

Modern Chivalry and Ancient Rhetoric

A somewhat neglected figure of early American literature is eighteenth-century political figure and novelist Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816). Known for one book, *Modern Chivalry*, the first two volumes of which were published in 1792, Brackenridge continued publishing volumes of his masterwork until 1815. As Alexander Cowie notes, “the term novel must be stretched considerably to accommodate *Modern Chivalry*, a bulky, episodic, almost plotless book”¹—not without reason does Brackenridge name his hero Captain Farrago—nevertheless, to one willing to slog through more than eight hundred pages of this picaresque tale, the work yields some little gems.

Of most interest to the classicist is the influence of numerous Roman authors on this work. Although Brackenridge’s favorites were Horace and Lucian, and Juvenal is clearly an inspiration for his satire, Cicero and other rhetoricians are major players in this work. A diatribe from one of his illiterate characters rings true as the raving of an outraged son of the soil, but a closer analysis reveals a wealth of rhetorical techniques at work in his supposedly uneducated speech. Thus Brackenridge subtly ridicules the champions of ignorance by having them defend themselves in the language of those they scorn. *Modern Chivalry* shows that American anti-intellectualism has deep roots, but that those fortunate enough to receive a classical education have always brought formidable weapons in to the fight against ignorance.

¹ *The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: American Book Co., 1951), 43.

^{1 1} *The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: American Book Co., 1951), 43.

