

# Canon before Canon, Literature before Literature: Thomas Pope Blount and the Scope of Early Modern Learning

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**ABSTRACT** Sir Thomas Pope Blount (1649–1697), an English essayist and country gentleman, published two major literary biobibliographies, *Censura celebriorum authorum* (1690) and *De re poetica* (1694). In this essay, Kelsey Jackson Williams discusses the texts within the genre of *historia literaria* and contemporary understandings of literature. In doing so, he engages with current debates surrounding canon formation and the shifts in disciplinary boundaries that followed in the wake of the Battle of the Books. Early modern canons and definitions of “literature” differed radically from their modern equivalents, and a close reading of Blount’s work offers a window onto this forgotten literary landscape. **KEYWORDS:** *historia literaria*; biobibliography; Battle of the Books; John Locke; development of literary canon

☞ **JOHN LOCKE’S LIBRARY** has long been recognized as a site of extensive annotation, commonplacing, and organization.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Locke interleaved Thomas Hyde’s 1674 catalogue of the Bodleian Library and, using his own system of shelf marks, re-created it as an inventory of his own collection.<sup>2</sup> Less well known are Locke’s annotations in another product of late seventeenth-century scholarship, Thomas Pope Blount’s 1690 *Censura celebriorum authorum*.<sup>3</sup> The *Censura* contains brief biographies

1. John R. Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1971); G. G. Meynell, “John Locke’s Method of Common-placing, as Seen in His Drafts and His Medical Notebooks, Bodleian MSS Locke d. 9, f. 21 and f. 23,” *The Seventeenth Century* 8 (1993): 245–67; Richard Yeo, “John Locke’s ‘New Method’ of Commonplacing: Managing Memory and Information,” *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 2 (2004): 1–38.

2. Harrison and Laslett, *Library of John Locke*, 30. Locke’s copy of Hyde is now Bodleian Library, Locke 17.16.

3. Sir Thomas Pope Blount, *Censura celebriorum authorum: sive tractatus in quo varia virorum doctorum de clarissimis cujusque seculi scriptoribus judicia traduntur* (London, 1690). Locke’s copy is

of authors, from Hermes Trismegistus to Tanneguy Le Fèvre, with critical opinions of their work and a guide to the best editions. Its scope is truly catholic, embracing poets, dramatists, philologists, scientists, and philosophers, among others, on equal terms. Locke's copy was interleaved throughout with ruled blank pages and re-bound in sturdy vellum. On these blank sheets, he made extensive additions to the existing text and compiled ninety-four new entries on ancient and contemporary writers that contained the latest in critical opinion, culled from scholarly journals, books, and letters.<sup>4</sup> He even included extracts from Jean Le Clerc's favorable review of his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, quietly placing himself among the firmament of the pan-European canon.<sup>5</sup>

Locke's use of the *Censura* indicates the value that he placed on it as a key work of reference, but what was the *Censura* itself?<sup>6</sup> This essay, beginning with a survey of Blount's life and writings, examines the *Censura* and its companion work, *De re poetica: or, Remarks upon Poetry with Characters and Censures of the Most Considerable Poets Whether Ancient or Modern* (1694). These texts have hitherto been neglected—or, when they have been noted, their relevance to literary history has been misunderstood. When Richard Terry observed that the *Censura* included “continental literary figures such as Dante, Petrarch, and Rabelais” among its pages but that “only Chaucer and Bacon amongst its entrants could be said in any sense to belong to English literature,” he was participating in a wider misunderstanding of Blount, one that dismisses his works' relevance to the study of literature because the canon they present is at odds with its modern successor.<sup>7</sup> Instead, this essay argues that Blount's works, and those like them, offer a new way of thinking about the evolution of canons and literature before the eighteenth century. Whereas previous scholarship on canonicity has focused on the point at which the “modern canon” was born, or has examined the economic, ideological, and political frameworks within which it developed, I propose that Blount's works are representative of an enduring premodern canon that was neither nationally nor generically limited in the same ways as the present canon of English literature.

The goal of this essay is to offer a more nuanced and informed approach to Blount and the historically contingent definition of literature his texts embody, contextualizing two of his works within the genre of *historia literaria* and highlighting their importance for understanding the gap between modern and premodern literary

now Bodleian Library, Locke 15.38. All subsequent references to the *Censura* (hereafter CCA) and to Blount's *De re poetica: or, Remarks upon Poetry with Characters and Censures of the Most Considerable Poets* (London, 1694; hereafter DRP) will be given parenthetically.

4. See Bodleian Library, Locke 15.38, 746ff., for Locke's manuscript index to the new biographies.

5. *Ibid.*, 701. This has been noted before; see John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration, and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge, 2006), 480.

6. Locke was not the only prominent figure to make extensive use of the *Censura*. An 1854 sale catalogue records the existence of a copy of the 1690 edition “[w]ith numerous manuscript additions by [Thomas] Gray, relative to the different editions of the Authors enumerated by Blount, the prices at which they might be obtained in the Poet's time, &c.”; *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, ed. A. N. L. Munby, 12 vols. (London, 1971–75), 2:67. This copy has not been traced.

7. Richard Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past, 1660–1781* (Oxford, 2001), 76.

canons. These biobibliographical texts are not only important in their own right, as English exemplars of a significant, but largely neglected, early modern scholarly genre, but they also provide a window onto early modern canon formation. As such, they can be placed within current critical debates about the development of an exclusively *literary* canon during the course of the eighteenth century and can serve as an important corrective to scholarship that either seeks to project modern understandings of canonicity onto the early modern period or begins with the birth of that modern canonicity in the eighteenth century. To neglect the systems of textual categorization and valorization that existed before the birth of the modern literary canon is to fundamentally misunderstand the early modern intellectual landscape.

Once the purpose, scope, and contexts of Blount's work have been properly understood, his use by Locke can be seen in a new light. This essay concludes by returning to Locke's copy and re-examining the ways in which he reconstructed the *Censura* as an up-to-date scholarly tool of the early Enlightenment. Locke's additions to the *Censura* not only reveal his own interests during the 1690s but also point to the changing currents in European scholarship that would come to exert increasing pressure on Blount's catholic vision of literature.

#### Blount and the *Censura*

Sir Thomas Pope Blount, first Baronet (1649–1697), stood in a class of his own, according to the editors of the *Biographia Britannica*. Writing in 1747, they were quick to distinguish their seventeenth-century forebear from other, inferior, practitioners of *historia literaria*, which opinion, they added, “we may be the rather allowed to say, having often consulted Sir Thomas's book in order to enrich our own.”<sup>8</sup> However, when he published the *Censura celebriorum authorum* in 1690, Blount was forty-one and, on the face of it, an unlikely author for such a work. Hailing from a provincial gentry family, he had not attended university, and his formal education had been limited to a cursory association with Lincoln's Inn in the late 1660s.<sup>9</sup> Created a baronet by Charles II on January 27, 1680, he initially disputed payment with the Exchequer but ultimately handed over the standard £1,095 fee for that “privilege.”<sup>10</sup> His eighteenth-century biographer describes him as “a lover of liberty [and] a sincere friend to his country,” which, more prosaically, translated into membership in the Green Ribbon Club and staunch Whig and Williamite sympathies. His parliamentary career was entirely unexceptional.<sup>11</sup> In short, his public life was that of an ordinary, undistinguished member of the Restoration landed gentry, with little indication of the omnivorous scholarship that underpins the *Censura*.

8. *Biographia Britannica: or, the Lives of the Most Eminent Persons in Great Britain and Ireland*, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (London, 1778–93), 2:379.

9. He was admitted there on December 1, 1668; see *The Records of the Honorable Society of Lincoln's Inn, Volume I: Admissions from A.D. 1420 to A.D. 1799* (London, 1896), 303.

10. George E. Cokayne, *Complete Baronetage*, 6 vols. (Exeter, U.K., 1900–1909), 4:113.

11. *The House of Commons, 1660–1690*, ed. Basil Duke Henning, 3 vols. (London, 1983), 1:669–70.

In Blount's family circle, however, signs of an intellectual bent appear that go some way toward explaining his own education and literary output. His father was Sir Henry Blount (1602–1682), author of the well-known *Voyage into the Levant* (1636) before the civil wars, and his brother was Charles Blount (1654–1693), the deist and freethinker.<sup>12</sup> The lack of any university education for the two brothers is explained by John Aubrey's recollection that the elder Blount

Inveighed much against sending youths to the universities . . . because they learnt there to be debauched; and that the learning that they learned there they were to unlearn againe, as a man that is buttoned or laced too hard, must unbutton before he can be at his ease.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, Henry Blount chose to have his sons educated at home and “took care to acquaint [Thomas] with the several branches of polite literature, most worthy the notice of a person of his rank.” Thomas's subsequent intellectual development is not recoverable in any detail, but later accounts recall that his reputation as a “judicious and learned man” played a role in the granting of his baronetcy.<sup>14</sup>

The publication of the *Censura* in 1690 was swiftly followed by *Essays on Several Subjects* in the following year, then *A Natural History: containing many not common observations: extracted out of the best modern writers* in 1693 and *De re poetica* in 1694. A second edition of the *Censura* was printed in Geneva in 1696, and an expanded edition of the *Essays* appeared in the year of Blount's death, 1697.<sup>15</sup> Of these works, the *Natural History* and *De re poetica* follow the model of the *Censura* in providing extracts from earlier authors, while several of the *Essays* address issues that reappear in Blount's life and work. The surprisingly titled diatribe on “The great mischief and prejudice of Learning” includes his theory of reading, that

Reading may very properly be compared to Eating, and Meditating to Digesting; as therefore to one hour Eating, we allow many hours for Digesting; So to one hours Reading we should assign a sufficient time for Meditating, and Digesting what we have read.<sup>16</sup>

12. *Oxford DNB*, s.v. “Blount, Sir Henry,” by Nabil Matar; s.v. “Blount, Charles,” by Dario Pfanner; Karl-Josef Walber, *Charles Blount (1654–1693), Frühaufklärer: Leben und Werk* (Frankfurt, 1988); Sir Henry Blount, *A Voyage into the Levant* (London, 1636).

13. John Aubrey, “*Brief Lives*,” *Chiefly of Contemporaries, Set Down by John Aubrey, between the Years 1669 & 1696*, ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1898), 1:109–10. Aubrey probably knew the elder Blount through Francis Potter, their mutual acquaintance at Trinity College, Oxford (*ibid.*, 1:108).

14. *Biographia Britannica*, 2:378.

15. A third and final edition of the *Censura* was published in Geneva in 1710. The two Continental editions add no new material but translate the heteroglot text of the 1690 edition into uniform Latin.

16. Sir Thomas Pope Blount, *Essays on Several Subjects* (London, 1691), 59. The digestion metaphor ultimately derives from Seneca, Epistle 84. For another early modern use, see Francis Bacon, “Of Studies,” in *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford, 2000), 152–54.

His essay on education and custom echoes the Anglican philosopher and theologian Meric Casaubon's statement that "Errour serves us for a Law, when it is become publick Custom," and in "Of the Ancients" he treads a moderate "Modern" course, admitting that "Antiquity is ever venerable, and justly challenges Honour, and Reverence; but yet there is difference between Reverence and Superstition."<sup>17</sup> Throughout his essays, Blount appears as a characteristic gentleman-scholar of the late seventeenth century: well versed in polite literature and natural philosophy (the former more than the latter), orthodox in his political views, but with a dash of freethinking in his theological opinions, and tolerant, up to a point.

The *Censura* forces a revision of this picture and allows us access to a very different side of Blount, one steeped in the culture of the European Republic of Letters. He writes in his essay on "The variety of Opinions" that "[a]ll our several Opinions are nothing but the meer various Tasts of several Minds," but in spite of this conviction, he compiled a work that was one of the largest collections of critical opinion (*censura*) published in the early modern period.<sup>18</sup> Blount gives his rationale for composing the *Censura* in its preface (sigs. ar–a2r). He originally compiled it for his own use but became convinced by certain "famous learned men" to communicate it to the "world of letters."<sup>19</sup> In this, he was encouraged by the reception of such periodicals as the *Acta Eruditorum*—at the time, one of the principal scholarly journals in Europe—which were read not only by those on "the lowest bench" but also by those "who held the first place amongst the learned."<sup>20</sup> As an additional reason for its publication, he notes that learning (*doctrina*) cannot be obtained without much study and diligence, while to suppose that it could be derived from divine inspiration is mere fanaticism; even a poet, he states, can do little without industry (sig. ar). This distinction between talent (*ingenium*) and art or knowledge (*ars*) is a commonplace derived ultimately from Horace and his contemporaries but is given a specifically theological cast by Blount.<sup>21</sup>

In these opening statements, Blount positions himself within European learned culture on the one hand and English debates over the value of knowledge on the other. The "learned men" who recur in this text are *eruditi*, the French *érudits* who, with their humanist scholarship in philology, antiquarianism, and science, became opposed to

17. Blount, *Essays*, 69, 77; compare with Meric Casaubon, *A Treatise of Use and Custome* (London, 1638); and see Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 28–29.

18. Blount, *Essays*, 155.

19. "Quum hoc Opus primum occepi, illud *Orbi literatio* communicare haud mihi in animo erat; ad meum usum solummodò congeSSI: Nunc verò, hortantibus viris eruditione claris, in vulgus emitto" (CCA, sig. ar).

20. "Equidem quum observarem quàm avidè *Acta Eruditorum*, aliosque id genus libros arriperent Homines, non solum qui infimum subsellium occupant, sed qui primum inter eruditos locum tenent" (CCA, sig. ar). For the *Acta*, see Hubertus Laevan, *The "Acta Eruditorum" under the Editorship of Otto Mencke (1644–1707)*, trans. Lynne Richards (Amsterdam, 1990).

21. For the *ars–ingenium* dichotomy, see C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1960), 86–110, and for ingenuity's early modern context, see Rhodri Lewis, "Francis Bacon and Ingenuity," *Renaissance Quarterly* 67 (2014): 113–63.

the *philosophes* during the course of the subsequent century.<sup>22</sup> They existed within the *orbis literarius*, the world of letters that included, but was broader than, the Republic of Letters that held such a central place in early modern learned society.<sup>23</sup> Blount is not only allying himself with the party of erudition but also making a claim for the universality of that erudition by siting it within the *orbis literarius* and observing that one of its chief organs, the *Acta Eruditorum*, is read by those who hold pride of place among the learned as well as by beginners seated on the lowest benches of the court of learning.<sup>24</sup> As will be discussed below, this placed Blount squarely within the “Modern” camp during the ensuing Battle of the Books.

The continuing value of erudition is only half of Blount’s claim, however. The cautionary maxims that follow place him in a very different debate. Blount’s *doctrina* is learning, but with an inevitable undertone of something taught, of a doctrine not to be contradicted. By coupling this *doctrina* with the fanaticism brought about by believing it is derived from divine inspiration, Blount echoes contemporary theological debates. In his argument for learned doctrine over immediate inspiration, he firmly places his work in the intellectually moderate, theologically conservative tradition championed by mainline Restoration Anglicanism.<sup>25</sup> This was not a controversial position. Although Blount emphasizes the theological necessity of reining in *ingenium* with *ars*—as was appropriate for a work that includes an extensive selection of post-Reformation Anglican theologians—he is, in essence, echoing Dryden’s judgment in *Of Dramatick Poesie* that “[j]udgment is indeed the Master-workman in a Play: but he requires many subordinate hands, many tools to his assistance.”<sup>26</sup> The difference between Blount and Dryden, and, indeed, between Blount and Horace, is that for the two poets, the tools of judgment/*ingenium* are versification and meter; for Blount the tool is scholarship.

After establishing these theoretical distinctions, Blount turns to more pragmatic issues. Few, he writes, are truly learned, “whatever smatterers may say,” because it takes great pains to become so. Therefore his book provides an augmentation to one’s own judgment by providing the judgments (*judicia*)—not, it should be noted,

22. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert et al., *Encyclopédie, ou, Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connoissances humaines*, 42 vols. (Yverdon, Switzerland, 1770–75), 5:914–18; Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Historiens et la monarchie*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1988); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge, 1999), chaps. 6–7.

23. Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, *La République des lettres* (Paris, 1997); Noel Malcolm, “Private and Public Knowledge: Kircher, Esotericism, and the Republic of Letters,” in *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, ed. Paula Findlen (New York and London, 2004), 300 (on “*orbis literarius*”).

24. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1969), s.v. “*subsellium*,” usually referring to a judge’s bench or a bench in court, but also to one in a theater.

25. See Lawrence Klein and Anthony La Vopa, *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850* (San Marino, Calif., 1998), and the critique of more recent scholarship by Jordana Rosenberg, “Accumulate! Accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets!’: Secularism, Historicism, and the Critique of Enthusiasm,” *The Eighteenth Century* 51 (2010): 471–90.

26. John Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie, an Essay* (London, 1668), 71.

*opinions*—“of the most learned men.”<sup>27</sup> This new argument introduces a worrisome uncertainty, for if few are truly learned (and, it is assumed, the reader is not necessarily among these few), how can the smatterer be distinguished from the *doctissimi homini*? The answer lies in Blount’s text itself, which creates a circular chain of authority to justify its judgments. Why should we have a poor opinion of the Greek style of Theophylact of Simocatta? Because the philologist Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609) calls him “le pauvre Escrivain” (238). Why should we trust the judgments (*judicia*) of Scaliger? Because, to return to the bench metaphor used earlier by Blount, he is the “prince of the senate of critics,” according to Gerardus Joannes Vossius (569). Why trust Vossius? Because he is cited by Blount himself. Blount performs a careful rhetorical move, undercutting the certainty of the reader’s judgment and deftly replacing it with the certainty of the judgment of his canon of *doctissimi homines*.

Blount’s reader has more to fear than being led astray by the prating of diletantes, however. The *Censura* also helps him in furnishing a library. Without a good knowledge of authors, Blount insists, it often happens that one is “defrauded of both time and money” in attempting to do so.<sup>28</sup> The *Censura* becomes a handbook to help the unwary library builder through a wilderness of potentially worthless texts, giving him the comparative data he needs to, say, ignore that tempting book of Jacobean plays and opt instead for Isaac Casaubon’s *Exercitationes*. Blount identifies plagiarists and their sources, notes whether a book is in the *Index* of works forbidden by the Catholic Church, and, crucially, gives advice on the best editions. This is not to say that the *Censura* is entirely comprehensive, as Blount is quick to note, for he only deigns to concern himself with those authors most valued by the learned. Accordingly, he excuses himself for the absence of English writers, observing that by the standards he has set, most Englishmen must be excluded; the greater part of them wrote in the vernacular and as such, were not understood by foreign scholars.<sup>29</sup> As will be seen, he would have occasion to reconsider this omission in his *De re poetica*.

27. “Atque hinc est, quòd pauci revera docti sint (quicquid crepent *Scioli*) quoniam laborem atque operam ferre nequeunt. Ut autem maximum, quantum fieri potest, fructum ex lectione perciperes, quendam tibi *Authorum* delectum, deque iis varia Doctissimorum Hominum *judicia* proposui” (CCA, sig. ar).

28. “Quod enim ad ipsius Operis rationem spectat; hoc se maximè nomine commendat; quòd inde tibi *Bibliothecam* instruere possis; quam ad rem *Notita Autorum* apprimè utilis ac necessaria; quae nisi adfuerit, saepè evenit, ut Homines in libris comparandis & *tempore* simul & *nummis* fraudentur” (CCA, sig. ar–v). Blount is here tapping into a long-standing tradition of guides to the assemblage of libraries, among the most well-known of which was Gabriel Naudé’s *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (Paris, 1627), translated into English by John Evelyn as *Instructions concerning Erecting of a Library* (London, 1661). See Mathilde V. Rovelstad, “Two Seventeenth-Century Library Handbooks, Two Different Library Theories,” *Libraries & Culture* 35 (2000): 540–56; and Bertil Jansson, “Bibliotekarien Gabriel Naudé och hans *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque*” (thesis, University of Borås, Sweden, 2004).

29. “Scriptores enim isti maximam partem in vernaculâ linguâ scripserunt; indeque factum est, ut apud eruditos *Exteros*, qui linguam nostram non callent, haud satis noti sint, licèt de Patriâ nostrâ optimè meruerint, maximamque famam sibi domi comparaverint” (CCA, sig. a2r).

Blount organized the *Censura* chronologically because, he writes, it is more agreeable to the reader to observe the “*fluxus & refluxus Doctrinae*” (the “flowing to and fro of learning”), the rise of ancient letters and the subsequent Renaissance, than to organize the text alphabetically. The latter method, he adds, is better suited to a dictionary than a *historia literaria*.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the *Censura* begins with Hermes Trismegistus—whose existence Blount stubbornly supports, despite quoting Casaubon’s demolition of the Hermetic Corpus—and progresses through the entirety of classical literature from Hesiod and Homer to the shadowy figures of late antiquity: Martianus Capella, Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, and others.<sup>31</sup> The ancients occupy approximately a third of the *Censura* and tend to be supported by both ancient and modern judgments, though those by modern critics predominate. Throughout, the English contribution to the Renaissance philological tradition is emphasized. Blount points out authors who were edited by his countrymen, noting that Iamblichus was published with an elegant translation and learned notes by Thomas Gale in 1678 (160), and that the Eton Chrysostom, though partially superseded by later Continental works, is still bright (*nitida*) as a beacon of editorial acuity (197). Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides is likewise singled out as a most accurate (*accuratissime*) rendering (14). These are only drops in the ocean, however. Blount is not parochial in his deployment of modern scholarship but ranges across the Continent in search of the best editions and the best criticism of classical authors.

The nine centuries between the end of the classical world and the beginning of the Italian Renaissance receive a surprisingly full treatment, almost a hundred pages in the 745-page work (220–315). Many of the authors named are Byzantine, published in the Parisian *Scriptores Byzantinae* or elsewhere, but western medieval texts are not neglected. Gildas, the first British author to be included, receives extensive treatment, as does Bede, Alcuin, Rabanus Maurus, Johannes Scotus Erigena, Lanfranc, William of Malmesbury, and others. Islamic and Jewish authors also receive some coverage, with entries on Avicenna (251), Aben Ezra (270), Averroes (271), and Maimonides (274–75).<sup>32</sup> In discussing English authors, Blount displays at least a cursory familiarity with the manuscript holdings of various English libraries—citing, for example, manuscripts of William of Malmesbury at Oxford and Cambridge (267) and manuscripts of Roger of Hoveden at Cambridge (282).

The heart of the *Censura*, however, accounting for more than half its length, is devoted to the authors who lived from the “revival of learning” to Blount’s own time. The fifteenth century is scantily represented in forty-seven pages (315–62), but the sixteenth occupies two hundred and sixty (363–623), and the seventeenth a further one hundred and twenty-two (623–745). Blount includes authors from across Europe, with a predominance of Italian, French, German, Dutch, and English figures, as well as theologians, philologists, philosophers, antiquaries, poets, playwrights, natural philoso-

30. “Quod magis *Dictionarii* quàm *Historiae Literariae* speciem praeberet” (*CCA*, sig. av).

31. *CCA*, 1–200, covers the period from the earliest times to 500 CE.

32. Locke expanded this category considerably in the additions to his copy of the *Censura*; see below.



phers, and a host of others, all authors of works leading to “literature” in its premodern sense of familiarity with humane learning.<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to identify one writer as more significant than another in this panoply, but the judgments quoted in some entries point toward the paramount importance of certain figures. At the center of this early modern canon is that “eternal dictator of all literature,” Joseph Scaliger.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, that “incomparable man,” Isaac Casaubon (620–22), and the Hebraist and legal antiquary John Selden (1584–1654), “one of the greatest Men that any Age has produced” (695–96), stand above the crowd.<sup>35</sup> It is to the golden age of humanism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that Blount is most drawn; prominent figures of his own time, the younger Casaubon, the younger Vossius, and Oxford orientalist such as Edward Pococke and Edward Bernard, are conspicuously absent.<sup>36</sup> Although Blount’s secondary material is current to the 1680s, his biobibliographies cease with writers active in the 1650s—Johann Friedrich Gronovius (1611–1671), Thomas Willis (1621–1675), and Tanneguy Le Fèvre (1615–1672) being the latest named. The reason for this, however, is probably not ideological, but rather a lack of critical material or perhaps a lack of conviction as to which contemporary authors deserve a place in his canon.

In this final portion of the *Censura*, Blount includes a number of British writers, almost all of whom wrote in or were translated into Latin, in keeping with his disclaimer that English-language texts fall largely outside the remit of his work. Selden, unsurprisingly, has pride of place, but William Camden, Francis Bacon, William Harvey, Thomas Hobbes, Peter Heylin, and Richard Hooker, among others, are given ample room.<sup>37</sup> If there is an omission, it is in the realm of poetry. Chaucer is present, but more modern English poets, including Spenser and Shakespeare, are absent. This omission is repeated in the vernacular literatures of other European languages: Dante is present while Ariosto is absent, for example. Instead, Blount focuses on the Latin poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. George Buchanan (1506–1582) is

33. The distinction between premodern and modern definitions of “literature” has received substantial attention over the last fifty years. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass., and Oxford, 2008), 15–16; Alvin B. Kernan, “The Idea of Literature,” *New Literary History* 5 (1973): 31–40; René Wellek, “Literature and its Cognates,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, 5 vols. (New York, 1973–74), 2:81–89; and Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1976), 150–54.

34. “Literarum omnium Dictator perpetuus, & per omnia Diis magis quàm Homini bus comparandus” (*CCA*, 570). The quote is from Caspar Schoppe’s *De arte critica* (Nuremberg, 1597), as excerpted by Blount.

35. The praise of Selden is from Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 2 vols. (London, 1679), 1:264.

36. Pococke and Meric Casaubon were subsequently added by Locke (Bodleian Library, Locke 15.38, 581, 622).

37. Selden’s central position in this constellation would have seemed surprising to modern eyes before the publication of G. J. Toomer, *John Selden: A Life in Scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2009), but his own time rated him at least as highly; see Adam Littleton (“Redman Westcot”), “The Translator’s Preface to the Reader,” in John Selden, *The Reverse or Back-face of the English Janus* (London, 1682), sig. a3r–(a)r.

compared favorably with the Roman poets (463–64), and the *Argenis* of John Barclay (1582–1621) is highly praised (655–56). Behind these recognizable names, however, are a host of other Neo-Latin poets and playwrights who are by now little known.<sup>38</sup> In Blount’s canon, publication in the international language is, if not necessary, certainly highly desirable, and those authors who wrote in the vernacular risk being abandoned to parochialism.

☞ *De re poetica*

The absence of vernacular English poets from the *Censura* is not due to any lack of regard on Blount’s part, for in his *De re poetica* he states that “no People, perhaps, since the *Old Romans*, have carried *Poetry* so high in all Points as the English” (sig. a4r). Although this was, to some extent, a conventional opinion—it closely echoes Dryden’s estimation of the superiority of English over Continental poetry—it nonetheless marks out Blount as a supporter of specifically English poetry despite his insistence on the necessity of linguistic internationalism in the *Censura*.<sup>39</sup>

The *Poetica* is similar in structure to the *Censura*, but with three significant differences: it is in English, its biobibliographies are alphabetical rather than chronological, and it is prefaced with a series of “Remarks upon Poetry” (1–129). This critical preface—and indeed, the work as a whole—has been neglected since Thomas Warton used it as one of the sources for his *History of English Poetry*, but it nonetheless stands out as a representative summary of the poetic theories and traditions prevalent in the 1690s.<sup>40</sup> Blount begins by discussing the antiquity of poetry and how it was valued and encouraged in former ages but is discouraged in the present (1–15). He follows this with assertions, drawn from Cowley and Dryden, that a poet ought to be good-humored (“[t]here is nothing that requires so much serenity and cheerfulness of *Spirit*”), ought to keep his fancy and wit within bounds, and should avoid obscenity (15–22). He declines to answer whether poetry owes more to art or nature and then proceeds to run through poetic forms (from eclogues to lampoons), national poetries, rhyme versus blank verse, translations, critics, and farce. Blount’s prefatorial summaries of national literatures are at odds with the canon he goes on to present in the second part of the *Poetica*. He quotes extensively to prove the excellence of the Restoration stage (83–90) but includes no dramatists from that era in the censures and, though he devotes a

38. Examples include, among many others, such Latin poets as Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503) and Jacopo Sannazaro (1458–1530); *CCA*, 352–54, 364–65. For guides through this still largely unmapped jungle, see J. W. Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds, 1990), and Jozef IJsewijn with Dirk Sacré, *Companion to Neo-Latin Studies*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Leuven, Belgium, 1990–98). In the case of Sannazaro, see *Latin Poetry*, trans. Michael C. J. Putnam (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

39. Dryden, *Essay*, 7.

40. David Fairer, “The Origins of Warton’s *History of English Poetry*,” *Review of English Studies* 32 (1981): 37–63. For the critical context for Blount’s work, see Joshua Scodel, “Seventeenth-Century English Literary Criticism: Classical Values, English Texts and Contexts,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3, *The Renaissance*, ed. G. P. Norton (Cambridge, 1999), 543–54.

chapter to French poetry (97–102), includes no French authors save René Rapin, who wrote in Latin.

The censures collected in the *Poetica* instead offer a revealing foil to the canon of writers that Blount presented in the *Censura* four years before. Of the sixty-seven authors he includes, over half (thirty-six) are ancients, and all but three of these also appear in the *Censura*. The exceptions are Anacreon, Callimachus, and Sappho, and the reasons behind their exclusion from the *Censura* are unclear; possibly Blount felt that three Greek poets who had—as was thought at the time—few or no poems surviving were not sufficiently important in the field of literature as a whole, but deserved mention within the more specialized remit of poetry. The modern authors represented are limited to those writing in English, Latin, and Italian. For Blount, the founders of the two vernacular literatures are Dante (“the first of *Italian Poets* of any Fame or Note,” 56) and Chaucer (“one of the first Refiners of the *English Language*,” 42). From these developed two traditions, one leading through Boccaccio and Petrarch to Tasso and Ariosto, and another beginning in the sixteenth century with Sidney and Spenser but only flowering in the seventeenth century.

Blount writes in the dedication to the *Poetica* that in English, “those who have engag’d [in poetry] of the *better Rank*, have particularly signaliz’d themselves,” and this conviction comes through in his canon of English poets (sig. A4r). Leaving aside the four dramatists—Jonson, Shakespeare, Beaumont, and Fletcher—he includes chiefly lyric poets from elite backgrounds: Cowley, Davenant, Denham, Donne, Milton, Oldham, Philips, Rochester, Suckling, and Waller. He rates Shakespeare highly but only as “[o]ne of the most Eminent Poets of his Time” (202), while Waller’s verses “are thought fit to serve as a Standard, for all Succeeding *Poems*” (243). Nonetheless, allowing for Blount’s prejudice in favor of his social peers, the list of English worthies in the *Poetica* is not so tremendously different from later understandings of the seventeenth-century poetic canon and closely echoes contemporary estimates such as Joseph Addison’s “Account of the Greatest English Poets,” both in its overall structure and in its particularly high estimation of Cowley and Waller.<sup>41</sup> The only truly idiosyncratic characteristic of Blount’s canon is the absence of Dryden (who is, nonetheless, quoted extensively in the censures themselves); this seems to be not a judgment against him, but a categorical exclusion: Blount includes no living writers in the *Poetica*.<sup>42</sup>

The modern Latin poets remain to be considered. Noticeably, all of them—with the exceptions of Milton and Rapin—also appear in the *Censura*, additional evidence of Blount’s understanding of it as a European rather than Anglocentric text. They include such fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanist poets as Jacopo Sannazaro (1458–1530), George Buchanan (whom Blount recognized in the *Censura* as the best-known British poet), Girolamo Fracastoro (1478–1553), Giglio Gregorio Giraldi

41. Joseph Addison, “Account of the Greatest English Poets,” in *The Annual Miscellany, for the Year 1694: being the Fourth Part of Miscellany Poems*, ed. J. Dryden (London, 1694), 317–27. See also René Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History* (1941; repr., New York, 1966), 20–21.

42. The most recent poets discussed are Edmund Waller, who died in 1687 (*DRP*, 243–48), and John Oldham, who died in 1683 (*DRP*, 138–42).

(1479–1552), and Marco Girolamo Vida (1485–1566) as well as the two seventeenth-century poetical greats, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and Daniel Heinsius (1580–1655), both now better known for their scholarship than for their poetry. The recently deceased René Rapin (1621–1687) stands out as the only recent Latin (or, indeed, foreign) poet to be mentioned in the *Poetica* and is highlighted by Blount not only for his critical works but also for his *Hortorum Libri IV* (1665), which had been translated into English by Blount’s cousin, the virtuoso and scientist John Evelyn, in 1672.<sup>43</sup>

The *Poetica* thus presents a canon more familiar than the unknown continent of the *Censura* but that nonetheless, in its emphasis on lyric poetry over drama, its inclusion of modern Latin poets, and its high praise of such writers as Cowley, Rapin, and Waller, remains a strange text to modern eyes, a product of its period that offers an important corrective to current conceptions of the seventeenth-century literary landscape.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, when placed next to the *Censura*, it opens up another dimension of historicized understanding. The two works, the *Censura* and the *Poetica*, represent different canons: the former, that of the international literature of Europe from the classical era to the mid-seventeenth century; the latter, the poetical canon seen from the vantage point of late seventeenth-century England, beginning with the Greeks and Romans, passing swiftly through the Italians, and dwelling at length on the generation immediately preceding its publication. The canon presented in the *Poetica* is essentially a subcategory of the larger expanse presented in the *Censura*. For Blount and his contemporaries, these were not competing spheres of learning but rather a branch and a tree. This would, however, change entirely with the Battle of the Books, which saw the two pitted against each other in a way entirely alien to writers of Blount’s generation.

### Historia literaria

This whistle-stop tour through the *Censura* and the *Poetica* gives some indication of their intentions and expanse: Blount intended nothing less than a complete survey of the common literary inheritance of early modern Europe. In doing so, he was not alone. As he implies in his distinction between a dictionary and a *historia literaria* in the preface to the *Censura*, he is participating in the already well-established latter tradition. The *historia literaria* was one of many forms of encyclopedic erudition practiced in the early modern period. In structure, it tended to be organized either by author—the path Blount followed—or by subject. Examples of the former, such as the Scottish polymath Thomas Dempster’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Scotorum* or the Oxford antiquary Anthony Wood’s *Athenae Oxonienses*, usually consist of a short biography of the subject, often with assessments of their writings, *à la* Blount, followed

43. René Rapin, *Of Gardens*, trans. J. Evelyn (London, 1672).

44. See Jan Gorak, “Canons and Canon Formation,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 4, *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. N. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge, 2005), 560–84, for a discussion of shifts in content and conception within the literary canon during and immediately after Blount’s period, to be supplemented by William St. Clair’s discussion of “the old canon,” a later eighteenth-century variation upon that presented by Blount in *DRP*; see St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 122–39.

by a list of their works and, much of the time, bibliographical details and commentary on the different editions thereof.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the *historia literaria*, of which Daniel Georg Morhof's *Polyhistor* is perhaps the best known, is organized into thematic chapters, and within each chapter presents something between an annotated bibliography and a literature review of relevant works.<sup>46</sup> These could attempt to cover the whole expanse of human knowledge, as in the ambitious instance of Morhof, or could limit themselves to a narrower ambit, as with Johann Albert Fabricius's immensely erudite 1713 survey of antiquarian literature.<sup>47</sup>

Within this broad church, *historia literaria* had two origins as a genre, one ideal and one pragmatic. The ideal could be found in Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), in which he calls for an intellectual history of the learned disciplines as a basis on which to build new scholarship.<sup>48</sup> Looking back from the vantage point of the late seventeenth century, practitioners of *historia literaria* such as Morhof had no doubt that Bacon was their intellectual forebear.<sup>49</sup> Realistically, however, Bacon, although he might have been an honored prophet, was neither the driving force behind the discipline nor its inventor. As Ann Blair has observed, the overabundance of books and knowledge was a pressing issue for seventeenth-century scholars.<sup>50</sup> Bibliographers and librarians such as Gabriel Naudé and Adrien Baillet lamented the impossibility of grasping the totality of scholarship in an age so overflowing with books.<sup>51</sup> In response to this, more pragmatic forms of encyclopedic learning were invented or developed from previously existing methods.<sup>52</sup> Such techniques attempted, in various ways, to control and organize the information overload of early modern scholarship. One way in which they did so was to coopt and revitalize older scholarly genres, including a bio-bibliographical tradition that dates back to St. Jerome's late fourth-century *De viris illustribus*, a collection of biographies that pays particular attention to its subjects' writings and whose structure and organization, itself modeled on classical works stretch-

45. Thomas Dempster, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Scotorum lib. XIX* (Bologna, 1627); Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of all the Writers and Bishops who have had their Education in the Most Ancient and Famous University of Oxford*, 2 vols. (London, 1691–92).

46. Daniel Georg Morhof, *Polyhistor, literarius, philosophicus et practicus*, ed. J. Frick and J. Moller, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Lübeck, 1732).

47. Johann Albert Fabricius, *Bibliographia Antiquaria, sive, Introductio in notitiam scriptorum qui antiquitates Hebraicas, Graecas, Romanas, et Christianas scriptis illustraverunt* (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1713). A second edition was published in 1716.

48. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. M. Kiernan (Oxford, 2000), 62. See also *Historia literaria: Neuordnungen des Wissens im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. F. Grunert and F. Vollhardt (Berlin, 2007).

49. Morhof, *Polyhistor*, 1:9.

50. Ann Blair, "The Practices of Erudition According to Morhof," in *Mapping the World of Learning: The Polyhistor of Daniel Georg Morhof*, ed. F. Waquet (Wiesbaden, Germany, 2000), 59–74; Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 2010).

51. Blair, "Practices," 59–60.

52. Eric Garberson, "Libraries, Memory and the Space of Knowledge," *Journal of the History of Collections* 18 (2006): 109–10; Anthony Grafton, "The World of the Polyhistor: Humanism and Encyclopedism," *Central European History* 18 (1985): 31–47.

ing back as far as the third-century BCE Alexandrian scholar Callimachus, provided a model for the many author-centric works of *historia literaria* produced from the sixteenth century onward.<sup>53</sup>

*Historia literaria*, then, often presents itself as a pioneering project to augment knowledge but is at least as much a rearguard battle against the excess of knowledge already present, couched in a formal scholarly tradition with origins in the ancient world. Following a Baconian template, it can take the form of a history of the rise and progress of a discipline or disciplines, often, but not always, couched in biobibliographical terms. An early example of this is Gerardus Joannes Vossius's *De philosophia et philosophorum sectis* (1658), whose systematic treatment of ancient philosophical schools anticipates the large-scale systematization of the development of knowledge in such works as Morhof's *Polyhistor* (1689–92) and Peter Lambeck's *Prodromus historiae literariae* (1710).<sup>54</sup>

The genre of *historia literaria* was thus formally expansive, including a variety of works, from mere bibliographies or biobibliographies to what might today be called histories of scholarship. Blount, in placing his *Censura* within its generic orbit, was not unusual. Author-centered *historiae literariae* were developed by antiquaries throughout the British Isles to manage and shape knowledge about writers. Early and influential examples of the genre in England include John Leland's *De viris illustribus* (ca. 1545), John Bale's *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytanniae catalogus* (1559), and John Pits's *Relationum historicarum de rebus anglicis* (1619), while Scottish scholars composed at least four national *historiae literariae* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>55</sup> In Blount's own generation, William Cave and his assistant Henry Wharton produced the massive *Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum historia literaria* (1688–89), an

53. St. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington, D.C., 1999). For the earlier history of this genre in the classical world, see Rudolf Blum, *Kallimachos und die Literaturverzeichnis bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt, Germany, 1977). Gretchen E. Minton has highlighted the parallels between Jerome's work and that of William Cave in her biography of the latter, *ODNB*, s.v.

54. Gerhard Johann Vossius, *De philosophia et philosophorum sectis* (The Hague, 1658); Peter Lambeck, *Prodromus historiae literariae* (Leipzig and Frankfurt, 1710). For the later development of *historia literaria*, see Michael C. Carhart, "Historia Literaria and Cultural History from Mylaeus to Eichhorn," in *Momigliano and Antiquarianism: Foundations of the Modern Cultural Sciences*, ed. P. N. Miller (Toronto, 2007), 184–206.

55. John Leland, *De viris illustribus: On Famous Men*, ed. and trans. James P. Carley with Caroline Brett (Toronto and Oxford, 2010); John Bale, *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytanniae, quam nunc angliam & Scotiam vocant: Catalogus* (Basel, 1559); John Pits, *Relationum historicarum de rebus anglicis* (Paris, 1619). The English contribution to the *virii illustres* tradition is discussed, although without reference to *historia literaria*, by Richard Sharpe, "The English Bibliographical Tradition from Kirkestede to Tanner," in *Britannia Latina*, ed. C. S. F. Burnett and C. N. J. Mann (London, 2005), 86–128. For Thomas Tanner's contribution to this tradition, see Sharpe, "Thomas Tanner (1674–1735), the 1697 Catalogue, and *Bibliotheca Britannica*," *The Library* 6 (2005): 381–421. Scottish *historiae literariae* include Dempster, *Historia ecclesiastica*; and George Mackenzie, *The Lives and Characters of the Most Eminent Writers of the Scots Nation*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1708–22), as well as the unpublished works of the early seventeenth-century scholar David Buchanan, *De scriptoribus Scotis libro duo*, ed. David Irving (Edinburgh, 1837), and the Restoration polymath Robert Sibbald, "Historia literaria gentis Scottorum," National Library of Scotland, MS Adv.33.3.21.

ecclesiastically focused contribution to the genre that harks back to its Hieronymian origins and echoes its French rival, Louis Ellies Du Pin's vast *Nouvelle bibliothèque des auteurs ecclésiastiques* (1686–1715).<sup>56</sup>

Cave was not the only English practitioner of *historia literaria* to have Continental competition. Indeed, a work strikingly similar to Blount's was being published concurrently in France: Adrien Baillet's *Jugemens des savans sur les principaux ouvrages des auteurs* (1685–90).<sup>57</sup> Baillet (1649–1706) was a minor cleric and librarian to the advocate general in Paris and was known for his Jansenist views.<sup>58</sup> Like Blount, he attempts to systematize the judgments of the learned on a similar canon of books, which he perceives to be central to European literature. Unlike Blount, Baillet paraphrases the judgments rather than quoting them directly and, instead of presenting a homogenous cavalcade of worthies from antiquity to the present, divides his work into a series of generic sections. He begins with critics and passes in subsequent volumes through grammarians, translators, poets, pseudonymous authors, and satirists, among others. Differences in weight are also present. Poets—classical, Neo-Latin, and vernacular—are given considerably more emphasis than “Critiques” and “Grammariens” (within which Baillet comprehends the philologists who figure so largely in Blount's volume).

This similarity to Baillet was observed by Jean-Pierre Nicéron in an excursus to his biography of Blount's father, and it is repeated in the *Biographia Britannica*.<sup>59</sup> Even so, writing in the *Acta Eruditorum*, a contemporary reviewer of Blount's *Censura* was put more in mind of the edition of Tobias Magirus's *Eponymologium criticum* (1687), published by the legal historian and correspondent of Leibniz, Christian Wilhelm von Eyben.<sup>60</sup> The *Eponymologium* in its original 1644 edition was little more than a list of classical names with explanatory quotes, but in von Eyben's greatly expanded text, numerous moderns are added and the quotations begin to take on the character (and the name) of *censura*, one example being the several pages devoted to Joseph Scaliger, which closely resemble the relevant entry in Blount's *Censura*.<sup>61</sup> It is significant, as

56. William Cave and Henry Wharton, *Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum historia literaria* (London, 1688–89); Louis Ellies Du Pin, *Nouvelle bibliothèque des auteurs ecclésiastiques*, 2nd ed., 19 vols. (Paris, 1686–1715).

57. Adrien Baillet, *Jugemens des savans sur les principaux ouvrages des auteurs*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1685–90).

58. See Pierre Bayle, *A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, 10 vols. (London, 1734–41), 2:579–88. See also Françoise Waquet, “Pour une éthique de la réception: Les ‘Jugemens des livres en général’ d’Adrien Baillet (1685),” *Dix-septième siècle* 159 (1988): 157–74.

59. Jean-Pierre Nicéron, *Memoires pour servir à l’histoire des hommes illustres dans le république des lettres*, 43 vols. in 44 (Paris, 1729–45), 23:399; *Biographia Britannica*, 2:379.

60. Review of Thomas Pope Blount, *Censura celebriorum authorum* (London, 1690), in *Acta Eruditorum* 9 (1691): 24–25. The reviewer also compares Blount to Morhof, Baillet, and Cave, highlighting the vitality of *historia literaria* as a literary genre at the close of the seventeenth century. For von Eyben, see Johann Friedrich Jugler, *Beyträge zur juristischen Biographie*, 6 vols. (Leipzig, 1773–80), vol. 1, pt. 1, 209–14.

61. Tobias Magirus, *Eponymologium criticum*, ed. C. W. von Eyben (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1687), 731–35.

well, that the *Acta Eruditorum* serves as a reference point in engagements with these works, both in Blount's mention of it in his introduction and in the subsequent review of the *Censura* published in the 1691 *Acta*. Ann Blair has shown how those *historiae litterariae* that specifically focused on the retailing of *judicia* rose to prominence at the same time as the learned journals such as the *Acta*, the *Journal des sçavans*, and the *Philosophical Transactions*, which provided book reviews.<sup>62</sup> It is unsurprising to find that the *judicia* in the most recent entries within Blount's *Censura* make frequent reference to these journals.

All of this goes to show that Blount's work was no novelty. Rather, it existed within a well-established genre and was closely related to the works of Baillet, von Eyben, and many others, as well as owing a substantial debt to the new genre of the learned book review. Blount explicitly positions himself within the tradition of *historia litteraria* and engages with that tradition, not only in the structure and content of his work but also in its intended purpose. The *Censura* and the *Poetica* are designed to cope with the information overload that dogged the early moderns. They offer basic advice on which authors are worth reading and which authors are worth having on one's shelves. In this last point, which Blount emphasizes in his introduction to the *Censura*, they feed back into the dialogue between encyclopedic learning and its deployment in the physical setting of the library, as discussed by Garberson.<sup>63</sup> Texts such as Blount's could be used not only as reference works or pedagogical tools but also as guides for preparing a physical space in which knowledge could be retrieved and generated.

### Blount and the Battle of the Books

Despite their forbiddingly technical appearance, the *Censura* and the *Poetica* are not merely arid dictionaries, compiled in lazy solitude by a gentleman-scholar. The very nature of their content—the valuation of texts—is politicized and speaks to the concerns raised both by the Battle of the Books and by the larger early Enlightenment crisis, which saw the Republic of Letters as a whole come under increasing pressure.<sup>64</sup> Blount, here and in his *Essays*, adheres to the “Modern” side in the Battle, recognizing and encouraging scholarship that led to the recovery of the classical past as well as to developments in science and medicine. His partitioning of modern English poetry into the *Poetica* and his foregrounding of recent philological and theological works in the *Censura* confirms his opposition to the “Ancient” valorization of “polite literature” as superior to traditional forms of scholarship. Blount is among the last generation to hold these competing and increasingly fractured ideals together; for him it is no contradiction to write one text, the *Censura*, on the wide expanse of humanist literature,

62. Blair, *Too Much to Know*, 166–68.

63. Garberson, “Libraries.”

64. For the crisis in the Republic of Letters at the turn of the eighteenth century, see Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “How Germany Left the Republic of Letters,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 421–32.



and another, the *Poetica*, on the narrower field of poetry (especially “polite” English poetry). For those who came after him, and after the Battle of the Books, such a synthesis became increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

The English Battle of the Books and its place within the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns are too well known to need detailed recital here, but it is worth recalling their general contours.<sup>65</sup> The origins of the Quarrel lay in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and initially centered around the question of whether modernity could ever hope to surpass the achievements of the ancients in history, literature, science, or any other discipline. In the Battle, however—which was sparked by Sir William Temple’s essay “Upon Ancient and Modern Learning” (1690) but which had its roots in Restoration polite culture—this went hand in hand with outright anti-intellectualism on the part of the Ancients.<sup>66</sup> This anti-intellectualism generally consisted of attacks on the usefulness of philology, the scholarly discipline that had evolved to understand and interpret the classical heritage. Philologists (or “criticks”) were branded as “pedants” and deemed to be “unfit for all other business, and ridiculous in all other Conversations” and, indeed, to be “pretending to more than they had.”<sup>67</sup> This potent accusation of simultaneous impoliteness and pointless or pretended learning was regularly deployed against Richard Bentley in his controversy with the so-called Christ Church wits over the age of the epistles of Phalaris, and it was to become a mainstay of the Ancient line in the Battle of the Books.<sup>68</sup>

As a result, the Ancients went far further than simply denying the possibility that modernity might excel the classical world. They denied the worth and public acceptability of the entire scholarly arm of the humanist project, branding that collective attempt to recover and understand the ancient past as “pedantry” and “impoliteness” while nonetheless benefiting from its products: the textually “clean” editions of the classics that they prized. Both sides of the Battle partook of the humanist inheritance, even while humanism itself was disintegrating beyond recognition, but it is hard to avoid seeing the Ancient standpoint as an essentially hypocritical one—pushing away the unpleasant technicalities of philology on the one hand while reaping its fruits with the other. An Ancient victory, which did, *pace* Levine, occur in England during the first decades of the eighteenth century, spelled utter ruin for the intellectual tradition represented in Blount’s *Censura*. Instead, the “polite” tradition contained in the *Poetica* became the new and central canon.

65. The classic account remains Levine, *Battle of the Books*.

66. Sir William Temple, “Upon Ancient and Modern Learning,” in *Miscellanea: The Second Part*, 2nd ed. (London, 1690), 3–75.

67. *Ibid.*, 71. Temple was by no means novel in this pen portrait, however, for it appears in much the same form as the “pretender to learning” in John Earle, *Micro-cosmographie, or, a Peece of the World Discovered* (London, 1628), no. 33, and was a routine source of irritation for earlier scholars. For further examples of this brand of anti-intellectualism, see Meric Casaubon, *Generall Learning: A Seventeenth-Century Treatise on the Formation of the General Scholar*, ed. Richard Serjeantson (Cambridge, 1999), 90.

68. Levine, *Battle of the Books*, 47–84; Kristine Louise Haugen, *Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2011), 110–23.

It is therefore unsurprising, given the stakes, that Blount was a Modern. He died just as the Battle was reaching fever pitch, but his views are clear, not only from the *Censura* but also from the two editions of his *Essays*. In his essays “Of the Ancients: and the Respect that is due unto them: That we should not too much enslave ourselves to their Opinions” and “Whether the Men of this present Age are any way inferiour to those of former Ages, either in respect of Vertue, Learning, or long Life,” he cuts to the quick regarding the issues surrounding the Battle.<sup>69</sup> In particular, addressing the supposed greater learning of the ancient world, one of the pillars of the Ancient argument, Blount attacks the wisdom of the Egyptians. By recasting Egypt as a primitive, semi-barbaric society and basing his views upon the latest scholarly research, he implicitly argues against the claims of Temple and others that human history represents a continual forgetting and decline.<sup>70</sup> Instead, he follows in a distinguished tradition of modern English scholarship by stating that “there is a difference between Reverence and Superstition; We may assent unto them [that is, the classical world] as Ancients, but not as Oracles.”<sup>71</sup> Blount was by no means an extreme “Modern,” but nonetheless the *Censura* unmistakably endorses the scholarly tradition that was coming under attack from the Ancients and that represents part of the larger intellectual culture represented and defended by such contemporaries as Richard Bentley and William Wotton.

### Canons

The sea change in English culture after the Battle of the Books was nowhere more evident than in the dramatic alterations that beset the canon over the course of the eighteenth century. In the canon debates of the late twentieth century, Douglas Lane Patey forcefully argued for dating the birth of the modern canon to the mid-eighteenth century and associating it with fresh aesthetic theories and new, narrower definitions of literature, both manifestations of the larger cultural shifts exemplified by the Battle.<sup>72</sup> While essentialists such as Trevor Ross and Richard Terry subsequently argued that the eighteenth-century shift was one of semantics rather than of meaningful intellectual categories, the broader consensus, now supported by William St. Clair’s magisterial study of the legal and economic underpinnings of canon formation, reaffirms the essentials of Patey’s argument: the modern English literary canon began to assume a recognizable form in the eighteenth century, shaped by copyright law, publishing gambits, the colonization of the term “literature” by what had previously been known as “poetry,” and the development of new aesthetic paradigms.<sup>73</sup>

69. Blount, *Essays*, 77–141.

70. *Ibid.*, 103–9.

71. *Ibid.*, 77.

72. Douglas Lane Patey, “The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon,” *Modern Language Studies* 18 (1988): 17–37.

73. See Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal, 1998). Terry’s views are laid out at length in *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past*, but they exerted most influence—and attracted most criticism—in his “Literature, Aesthetics, and Canonicity in the Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21 (1997): 80–101. This was part of a forum on “What is Literature?” in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21, no. 1 (1997): 80–107, and 21, no. 3 (1997): 79–99, the consensus of which was for an eighteenth-century origin point for the

Although the upholders of this consensus have agreed about the dangers of pushing a modern understanding of canon too far back into the early modern era or assuming that pre-eighteenth-century “poetry” can be unproblematically equated with modern “literature,” they have been largely silent concerning the state of affairs before the eighteenth-century “canonical turn.” The question of what the canonical and generic landscape looked like before modernity has been left conspicuously unasked. Likewise, Terry—a minority voice, but one whose provocative arguments for essentialist understandings of canon and literature did much to stimulate debate—has repeatedly discussed the construction of a “native literary heritage” or “native canon.”<sup>74</sup> While his determination to limit the extent of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “poetry” and “literature” to the modern category of creative writing has been hotly contested, his adjective “native” has raised no objections. There has been little suggestion that canons, whether in the eighteenth century or before, could exist in any form other than an essentially monolingual, national one. Rather than considering the possibility that premodern canons may have invoked transnational or polyglot understandings of intellectual culture or stepped beyond the poetry/literature axis, the main question asked by this thread of the canon debate has simply become “When did the English develop the modern English canon?”

Blount’s *Censura* and *Poetica* offer an instructive lesson in these hitherto-neglected possibilities. The “poetry” that became “literature” was siphoned off into the *Poetica*, while the “literature” that became something else—scholarship, erudition, pedantry, classics, or some other category or categories—takes center stage in the *Censura*. In neither text, however, are the nationalist presuppositions that informed so much of the modern canon debate present; Blount’s geographical sphere is not England but the Republic of Letters. Nonetheless, his work is a form of canon-building, or rather an assent to an already-existing canon enshrined in *historiae literariae* and the other reference works of humanist scholarship. As such, it offers a road map to a canon *avant la lettre* as well as a “prehistoric” canon of poetry that would later form the basis for subsequent centuries’ “literary” canons without being the hermetically sealed native poetic canon envisioned by Ross or Terry. Blount’s was an inherently “Modern” work, as has been argued above, but its modernity paradoxically meant that it was superseded by the antique in the subsequent century. It provides us not with a view of what literature was to become but with what it looked like before the profound shifts in taste and categorization that were to take place in the age of Addison, Pope, and their successors.

What can the judgments of the *érudits* teach us? Why should we care that Blount privileged, say, Selden rather than Shakespeare in his understanding of the development of English “literature”? The first response to this is that the judgments of the *érudits* were not intended for the *érudits* alone. Blount himself was no esoteric philologist or antiquarian, no Fabricius tracing the evolution of the study of Roman sepulchers,

modern English literary canon. That consensus was subsequently subjected to considerable revision and partial confirmation by St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, esp. chap. 7.

74. Terry, “Literature, Aesthetics, and Canonicity,” 92–95.

but simply an unexceptionally learned representative of the English province of the Republic of Letters in the late seventeenth century. His works were pitched to those who had only the foggiest notion of the larger European literary tradition and needed the secure framework of a canon in which to read and acquire books. In this respect, Blount's works set forth the books needed to obtain "literature"—that is to say, to acquire the condition, known as literature, of having read certain privileged texts.<sup>75</sup> They offer a view of the Republic of Letters as a canon-building and canon-disseminating institution, echoing John Guillory's "specific institution of reproduction," which he saw as a necessary home for any canon of literature.<sup>76</sup> Instead of the school, which Guillory saw as the institutional location of the modern canon, Blount's canon existed, more diffusely, but no less enduringly, in the imagined institution of the Republic of Letters, a mental construct through which he shaped his and his texts' identities.

If we accept that the *Censura* and the *Poetica* represent types of canon, the next questions are: how universal are those canons for the period, and how did Blount himself operate within those canons? Like any such collections of texts, their boundaries are fluid, as can be seen from a comparison of Blount with Baillet. The premodern canon appears differently from different vantage points, and Blount, writing in England in 1690, inevitably emphasizes a tradition slightly divergent from, say, Baillet, writing in France in 1685. Nonetheless, there are enough similarities to conclude that the works articulate the same normative collection of privileged texts and that Blount's catalogue in the *Censura* would not have been regarded with incredulity or confusion in other contexts across Europe.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, as Terry has shown, the canon of specifically English poets elaborated in the *Poetica* appears in a number of other seventeenth-century contexts.<sup>78</sup> From Ben Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare" (1618) to Sir John Denham's *On Mr. Abraham Cowley His Death and Burial Amongst the Ancient Poets* (1667) and Joseph Addison's "Account of the Greatest English Poets" (1694), mentioned above, there is a developing canonical tradition that accords closely with Blount's.<sup>79</sup>

Blount's treatment of English writers was not, however, a history of vernacular English writing grafted onto a European root but rather a chapter excerpted from a

75. Compare Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 46–48, for "literature" as a state of being rather than a type of text.

76. John Guillory, "Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate," *ELH* 54 (1987): 495.

77. Additional proof of this can be found in the existence of the 1696 and 1710 Genevan editions of the *Censura*, ample evidence of a receptive Continental audience.

78. Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past*, chaps. 2–3.

79. Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare and what he hath left us," in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies: Published According to the True Originall Copies* (London, 1623), sig. A4r–v; Sir John Denham, *On Mr. Abraham Cowley His Death and Burial Amongst the Ancient Poets* (London, 1667). For the later eighteenth-century evolution of this tradition into modern literary history, see Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J., 1970), pt. 4.

larger European narrative. For him, the canon to be valued in this context was the canon common to all Europe, one in which he saw England and English writers making a small but valuable contribution. Likewise, those British works that appear in both the *Censura* and the *Poetica* were not meant by Blount to be read in a solely British context but rather to be seen as the products of a truly international literature; and they were: John Owen's epigrams are known in imprints from as far afield as Leipzig, Leiden, Hamburg, and Bratislava, while George Buchanan's works were published in Latin or vernacular translations in Strasbourg, Antwerp, Herborn, and Frankfurt.<sup>80</sup> By contrast, Shakespeare seems not to have been published or translated abroad at this time, except in the obscurity of the Livonian scholar Friedrich Menius's *Engelische Comedien und Tragedien* (1620), which includes a German translation of *Titus Andronicus*.<sup>81</sup>

The *Poetica* occupies an uneasy place within this narrative, conveniently according with more modern views of literature and canonicity and placing an emphasis on English vernacular poets in a fashion entirely absent from the *Censura*. But this seeming contradiction is, again, simply a shift in perspective and a narrowing of focus. What is present in Blount's two works may be conceived of as a Venn diagram: in one circle lies the shared, international literature of Europe; in another lies poetry as seen from an English viewpoint. The two partially, but by no means completely, overlap. Put another way, vernacular poetry in English occupied one small corner of the vast expanse of early modern European literature and was by Blount given its due but no more in the *Censura*. The specificity of the *Poetica*, however, allowed for it to be discussed in more detail and for figures who would have been too minor on a European, pan-literary stage to merit inclusion in the *Censura* to be included as important points on a map of the more narrowly "poetic" landscape.

This is not to say that twenty-first-century literary critics should hurriedly put down their Shakespeare and pick up their Buchanan, nor that premodern canons such as Blount's should be taken at face value. Instead, this is an argument for understanding contexts. Knowing the contours of the premodern European canon is vital, not only for intellectual historians but also for students of the modern vernacular canons, including that of English literature. By unthinkingly accepting the shape of our received, modern canons—which we too often do, despite the vigorous and healthy criticism that has been leveled against them in the past thirty years—we cut ourselves off from that vast continent of writing, learned and imaginative, polemical and playful, that made up the literary inheritance of Blount and his contemporaries. In examining the texts and contexts of his *Censura celebriorum authorum* and *De re poetica*, I have

80. John Owen (Joannes Audoenus), *Epigrammatum* (Leipzig, 1617); *Epigrammatum* (Leiden, 1628); *Teutschredender Owenus* (Hamburg, 1653); *Epigrammatum* (Bratislava, 1658). George Buchanan, *Jephtes oder Gelübd*, trans. J. Bitner (Strasbourg, 1582); *Paraphrasis Psalmorum Davidis poetica* (Antwerp, 1588); *Psalmorum Davidis paraphrasis poetica* (Herborn, 1608); *Rerum Scotticarum historia* (Frankfurt, 1624).

81. *Engelische Comedien und Tragedien*, ed. and trans. Friedrich Menius (n.p., 1620). For Menius, see Stefan Donecker, "Arbeiten und Projekte des Dorpater Professors Friedrich Menius in den 1630er Jahren," *Forschungen zur Baltischen Geschichte* 6 (2011): 31–60.

endeavored to show how those texts and, by extension, the tradition of *historia literaria* as a whole, can offer scholars a guide to the landscape of early modern literature and an understanding of how the period valued those writers who were perceived to be, in some way, canonical.

### ☞ A Lockean Postscript

In the aftermath of the Battle of the Books, a whole world was magisterially swept aside, but for both Blount and Locke, the landscape of an older canon of literature was still well known and charged with significance. Its continued relevance can be seen in Locke's attempts to maintain the *Censura* as an up-to-date reference tool, rather than simply an artifact of its time. Among the additions he made to his own copy were entirely new entries on such contemporaries as Thomas Burnet, whose *Telluris theoria sacra* (1681; English edition, 1684) inaugurated a sprawling pamphlet war on the nature of biblical geology, and the recently deceased Meric Casaubon, who had mounted an ill-fated attack on the new Royal Society a few decades before.<sup>82</sup> Also present in Locke's additions are entries on older figures who suddenly became the objects of intense interest in the 1690s: Ioannes Malalas, the sixth-century Byzantine chronicler who had been virtuosically analyzed as a source of older, otherwise lost, classical texts and traditions by the young Richard Bentley in 1691, and Phalaris, the Sicilian tyrant whose supposed epistles were at the center of the Battle of the Books.<sup>83</sup> For Locke, Blount's work was the gateway to a vibrant and ongoing tradition; to be a useful reference tool, it had to be continuously updated, taking into account the latest revelations and controversies of the *orbis literarius*.

Locke's additions to the *Censura* also point implicitly to what he perceived to be the gaps in Blount's work. Nowhere is this more evident than in his choice to include an entry for the Bible itself, historicizing holy writ and placing it in an intellectual-historical context in a way that Blount had avoided doing.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, Locke determinedly improved on Blount's Hebraic scholarship, introducing entries on everything from the Talmud and the Mishnah to the semilegendary rabbi Simeon bar Yochai and the fifteenth-century scholar Isaac Abrabanel.<sup>85</sup> In doing so, he expanded and revised Blount's concept of the European canon, drawing in aspects of the Judaic tradition that had been only patchily represented in the original and reaffirming the late humanist commitment to Hebrew learning as a part of the larger classical inheritance.

That Locke engaged so closely with Blount's world is no surprise. Almost two decades older than Blount, Locke had grown to intellectual maturity in the world of polyhistorians and humanists that Blount mapped. While its texts, methodologies, and

82. Locke's entries for these men are at Bodleian Library, Locke 15.38, 548, 622.

83. *Ibid.*, 12, 517. See Levine, *Battle of the Books*; and Haugen, *Richard Bentley*, 81–99, 110–23.


84. Bodleian Library, Locke 15.38, 68.

85. *Ibid.*, 108, 221, 336, 572. See also Fania Oz-Salzberger, "The Political Thought of John Locke and the Significance of Political Hebraism," *Hebraic Political Studies* 1 (2006): 568–92.

theoretical frameworks would be subjected to biting criticism and revision over the course of the eighteenth century, the two men inhabited a common world of letters that both produced and defined the canons of their age.

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