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The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age

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Anyone at all familiar with the range of debate on such topics as multiculturalism, Great Books, a Core Curriculum, or "the canon" is bound to be intrigued by Joseph M. Levine's *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age*. The book examines the tough and often bitter debates about the value of the classics that surfaced in the relatively small literary world of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England. Even readers well versed in the specifics of this debate will doubtless wonder whether a comic-depressing analog may be discovered in the feuding of contemporary American academics. As Levine writes on the opening page of his book, shortly after Sir William Temple, one of Swift's early benefactors, published a "rather commonplace essay" in 1690 on the "ancients and the moderns,"

the air was filled with books and pamphlets, charges and countercharges, high principle and low invective . . . For a moment it looked almost as if the fate of Western civilization hung in the balance: whether to go forward to something new and better, an advancement of learning and a material culture beyond anything hitherto known, or whether to hanker after a golden age in the past and to lament the decadence of the modern world. . . . For decades the commotion continued unabated, as nearly every literate Englishman thought to offer his opinion and join the fray. (p. 1).

Anyone who remembers the notorious popularity of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, not to mention the number of publications (of varying quality) its popularity helped nurture, will be taken with Levine's book from the start. Indeed, his book on Swift, Pope, and their contemporaries will perhaps encourage us to look at our own predicament afresh.

Levine, however, does not focus on the relations between twentieth-century intellectual-political grievance and eighteenth-century notions of taste. Rather, he offers an immensely learned story about just what so angered Swift and Pope. To be sure, as Levine points out, the minor publications relating to *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Dunciad* were scrutinized long ago in the heyday of what is now unfairly called the Old Historicism. Twentieth-century scholars in England and America who came of age before the Second World War traced the references in Swift's and Pope's works and published their findings. But Levine adds significantly to their achievement in asking his readers to see the side of the argument that Swiftians and Popeans, with understandable devotion to their subjects, tend to minimize. In *The Battle of the Books*, we are offered a sympathetic view of the gradual emergence of principled philological study as applied not only to Greek and Roman literature, but to Elizabethan literature as well. The "modern" practitioners of this new way of reading appeared dull to gentlemen of taste, and as twentieth-century scholars well know, they made monstrous mistakes. Their "conjectural criticism"—editorial guesswork, really—is responsible for legendary errors. Yet in Levine's book, conjectural criticism is explained not as a collection of foolish "improvements," but as an earnest attempt by immensely learned people to stir debate and thus, through constructive combat, advance thought. Making a wrong guess, and having it pointed out in lively, contentious prose, was better than making no guess at all. Further, Levine argues compellingly that the "ancients" were not simply critical of dullness, but vigorously against the possible emergence of new intellectual "disciplines" or "fields."

Levine's work, in short, challenges the notion that the greatest works of literature are those that withstand the test of time.

If Levine offers a reliable and concise view of literary trends in the early eighteenth century, he also offers colorful sketches of the commanding generals in the major battles. Again, Levine appears to know that any description of somewhat arcane early eighteenth-century literary debates must first and last be interesting to read. To his credit Levine's treatment of two of the major combatants, Sir William Temple and William Wotton, reads something like a comparison of General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant. Temple was reared according to the honored traditions of the gentleman. "The young man was no scholar," writes Levine. After a distinguished career as diplomat, which included a significant contribution to the writing of the Triple Alliance (1668), he retired in 1680 to Moor Park, having had, in his words, "enough of the uncertainty of Princes, the caprices of fortune, the violence of factions, the unsteadiness of counsels, and the infidelity of friends." As Levine writes,

The man, then, who sat down in later life to pen some thoughts on the ancients and moderns was a man widely, if not deeply, versed in the classical authors. He had assimilated them, at least the Latin writers, in the natural manner of the seventeenth-century gentleman and man of affairs. . . . Like Cicero, Temple was a skeptic, and only moral philosophy escaped his doubt. Nor had he the time and patience, much less the skills or interest, of a classical scholar. He was an ancient without a profound knowledge of antiquity, no more than a pale imitation of his beloved models, as he would have been the first to say. (p. 17).

In his literary retirement at least, he represented in real life the type John Pomfret lauds in a widely read Augustan poem, *The Choice: a Poem written by a Person of Quality* (1700):

Near some fair town I'd have a private seat....
At th' end of which a silent study plac'd

Should be with all the noblest authors grac'd;
Horace and Virgil, in whose mighty lines
Immortal wit, and solid learning shines. . . .

It is not difficult to understand why Swift sought advancement from this man.

William Wotton was Temple's principal antagonist. "William Wotton was in his own way as good an example of seventeenth-century classicism as William Temple," writes Levine,

although in spirit and temperament he was a perfect contrast. Not only was he young; he was very much more precocious. His education had been by any standard extraordinary; at the age of six he could read in three ancient languages; by the age of ten he was at the university. . . . The young Wotton became a celebrated *érudit* in an age of learned men—but he never touched upon the great world of events. If he was alert to nearly every activity in the world of scholarship and intellect, he knew almost nothing about the larger world of diplomacy and politics. (pp. 30-31).

I have quoted these two passages at some length to indicate by example how Levine joins analytical and literary technique. His book addresses the issues more or less chronologically, with the first two-thirds focussing on debates about literature, and the last third focussing on debates about the preferred historical mode—antiquarian or narrative. After about 100 pages, the principal delight of the book becomes obvious: Levine has tried to apply in his own writing the best advice of his Augustan predecessors. If the book has an essential thematic bias, it is that the scholars, largely because of the excellence of the satire directed against them, have yet to receive their due; yet he pays the gentlemen of taste a supreme compliment by writing crisp, bright, and well-phrased sentences.

The book has its faults, but they appear to be relatively minor.

Any large study of a complex intellectual movement or trend ought to treat in some detail how readers responded to it all. Recent work in the make-up and proclivities of eighteenth-century reading audiences perhaps could have been brought to bear more profitably. It is of course not enough simply to gauge the reaction of the world by depending on reviews—a kind of writing typically produced by professionals who do not necessarily represent the reading public very well. Yet Levine has scoured libraries for relevant sources. And his notes are exceptionally full, citing sources in many languages.

Unfortunately, the book does not have an adequate index or bibliography. The index omits the nineteenth- and twentieth-century secondary sources included in the notes. If, for example, one were to want to find quickly Levine's response to A. C. Elias, Jr.'s *Swift at Moor Park: Problems in Biography and Criticism* (U of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), which Levine does refer to in his notes, one would have to go through many pages. The absence of a bibliography is regrettable as well, for Levine treats an enormous number of printed works—classical, eighteenth-century, and contemporary. Bibliographies are pretty much standard these days even in doctoral dissertations, and Levine's magnificent work of intellectual history should have a solid bibliography. The book will be referred to again and again in research libraries.

But readers who start this book on page one are likely to read it "through," to use one of Samuel Johnson's tests of a book. Levine has defined an important project and executed it with a learning that is never heavy and a style that will charm. In its success in bringing together a range of works to elucidate a particular theme, *The Battle of the Books* perhaps resembles Lawrence Lipking's *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-century England* (Princeton UP, 1970) and Barbara Shapiro's *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-century England: A Study of the Relationships Between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law and Literature* (Princeton UP, 1983).

Yet unlike these books, Levine's closes with a sobering thought—one we would perhaps do well to meditate upon in these canon-conscious days: "Despite the best efforts of both sides, the battle of the books ended in a draw." (p. 414) If the book does have indirect application to the lamentable hostilities of our own age, it is in reminding us that intellectual wars, like real ones, rarely turn out the way people expect them to. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the "fate of Western civilization" did not, after all, "hang in the balance." And those who presented the most sweeping arguments seem now simply learned and quaint.

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