printers put at the foot of pages of letterpress to identify sheets in the folding and sewing of a book. Without becoming too involved in the intricacies of bibliography, it is sufficient to say the following:

1. A signature or gathering will, when it is folded, form one section of a book, stitched through the last folding and consisting rarely of four, commonly of eight, sixteen or thirty-two pages.
2. Signatures run in sequence from A to Z, and thereafter if necessary start again at Aa.
3. Because early presses were small in size, even a book of average page size such as *Characteristicks* (about 19 × 11 cm trimmed) might be printed on sheets each folded just once into two leaves of four pages; a gathering was then made of four folded sheets, and each sheet was identified by a letter and a number on its first page. Thus (as in the book under discussion) the first, third, fifth, and seventh pages of the second gathering would be marked B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>3</sub>, and B<sub>4</sub>; the eight pages after stitching would not be marked, and the next gathering would start with C<sub>1</sub>.

Departures from this system usually indicate either a defective copy — which is one of the reasons for using it — or a deliberate irregularity such as the interpolation of engraved plates printed separately by a different process. In fact all copies of this particular volume are unusual in that the first four pages, and also pp. 345–48, depart from the sixteen-page norm because they consist of sheets containing both letterpress and engraving.<sup>12</sup>

Further, the last signature before the Index (Bb) comprises only seven leaves or three and a half sheets, with a stub to hold the stitching; signature Cc starts with the last lines of text (p. 391) (Pl. 1) and the Index runs from Cc<sub>2</sub> through signatures Dd and Ee and ends with a gathering of eight pages, Ff and Ff<sub>2</sub> and their counterparts after the centre fold. The irregularity of the seven-leaf signature Cc is unexplained; it is possible that, printing a book a few signatures at a time, Darby may have underestimated.

The copies that include the *Letter Concerning Design*, however, are more complicated. That it is an unforeseen interpolation is suggested by slight differences from the rest of the volume in type face and in measure (the width of the text); suspicion is confirmed by an examination of the signatures. The text of the *Letter* begins on p. 393 (Cc<sub>2</sub>) and runs through pp. 399 (Cc<sub>5</sub>) and 407 (Dd) to p. 411, followed by three blank pages as the end of the gathering.<sup>13</sup> The existence of Cc<sub>5</sub>, apparently the second half of sheet Cc<sub>4</sub>, is an anomaly.<sup>14</sup> Turning on to the Index, we find that it is identical with that in the exclusive copies. That is to say, it does not cover the *Letter*, and must have been made before any decision to include the *Letter* in the volume. Moreover, it starts again with the same set of signatures from Cc<sub>2</sub> to Ff<sub>2</sub> that have already been used in the *Letter*.

Finally, the four inclusive copies traced represent between them three different states. In the British Library copy the type for p. 391 was altered only by the removal of the words 'The End of the Third Volume' and the addition of the catchword 'A' for the ensuing title; the rest of the type is identical with the exclusive copies. In the other three copies the page has been re-set (Pl. 1), with some words on different lines, and with the

page number placed within the setting measure of the text, as in the following pages, rather than outside it as in pages up to 390.

The occasion of re-setting was apparently used to correct a misprint in the last sentence of the starred note; previously it had begun, 'And this is always is the best'. But at the same time the rest of the sentence was altered from 'when the Colours are most subdu'd, and made subservient' to 'when the Colours are most subdu'd, and subservient'.<sup>15</sup> The Bodleian copy represents this state, but while the Colorado and Pennsylvania copies are re-set in the same way, in another respect they conform with the British Library copy and the exclusive ones: in them the words, 'The End of the Third Volume' have been restored or retained and the catchword 'A' does not occur.

These variations reinforce the conclusion that the *Letter* was inserted as an after-thought, by interfering with already printed volumes complete with Index. They suggest, furthermore, that the surgery involved left a shortage of sheets containing p. 391, for which more than one type of substitute was found.<sup>16</sup>

Statistically, copies with the *Letter* are rare, and this is not surprising in view of the way it was inserted. The third and fourth editions (1723 and 1727) do not contain it.<sup>17</sup> It looks very much as if its first official publication really was in 1732 and a residual stock of the 1714 edition was up-dated by the various additions. We might like to argue, though it cannot be proved, that this was done after 1727, and by Darby.<sup>18</sup> But however early it may have been, the conclusion seems inevitable that not only the readers of the first, third and fourth editions, but also some 85 per cent of readers of the 1714 edition did not have the opportunity to read the *Letter* in print.

## NOTES

1 *Le Jugement d'Hercule* (Journal des Sçavans, LII, 1712); *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature* [etc.], 1713. Shaftesbury's own intentions were not fully realized until the publication of *Second Characters* in the edition of B. Rand (Cambridge, 1914). The plan of the work appears from correspondence discussed in Rand's introduction and from Shaftesbury's own draft prefaces, printed there.

2 *Second Characters*, p. xii.

3 The 4th Earl's biography was first printed in Bayle's *General Dictionary* (1734–41). I have used the text in B. Rand, *Life, Unpublished Letters . . . of Anthony Earl of Shaftesbury* (New York, 1900) where the passage is on p. xxix.

4 See n. 1.

5 This is discussed by, among others, C. Hussey in M. Jourdain, *The Work of William Kent* (1948), pp. 18ff., and K. Downes, *Hawksmoor* (1959), pp. 33–36.

6 E.g. in R. L. Brett, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury* (1951) where editions are listed up to 1737.

7 K. Downes, *English Baroque Architecture* (1966), p. 16. There the date is unaccountably given as 1731, an error repeated in idem., *Vanbrugh* (1977), p. 77.

8 This information, which is to be found in the BL Catalogue, was brought to the notice of architectural historians by S. Lang in *Jnl. Soc. of Architectural Historians*, xxxviii (1979), p. 209.

9 The commonness of the work today comes from the multiplicity of editions rather than the size of each; probably they were all small, though Shaftesbury expected the second to consist of 800 to 1,000 (Rand, *Life, Letters*, p. 528). Many libraries have only the first or third (1723) edition, including some of those credited with the second in the *National Union Catalog* (American Library Association, Resources and Technical Services Division). I am indebted to all those who have helped with information, and notably the specialist staff of the libraries detailed in n. 10. The *National Union Catalogue* is the largest convenient source for locations, and there is nothing comparable for Great Britain. However, there is no reason to suppose that the British distribution differs significantly from the American. The Gregg Press reprint of 1968 is of a copy without the *Letter*.

10 In addition to copies in the British Library and Bodleian Library (inclusive) and Reading University (exclusive) which I have examined personally, I received details of those in the University of Colorado, Boulder, and University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (inclusive), and the following (exclusive): Edinburgh University; Leeds

Public Library; Westfield College, London; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.; Princeton University; Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.; University of Illinois, Urbana; Cornell University; William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, UCLA; University of British Columbia, Vancouver; University of Chicago; Harvard University (3 copies); University of California at Berkeley; Stanford University (2 copies); Columbia University; Yale University; University of Cincinnati; Library of Congress.

11 It should be mentioned that in all known copies of the 1714 edition the colophon at the end of volume III is dated 1715.

12 In most copies these pages are on thicker paper, in many cases now discoloured, but the whole of the British Library copy is on thick paper.

13 Signature Dd comprises 8 pages.

14 It is not easy, and perhaps not profitable, to argue from the stitching, since all four copies have been repaired if not rebound.

15 Nevertheless an error remained: the subscription of the *Letter Concerning Design* on p. 411 has 'Your Lorship's' for 'Your Lordship's'.

16 The Reading copy alone has appended Darby's eight-page catalogue, which offers the second edition as 'with great Improvements' and also 'the same on fine Royal Paper' of which the thick BL copy (see n. 12) may be an example. The second edition is not mentioned in the *Monthly Catalogue of Books* which started in May 1714, and it was not registered at Stationers' Hall (kindly checked for me by Miss Robin Myers, FSA, Hon. Archivist to the Stationers' and Newspaper Makers' Company).

17 The editions of 1744 and 1749, which again lack the *Letter*, are a marginal issue, since they are in duodecimo with a Birmingham imprint.

18 Shaftesbury considered Darby niggardly and artful, pinching 'in everything, ink, paper, character, whenever he can save' (*Life, Letters*, p. 464). The insertion was not made from sheets printed for the 1732 edition, which are differently set.

Judgment and Knowledg in the kind. For of this *imitative Art* we may justly say; " That tho It borrows help indeed  
" from Colours, and uses them, as means,  
" to execute its Designs; It has nothing,  
" however, more wide of its real Aim,  
" or more remote from its Intention, than  
" to make a *shew* of Colours, or, from  
" their mixture, to raise a \* *separate* and  
" *flattering* Pleasure to the SENSE."

\* The Pleasure is plainly foreign and separate; as having no concern or share in the proper Delight or Entertainment which naturally arises from the Subject, and Workmanship itself. For the Subject, in respect of Pleasure, as well as Science, is absolutely compleated, when the Design is executed, and the propos'd Imitation once accomplish'd. And this always is the best, when the Colours are most suble'd, and subservient.

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Pl. I Two states of p. 391 of the Characteristicks. Left: altered state (University of Colorado). Right: original state