

The Battle of the Books: As a Mock-Epic

classmate

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- A mock epic may be defined as a parody or ridiculous imitation of the epic. The chief features of epic are
- (1) the narration of the heroic exploits of some national hero. It is generally an account of deeds of valour of heroic proportions.
 - (2) the style and diction are exalted and lofty in keeping with the greatness of the theme
 - (3) there is the introduction of supernatural called 'the machinery'
 - (4) A number of episodes and digressions are introduced for the sake of variety
 - (5) the epic itself is divided into a number of parts or books

A mock-epic is a travesty of the epic: a trivial subject is meted out the grand treatment of the epic, and the effect is funny and ridiculous in the extreme. The Battle of the Books is the first and greatest of the prose mock-epics in the language. The exalted epic manner and style have been used effectively for a trivial subject i.e., a literary controversy of the day regarding the comparative merits of ancient and modern learning.

The Battle of the Books is one of the finest satires in the language. Swift has adopted the epic frame work for his prose satire which involves mainly personalities and some principles. The construction of the plot is in the manner of an epic. The whole structure falls naturally into five parts. (1) the beginning of the quarrel among the books on the shelves of the King's library.

(2) The allegory or fable of the spider and the bee, which is an episode or digression in the manner of an epic

(3) the account of the disposition and arrangement of the troops of the Ancients and the Moderns, and the actual

encounters between them, closely modelled on similar accounts in Homer and Virgil.

- (4) the introduction of the Supernatural. Fame reports of the impending battle to Jupiter, and a Conference is held in the milkyway. The gods and goddesses intervene during the combats of the third part. This imparts epic grandeur and vastness to the entire narration.
- (5) Finally, there is the concluding comic episode in which Bentley and Wotton are transfixed by a lance aimed at them by Boyle.

The subject of the mock-epic, as already pointed out above is trivial, but it has been treated in the grand manner of an epic. The narration is exalted throughout. Swift invents the fiction of the battle fought last Friday between the Ancient and Modern books in the King's library, and then mockingly, in imitation of the epic manner, proceeds to give its origin. It originated long ago in a request made by the Moderns to the Ancients to vacate the high peak occupied by them on Parnassus as its height spoiled the prospect of theirs. The Ancients suggest that the Moderns should raise their own peak instead of asking them to lower theirs.

The Digression

Thus ensues the long and obstinate war. In this war, the Dean tells us mockingly, ink is the great missile weapon, and it is conveyed through a great engine called a quill. The ink itself is referred to as a 'malignant liquor' made of gall and copperas. Then comes the digression or episode of the bee and the spider. In the pompous epic manner, the spider's web is called a 'fortress' and big holes in it are called "Chasms" and "gulf" as the bee enters, the fortress shakes as if there were an 'earthquake' or that "nature was approaching to her final dissolution."

The description of the actual battle of the books, too, is in the grandiloquent epic style. Both the sides hang out their trophies of war, which are nothing but books of controversy of various kinds. The respective troops are then arranged in battle formation. Both the sides have their heavy cavalry (epic and other serious poetry), and light horse (standing for lyric and other non-serious verse). The moderns who are numerous quarrel about the choice of a leader, while the Ancients, fewer in number, choose Homer with one accord as their leader. Then follows an account, again in the lofty manner of the epic, of the actual encounters between the different warriors, the most remarkable being the duels between Dryden and Virgil, Cowley and Pindar.

In the epic manner, there is supernatural intervention during the combats between the various Ancient and Modern warriors. Epic poets introduce the supernatural in their works for various reasons. First, it serves to raise the action of the epic above the merely human; it magnifies the significance of the hero and his deeds. He is so significant that even the great gods are concerned in his welfare. Secondly, it imparts variety to the epic and heightens its interest. Thirdly, the intervention of the gods serves to explain many chance events and accidents, many things which can not be accounted for otherwise. Fourthly, the element of the supernatural serves to bring home the moral that the gods are all powerful and they always reward the virtuous and punish the wicked.

The Supernatural intervention has also been introduced by Swift in his satire in imitation of the epic poets. Goodness Fame reports to Jupiter about the impending battle between the ancient and the moderns, a conference is held in the milkyway, and Jupiter reads the book of Fate. Pallas

decides to support the Ancient, while Momus undertakes to help the moderns. Then follows the descent of Momus (again in the epic manner) to the abode of the goddess of Criticism who is persuaded to come to the help of the moderns. She is pictured with her relatives Ignorance, Pride, Dullness, Noise etc. At the orders of this Goddess, Dullness and Ill manners attend Wotton and Bentley in all their encounters.

The Gods actually intervene in the various encounters between the ancient and the moderns, and thus determine the fate of a combat. Thus (a) Virgil consents to a change of armour with Dryden because the goddess of Diffidence casts mist in to his eyes (b) Blackmore is protected from the spear of Lucan by the Roman God of medicine (c) The shield given by Venus protects Cowley from a spear thrown by Pindar, and when he is finally killed she takes care of his body.

Thus the Battle of the Books is a mock epic, a travesty of the epic manner and style. Much has been made of trivialities. Swift was the first to use the epic framework for a prose-satire, and he has done it with such success that the Battle of the Books has become one of the classics of the tongue. He has made fun not only of (1) the literary controversy and (2) of personalities like Dryden, Wotton and Bentley but also of (3) the epic manner itself. There is no battle at all, it is all a figment of the Dean's imagination. Hence, as Murray puts it, it is all a "delightful fantasia."

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