

The Death of Dueling

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Violence in some form or another has probably always existed. Civilization did not end violence, it merely provided a framework to ritualize and institutionalize violent acts. Once civilized, ritual violence became almost entirely a man's realm.¹ Ritual violence took many forms; but, without a doubt, one of the most romanticized was the duel. Dueling differed from wartime violence and barroom brawls because dueling placed two opponents, almost always of similar social class, against one another in a highly stylized form of combat.² Fisticuffs and war were not the same. Neither followed the rigid formalities dueling demanded, and fighters did not always defend personal honor as duelists, at least in theory, always did.³ Dueling was a unique form of violence, its origins found only in the upper echelons of society, distinctly separate from other violent acts.

It is unclear exactly when the practice of dueling began or when the first actual duel took place. Most writers agree that dueling probably began as a primitive judicial system where disputes were arbitrated by hand-to-hand combat.⁴ But when civilization eventually created regularized procedures to dispense justice, dueling continued as a means to dispute matters of honor.⁵ The duel of honor can be traced back to medieval tournaments,

¹ Pieter Spierenburg, *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 13.

² Richard Cohen, *By the Sword: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions* (New York: Random House, 2002), 40.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barbara Holland, "Bang! Bang! You're Dead: Dueling at the Drop of a Hat was as European as Truffles and as American as Mom's Apple Pie," *Smithsonian*, October 1997, 123.

⁵ Woody West, "No Real Justice? Revive The Duel," *Insight on the News* 2, August 1999, 48.

feuds, and a chivalric code of honor emphasizing virtue.⁶ Eventually this code of honor evolved into the upper class and nobility's theory of courtesy and the idea of the "gentleman". This resulted in the adoption of one-on-one combat to settle affairs in the sixteenth century.⁷ The duel of honor, as recognized from entertainment media, was based primarily on the Italian Renaissance idea of the gentleman and arrived in England in the 1570s.⁸ The practice was welcomed by the upper classes, who had long been awaiting a method to solve disputes. But the warm reception was not shared by royalty, and Queen Elizabeth I outlawed the judicial duel in 1571.⁹ Her attempts to remove the practice from England failed and dueling quickly gained popularity.¹⁰

Dueling thrived in England for nearly three centuries; however, the practice eventually came to an end in 1852, when the last recorded English duel was fought. There were many contributing factors to the practice's end. Criticism of dueling, a growing distaste for violence, legal resistance, religious moralism, and new ideas of manhood and honor all decreased the popularity of the duel. Because of its decreased popularity, it became more difficult and less rewarding to duel, so that by the nineteenth century, popular alternatives such as newspapers and court settlements finally defeated the duel.

When dueling arrived in England it found its niche among the landed few. Harold James Perkin pointed out that, "differential status was part of the given, unquestioned environment into which men were born."¹¹ The upper classes appeared to have always been separate from the lower classes, and they had a different set of values. Honor was held in the highest esteem by the upper classes, and paramount to this honor was a gentleman's reputation

⁶ Robert B. Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel: Masculinity, Honour and Ritual Violence In London, 1660-1800," *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2002): 525.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Markku Peltonen, "Francis Bacon, the Earl of Northampton, and the Jacobean Anti-Dueling Campaign," *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 1 (2001): 2-5.

⁹ Cohen, *By the Sword*, 44.

¹⁰ Holland, "Bang! Bang! You're Dead," 123.

¹¹ Harold James Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 24-25.

among his peers.¹² The gentry displayed their status and honor in their manner of dress, speech, behavior, and any other possible means.¹³ As a gentleman's actions and appearance were representative of his status and reputation, all outward signs and matters of protocol were rigidly stylized.¹⁴ Acting outside of protocol would lead other gentlemen to question the honor of that individual.

Dueling appeared to be a perfect solution for many reasons. First, only gentlemen could challenge each other to a duel.¹⁵ Furthermore, dueling upheld the idea of honorable behavior that was so important to would-be duelists. In fact, by the 1700s, dueling textbooks, most notably the widely accepted *Code Duello*, dealt less with actual duel than with the etiquette involved, such as the proper conditions for challenging and accepting, and how best to maintain proper respect.¹⁶

Dueling was reserved only for matters of honor, but the theory of honor to which gentlemen were bound was complex. Honor did not always appear to be the obvious cause of dispute. The romantic image of dueling for a lady's favor, for example, is a false one. Duels involving women were not fought to gain a woman's love, but rather because men took responsibility for the honor of certain women in their lives, including the women they were courting.¹⁷ For instance, a duel that took place in 1791 between two soldiers of the same regiment apparently started because the two men were interested in one woman, and when she eloped with one, the other issued the challenge, not because of love, but rather because of gentlemanly duty. The challenger opted to duel because the woman wrote him claiming that she had been forced to elope. Despite the appearance of a romantically based duel, the challenger was acting on what he felt was his gentlemanly duty on behalf of the lady.¹⁸ Most, if not all, of a gentleman's honorable duties could be well enforced by dueling,

¹² Peltonen, "Francis Bacon," 6.

¹³ Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Holland, "Bang! Bang! You're Dead," 124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

¹⁷ Barbara Holland, *Gentlemen's Blood: A History of Dueling from Swords at Dawn to Pistols at Dusk* (Harrisonburg: Bloomsbury, 2003), 38.

¹⁸ *Times* (London), 17 January 1791.

and so the practice found wide acceptance among the upper classes looking for ways to solve disputes.

But this acceptance had not gone unchallenged. There were many critics within sections of the gentry and nobility, even as their peers were fighting duels.¹⁹ In the 1770s these criticisms grew stronger.²⁰ England was changing, and so too was the English gentleman. England underwent many changes to accommodate industrialism. London, for example, gained the benefits of urban planning, such as better-paved streets, and more importantly, a more organized police force. Hence Londoners were less willing to conduct disputes in the streets.²¹ Dueling had been outlawed for over a century, and with the unwillingness to fight publicly, it became increasingly popular to conduct duels in private, away from watchful eyes.²² This contradicted the idea that duels took place to maintain one's reputation, and thus duels lost some appeal. In addition, the ideas of how an honorable gentleman behaved were changing. Reputations were becoming public, and were more often defined in smaller social settings such as clubs, societies and the workplace.²³ Honor also became much more personal. No longer did one person's actions affect the honor of his entire family for generations.²⁴ Cultural opportunity grew, men expected more from life and they began to examine mankind's potential.²⁵ Because of these expanded horizons and new knowledge, men and their conduct began being judged by more modern standards of behavior, most of which centered upon the idea of politeness.²⁶ Anger, and the behavior associated with it, became less accepted in society.²⁷

¹⁹ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 539.

²⁰ *Honour's preservation without blood: or, sober advice to duelists* (London, 1680), 24.

²¹ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 526.

²² Cohen, *By the Sword*, 50.

²³ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 542.

²⁴ Spierenburg, *Men and Violence*, 12.

²⁵ Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 11.

²⁶ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 526.

²⁷ Elizabeth Foyster, "Boys will be boys? Manhood and aggression, 1660-1800," in T. Hitchcock and M. Cohen, eds., *English masculinities, 1660-1800* (London, 1999), 162; quoted in Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2002): 525-545, n. 81.

Dueling's critics had always said that it was ridiculous to think that one's honor could be called into question just because of malicious words and other small offences.²⁸ As England industrialized, it became clear that the critics were ahead of their time. The notions of honor were ever changing as well. Even in the seventeenth century, Sir Francis Bacon, one of dueling's greatest critics, adamantly believed that for dueling to end, the theory of honor lying just beneath its surface must be abolished as well.²⁹ By the mid-eighteenth century, the theory was not abolished, but it was weakened by new ideas of honor and new concepts of politeness.

Despite these social changes, the practice of dueling evolved, and although it was not only the weaponry that changed, the shift from swords to pistols in the early 1760s was an important transition.³⁰ All of dueling's rules were based upon swordplay. But fencing had become much more rule-bound and almost choreographed, with time allowances for recovery after a lunge, and moments for rest similar to a time-out.³¹ These rules removed many of the inherent risks found in dueling. Without risk, courage could not be displayed. Dueling with pistols was a legitimate answer to this problem and pistols quickly became the weapon of choice.

Pistols, like all technological implements, improved. They became more accurate, and logically, duels should have become more deadly. However despite increasing accuracy and other advancements with the weaponry, dueling injuries became less common, mostly because of the manner in which duels were conducted.³² Dueling's rules changed to accommodate the new weaponry. Pistol duels offered participants opportunities to refuse to fire or to fire in the air, ending the duel.³³ And as guns became the prominent weapon, the seconds gained more administrative capabilities presiding over the duel, including the number of shots fired, and the ability to end the duel if necessary.³⁴ Most

²⁸ Peltonen, "Francis Bacon," 16.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 528.

³¹ Ibid., 530.

³² Holland, *Gentlemen's Blood*, 79.

³³ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 543.

³⁴ Holland, "Bang! Bang! You're Dead," 124.

importantly, wearing swords had been common for gentleman when dueling was introduced in England, allowing duelists to fight immediately. Not so with the pistol. When a challenge was issued, there had to be a delay so that the pistols could be acquired, and this allowed anger to give way to reason and gave seconds and friends an opportunity to try to settle the argument without firing shots.³⁵ Pistols re-introduced risk to the duel of honor, but paradoxically made the duel less fatal.

While the firearm solved one problem, it introduced another. Unlike the sword, which was primarily an aristocratic weapon, almost anyone could own or operate a pistol.³⁶ Mastering the art of swordplay took decades, requiring an instructor and daily training, but mastering a pistol took much less time.³⁷ With the introduction of the pistol into the duel of honor, dueling spread downward from aristocratic society into the new middle classes.³⁸ This weakened the duel's appeal to some, but others felt that dueling was still a viable solution to matters of honor.

As the nineteenth century drew near, attitudes towards violence changed. Life spans were lengthening, medical treatments were improving, and child mortality rates were declining.³⁹ Across Europe, violence became less acceptable. The criminalization of violent acts grew out of modernization and the emergence of a market economy. The new middle class competed with the traditional gentlemen for power and prestige. Money was becoming as valuable as land.⁴⁰ The gentleman's honor, like the gentlemen themselves, had competition.

In England, ideas instilled by the Renaissance and Enlightenment were being re-thought because of the movement towards the Industrial Revolution.⁴¹ Evolving industrial relationships in the eighteenth century often resulted in visible violence.⁴² War with France from 1793-1815 was the most

³⁵ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 533.

³⁶ Ibid., 532.

³⁷ Holland, *Gentlemen's Blood*, 79.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 143.

⁴⁰ *The Victorian Criminalization of Men*, Pieter Spierenburg, ed., *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 200.

⁴¹ Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 11-12.

⁴² Ibid., 32.

publicized yet in England and the population tired of bloodshed.⁴³ The English, even those who had once enjoyed the duel, were affected. John Chamberlain, in a letter written in the seventeenth century, explained how a foreign war's bloodshed would help abate domestic violence.⁴⁴ By the nineteenth century this idea had become widely recognized and could clearly be seen. The war and synchronized factors contributed to the decreasing acceptance of violence.

Aggressive behavior in general was growing unacceptable. Representatives from a plethora of cultural movements, "from Evangelicalism to Utilitarianism," condemned manhood's culture of honor.⁴⁵ This dramatically affected Englishmen. Homicide records indicate that public violence committed by gentlemen in London had decreased in the late eighteenth century.⁴⁶ Killing to defend one's honor lost its traditional excusable nature.⁴⁷ A reported duel in 1791 makes no mention of further legal proceedings or repercussions.⁴⁸ However, in 1840, a similar duel filled multiple columns in the *Times*, discussing the legal measures following the duel on three separate occasions.⁴⁹

Large numbers of people, from a variety of social classes, were willing to do just about anything to prevent duels from occurring.⁵⁰ Such is the case of the duel between the Earl of Cardigan and Captain Harvey Tuckett. A miller surnamed Dann witnessed the preparation, called for his wife to take notice, interfered with the duelists, and later testified regarding what occurred.⁵¹ This was not an isolated incident. Many times bystanders interrupted duels, or notified the by then larger and

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ N.E. McClure, ed., *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: 1939), 297-298; quoted in Peltonen, "Francis Bacon," *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 1 (2001): 16, n. 55.

⁴⁵ *The Victorian Criminalization of Men*, 204.

⁴⁶ Robert B. Shoemaker, "Male Honour and the decline of public violence in eighteenth-century London," *Social History*, 26 (2001): 190-208.

⁴⁷ *The Victorian Criminalization of Men*, 204.

⁴⁸ *Times* (London), 15 October 1840.

⁴⁹ *Times* (London), 16, 17, 22 September 1840.

⁵⁰ Antony Simpson, "Dandelions on the field of honour: dueling, the middle classes, and the law in nineteenth-century England," *Criminal Justice History*, 9 (1988): 106-107.

⁵¹ *Times* (London), 15 October 1840.

more involved police force. Duelists were forced farther and farther out of the public eye. Duelists had long argued that duels were fought to defend their reputation, but as dueling became private and audiences became smaller and smaller, the gains ceased to outweigh the risks.⁵² Dueling had lost much of its popularity by the early nineteenth century, however duels were still common occurrences. But as opposition grew, alternatives began gaining popularity and support.

One course of action that had long been available gained support in the early nineteenth century. Settling matters of honor using the court system to appeal to civil laws grew in popularity and was common by 1804.⁵³ This was partially due to changes within the courts themselves. At the turn of the nineteenth century, new legislation increased the legal penalties for violence, dueling included.⁵⁴ The increased legal pressure compounded the cultural movements to replace the "worship of honor" with more peaceful ideals, so that dueling's risks outgrew the advantages.⁵⁵ Dueling circled the drain during the nineteenth century, and the courts tried more cases regarding honor as the century advanced. One such case was documented in the *Times* in 1840. The insulted gentleman expressed that, "his enemy should pay dearly for it [the insult, in this case, a slap to the face]," however, the gentleman also declared that the matter would not lead to a duel, as dueling was illegal and immoral.⁵⁶ The issue was resolved, reparations made, and honor was maintained with no bloodshed.

The most popular of the arising alternatives was the press. Duels were fought less with pistols and fought more with words in newspapers. Would-be participants quickly learned that since dueling was losing popularity, a new method to defend reputations needed to be found. The industrial changes and the connected social changes allowed more money to be spent on newspapers, which were quite popular, especially among the wealthy.⁵⁷ Duels

⁵² Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 537.

⁵³ John Trusler, "A System of Etiquette," (Bath, 1804), 64-66; quoted in Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2002): 525-545, n. 88.

⁵⁴ *The Victorian Criminalization of Men*, 203.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁶ *Times* (London), 5 December 1840.

⁵⁷ Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 143.

had become more taboo and were conducted more frequently in private settings; however newspapers could reach a broader audience than any single duel ever could. It would not have been difficult to see the advantage print media offered. By the early nineteenth century, reputations were defended and matters of honor were increasingly resolved more effectively in correspondences through newspapers.⁵⁸

In 1852, the last recorded duel was fought in England.⁵⁹ There were most certainly a few people who still clung to the old ideas of honor, but for the most part, the idea of manhood and its honor had changed to fit a new industrial England. A newfound disapproval of violence and aggression echoed long-held criticisms of the duel. The legal system and, even more so, the press, catered to the new ideas of gentlemanliness, allowing gentlemen to settle disputes in a non-violent manner. The era of honor through combat faded into the past, replaced by an entirely new idea of manhood. By the 1850s, the pen had become mightier than the sword. Even mightier than the pen was the printing press, which laid the final deathblow to a practice weakened by so many opponents.

⁵⁸ Shoemaker, "The Taming of the Duel," 542.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 527.