

JONATHAN SWIFT'S *THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS*:  
ITS BACKGROUND AND SATIRE

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The seventeenth century in England had witnessed a series of conflicting standpoints and attitudes in religion, politics and learning. In religion and politics the controversy reached a tragic summit, when the opposing parties took to arms to silence one another. In the field of learning, the controversy was not less vehement and emotional than the politico-religious one. It was, however, carried out peacefully except in "St. James's Library!"

To spotlight the very beginning of the Ancient-Modern controversy is not an easy thing to do for sure; perhaps impossible. But, for the sake of convenience, one can take Bacon as the "man largely responsible for creating the war." (Jones 1951: 10). The doubting attitude of Bacon and his insistence on experiment and data analysis as opposed to the authority of Aristotle were daring cries against the claimed invulnerability of the Ancients' authority. Nevertheless, as it has been pointed out quite often, Bacon, though rebelling against the authority of the Ancients, was returning to the Ancients in spirit and method. The Baconian observations and ideals were taken at their face value, and the bullet had been triggered. In 1616, Godfrey Goodman, at a time when Bacon was still experimenting, produced *The Fall of Man, or the Corruption of Nature Proved by Natural Reason*. Goodman added a new dimension to the controversy; a dimension that was to dominate the intellectual thought of the seventeenth and parts of the eighteenth century. The issue of the decay versus the progress of nature had been introduced. Goodman, a clergyman, held that corruption was introduced into all nature through the sin and fall of Man. That is, the more man departed from the original model of things, the more imperfect and distorted he became. Thus a religious argument was manipulated to give truthfulness to a certain standpoint. Goodman's favoritism toward the Ancients was challenged by George Hakewill's *An Apologie*

or *Declaration of the Power and Providence of God in the World, Consisting in an Examination and Censure of the Common Error Touching Nature's Perpetual and Universal Decay*, 1607. Hakewill was of the opinion that the Moderns were not inferior to the Ancients. To refute the concept of the decay of nature, Hakewill introduced the idea of the "circular progress" of that nature. Further,

He established for the whole controversy the method of comparing men and accomplishments in particular fields, thus analyzing the problem and making the issue clearcut. In this he was followed by Glanville, who in turn was followed by Wotton. (Jones 1951: 14)

With the establishment of the Royal Society, the controversy reached a point of culmination. Besides, the "battle" had been crystallized as basically scientific, unlike its literary counterpart in France. But the scientific movement in England was not without impact upon literature. The first demand for a scientific experimentation is skepticism and a mind free from preconceptions, a critical attitude toward all ideas and, consequently, an endeavor to get rid of the Idols of the Mind. In his *History of the Royal Society* (1667), Sprat, following the path of Bacon, upheld the anti-authoritarian principle. The very motto of the Royal Society — Nullius in Verba — was the best demonstration of the skeptical attitude of the new organization. Dryden, in his "To My Honored Friend, Dr. Charleton," praised a member of the Royal Society for challenging

The longest Tyranny that ever swayed,  
Was that wherein our Ancestors betrayed  
Their free-born Reason to the Stagirite,  
And made his Torch their universal Light. (1—4)

Dryden's skepticism was in conformity with the scientific temper of his times. In his criticism, he seemed to prefer the Moderns to the Ancients except in his *A Parallel of Poetry and Painting*. In his *Essay of Dramatic Poetry*, though he exalted the writers of his own day above the Elizabethans, he did not consider the Elizabethans' dramatists inferior to the Ancients.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the scientific movement, despite Newton's great contributions, became a little weaker. In 1690, Sir William Temple published *Of Ancient and Modern Learning*. The main target of Sir William's attack was science and, more specifically, the Royal Society. He upheld the Ancients against the Moderns, comparing the Moderns' claims for superiority to a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of a mighty giant. In advancing the case of the Ancients against the Moderns, Temple pointed out the modesty of the Ancients: they, the Ancients, went to seek the knowledge and wisdom of the East. This trait, the modesty of the ancients, would have appealed to Swift; a man disgusted with the pride and self-sufficiency of the Moderns. The Moderns were, according to Temple, inferior to the Ancients except in the invention of the compass. But, even with this instrument in their hands, the Moderns failed to advance geography any further. To Temple,

the "great wits" the Moderns could boast of were Sidney, Bacon, and Selden.

In defense of the Royal Society and the accomplishments of the Moderns, William Wotton published his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* in 1694. Wotton, after presenting the claims of the Moderns and the Ancients, gave more evidence in behalf of the achievements of the Moderns. Temple, however, committed one mistake which left him vulnerable to the attacks of his opponents. He marshalled as evidence of the superiority of the Ancients two doubtful works: Aesop's *Fables* and the *Epistles* of Phalaris. Bentley was of the opinion that the *Epistles* are spurious and the *Fables* lack the antiquity attached to them. Charley Boyle, encouraged by the authorities of Christ Church, Oxford, published a new edition of the *Epistles*. If the story of Bentley's unscholarly treatment of Boyle's demand for a manuscript from the King's library, where Bentley was a librarian, is to be believed, the "battle" was, then, escalated to involve personal offenses. Boyle, in retaliation for his alleged mistreatment, twitted Bentley for his, Bentley's, unjustifiable conduct. Bentley, on the other hand, retaliated by giving Wotton, who was working on a new edition of his *Reflections*, a *Dissertation* to be included in the new edition. That *Dissertation* demonstrated, on grounds of textual criticism, that the *Epistles* were a late production and, therefore, were not written by Phalaris. Wotton's second edition of his *Reflections* and Bentley's *Dissertation* appeared in the year 1697. The Christ Church men

replied in *Dr. Bentley's Dissertation examined by the Hon. Charles Boyle Esq.* — a clever attack written mainly by Atterbury. Swift was back at Moor Park, and acting as Temple's confidential and trusted secretary. (Murry 1954: 75)

Several forces were drawing Jonathan Swift to the controversy, and in 1704 he published his *The Battle of the Books*, the most literary product of the conflict. First of all, his benefactor and friend, Sir William Temple, was involved. Moreover, Swift was known for his hatred of mathematics and the so called "new philosophy". However, Swift was particularly annoyed by the pretensions of the Moderns and their high opinion of their achievements. What Swift satirizes, it seems to me, is the pride of the Moderns rather than their achievements as such-though he considers some of the Moderns' accomplishments impractical and utterly worthless. Thus his "Full and True Account" opens by attributing the cause of war to pride. Pride, says the "impartial" persona of *The Battle of the Books*, is

nearly related to beggary and want, either by father or mother, and sometimes by both; and to speak naturally, it very seldom happens among men to fall out when all have enough; invasions usually travelling from north to south, that is to say from poverty upon plenty. (Swift 1960 : 359)

War is closely related to pride which is the offspring of want. Further, the historical course of war is from the north to the south. Swift, thus, establishes

one of the dominant motifs in *The Battle of the Books*. The "battle" is no more than a modern attempt to plunder on the dwellers of the south—the Greeks and Romans. The cause of the plunder is the want and inferiority of the invaders themselves. The general picture that is depicted so far is that of the Moderns as barbarous hordes preying on a civilized Roman Empire. But, we are not to expect the annihilation and defeat of that ancient citadel of culture and learning. The "Parnassus" where the Ancients dwell is a solid rock, and if the Moderns attack it, we are informed, they can only "break their tools and hearts, without any damage to itself." (Swift 1960: 361)

The claims of the Moderns are presented as ridiculous and meaningless rather than dangerous. They demand of the Ancients

to remove themselves and their effects down to the lower summit, which the Moderns would graciously surrender to them, and advance in their place; or else that the said Ancients will give leave to the Moderns to come with shovels and mattocks, and level the said hill as low as they think it convenient. To which the Ancients made answer: how little they expected such a message as this from a colony whom they had admitted out of their own free grace, to so near a neighborhood. (Swift 1960: 360)

Since they could not raise their own side of the hill, the Moderns try to overcome the Ancients by a ridiculous demand. Expressions like "shovels", "mattocks", and "dig" suggest one of the charges "that were made against the new philosophy: namely, that it was material and mechanical." (Jones 1951: 38)

Thus *The Battle of the Books* begins by a general portrayal of the Moderns as "enthusiasts" who soar higher than they really are. The "impartial" persona gives us the impression of a historical narrative. But an examination of this historical narrative shows that it is not an ordinary historical account, but rather, in its imagery and language, constitutes an introduction of an allegorical epic. This is enforced by the episode of the spider and the bee, which gathers the motifs so far demonstrated.

When the scene changes to St. James library, Swift gets an opportunity to pinpoint and particularize his attack. The library is directed by Bentley—one of the chief targets of Swift's satire. By a clever manipulation of the allegory of the spider and the bee, the reader tends to forget the persona of the narrative and focuses instead on the picture and the conversation presented. Further, the reader is given the main objectives of the satire.

The spider obviously stands for the Moderns. It embodies the modern characteristics Swift hates most. Its manner of talking is crude, rude, and, to a great extent, barbarous. When it catches sight of the bee, the spider addresses it thus

Is it you, with a vengeance, that have made this litter here? Could you not look before you, and be d— —nd? (Swift 1960: 366)

The bee, the Ancients, replies gently and politely:

'Good words, friend,' said the bee (having now pruned himself, and being disposed to droll) 'I'll give you my hand and word to come near your kennel no more; I was never in such a confounded pickle since I was born.' (Swift 1960: 360)

The obscenity of the spider's talk may refer "partly to Bentley's overbearing controversial manner." (Williams 1968: 18) However, the satire is directed at the arrogance and ill-manners of the Moderns. The conceited pride of the spider culminates in its pretensions of self-sufficiency and originality. The spider is extremely proud of its cobweb which it takes for a fortress.

'Not to disparage myself,' said he, 'by the comparison with such a rascal, what are thou but a vagabond without house or home, without stock or inheritance, born to no possession of your own, but a pair of wings and a dronepipe? Your livelihood is an universal plunder upon nature; a freebooter over fields and gardens; and for the sake of stealing will rob a nettle as easily as a violet. Whereas I am a domestic animal, furnished with a native stock within myself. This large castle (to show my improvements in the mathematics) is all built with my own hands, and the materials extracted altogether out of my own person.' (Swift 1960: 366)

Notable is the spider's pride of its achievements in the field of mathematics. This reflects Swift's disgust with mathematics and his hatred of the Moderns' disregard of traditional values and their pretensions to originality and independent qualities. Thus

The spider is chosen as the image of the moderns not only for its generally unpleasing nature but for more specific reasons: it spins everything out of its own entrails, as the moderns insist on the importance of their own ideas and pay no attention to the wisdom learned over the centuries, and as a result it produces only a flimsy and dusty cobweb for all its self-conceit; also it is poisonous (virulent in controversy). The bee, on the other hand, follows ancient tradition, and produces 'sweetness and light' — delight and wisdom. It creates not out of its own entrails, or individual ideas, but out of flowers, the world of things outside itself, and is guided by earlier creators. Aesop, the writer of moral beast tales, appropriately makes the application. (Williams 1968: 80—81)

The proud, conceited, and individualistic spider bears a great similarity to the self-sufficient persona of *A Tale of a Tub*. Ultimately, the episode of the spider and the bee demonstrates the shortcomings of the Moderns and the sweetness and light of the ancient culture which is portrayed as perennial and everlasting. Artistically, the episode emphasizes the mock-heroic and allegorical techniques of *The Battle of the Books*.

The scene shifts to the preparations for the "war". Again the Moderns' individualistic pride is, mock-heroically, ridiculed.

The Moderns were in very warm debates upon the choice of their leaders; and nothing less than the fear impending from their enemies could have kept them from mutinies upon this occasion. The difference was greatest among the horse, where every private trooper pretended to the chief command, from Tasso and Milton to Dryden and Withers. (Swift 1960: 369)

Among the Ancients, on the other hand, there was no such a pretence to excellence on the part of each individual, but simply "Homer led the horse." (Swift 1960: 369) Worse than the Moderns' general pretension, then, are the specific cases of pedantry. Each individual writer among the Moderns thinks that he excels the others in his field. Ultimately, the pride of the Moderns turns to be a mere stupidity. The introduction of the hideous goddess, criticism, on the side of the Moderns emphasizes this. And again Swift turns from the general to the specific. Wotton is singled out as the son and darling of that goddess. Criticism is the daughter of ignorance and pride, and her function is to help Bentley and Wotton in the battle. This refers to their critical endeavors to discredit the antiquity and authenticity of Aesop's *Fables* and the *Epistles* of Phalaris. To support her "true" son, the goddess

"took the ugliest of her monsters, full glutted from her spleen, and hung it invisibly into his (Wotton's) mouth, which, flying straight up into his head, squeezed out his eye-balls, gave him a distorted look, and half overturned his brain. Then she privately ordered two of her beloved children, Dulness and Ill-Manners, closely to attend his person in all encounters. Having thus accoutred him, she vanished in a mist, and the hero perceived it was the goddess his mother." (Swift 1960: 372)

The "heritage" of ill manners and stupidity, bestowed upon Wotton by his mother, re-enforces the spider episode.

The catalogue of the heroes on both sides does not only follow the epic traditions, but refers us to specific cases. Among the Moderns, we meet Tasso, Milton, and Blackmore, perhaps, mentioned to be ridiculed for their departure from the Ancients in writing Christian epics. Withers, Ogleby and Creech are mentioned as symbols of stupidity. Cowley and Dryden are introduced for their association with the Royal Society. Both men wrote poems celebrating that organization: Cowley an *Ode to the Royal Society* and Dryden "to Dr. Charleton." All these are either "killed," "wounded," or defeated by their Ancient counterparts.

The rest of the "Battle" is a running account in mock-heroic terms of the important episodes occurring as the two warring parties engage one another, when we come to the end, the mockheroic technique and tone turn to the broadest burlesque. Wotton and Bentley have been presented throughout *The Battle of the Books* as types of pedantic learning and stupid criticism. At the end, they are both spitted together by Boyle's lance.

As when a skilful cook has trussed a brace of woodcocks, he, with iron skewer, pierces the tender sides of both, their legs and wings close pinioned to their ribs; so was this pair of friends transfixed, till down they fell joined in their deaths, so closely joined that Charon will mistake them both for one, and waft them over Styx for half his fare. (Swift 1960: 380)

The picture we get is of a heap of mixed flesh. This, it seems to me, serves a twofold Swiftian purpose. Wotton and Bentley had opposed Temple, Swift's

benefactor, and so they fell together by Boyle, a defender of Temple's position. Further, Wotton and Bentley are representatives of the Moderns who pride themselves for their distinctive and independent individualities. Swift dashes this pride by making the representatives quite indistinguishable from each other—killed jointly by one spear.

Swift, thus, chooses to ridicule the Modern position through an allegory in which the Ancient and Modern books fight a battle in St. James library in which Bentley is a librarian. The allegory points to and exposes to laughter those qualities of pride, arrogance, and individualistic self-sufficiency which Swift considers so ridiculous as to discredit the case of the Moderns. The emphasis of Swift is on these qualities rather than on the modern accomplishments as such. It is true Swift has his own reservations regarding the accomplishments of the Moderns in the field of mathematics. In the third voyage of Gulliver, the floating island of Laputa, inhabited by men who devote themselves to abstract sciences, symbolizes the lack of down-to-earth qualities of impractical scientists. In *The Battle of the Books*, while exposing the qualities of the Moderns Swift thinks so objectionable, he has an unusual sense of moderation. The dwelling of the Moderns is described as second in height and eminence to the peak itself where the Ancients dwell. Swift does not locate the Moderns as we expect, in a dungeon or a deep vale. Besides, Swift, or rather the narrator, speaks of

the warm heads of either faction, and the pretensions somewhere or other so exorbitant, as not to admit the least overtures of accommodations. (Swift 1960: 360)

These depictions do not only give an air of truthfulness to the "impartial" persona Swift adopts, but stimulate us to question Swift's own motivations in writing *The Battle of the Books*. Was his sole aim to defend Temple's position in the controversy? Was Swift siding completely with the Ancients?

Undoubtedly, Swift favors the Ancients, or at least he seems to.<sup>1</sup> But, the technique of the mock-heroic is really a burlesque of the ancient epic, and, thus, of the chief representative of the ancients—Homer. It seems to me that there is another dimension on which *The Battle of the Books* operates: a ridicule of the whole controversy of the Ancients versus the Moderns. Swift might have thought that the controversy, a modern innovation, is another indication of the impracticality and pedantry of the Modern learning. What we can conjecture is that Swift intended to ridicule both cases—the Ancients' and the Moderns': since they were presented by modern writers. The Swiftian satire in *The Battle of the Books* focuses on the pride, self-sufficiency and ill manners of the modern writers who, as Swift sees them, reduce learning to selfish considerations of their own private ends.

<sup>1</sup> See Pinkus 1959 for an elaborate treatment of this point. See also Highet 1946 and Johnson 1962. On the topic of Ancients versus Moderns in Swift's other writings, particularly *Gulliver's Travels*, see Nath 1980.

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