Chapter 8

From Confutation to Criticism

In 1723 Bernard Mandeville used the Great Fire of London as an example in an argument diametrically opposed to traditional religious interpretations of that momentous event put forward by clergymen such as Richard Allestree, Richard Baxter, and Edward Stillingfleet:

The Fire of London was a great Calamity, but if the Carpenters, Bricklayers, Smiths and all, not only that are employ’d in Building but likewise those that made and deal in the same Manufactures and other Merchandizes that were Burnt, and other Trades again that got by them what they were in fully Employ, were to Vote against those who lost by the First; the Rejoycings would equal if not exceed the Complaints.1

For Mandeville, it was upon the private vices of men, wishing to profit from a calamity such as the Great Fire, that a thriving society was built, provided that it was dextrously managed by skillful politicians. Drawing this shockingly non-providential conclusion from one of England’s greatest natural disasters, Mandeville also rejected the confutational commonplace that atheists were a threat to political society. It was a controversial argument which challenged centuries of assumptions about atheists and the gamut of threats that atheists were thought to pose.

This chapter examines the understanding of atheists and the argumentative attacks upon atheism and anti-atheism from 1680 to 1720 in the work of Charles Blount, John Locke, Pierre Bayle, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Richard Blackmore, and Mandeville. In doing so it traces the challenges such thinkers issued to the form and the content of early modern anti-atheist confutation. However, Mandeville’s claim that atheists were socially and politically nonthreatening and his

1 B. Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees (London, 1723), 415. Mandeville's is a view we still find natural today: “When disaster strikes, there will always be those who see an opportunity for making money”: A. Tinniswood, By Permission of Heaven: The True Story of the Great Fire of London (New York: Riverhead, 2004), 68. Stillingfleet preached a conventional sermon on the fast day appointed for the Great Fire on October 10, 1666: A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, At St. Margarets Westminster October 10 1666 (London, 1666). Sermons about the fire were still being preached in Mandeville’s day. See B. Ibbot, A Dissolution of this World by Fire: A Sermon Preach’d…on Monday, September 3 1711. The Day of Humiliation for the dreadful Fire, in the Year 1666 (London, 1711).
exclusion of religious apologists from the public square should not be construed as the triumph of an early Enlightenment understanding of atheism.² Such a judgment would be centuries premature. David Hume had to defend his sceptical philosophy against the charge that it presaged a slippery slope to atheistic social chaos in the 1770s, Percy Shelley was expelled from the University of Oxford for *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), and the atheist Charles Bradlaugh fought a prolonged battle in order to take his seat as an MP in the 1880s.

By focusing on the ways in which anti-atheist *confutatio* was subsumed under a broader rhetoric of Augustan *ars critica*, this chapter begins by detailing Blount’s caustic criticisms of revealed religion which challenged early modern religious apologists. Although Locke rejected any suggestion that atheists should be tolerated in political society, he concurrently advanced several arguments that undermined the content of traditional anti-atheist apologetics and the rhetorical excess he thought such works too often displayed. Pierre Bayle was the first to advance the claim that a virtuous atheist could exist and that a society of atheists was indeed a real possibility. We will see that he did so by employing the rhetoric and arguments of anti-atheist confutation against itself in a manner similar to Blount. This chapter will also show that it was the third Earl of Shaftesbury, intimately familiar with Bayle’s argument, who first advocated a more or less systematic rejection of confutation as a mode for answering atheists in favour of a polite criticism that could accept the existence of virtuous atheists but nonetheless maintained anti-atheist assumptions and levelled several conventional anti-atheist arguments for broadly political purposes. Eighteenth-century apologists such as Richard Blackmore mirrored Shaftesbury’s ideals in the sense that Blackmore embraced a polite form of addressing atheists while nonetheless advocating quite traditional anti-atheist arguments, taking Bayle as his primary target in doing so. Having rejected the logic of anti-atheist confutation of which Locke complained, Blackmore could not imagine how political society could function without the religious, political, and moral obligation of both natural and revealed religion. Finally, this chapter will examine Mandeville’s naturalistic explanation of how society was founded, operated, and prospered, in which he eschewed the traditional connection between religious belief and political society. Given this perspective, Mandeville not only defended the existence of atheists in political society on Baylean terms, he went further by identifying

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2 J. Champion’s warning to scholars against adopting the language of warfare and victory that was used by freethinkers and deists themselves, and thus seeming to condone one side or the other in this dispute, is apposite here: *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies 1660–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 232.