chapter 11

Time, Myth and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns: Racine and Fontenelle

Sara E. Melzer

The quality of a barbarian...would be natural to men unless a good education corrected for it.

FURETIÈRE, Dictionnaire universel

Mon mal vient de plus loin.

RACINE, Phèdre

The issue of human time is central to the Quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns, a series of debates in early modern France that, broadly speaking, began in the early sixteenth century and extended to the mid eighteenth-century. Did the imagined course of human time travel downwards towards decline? Did each successive era degenerate in relation to a more perfect civilization in the past when giants and geniuses supposedly walked the earth? The dominant view of the ancient Greeks and Romans issued a resounding yes. Hesiod articulated this perspective in his Works and Days, describing the deterioration of the human race over time. “A golden race of mortal men” marked its high point, which then degenerated into humans made of increasingly baser metals: silver in a subsequent era, then followed by bronze and

---

1 I would like to thank Sylvie Romanowski and Eric Gans for their insightful readings of this essay.

2 Some scholars situate the Quarrel within a narrower frame, depending upon the issue they highlight. For example, see Joan de Jean, Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle (Chicago, 1997). She dates the Quarrel from 1687–1715. Larry Norman, in Shock of the Ancient. Literature and History in Early Modern France (Chicago, 2011), also frames the Quarrel roughly within this time frame, but acknowledges it can be expanded in both directions by a few decades. Other scholars interpret it more broadly, see Terence Cave, “Ancients and Moderns: France,” in The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism 111: The Renaissance, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge, 1999); Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature (London, 1967); Hubert Gillot, La Querelle des anciens et des modernes en France (Geneva, 1968); Hélène Merlin-Kajman, Public et littérature en France au XVIIe siècle (Paris, 1994).
then iron, which were “unlike the golden one in thought or looks.”\(^3\) Such a view meant that those peoples who were born at a later historical moment were inherently inferior to those who had arrived first on the scene of human (that is, European) history.

Although the French were late-comers in history, their cultured elite, comprised mainly of men and women of letters, imitated the Greek world of thought, including its underlying assumptions about the nature of time, with its supposed degenerative effects on the human soul, mind, and character. This educated elite who most ardently favored imitating the Greeks and Romans were called the “ancients” in the Quarrel. (I use the term “ancients” with a small “a” placed in quotes to differentiate the early modern French partisans of Greek and Roman thought from the Greeks and Romans themselves, which I indicate with the capitalized term Ancients without quotes.) The “moderns,” however, challenged the imperative to imitate the Ancients and rejected their view of time. They sought to reverse the imagined path of time, to slant it upwards so that the future could conceivably improve upon the past. Such a reversal would make the concept of progress imaginable, thus ushering in a foundational notion of modernity.

This debate about the slope of time shaped every arena of human thought: science, philosophy, economics. It also had profound implications for France’s elite world of letters, which was dominated by Humanist thought.\(^4\) Imitating Greco-Roman thought created a serious dilemma for the French cultured elite, trapping them in a circular bind. To civilize themselves, the French cultured elite imitated the Greeks as the highest embodiment of civilization, with the Romans a cut below them. But what they were imitating were thought structures that assumed time and history were slanted downwards towards decline. This meant that no matter how well the French imitated Greco-Roman thought structures and forms of expression, they would never come close to their exalted models because the playing field was not level. No matter how strongly they believed in the myth of the *translatio studii*, in which the Greeks and Romans supposedly chose them as heirs and kin to their learning, the educated

---


\(^4\) Humanism, as it is conventionally defined in literary studies, was an intellectual movement that began in Renaissance Italy and then made its way into France from 1400–1600. Its central belief was that the ancient Greeks and Romans were at the pinnacle of intellectual and human achievement, and Europeans should look to them as their models. Humanism had a notion of time built into it: the height of human civilization existed in the past, with the present representing a fall away from it; the goal of the era’s contemporary writers was to revive this lost past through imitation.