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Introduction: Ancients, Moderns and the Historiography of the Enlightenment

Traditionally, the Ancients versus Moderns debate in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France and England was conceived of as a quarrel between antiquarian upholders of classical scholarship and champions of the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution, as in R.F. Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: study of the rise of the scientific movement in seventeenth-century England* (2nd edn., 1965). However, this picture has been significantly revised. Twenty years ago Joseph Levine, in *The Battle of the Books* (1991), showed that the battle lines in England were not where historians had imagined them to be. Rather, the conflict there was one between humanists on the side of the Ancients who valued the classical past as a model for the present which provided practical lessons for statesmen, and on the side – ironically – of the Moderns a new kind of classical scholar who wished to apply the most up-to-date methods of textual criticism, numismatics and the various other auxiliary branches of scholarship to further understanding of ancient history and literature. The Moderns, in other words, were *not*, as had been imagined, anti-classical. More recently, Dan Edelstein, in *The Enlightenment: a genealogy* (2010), has shown how central the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns was to the making of the European Enlightenment, a significant refurbishment of Peter Gay's interpretation of the Enlightenment as *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966). In addition, Edelstein has argued that while both Ancients and Moderns welcomed the rise of the new science, it was antiquity which provided the main matter of debate between the two parties, particularly in France, where the contest was really between two different kinds of Modern. Indeed, Edelstein points to the substantial influence of the Ancients on the *philosophes* in eighteenth-century France. In a further refinement of the problem, Larry Norman, in *The Shock of the Ancient* (2011), a study of late seventeenth-century French literature, has shown that the appeal of antiquity was as a kind of quasi-ethnographic 'otherness', quite different from conventional understandings of the significance of neo-classicism. Both Ancients and Moderns, according to Norman, appreciated the gulf between antiquity and the present; but they read this fissure in different ways. Moreover, Norman shows that antiquity was itself disaggregated into a series of phases from an archaic, primitive era through to ages of greater classical sophistication. No longer are scholars able to treat the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns as clashes of monolithic parties which differed fundamentally over the values of classical antiquity and scientific modernity.