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# THE BATTLEFIELD: FROM POLEMIC TO PARCHMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*“Until the dawn of the Renaissance, the ancient learning and knowledge were looked upon as the summit of human civilization”.* The ancients were worshipped as the ultimate authority in all fields of literary inquisition. But, when Europe emerged from the Early Middle Ages into the Modern Era, the litterateurs discovered “new values in secular life and *“a new confidence in man’s unaided confidence”* and it soon broke itself from the chains of the “ultimate authority”. In a twinkling of an eye, a fracas broke out between the ancients and the moderns in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in France and the literary conflict did not leave England untouched. After the establishment of the Royal Society in 1660, it made the people to reflect on the respective merits of the old and the new philosophy. **“A great writer in writing himself writes his times”**. Jonathan Swift lived and wrote during the period, of which in literary history is known as Age of Pope. *The Battle of the Books* is a satirical novel by Jonathan Swift, written in 1697 as part of his broader work, *A Tale of a Tub*. This novel is a witty and thought-provoking exploration of the debate between *Ancient and Modern* litterateurs and their wisdom.

This research aims to throw the light on themes, structure and the style of writings. The proponents of modernity argue that their age, characterized by advancements in science and reason, surpasses the supposedly superstitious and limited periods of ancient Greece and Rome. On the other hand, those who uphold the ideals of antiquity argue that all fundamental knowledge can be found within the works of Virgil, Cicero, Homer, and Aristotle.

**Key words:** Pretension, enthusiasm, sham ideas, exalted hubris, satire, ancients and moderns.

## INTRODUCTION

*“Proper words in proper places make the true definition of style”*

- Dean Swift

Jonathan Swift lived and wrote during the period of which in literary history is known as Augustan Age. In terms of political history, this age spans the three successive reigns of William III (1658-1702), Queen Anne (1702-1714) and George I (1714-1727). Anglo-Irish poet, satirist, essayist, and political pamphleteer Swift was born on November 30, 1667, in Dublin, Ireland. He spent much of his early adult life in England before returning to Dublin to serve as Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin for the last 30 years of his life. It was this later stage when he would write most of his greatest works. Swift is widely acknowledged as the greatest prose satirist in the history of English literature.

**“The Battle”** was written to meet the mortifying situation between his patron William Temple and his rivals Richard Bentley and William Wotton. William Temple, an astute diplomat was spending his honourable retirement in the pursuit of literature and gardening. He was commonly regarded as an embodiment of liberal culture. In 1690, he happened to write an essay on *Ancient and Modern Learning*. It was rather another addition of the controversy regarding to the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns then going on in Europe (pg.no 137). His work negated the fracas in support to the modern learning and Temple gave the palm of supremacy to the ancients in his writing. One of his supporters, Charles Boyle, thereupon set himself the task of editing a new version of the *Epistles of Phalaris*, which received an undiluted praise from Temple. But before he could pull it out, William Wotton, a supporter of modern learning published his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) to lock horns with Temple. The Keeper of St. James's Library, Richard Bentley, a noted philologist, a great scholar and most of all a supporter of moderns, had shown discourtesy to Boyle when the latter was consulting on *Epistles of Phalaris* manuscript to prepare his new edition. The whole affairs turned scandalous as it ridiculed the judgements of those who sided with Temple. Swift's writings penned down in the defence of Temple. It is believed that Swift started to work on this satire in June 1697 and completed in March 1698.

## A CRITICAL EXAMINATION – 1<sup>ST</sup> EPISODE

Structurally, *The Battle of the Books* is comprised of five episodes. The **first episode** consists of the tussle between the Ancients and the Moderns for the right to live on the highest peak of

Parnassus, where the moderns live on the lower peak and the ancients live on the highest peak. Unable to rise higher than the ancients, out of covetousness, an emissary is sent up to ask the ancients to remove themselves, otherwise the moderns will “*come with shovels and mattocks, and level the said hill as low as they shall think it convenient*”. Soon the controversy takes place in St. James’s Library and an epic battle fought in a library when various books come alive and attempt to settle the arguments between moderns and ancients.

Through the ***lens of mimesis***, we see the allegorical representation of the fracas between the Ancients and the Moderns mirroring the conflict between William Temple the supporter of the classical literature and contemporary literature supported by William Bentley who engaged in intellectual debates of Swift's time.

The ***lens of social alienation***, projects the struggle for the peak of Mount Parnassus which transcends as a literary dispute, transforms into a potent allegory for the social and intellectual power dynamics of early 18th-century Europe. The inability of the Moderns to physically ascend the mountain mirrors their marginalization within the existing social hierarchy, dominated by the established authority figures represented by the Ancients. Moreover, the Moderns' threat to level the mountain entirely can be interpreted as a radical act of rebellion against the oppressive weight of tradition which lifts the desire to dismantle the existing power structures and to establish a new intellectual, social landscape that reflects their values and aspirations.

## **A CRITICAL EXAMINATION – 2<sup>ND</sup> EPISODE**

In this episode, Swift employs the allegorical episode of the Bee and Spider to satirize the “*Ancients vs. Moderns*” debate with remarkable efficiency. During the battle, a bee (symbolizing the Ancients) gathers from their well-stocked shelves, while a self-centered spider (representing the Moderns) claims dominion over theirs.

Though the ***lens of Aesthetic theory of Plotinus***, of Swift uses the Bee and the Spider to symbolize contrasting philosophies. The Bee, industrious and seeking beauty (like Plotinus' concept of seeking divine essence), represents the Ancients' pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment. The Spider, self-absorbed and claiming its web (material world focus), embodies the perceived flaws of the Moderns – materialism and self-interest.

The ***fragmentation lens*** helps to uncover the Bee and the Spider’s fragmented nature of individual identity and perception. The Bee's industriousness and pursuit of beauty stand in

contrast to the Spider's self-centeredness and egotism, reflecting the multiplicity and diversity of human experience. Their symbolic significance extends beyond their individual actions, representing broader philosophical and cultural debates about tradition, innovation, and the pursuit of knowledge.

### A CRITICAL EXAMINATION – 3<sup>RD</sup> EPISODE

The **third incident** deals with the battlefield. The two sides, the Ancients and the Moderns, assemble on the battlefield. Some of the Ancients include Homer, Pindar, Virgil, Herodotus, Lucan, Euclid, Plato, Aristotle and of course Temple and the moderns are supported by Dryden, Withers, Cowley, Descartes, Harvey and so on.

Aristotle's *catharsis theory* suggests audiences experience the emotional release through intense drama, like the war scene in "The Battle of the Books." The battlefield scene builds tension and emotions as Ancients and Moderns clash. Witnessing their struggles and the battle's resolution can be cathartic for readers. It evokes the heightened emotions as characters grapple with fear, anger, and uncertainty. The outcome is uncertain, further intensifying the emotional experience for both characters and readers.

Through the *stream of consciousness*, the battlefield scene in "The Battle of the Books" allows for a deeper exploration of the character's inner lives and the chaotic nature of the conflict. By delving into the character's thoughts and perceptions in a raw and unfiltered manner, the narrative captures the intensity and complexity of the emotional experience, immersing the reader in the tumultuous world of the battlefield.

### A CRITICAL EXAMINATION – 4<sup>TH</sup> EPISODE

In the **fourth incident**, Swift introduced the Gods and the Goddesses siding with the ancients and the moderns. Momus, the God of Ridicule was the patron of the moderns, made an excellent speech of his followers and Pallas, the patron Goddesses of the ancients delivered speech in favour of the ancients to Jupiter. Here, Swift made an effective use of supernatural characters to disparage the moderns and to establish the superiority of the ancients.

The speeches delivered by Momus and Pallas exemplify the principles of *rhetorical theory* outlined by Aristotle. Through their strategic use of language and rhetorical devices, Momus and Pallas seek to persuade Jupiter to support their respective factions, highlighting the persuasive power of rhetoric in shaping opinions and influencing decision-making.

Through the *lens of metafiction*, Momus and Pallas addresses to Jupiter function as metafictional devices. These speeches draw attention to the constructed nature of narratives and the power of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the world. By directing their arguments towards Jupiter, the ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning, the narrative invites metafictional reflection on the nature of authority and interpretation in the construction of meaning. Furthermore, Momus and Pallas themselves can be interpreted as allegorical representations of the storytelling process itself. Momus, the God of Ridicule, embodies the critical and sceptical aspects of literary analysis, while Pallas, the Goddess of Wisdom, represents the pursuit of knowledge and understanding through the act of storytelling.

### A CRITICAL EXAMINATION – 5<sup>TH</sup> EPISODE

The **fifth incident** is an allegorical version of the supposed victory of Charles Boyle, who wrote in defence of Temple's praise of the ancients, over Wotton and Bentley. Thus ends the account of the battle of the books. The victory belongs to the ancients, even though the author does not state it directly.

For this episode of Bentley and Wotton, the *theory of Hubris* can be applied. Hubris, a concept deeply rooted in Greek tragedy, refers to excessive pride or arrogance, often leading to downfall or punishment. According to this theory, the characters' excessive pride and arrogance, which ultimately leads to their downfall. Their tragic fate serves as a warning against the dangers of overestimating one's abilities and defying divine authority. Bentley's character epitomizes hubris through his excessive arrogance and self-importance. Despite his physical deformities and grotesque appearance, Bentley displays a sense of superiority over the Ancients and boasts about his capabilities as a leader. Wotton, Bentley's companion, also displays hubris through his actions. His attempt to drink from the fountain of Helicon despite Apollo's interference reflects his defiance of divine authority and his belief in his own entitlement.

Through the lens of *grotesque realism*, the grotesque elements are evident in the vivid and exaggerated descriptions of Bentley's deformed appearance and his unconventional weaponry, such as the flail and vessel of ordure. It is further emphasized by the absurdity of Bentley's actions and his futile attempts to overpower the ancients while armed with unconventional weapons. Wotton's encounter with Apollo at the fountain of Helicon, where he is prevented from drinking and only manages to ingest slime and mud, also exemplifies grotesque realism by depicting bodily functions and bodily experiences in a manner that is exaggerated and distorted. Moreover, the violent and chaotic confrontation between Bentley,

Wotton, and Boyle, culminating in their simultaneous deaths, can be seen as a grotesque portrayal of bodily violence and mortality.

## **EPILOGUE**

The litterateurs of their epoch, always follow either the theme of their past/corresponding epoch or the structure of the ancient litterateurs for their inspiration (archetypical criticism). The themes, structure and the style of writings are sometimes adapted or adopted and it just revolves like the rotation of the Earth, which is unstoppable. The ancients are the roots of the Tree of Enlightenment and the moderns are the leaves and flowers which will continue to blossom from the branches of the tree, as the effluxion of time goes on. Till the end of the satire, Swift's mindset was unveiled by the critical lens and indirectly illuminated the Ancients as an emotional and intellectual sympathy and they are shown as polite, courteous, peaceful and gracious, while the moderns are cantankerous, rude and aggressive. The book projected only a partial account controversy of the Ancients and the Moderns, as some epochs and their writers have been omitted.

**“We should always know the unwrapped past, to present the present a gift of future”**

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