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Beattie's Lost Letter to the *London Review*

JAMES FIESER

The most well known written attack on Hume's philosophy during his life was James Beattie's *Essay on the nature and immutability of truth* (1770). Beattie's target was Hume's *Treatise* and its skeptical discussions of personal identity, the origin of ideas, causality, and virtue. His *Essay* was highly praised and resulted in a yearly pension from King George III. Hume is reported to have reacted with anger to the publication of the *Essay*,¹ and Hume's advocates retaliated by charging Beattie with unjustly abusing Hume. One such advocate was the *London Review*.

The last issue of the *London Review* contains an editorial response to a letter they received from James Beattie. The context of the *London Review* response indicates that Beattie's letter was to have been printed in that journal. Strangely, however, the letter never appeared. Enough detail is provided in the *London Review's* response to reconstruct the thrust of Beattie's letter: Beattie contends that, contrary to the *London Review's* accusations, he did not abuse Hume in the *Essay*, and that Hume's criticisms of Beattie's poetic writings were based on prejudice. The letter is important since it represents Beattie's only attempt at a public defense of his treatment of Hume, and an explanation of Hume's unfavorable reaction to his poetical writings.

After presenting the *London Review's* "Answer," I will discuss the nature of the conflict between Beattie and the *London Review*, and reconstruct the key

points in Beattie's letter. It will be helpful to begin with background on the *London Review* itself.

The *London review of English and foreign literature* was founded in January 1775 by William Kenrick as a monthly book review journal styled after, and in competition with, the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review*. The review lasted for twelve Volumes with its final issue in December 1780. Kenrick, born in 1725, reviewed for the *Monthly Review* for seven years and was himself the author of books and articles on a range of subjects. As early as 1759 Kenrick voices his praise for Hume in an article for the *Monthly Review*, referring to him as a "masterly writer."² Kenrick had a reputation for maliciously and deceptively provoking disputes with other writers, including Johnson, Garrick, and Goldsmith. Unlike the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review*, which zealously preserved the anonymity of their reviewers,³ the *London Review* hinted at the authorship of their reviews by providing a single initial at the close of each article. The initial "W" refers to Kenrick himself. Kenrick's son, William Shakespeare Kenrick, assumed editorship of the journal when Kenrick was taken ill in the Spring of 1779 and after his death in June 1779.

The Response to Beattie's Letter

The reply to Beattie's letter appeared as the final item in the July 1780 issue of the *London Review* under the heading "Correspondences," and under the subheading "Answer to an Extract from a Letter from Dr. Beattie." The complete reply is as follows:

Having, we apprehend, done Dr. Beattie ample justice by publishing his defence, let us now be equally just to the memory of a man who can no longer defend himself. Dr. Beattie's defence charges Mr. Hume with the meanness of contradicting himself in a fit of disgust, and of being swayed by passion in pronouncing sentence upon his poetical works. Till he produces his evidence, this attack upon the established character of Mr. Hume will have but little weight with the public, who have been long apprised of his exemplary probity, and strict honour. Why should Dr. Beattie suppose that we should be misinformed by a disinterested person, and desire us to disbelieve his testimony, when he would have us believe himself, who is not disinterested? Does he wish to prove that "we believe in all unbelief?"

The Dr. says, "I never had any personal pique at Mr. Hume." The following extracts from his essay on truth we shall present to the reader, and leave him to judge whether the rage with which they are written does not indicate something more than pique? (p. 18.) "Why should Hume's principle and talents extort at once our esteem and detestation, our applause and contempt," (p. 479.) "Why can I not

devise an apology for these philosophers, to screen them from this dreadful imputation of being the plagues and enemies of mankind! Perhaps they do not themselves believe their own tenants, but publish them only as the means of getting a name and fortune. But I hope this is not the case, God forbid that it should! For then the enormity of their guilt would surpass all power of language; we could only gaze at it and tremble. Compared with such wickedness the crimes of the thief, the robber, the incendiary, would almost disappear, &c. &c. &c. (page 481.) "Yet the traitors to human kind, the murderers of the human soul, how can you answer for it to your own hearts! Surely every spark of your generosity is extinguished for ever, if this consideration does not awaken in you the keenest remorse, and make you with in bitterness of soul.—But I remonstrate in vain. All this must have often occurred to you, and been as often rejected frivolous. To plead with you on the principles of benevolence or generosity, is to address you in a language you do not understand," &c. &c. From the whole strain of the *Essay on Truth*, it appears that the philosopher principally aimed at in these apostrophes is Hume. Nay Dr. Beattie goes so far as to attempt to prove that Hume was destitute of common sense, by telling us, (p. 47 and 48.) "that a man defective in common sense may acquire learning, and may even possess genius to a certain degree: but the defect of nature he can never supply: a peculiar modification of scepticism, or credulity or levity will to the end of his life distinguish him from other men."—Reader be not surprised; it is Dr. Beattie who tells you this, the same man who has spent a hundred pages of his *Essay on Truth*, in proving that all science is founded on *common sense*, or on, what afterwards turns out to equivalent language, axioms or self-evident propositions! the same man who has insinuated that Mr. Hume had a cold, unfeeling heart, and no imagination, though his account of Queen Mary's death be an affecting tragedy, and much superior to the elegant Dr. Robertson's who wrote after him, and whose business it was much more than Hume's to work upon our passions; though his Epicurean, and many other parts of his works breathe the true spirit of poetry, and shew clearly that he could never have relished the Doctor's poems, *versus inopes rerum nugaeque canorae*.

If we are not misinformed, Dr. Beattie owes more to Hume than he is aware of and ought therefore to pay more respect to his memory. Hume, whom Lord Mansfield wished to see often at his table, being asked once by a common friend, why he did not oftener favour his lordship with his company, replied that, though extremely fond of his lordship's conversation, he could not pay him frequent visits,

because he kept very low company, being always surrounded with nothing but parsons and bishops. This pleasantry procured Dr. Beattie his pension.

The "Answer" above begins with the following puzzling statement: "Having, we apprehend, done Dr. Beattie ample justice by publishing his defence...." In fact, Beattie's letter appears nowhere in the twelve volumes of the *London Review*. It is reasonable to suppose that Beattie's letter was to be printed immediately preceding the "Answer." Letters to the *London Review* were printed either in relevant articles, or at the end of each month's issue under the heading "Correspondences." But in either case the answer immediately followed the letter. Beattie's letter, then, was probably written within a few months prior to the appearance of the "Answer" in July 1780.⁴ The letter seems to have been pulled from the press at the last minute, without an editorial alteration of the first sentence of the "Answer." However, the printer must have taken liberties to add the title "Answer to an Extract...." For, this title would not have been present if Beattie's letter preceded it, as originally intended. Instead, the subheading would have simply read, "The Answer." The letter is not likely to have been withheld for prudential reasons; if this were so, then the "Answer" would have been withheld too. It is possible that Beattie's letter was misplaced in the confusion of the *London Review's* final published issue, or perhaps it was withheld because of space limitations. In any case, the *London Review* could escape charges of inconsistency since this was indeed their final issue.

The original manuscript of the letter has not yet surfaced. No mention is made of this letter or of the dispute between Beattie and the *London Review* by any of the Beattie or Hume biographers who had access to Beattie's manuscript collection, which is now in the University of Aberdeen Library.⁵ If the letter does still exist, it is most likely to have been among the possessions of William Shakespeare Kenrick.

The "Answer" is the resolution to a continuous dispute between Beattie and the *London Review* which began in the first volume of the journal. Since its inception, the *London Review* criticized Beattie for following Reid's untenable common sense philosophy, and for the above-mentioned unfair attacks on Hume in Beattie's *Essay*. Hume, on the other hand, was continually praised in the *London Review* for his originality, literary abilities, and moral character.⁶ In many cases, the reviewers' condemnation of Beattie and praise for Hume were only tangentially related to the subject of the book under review. To understand the context of Beattie's letter and the "Answer" it generated, it is important to trace the history of the dispute between Beattie and the *London Review* as it appeared in various articles in that journal.

The Dispute between Beattie and the *London Review*

The attacks on Beattie and praise for Hume in the *London Review* began in the first article of their first volume: their review of Joseph Priestley's *An examination* (1774).⁷ Priestley's work is a criticism of the common sense school of philosophy as it appears in the writings of Reid, Oswald, and Beattie. Priestley's fundamental objection to this philosophical school is its enumeration of so many instincts. The reviewer fully sides with Priestley's attack on Beattie:

After exploding Dr. Beattie's account of the foundation of truth and the testimony of the senses; our author proceeds with equal success, to expose the Doctor's misconception and idle representation of the imaginary effects of Bishop Berkeley's Theory of the Ideal World. He next explodes the hackney'd objections made by Dr. Beattie to the doctrine of necessity.... [January and February 1775, Vol. 1, 1-12, 91-96.]

The reviewer criticizes the title of Beattie's *Essay* for being "too florid and declamatory for a philosophical tract, professedly investigating truth." Lengthy excerpts are also presented from Priestley which condemn Beattie for attacking Hume with an "uncharitable persecuting spirit." The review closes noting that "we are neither so ready to admit, with Dr. Priestley, that Dr. Beattie's book has done much good to the cause of Christianity; nor with Dr. Beattie, that the writings of Mr. Hume have done much harm."

In the following issue of the *London Review*, a letter appeared by John Briggs who challenged the review and its insinuation that Beattie's ridicule of Hume was motivated by public opinion. For Briggs, Beattie's motive was to expose Hume's nonsense, and Briggs suggests that Hume's constitution was such as to accept it "unmutilated, unblemished, just as if nothing had happened." The *London Review* replied that it impartially quoted Priestley's attack, and that its job was not to intervene in disputes between people as capable as Beattie and Priestley (March 1775, Vol. 1, 244-246).

In December of that year, the review of William Mason's *The Poems of Mr. Gray* continued the attack on Beattie noting that Beattie's *Essay* betrays "his ignorance of the philosophy, he affects to despise..." (December 1775, Vol. 2, 488). The appearance of the 1776 quarto edition of Beattie's *Essay* prompted a further attack by the reviewer, in this case Kenrick, that the popularity of Beattie's *Essay* was the result of an approval of the work by people who never even read it.⁸ Kenrick also contends that the uniqueness of Beattie's *Essay* consists in the fact that a rational writer adopted "so irrational and absurd a principle as Dr. Reid's notion of sentimental *Common-Sense*" (January 1777, Vol. 5, 2). Kenrick's 1777 review of Locke's *Works* continues the attack on Beattie's common-sense philosophy. Kenrick argues that,

the *thoughtful* and *intelligent* are *few* in comparison of that herd of readers, which, to use the jargon of the times, give the *ton* to systems of philosophy as well as to fashions in dress. How else, in the name of *common-sense*, could the *nonsense* of Reid, Oswald, Beattie, have, under that plausible title, so generally seized and infatuated the minds of the pretended philosophers of their philosophizing age.

Their system is, to be sure, a very convenient one, and saves a world of thinking; making a *Macaroni* talk as wisely in half an hour as a man of sense from the study of half a century. [August 1777, Vol. 6, 148]

With the appearance of Hume's *Life*, the *London Review* further attacked Beattie while at the same time aggressively defending Hume's character. Kenrick's review of Hume's *Life* notes that Hume's autobiography contains no reference to Beattie's *Essay*. Kenrick then adds,

It were difficult to speak of this [i.e. Beattie's] work with more contempt than, we are well assured, Mr. Hume entertained of it. "Truth!" says he, "there is no truth in it; it is a horrible large lie in *Octavo*." What would he have said, had he lived to see the late splendid edition of it in *Quarto*? [March 1777, Vol. 5, 198–205]

The review closes with an endorsement of Adam Smith's assessment that in both life and death Hume approached "as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as the nature of human frailty will permit." Hume's abilities are further praised in the review of S. J. Pratt's *Apology* (1777), a work which defends the integrity of Hume's life and writings. The reviewer notes the attitude with which Hume "is said to have taken at Dr. Beattie's *Essay* on Truth; a work, the mention of which, it has been reported, he could not bear with any tolerable patience." The review closes citing Pratt's assessment that true philosophers "hold Beattie's Book in contempt; which is a philosophy calculated only for ladies, and fine gentlemen" (May 1777, Vol. 5, 332–339).⁹

Comments in several other reviews repeat these themes. Kenrick's review of Maclaine's *A series of letters addressed to Soame Jenyns* mentions Hume as a man of "irreproachable morals" (May 1777, Vol. 5, 340–347). Kenrick's review of Dodd's *Thoughts in Prison* criticizes Dodd's attack on Hume noting that "it is with an ill grace that in his circumstances he [i.e., Dodd] casts censure on inādel's of any *kind*, particularly on such characters as the late Mr. Hume" (August 1777, Vol. 6, 226–229). Kenrick's review of Caulfield's *An essay on the immateriality and immorality of the soul* defends Hume by noting that Caulfield must be subject to "lunar, as well as lucid, intervals, from his declaiming against the late *David Hume*, and others, for *reasoning like bedlamites*" (April 1778, Vol. 7, 270–279).

The final forum for an attack on Beattie was the review of Hume's *Dialogues*.¹⁰ The appearance of this review was eagerly awaited and was apparently antedated by letters to the *London Review* expressing impatience. For in the October 1779 installment (Vol. 10, 280), under the heading, "To our Correspondents," the following note appeared:

"*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. By David Hume. 8vo. 4s. sewed, Robinson."—in our next.

However, in the next month's installment another note appeared:

The sudden indisposition of an associate has deprived us of the article of Hume's *Dialogues* this month, but we hope to lay it before our reader in December's review. [November 1779, Vol. 10, 352]

Their review of the *Dialogues* contains the most significant of the attacks on Beattie. It includes the following:

The *Essay on the Immutability of Truth* owed its birth to the circumstances of Mr. Hume's having called the reverend author's poetry *milk and water*, and of his having since that time gone under the name of the *milk and water poet*. May not his suggestion, that the title of the *Essay* was a misnomer, and that it ought to have been entitled *a great lie*, produce the same laudable zeal in the Doctor's breast to write a similar declamation against the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*? [December 1779, Vol. 10, 365]

The review closes by praising the *Dialogues* for being "of more service to true religion than volumes of divinity...." Their highly favorable reception of the *Dialogues* stands in sharp contrast to the reviews which appeared in both the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review*.¹¹

A Reconstruction of Beattie's Letter

What prompted Beattie to write to the *London Review*? Assuming that the order of issues addressed in the "Answer" parallels the order in Beattie's letter, the first and overriding issue is Hume's attack on Beattie's poetical writings. The only occasion in the *London Review* where Hume is mentioned in association with Beattie's poetry is in the above quotation from their review of Hume's *Dialogues*. Hence, this must be the item which sparked Beattie's letter. In this review, the *London Review* argues that Hume initially referred to Beattie's poetical writings as "milk and water," and in retaliation Beattie wrote his *Essay* as an attack on Hume. In his lost letter, Beattie probably countered that the *Essay* appeared first and only after that did Hume, who was moved by

prejudice and disgust, criticize Beattie's poetry. Beattie then probably criticized the *London Review* for basing their account of the story on an unreliable source. Given the quotation at the close of the first paragraph of the "Answer," Beattie might also have charged the *London Review* with incredulity by believing the unbelievable. The *London Review* responds to Beattie's letter by challenging Beattie to produce the source for his side of the story. The *London Review* contends that, from its perspective, their account of the story is more credible since their source is impartial, and Beattie clearly is partial.

It is impossible to know now whether Hume's attack on Beattie's poetry either preceded or followed the appearance of the *Essay*. This part of the dispute, then, must go unresolved. However, there are sufficient reasons to believe that Beattie's motive for writing the *Essay* were unrelated to anything negative Hume may have said about his poetic writings. Although Beattie's *Essay* was published in 1770, he began working on it as early as 1765, and from the start it was intended as a polemical work against skepticism in general and Hume in particular.

In a letter to William Forbes of January 30, 1766 Beattie writes regarding his *Essay* that "I own it is not without indignation that I see sceptics and their writings (which are the bane not only of science but also of virtue) so much in vogue at the present day."¹² In his January 9, 1769 letter to Thomas Blacklock, Beattie provides a more detailed account of his motivations for writing the *Essay*, and again, the overthrow of skepticism is clearly given as Beattie's sole motive. These and other correspondences imply that his anger toward Hume was in reaction to the danger which might result from Hume's skeptical writings. In spite of Beattie's genuine intentions, unfavorable rumors circulated about the attacks in the *Essay* even before it was published. In the same letter to Blacklock, Beattie gives his reaction to one such rumor:

I have already fallen on evil tongues (as Milton says), on account of this intended publication. It has been reported, that I had written a most scurrilous paper [i.e. the *Essay*] against Mr. Hume, and was preparing to publish it, when a friend of mine interposed, and, with very great difficulty, prevailed on me to suppress it, because he knew it would hurt or ruin my character. Such is the treatment I have to expect from one set of people. I was so provoked when I first heard this calumny, that I deliberated whether I should not throw my papers into the fire....¹³

For Beattie, the story presented in the *London Review* was just another false rumor.

In his lost letter to the *London Review*, Beattie also appears to have denied the use of abusive rhetoric in the *Essays* which might reflect any "personal pique at Mr. Hume." The *London Review* counters by providing a list of

comments from the *Essay* which they consider mean-spirited. Beattie's correspondences help illuminate his apparent and puzzling denial of abusing Hume. Soon after the publication of the *Essay*, Beattie became aware of Hume's negative reaction to that work: "I have heard, from very good authority, that he speaks of me and my book with very great bitterness...and he says that I have not used him like a gentleman."¹⁴ In his letters, Beattie defends himself against Hume's charges of abuse with two distinct arguments. First, he contends that his abuse of Hume was justified by a righteous indignation toward Hume's irreligious writings. This is the justification offered in the Preface to the 1776 quarto edition of his *Essays*:

I had reason to believe, that his arguments, and his influence as a great literary character, had done harm, by subverting or weakening the good principles of some, and countenancing the licentious opinions of others. Being honoured with the care of a part of the British youth; and considering it as my indispensable duty...to guard their minds against impiety and error, I endeavoured...to form a right estimate of Mr Hume's philosophy.¹⁵

Beattie's second line of defense is that he denies having abused Hume at all:

Every body I have conversed with on the subject...approves of what I have done in respect to Mr. Hume; and none of them have been able to find any personal abuse, any coarse expressions, or even any indelicacy, in what I have written against him: so you see I have no great reason to value what my Scottish enemies say against me.¹⁶

Clearly, Beattie's letter to the *London Review* adopts this second line of defense.¹⁷

Conclusion

The details of Beattie's lost letter to the *London Review* contribute to the picture we have of Beattie, Kenrick, and the *London Review*. First, we may add Beattie's name to the list of disputes which Kenrick provoked with eighteenth century writers. In this regard, Beattie stands in good company. Biographers of Johnson, Garrick, and Goldsmith all argue that Kenrick's attacks on these writers were undeserved and even libelous. Similarly, at least some of the charges against Beattie by Kenrick and the *London Review* also appear groundless, especially that the *Essay* was motivated by Hume's attack on Beattie's poetical writings. Second, the *London Review's* continued defense of Hume shows that Hume had at least some influential and enthusiastic defenders of his skepticism. This is seen particularly in their flattering review of the *Dialogues* and their "Answer" to Beattie's letter.

Third, Beattie's letter, and the attacks in the *London Review* which incited the letter, extend the controversy between Beattie and Hume to ten years after the publication of the *Essay* and four years after Hume's death. The fact that this dispute was waged in a literary publication shows the broad and continued interest the public had in this issue. Finally, and most importantly, Beattie's letter indicates what would have been his only public statement regarding his treatment of Hume in the *Essay*. His official position, then, is that he did not abuse Hume, but only criticized Hume's skeptical arguments in an appropriate philosophical manner. Also, Beattie suggests that it is in fact Hume who was abusive by attacking Beattie's poetical works in mere retaliation for his criticisms of Hume in the *Essay*.

REFERENCES

- 1 Hume's only mention of Beattie in his letters is where he refers to him as a "bigotted silly Fellow" (Letter to William Strahan [Letter #509], October 26, 1775, in *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. II, edited by J. Y. T. Greig [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932], 301). Hume's angry reaction to Beattie is seen more fully in several published anecdotes. The most significant of these are from the *London Review* and Beattie's correspondences, which are discussed below.
- 2 William Kenrick, review of Philip Cantillon's *The analysis of trade* (1759), in *Monthly Review* 20 (April 1759), 309–315. Kenrick also praises Hume in his review of John Home's *The Siege of Aquileia* (1760), in *Monthly Review* 22 (1760), 220.
- 3 See Benjamin Christie Nangle, *The Monthly Review First Series: 1749–1789 Indexes of Contributors and Articles*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), v–xi.
- 4 At minimum, Beattie's letter was written after Hume's death (as indicated by the concluding paragraph of the "Answer") and, thus, would not have been associated with the first four volumes of the review (1775–1776).
- 5 The key biographical works based on Beattie's manuscript collection are: William Forbes, *An account of the life and writings of James Beattie* (Philadelphia: Isaac Riley, 1806); Margaret Forbes, *Beattie and his Friends* (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1904); and Ralph S. Walker, *James Beattie's London Diary: 1773* (1946). The first two of these, in particular, consist mainly of selections from Beattie's manuscripts. E. C. Mossner, *Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1954) also acknowledges access to this collection.
- 6 This praise is both more enthusiastic and consistent than appears in articles from either the *Monthly Review* or the *Critical Review*.

7 The early issues of the *London Review* did not contain authors' initials. Although Kenrick is the author of many *London Review* articles which attack Beattie, there is not sufficient internal evidence to establish Kenrick's authorship of the article on Priestley's *Examination*.

8 Beattie's quarto edition of his *Essays* is reviewed by Kenrick in three installments. Only the new essays on poetry and laughter are reviewed, although Kenrick announced in the first installment that he also intended to review the *Essay on truth*. In contrast to his condemnation of the *Essay on truth*, Kenrick's review of these other essays is highly favorable. This irony he notices himself:

we cannot help expressing our hopes...that the public will be soon favoured with an edition of these annexed *Essays*, in an octavo form, for the use of those who possess the *Essay on Truth* in that size; in order that such as, with ourselves, do not altogether relish Dr. Beattie's Dr. Reid's common-sense, may be happily convinced that he posses every other kind of sense. notwithstanding he be too refined for the plain result of the simple understanding of mere rational beings. (January 1777, Vol. 5, 12)

9 The review of Pratt's *Apology* is signed "R."

10 The review of Hume's *Dialogues* is signed "N."

11 The *Critical Review* denounces the *Dialogues* as "sophistry" (September, 1779, Vol. 48, 161-172). William Rose concludes his review in the *Monthly Review* arguing that the *Dialogues* "may serve, indeed, to confirm the giddy, the profligate, and the unprincipled in their prejudices against religion and virtue, but must be despised by every man who has the smallest grain of seriousness and reflection" (November 1779, Vol. 61, 343-355).

12 M. Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends*, 432.

13 W. Forbes, *An account of the life and writings of James Beattie*, 94.

14 Beattie to Thomas Blacklock, May 27, 1770, in Forbes, 118.

15 James Beattie, *Essays* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1776), xii.

16 Beattie to Rev. Williamson, September 8, 1771, in Forbes, 146-147.

17 An additional shift in Beattie's attitude toward Hume was prompted by Hume's Advertisement to the 1777 edition of his *Essays and treatises which disavows the Treatise*. In a letter of June 25, 1779 to Mrs. Montagu, Beattie writes,

All this, with what I then heard of his bad health, made my heart relent towards him; as you would no doubt perceive by the concluding part of the preface to my quarto book. (Forbes, 312)

That portion of Beattie's Preface reads,

Our author certainly merits praise, for thus publicly disowning, though late, his *Treatise of Human Nature*....I congratulate him upon it with all my heart. He has many good as well as great qualities; and I rejoice in the hope, that he may yet be prevailed

on to relinquish totally a system which I think would be as uncomfortable to him, as it is unsatisfactory to others. (*Essays*, xiv)

However, Beattie continues in his letter to Montagu that the posthumous publication of Hume's *Dialogues* inclined Beattie to believe that his change in attitude toward Hume was premature.

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