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Eighteenth Century and the Classics: An Account of Pope's Windsor –Forest and Swift's the Battle of the Books

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Abstract:

Scholars agree that unlike the preceding Renaissance epoch and the ensuing Romantic period, both of which attempted to dissociate from a suffocating past, eighteenth century delighted in the past, considering it a patron rather than an adversary. An idea prevailed that appreciation of the classical past could assist in creating a more valuable, more rewarding future. The two big areas for consideration were the ancient Greek and Roman cultures and the writings of medieval age. Engagement with the past, however, was a two-edged sword; the past could be a prefect, wonderful model for imitation on the one hand, while on the other the decadence and the decline of the ancient civilizations could be a source of melancholy and apprehension. This paper investigates how Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope engage with the past in their respective works *The Battle of the Books* and *Windsor-Forest,* in which they present their accounts of the debate that was popular during their time with regards to the success and prestige of ancient and modern authors. The first part of the article attends to the criticism levelled at the ways the two writers looked at and revered the ancients, in the context of eighteenth century revival of interest in the past. Then, it is illustrated that, while Pope is optimistic about the re-establishment of another Roman age, Swift does not hide his pessimism and disappointment about bringing back his beloved Ancients to life and practice.

Keywords: Greek, Roman, eighteenth century

الملخص:

يتفق النقاد على آنه بخلاف حقبه النهضيه السابقه و الفترة الرومانسية التى تلتها – و كلتاهما حاولتا الانفكاك عن الماضى الخائق –كان القرن الثامن عشر مبتهجاً، معتبراً آياه راعياً و ليس خصماً. و قد سادت فكرة مفادها آن تقدير الماضى الكلاسيكى يمكن آن يساعد فى خلق مستقبل آكثر قيمة و كفائة. و ثمة مجالان رئيسيان يجب آخذهما فى الاعتبار هما الثقافات اليونانية و الرومانية القديمة و العصور الوسطى. لكن الانخراط فى الماضى كان سيف ذو حدين. يمكن آن يكون الماضى مثالياً و نموذجاً رائعاً للتقليد من ناحية، بينما فى ناحية آخرى يمكن آن يكون انحطاط الجضارات القديمة مصدراً للكآبة و الخوف. تعد هذ البحث هى محاولة للتحقيق فى كيفية تعامل جوناثان سويفت و آلكسندر بوب مع الماضى فى آعمالهما الخاضة " معركة الكتب" و " وندسور فورست". يتناول الجزء الاول من المقال النقدالموجه الى الطرق التى نضر بيا الكاتبان الى القدماء و تبجيلهم، فى سياق اعادة احياء الاهتمام بالماضى فى القرن الثامن العشر. وتلى ذالک مناقشة وجهات النضر المتباينة للماضى التى شوهدت فى كل نص، مما يوضح كيفية تعبير كل كاتب عن الماضى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اليونانية، الرومانية، القرن الثامن عشر.

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پوختە:

زۆرێک لە ڕەخنەگرانی مێژوی ئەدەبی ئینگلیزی هاوڕان کە سەدەی هەژدەیەم جیاواز بوو لە سەردەمی ڕێنیسانس و سەردەمی ڕۆمانتیک لە ڕووی تێڕوانین بۆ ڕابردوو؛ لە کاتێکدا نوسەرانی ئەم سەردەمانە خۆیان لە ڕابردوو بە دوور دەگرت، نوسەرانی سەدەی هەژدەیەم جێژیان لە گەڕانەوە بۆ ڕابردوو دەبینی، وەک هاوڕێ نەک دوژمن سەیریان دەکرد. بۆچونێک هەبوو کە تێگەیشتن لە ڕابردوو (کلاسیکیەکان) یارمەتیدەر دەبێ لە دروست کردنی داهاتویەکی بەهادارتر. لەم چوارچێوەیەدا، نوسەران هەوڵیان دەدا سود لە کلتور و نوسینی یۆنانی کۆن و ڕۆمانیەکان و سەدەکانی ناوەڕاست وەربگرن. تێکەڵاوبوون لەگەڵ ڕابردوو دوو لایەنە بوو؛ لە لایەکەوە ڕابردوو نمونەیەکی جوان و باڵا بوو بۆ لاسایی کردنەوە، بەڵام لە هەمان کاتدا تێکچون و هەرەسی شارستانیە کۆنەکان جێگای نیگەرانی و ترس بوو. ئەم تۆێژینەوەیە هەوڵێکە بۆ تێگەیشتن لە چۆنیەتی گەڕانەوە بۆ ڕابردوو لە لایەن هەر یەکە لە شاعیران (جۆناسان سویفت) و (ئەلیکساندەر پۆپ) لە نوسینەکانیاندا بە ناوەکانی (شەڕی پەرتوکەکان) وە (دارستانی دیندسۆر). بەشی یەکەمی نوسینەکە باس لەو ڕەخنەیە دەکات لە هەردوو نوسەر گیراوە لەسەر چۆنیەتی گەڕانەوە بۆ ڕابردوو وە بەرزڕاگرتنی، لە چوارچێوەی هەوڵەکانی نوێکردنەوەی ڕابردوو لە سەدەی هەژدەیەم. دواتر تێڕوانینی هەردوو نوسەر بۆ ڕابردوو (کلاسیکیەکان) ڕوونکراوەتەوە.

Introduction

Literary scholar Martha Shackford notes that it seems a rather preposterous idea nowadays to oblige our pupils to study the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. However, the fact that their social and political history, philosophy, art, literature and religion have had a prolonged influence upon European cultures is undeniable, and that they have been the source of indefinable inspiration and admiration for many great English writers is similarly irrefutable (644-5). She further argues that, "the Augustan Age in English literature is, of course, merely pseudo-classical" (Shackford 651). Howard Erskine-Hill warns about using "Augustan Age", noting that generalizations in using the term prevent us from seeing the fact that not all the people "of that time admired Rome's Augustan Age, or at least were constantly aware of it" (xii). Yet the positive sense attached to the word "Augustan" accompanied it during the eighteenth century (Erskine-Hill 265). Generally, both Pope and Swift are considered among those who held the ancients with high esteem, supposedly privileging their cultural productions over those of their contemporaries. Pope's early poetry attempts to revisit, reconstruct and glorify the ancient Rome. In so doing, Pope expresses the hope to achieve "a new Augustan Age in Britain" (Erskine-Hill 240-1). This becomes apparent in his *Windsor-Forest* where Pope portrays the revitalization of a Roman creation; he makes an conspicuous analogy between Queen Anne and the Roman Augustus, and even introduces "the ancient Roman name for London: *Augusta''* (Erskine-Hill 241).

Windsor-Forest then owes much to the classical Roman heritage, and Pope delivers his messages in the poem by reworking certain ideas and techniques bequeathed to him from the classics-in particular Virgil. David Morris highlights that Virgil was Pope's "poet of his youth", although Horace and Homer replaced him from his middle years onwards (231). His awareness of Virgil dominates the style and vision exposed in *Windsor-Forest* and his other poems dated before 1715. Writing the poem at a time when the wars were concluding that had for long threatened the continent, Pope could once more dream of a brighter future for Britain, and he found the Augustan Rome a proper model to be emulated (Morris 231-2). Scott Cleary also observes that the political background of the poem, the rule of Queen Anne and the Treaty of Utrecht, signed in 1713, is one of the precepts identified with it. For this reason, critics tend to view *Windsor-Forest* as, among other things, a "poem that is

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recreating the myth of Rome first sought by Dryden" (649). As such, Pope becomes both a "classical reanimator and an imperialist sycophant" (Cleary 469). *Windsor-Forest* then, as a poem of imperialism, endorses England's manoeuvres to transcend the boundaries of Windsor Forest (Cleary 469). Even the language of the poem can be brought into a direct comparison with that of the poetry of the Augustan Age, for the poem comprises various literary kinds like georgic, pastoral, aetiological myth, prophecy and panegyric- a characteristic often found in the writings of Virgil (Juan Pellicer 445). Pope's imitations of Virgil become "so ambitiously frequent that the writer evidently means rather to show his literature than his wit" (Morris 232). Hence, Pope is inseparable with the Classics (Shackford 651).

According to Joseph Levine, the eighteenth century was marked by a protracted battle between the ancients like Swift who called for antiquity and considered Greeks and Romans superior to their contemporaries and the moderns who claimed that modern civilization not only had equated them, but had also surpassed them, in many fields (1-2). Swift was among those who sought in Latin and Greek heritages a treasury of wisdom never paralleled by anything following it. Thus, they found among the classics a perfect model that could only be imitated (Levine 3-5). In *The Battle of The Books* Swift's sympathy for the ancients is apparent, and although he does not have much to add to the debates, he means to "award the palm of the ancients" (Levine 116). Swift's railing against the declining world around him starts from his early writings, and despite his scepticism about associating with the past, "he holds it as a model for present emulation" (Fox 203). Although his exact stance in the debates remains somewhat ambiguous and unclear, Swift takes side with the Ancients against the Moderns whom he considered to "threaten to empty the world" of beauty and virtue (Fox 205). As a conservative and an enemy to progress, Mariam Starkman states, Swift favoured the old learning over the new one and even "rejected and reviled the new learning" (4). His *Battle*, however, was written in a "lost cause". Swift was fighting for the Ancients at a time when the Moderns had for the most part won the battle (Starkman 3).

Both works studied here align themselves with the ancient authors alike and show a relatively similar admiration, but they differ in their ambitions. Significantly, Seth Rudy observes that Swift knows that his defence of his beloved ancients' wisdom and scholarship, however effectual, is temporary. Pope, on the other hand, follows a less complex and "far more ambitious route to securing his place in the future alongside the venerable ancients" (Rudy 5). Unlike Swift whose defence of the ancients is self-consciously transient, Pope attempts to bring the ancients back to life both in his poetry and within himself. In this sense, the Golden Age of the ancients becomes his own, and he can therefore try to rebuild it in his era. Thus Pope saw himself as a descendent "of a literary bloodline that extended straight back to his revered ancients" (Rudy 5). Furthermore, Swift did not believe that the means of maintaining and rewriting the past existed for authors of his day, and it was for this reason that he could neither save the present nor the past. For Pope, however, any text, "composed with a genius like that of the ancients", could achieve the qualities that grant it a place in the making (Rudy 6).

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Pope's *Windsor-Forest* was published in 1713 in London by Bernard Lentott; Swift's *Battle* was published as part of *A Tale of a Tub* in 1704. Contemporaries and friends, Pope and Swift both idealize the classics and place a high status on the productions of classical literature, classical scholarship and classical culture in general, as opposed to their modern productions. However, they differ in their orientations; while Pope considers the classics as a model or a template that Britain can emulate to build itself a brighter future, Swift looks backwards- he views the classics as a mark of the degradation of the moderns and as a sign of how far the moderns have fallen. They shared a comfortable education of the classics, had similar attitudes of and admirations for the classical productions of the Augustan Age, as illustrated below. They also suggest that a better future can be achieved by returning to the ancients. Nonetheless, at least in the two texts studied here, they work in fundamentally different directions. Pope is optimistic about the prospect of regaining the glory of the ancients, whereas Swift does not appear to see much hope held out for that, and thus he is pessimistic.

Written to support William Temple who, in an essay predating Swift's version of the battle, had claimed superiority to the ancients, *The Battle of the Books* presents a virtual fight between two types of books in St. James' Library. Although at the beginning of *The Battle* Swift acknowledges that his aim is to "write down a full impartial account thereof", Levine is right to state that "there is no mistaking where his sympathies lay" (238,116). Throughout *The Battle* Swift's admiration for, and affiliation with, the classics is clearly felt. Before the books actually get involved in a decisive battle, they are interrupted by a heated debate between a spider and a bee, representing the Moderns and the Ancients respectively. From this, it becomes clear that *The Battle* is about the ancient and modern learning. Levine's statement that "all those activities that seemed to work by accumulation, such as the sciences and philosophy, were won for the moderns" seems to be some kind of simplification of the battle between the rivals (Levine 2). In his version of the battle, Swift attempts to win all the aspects for his Ancients, as testified by the conflict between the spider which has "Improvements in the Mathematicks" and is good at sciences and the bee who is proud of his "much study, true judgement, and distinction of things, brings home Honey and Wax" (*The Battle* 246, 248). The vulnerability of the spider's castle which, when the bee happens to alight upon one of its walls, "sunk down to the very foundation" reinforces the idea that even in mathematics the ancients are superior to the moderns, at least as perceived by Swift (*The Battle* 243).

It seems reasonable to suggest that *The Battle* shows Swift's pessimism about creating a new Augustan Age as much as it does his admiration for the ancients. As shown above, his reverence for the ancient heritage and ancient literature is not difficult to be discerned. The hints for his negativity in *The Battle* are many, though. Although in the battle it is obviously the Ancients who win, the fact remains that the battle is fought only in a library and is between books that are mere repositories of their authors' spirits, an indication that Swift realises that the Ancients are confined within the walls of the libraries. He is also aware that the librarian, who is a staunch modern, can bear "a cruel rancour to the Ancients"; that modern books can be favoured over the classical ones; that the library can be a place where classical books are "buried alive in some obscure corner"; and that ancient books might be "turned out of doors" (*The Battle* 239). Mark McDayter is right to state that while Swift emphasises on the longevity and the ethical guidance of the ancient books, he also focuses on the significance of the use of them. Ancient books that remain unread on the library shelves are in a sense "slaughtered", and this turns libraries into some kind of "graveyard of ancient wisdom" (McDayter 3). Swift is also

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doubtful about our ability to communicate with the ancients through the libraries. The spirits of the classical authors can be "mere shadows" or "emptied signifiers of the deadness and irrelevance of the past" (McDayter 5). Swift personifies the 'great' classical books of the ancient world where he writes 'When you walk among your books/ they reproach you with their looks (Swift 1736). For Swift, books, modern or classical, represent the spirits of their authors. Books here are alive and can even speak to their readers, but what Swift is not happy with is the fact that the ancient books are neglected by his contemporaris. For Swift, a book that is left on the liberary shelves for long, untouched, or bound, is in a sense killed. He thinks of Homer, Plutarch, Virgil, and Flaccus whose great books he thinks are not receiving their due importance and attention for they are put on library shelves and are barely used by his contemporaries.

Seemingly, even Swift himself is aware that the seeds for the defeat of the Ancients is planted, and that he is fighting for a lost cause, as Starkman suggests (3). This pessimism in *The Battle* starts from the very beginning when the Ancients and the Moderns cannot come to an agreement as to the height of the Hill Paranssus. Swift makes an allegorical reference to moutain Paranssus to show what the conflict between the ancients and the moderns looks like; each of the two sides is holding a hill of the mountain, the one held by the ancients being higher, thus leaving the moderns with a sense of jealousy. Jealous as to how the ancients should have the right to occupy the higher summit, the moderns go into a protracted quarrel. That the Ancients possess the "highest and largest" part of the land indicates that Swift views the Moderns to have fallen far below the Ancients, and that they should raise their status to that of their predecessors and "raise their own side of the Hill" (*Battle* 232-3). It is not preposterous to suggest that Swift's language at the beginning of the poem is in favour of the Ancients whom he saw as pioneers and great models for emulation. He places the Ancients so high above the Moderns that the later 'complain' about their 'prospects' being spoiled, clearly a disadvantage (*Battle* 237-8). The Ancients are aware of their inferior counterparts and thus 'admit' them 'out of their free grace' to so 'near a neighbourhood' (*Battle* lines 62-3). They consider themselves 'aborigins' of the high summit, and they do not understand a language of surrender to the Moderns.

Swift's last attempt to reconcile the opposing forces over the higher summit comes when the Ancients invite the Moderns to consider the disadvantage of being on the lower summit as being 'largely recompensed by the shade and the shelter it offered them' (*The Battle* lines 69-70). The implication here is that there should be no offence for modern writers to live under the shade of Greek and Roman icons; if anything, that provides them with a shelter. For Swift, the ancient civilizations have everything to offer, and one does not need to think of inventing new rules or practices. Surpassing the Ancients is either a 'folly' or 'ignorance'. Trying to topple down the higher summit only results in one's tools being broken without any damage to the rock itself, Swift suggests. From this, he suggests that it is wisest for moderns to elevate themselves, he is rather pessimistic that the Moderns (18th century writers who dissociated themselves from the past) can do so, since all this is rejected 'with much indignation' (*The Battle* 79).

Just as Swift's *The Battle of the Books* invites us to see that the modern time has fallen far below the ancient age, Pope's *Windsor-Forest* opens with a similarly bleak vision: reminding the reader that "the groves of Ede, vanish'd now so long" (1 line 7). This creates some negativity that gives the poem

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a relatively backward vision, like that of Swift. Pope, however, differs from Swift in that he also creates a positive vision through a Virgilian technique of amelioration. As Morris rightly puts, seldom is Pope satisfied with leaving the readers in uncertainty, and this poem "moves toward a point of reconciliation" (16). Opposite to *The Battle*, wherein the past and the present are far from being reconciled, and where the readers are intentionally left with an open conclusion, through its development *Windsor-Forest* maintains positivity about a betterment in the situation. The poem is deliberately planned to develop "from an idealized distant past, irrevocably lost, through a history vacillating between eras of discord and peace, to a vision of an idealized but attainable future, in which ambiguity is transformed into affirmation" (Morris 16). This harmonious resolution allows Pope to realize that a new Golden Age will not be achieved through nostalgia, but "through the noble discipline of art and labour" (Morris 17). Interestingly, while Swift seems hopeless, nostalgic and lamenting, Pope does not only imagine another Golden Age like that of the ancients, but also a "better" one.

In *Windsor Forest*, Pope goes as far as dreaming of recreating Britain based on the ancient archetypes. For him, it is not only ancient literature and art which are superior to modern models, but his contemporaries should look up to the classics for almost everything, from poetry to art to gardening and landscaping. If a brighter future was ahead of Britain, it would be best established on the ancient Greek and Roman models. Pope opens the poems by talking to Windsor Castle and says: 'Thy Forests, Windsor! And they green Retreats/ at once the Monarch's and the Muses Seats/ invite my lays' (lines 1-3). These lines are far from being just a physical description of a casle he knew, but they also combine elements from Greek and Roman mythology to make the place look even better. He gets his inspiration (lays= verses) from the landscape, 'greens' and 'retreats', a dwelling place while at the same time a place for the muses. Pope thuss lines himself with the classical writers by invocating to the Muses. Yu Liu (411) is right to suggest that in *Windsor Forest*, Pope loves even the very idea of romanticizing about having Homer, Horace, Virgil, and Martial in his times, whose presence (or just thinking of them) can turn an unglamorous, rather humble countryside into a great dwelling for gods and angels. In these lines, Pope shows his contribution to his contemporary landscaping style and implies that even the landscape can be made richer, more attractive, and more fulfilling when it follows the ancient examples.

The future Pope has in mind is better first because it possesses "all fruits of art and industry", and second because "it implies a progressive social evolution, and wisdom earned by experience, which makes the possibility of a second fall from grace extremely unlikely" (Morris 20). So Pope's new Golden Age, unlike the first one, will be without bloodshed. Queen Anne says in the poem: "No more my Sons shall dye with British Blood/ Red *Iber's* Sands, or Ister's foaming Blood" (16). Thanks to the quasi mythical character of Anna who can turn all discords into peace, together with mercantile expansion, a bright future is awaiting Britain. Pope writes: "At length Great ANNA said...Let Discord cease! / She said, the world obey'd, and all was peace!" (14). These sublime lines introduce a set of contrasting "conditions of discord and harmony" that make possible the establishment of a "new Golden Age in post-Uterchtian Europe" (Morris 234).

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Eighteenth-century Britain saw its educated elite engaged, besides literature and arts, with the "use and conceptualization of ancient history" while debating about imperialism (Mark Bradley 29). The question of whether or not the ancient history provided Britain with a model of empire to follow was at the heart of the debates (31-2). One of the concerns of *Windsor-Forest* is obviously the issue of a British empire after the model of the Romans. Walter Benjamin asserts that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (*qdt* in Laura Brown 42). It might not be very presumptuous to suggest that Pope was well aware of the fact Benjamin mentions, and that his poem seemingly concedes that the expansion of *Windsor Forest* towards the re-establishment of another Augustan Rome inevitably includes some barbarity. This requires Pope to borrow techniques from Virgil's *Georgics* by which he dismembers the problems incurred by imperialism; the feathered creatures in the poem are not "victims", but rather "grateful beneficiaries and celebrants of English imperialism" (Laura Brown 38-40).

Conclusion

Having looked at the literature about Pope and Swift and the classics and their respective works *Windsor-Forest* and *The Battle of the Books*, it can be inferred that both writers, in the texts studied here, show a relatively similar admiration to the ancients. They both revere the same authors and the productions of the classical age. This is, however, where their similarity ends. As to the use of the classics in the eighteenth century they have fundamentally different perspectives. While Pope sees the potential of his age to recreate another Augustan Age, Swift laments the loss of the beloved ancients and does not see another Golden Age ahead of his country.

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