

## Conference report

### 'The "Battle of the Books" and the European Republic of Letters'

University of Kent, Canterbury

report by the organizer: Dr. Paddy Bullard (School of English, University of Kent)

On Friday 4 May the University of Kent was host to a one-day academic workshop at which delegates presented new research on 'The "Battle of the Books" and the European Republic of Letters'. The colloquium was hosted by the university's Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies in the Keynes College Senior Common Room. Initial funding was generously provided by VALE-Paris-Sorbonne through its 'Agon: La Dispute' research project, the balance of expenses for the event being met by two further grants from the Faculty of Humanities and the School of English at the University of Kent. The organizer and delegates are extremely grateful to these three bodies for their support.

The research papers and discussion at the workshop focused on the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century quarrel between the partisans of 'Ancient' and 'Modern' learning, satirized most memorably by Jonathan Swift in 'The Battle of the Books' (1704). The purpose of the conference was to look at the topic from new interdisciplinary and international perspectives – because it was a truly *European* phenomenon, with relevance to the whole circle of arts and sciences as it was understood in the early-modern period. The delegates set out to investigate connections between the British quarrellers and their European counterparts – as readers, correspondents, translators and adversaries. One consequence of the international character of this controversy is that its themes and preoccupations are transformed when the exchanges cross national boundaries. The papers at the colloquium charted these shifts, and described the cultural machinery (journalism, correspondence, print) through which they were mediated.

The keynote lecture was given by Prof. Marcus Walsh of Liverpool University, who as editor of the standard edition of Swift's *Tale of A Tub* is arguably the leading scholar working on the quarrel of the ancients and moderns at the moment. His paper on documentation and enlightenment considered the formal effects of annotation, citation and tabulation in printed texts of this period, and argued the contrasting modes of adduction exhibited by texts of different genres. He located the distinctively modern development of what might be called the technology of hermeneutics in a range of texts associated with the quarrel.

Six further papers were delivered in three panels. The first panel focused on the material traces of archeology and architecture as topics for the construction of *ancienneté*, and also as sites for the unanticipated development of modern discourses. Stéphane Van Damme

(Sciences Po, Paris) spoke on 'Digging Authority: Invisible Past and Deceptive Ancientness in Archeological Paris and London', in which he compared the several different kinds of 'regimes of learning practices' that contested for authority in the antiquarian field of early modern historiography. Paddy Bullard spoke next on 'Parallels of the Ancient and Modern' in architectural theory, focusing on the text and translation of Fréart de Chambray's work in this area, and arguing that its English translator (John Evelyn) perceived and amplified certain modernistic tendencies in what was at a rhetorical level a text deeply committed to the 'ancient' position. In the second panel Sylvie Lafon (Paris VIII) spoke on 'Ancient Medicine, Modern Quackery' as represented in the medical writings of Bernard Mandeville. Lafon found in his writings a series of modernistic strategies deployed for the therapeutic purpose of curing men's diseases by sociability, and by diminishing the distance between patient and physician – here once again ancient wisdom was re-organized into modern structures and relations. Next Martine Pécharman (CNRS) spoke on ancient, modern and cross-channel exchanges in the history of John Locke's logic, stressing the importance of the priority of French circulation for the history of the *Essay's* contemporary reception. In the final panel Henry Power (Exeter) spoke on the quarrel over Homer and the problem of chronology, arguing that Jonathan Swift made an important intervention into the dispute with his portrait of Homer in book 3 of *Gulliver's Travels*, and that it was Swift's concern with question of the 'duration' of linguistic forms that made him deeply sceptical about the interpretative claims of the new philology. Finally, Alexis Tadié (Paris-Sorbonne) spoke on Pierre Motteux and the *querelle* in the British popular press, proposing that research into the diffusion of the debate about modernity reveals a field of intellectual engagement dominated neither by the scholarly playfulness nor the cultural violence stressed by earlier commentators, but rather by an expanding network of quarrels and debates that perpetually shifts topic and emphasis.

Three themes re-occurred in papers throughout the workshop. First, delegates repeatedly stressed issues of linguistic learning, translation and lexical change as being the fundamental matter of contest in the ancients and moderns dispute. Second, the keynote topic of documentation, mediation and fragmentation of information was reflected in nearly all of the papers given – the delegates agreed that this was an area of scholarly inquiry that the existing literature on the dispute fails to explore adequately. Third, social and cross-cultural exchanges were repeatedly seen as constituting the arguments of the dispute themselves, rather than simply complicating or reproducing them.