

## **“The Battle of the Books”**

“Battle of the Books, The” Prose satire by Swift. He began writing it about 1696 while living at Moor Park with Sir William TEMPLE, working as his secretary, editor, executor, and pupil. It was completed about 1698, and first published with “A TALE OF A TUB” as the secondary piece in 1704 by John Nutt in London. The full title is A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought Last Friday, Between the Ancient and the Modern Books in St. James’s Library. Swift divides the essay into three sections: “The Bookseller to the Reader,” “The Preface of the Author,” and “A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought Last Friday.” It was first included in Swift’s collected works by Hawkesworth in 1755.

### **SYNOPSIS**

Swift begins with a historical introduction of the controversy over the superiority of ancient or modern learning, and then depicts the Moderns challenging the legal rights of the Ancients to the intellectual ground of Parnassus. The keeper of St. James’s Library makes an appearance as Charles Boyle (who had been a fierce champion for the Moderns) but becomes confused for a time. This intermission provides time for the fable of the spider and the bee, followed by the mobilization of the Ancient and Modern writers. A second interlude traces the episode of Momus and Criticism and a number of battles between the writers, with an ending episode of Richard BENTLEY and William WOTTON meeting Temple and Boyle. Boyle defeats the two Moderns in a confident manner, leaving them pinned together with his spear so that even Charon the boatman could not distinguish between them. The ending promises sweetness and light (a phrase the poet Matthew Arnold would use effectively) and clarity of sense.

### **COMMENTARY**

Swift’s work is a comic drama enacting what for many scholars and dilettantes was a serious issue in the intellectual history of late 17th-century Europe: whether modern or ancient scholars were superior. Modern critics typically accept the view that the “Battle” clearly demonstrates Swift’s personal and cultural loyalty to Temple and the older man’s support for the Ancients. In addition, one can see Swift digressing from his position in “A Tale of a Tub” and anticipating certain sections of GULLIVER’S TRAVELS. His satire defending Temple’s Essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning against the attacks of the scholars Wotton and Bentley becomes a lively mock-heroic piece. Temple had taken the side of the Ancients in the great debate but

unfortunately had used spurious documents (Aesop and the Epistles of Phalaris) to defend his position against the modern gospel of progress. Wotton and Bentley, great textual critics, had quite rightly criticized the use of such documents, but Swift is much more interested in dealing with the profound question of the humanist and the pedant, polite learning and scholarship. The great question posed in the fable of the spider and the bee is a central point in the document: “Whether is the nobler Being of the two, That which by lazy contemplation . . . turns all into excrement and venom . . . or that, which, by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax.” This interlude in which a pompous and ill-tempered Modern, the Spider, finds his Gothic cobweb invaded by a Bee reveals Swift granting the achievements of Gothic architecture and scholastic disputation to the Modern. But Horatian urbanity (the current model of style in the late 1690s) is the defining quality of his Ancients. This latter group represents those who keep the past alive in the present, encouraging the virtues of antiquity without embracing their worst vices. In their ambition to be self-sufficient, the Moderns risk parochial narrowness; their manners show a failure of humanity as well as of humanism. In 1701 Swift arranged the publication of Temple’s *Miscellanea: The Third Part*, which contains “Some Thoughts upon Reviewing the Essay of Ancient and Modern Learning,” the answer to Wotton that he and Temple had written together. The “Battle” is Swift’s satirical dialogue on Temple’s original Essay and his later Thoughts. Using animal imagery again to declaim on man’s often contemptible behavior, he compares the two chief Moderns to “mongrel curs, whom native greediness and domestic want provoke and join in partnership.” His attack on pretense and false learning. remains relevant today as each reader seeks out true learning’s sweetness and light while casting aside sterile scholarship and learned pomposity.

**THE ABOVE MATERIAL HAS BEEN COMPILED FROM DIFFERENT OPEN SOURCES.**