

# Dueling in 18th century essay



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Throughout time, the image of the duel has transcended into our collective consciousness, so that there is hardly a person today who does not understand

what the word means, even though there are practically no modern day duels.

Anyone asked to define the word would be able to conjure up the image of two men

standing face to face, for the purpose of settling a dispute and very likely

leaving one of the men dead. The portrait of the duel has remained a constant in

literature through centuries and even in the modern day can be found in the

mediums of television and cinema. These fictional duels are usually pretty clear

cut, with good and evil coming together for a final face off where, ideally, the

just side will prevail. The myth of the duel is not consistent with the reality

of the duel as seen through facts of history and of literature of the time

period. While the literature of the time period sensationalized the duel to some

degree. it is partially through literature that it is possible to examine

aspects of dueling; the ethics behind the encounters, public opinion, and unspoken rules. As V. G. Kiernan states in his book *The Duel in European History*

“ What has been remembered of the duel has been mostly of an anecdotal kind.

It may be surmised that a good many of the countless stories connected with it

lost nothing in the telling and retelling; some have a decidedly novelistic flavor” (7). The reality of the duel is that it was not a clear cut event,

but rather an ambiguous one, with many rules and regulations, and open only to

certain sections of society. The purpose for a duel was not as justifiable as it is for the duel’s fictional counter part; historical duels have been fought for any number of reasons, some being entirely trivial. Most importantly, in the fictional duel, the just almost always prevail, which is definitely not true to life. Literature tends to embellish, simplify, and romanticize the duel and while it is possible to look to literature to glean some information, it is important to take that information and look beyond the myth for a more complete

picture. The duel evolved through centuries. Some form of the duel can be found

in almost any society at any given time. In biblical times, there is the well known battle of David and Goliath and even in the American old west there were

shoot-outs at high noon on main street. The duel that we are examining for the

purpose of this paper is the institution as it is found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the forms of it that led up to it in earlier ages.

There are several different definitions that apply to this phenomenon, but most

that reflect some bias for the time that they were stated, for even in the minds

of those who practiced the living duel, there was a dichotomy surrounding it.

One definition comes from Francois Billacois' book *The Duel*, where the author

states that the duel was “ a fight between two or several

individuals...equally armed, for the purposes of proving either the truth of a disputed question or the valor, courage and honour of each combatant.” (5)

This was an encounter between two men who both claimed to be just. The duel's

purpose was to decide who the victor in the dispute would be, either using rapiers, swords, or pistols. There was a challenger and an offended party, with

the offended party commonly being allowed to choose the weapons that would be

used to fight with. One party would usually end up dead at the end of the battle, but not always. Sometimes the victor would spare the life of the other party, instilling more honor upon himself. The reasons behind duels were so numerous that it would be impossible to list all, but several reasons did include women, long standing rivalries, politics, legal cases, and honour. (Billacois

77) Honour was probably the most important reason, for even if a duel was fought

for another reason, such as a woman, honour was almost always hiding in the

background. The modern duel evolved from trial by combat of the early middle

ages. “ Ordeal by battle was common to all Germanic people, and served as a

touchstone of honour, or as a settlement of legal disputes.” (Kiernan 29)

The idea of fighting for honour is a very old one, for if an individual’s honour was questioned, the only real way for that individual to restore his honour was

by fighting for it. Put in that situation, it was almost impossible for an

individual to back down, for if he did, his honour would suffer even more and he

would risk rejection from society. Since one’s honour was also intricately bound

to the honour of his family, it made backing down more difficult. Kiernan states

that when he writes that one was “ often caught in a fatal dilemma, between two choices, each destructive” (28). Though the form of the duel would change in the centuries that followed, the idea of honor and reputation remained

constant. “ The latter day duellist, compelled against his will and

conscience to take the field, was the heir to a dark curse with its beginnings

in the blood-stained cradle of aristocracy” (28). For those challenged to fight, even in the earliest times, there was hardly ever an easy way out.

### Trials

of the early middle ages often included such things as torture, made widespread

by barbaric laws, and if the defendant was lucky enough to survive the ordeal

alive, then he was proclaimed innocent As Christianity grew trial by ordeal grew

to become judicial combat. In judicial combat, the victorious party wins by divine intervention, for the victorious party was thought to be the just party in the eyes of the Lord. In the book *Field of Honor*. Ben Truman states “ the appeal to arms, as we may justly term the judicial combat, was an appeal to high

heaven, or to God” (10). God revealed the truth through battle by allowing

the victor to win. This idea is clearly demonstrated in the literature of the

period. In the Middle English poem “ *Amis and Amiloun*”, Amis is a

knight who has been accused of ruining the daughter of the Duke who is his

patron. After Amis denies this charge, the Duke declares “ It shal be proved

in batail, / And sen bitven hem to” (863-864). The Duke says this because he believes that God will reveal the truth through battle. Amis agrees to this, but when he is alone, he states “ Ich have that wrong and he the right- / Therefor Icham aferd to fight” (940-941), for even though Amis has denied the charge, it is true and he is afraid that if he fights he will lose because God knows that he is guilty. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the Duke’s wife and daughter back up Amis, which means if he loses the battle, they also will die. In an attempt to sneak around the technicalities of judicial combat, Amis has his friend, Amiloun, fight for him in disguise. Since Amiloun is innocent of the crime, for he has never slept with the Duke’s daughter, he is victorious in battle, but he does have his fair share of misfortune, for he must repent for trying to cheat God. Judicial combat was not limited to any particular group of people. Kiernan reflects this when he states “ heavenly justice being open to all, individuals of any rank could claim the right to ordeal by battle.” (34) One major exception to this was women, who had to



find champions to fight for them. If a woman could not find a champion, she would automatically be thought guilty. Examples of this can be found in *Morte*

*Darthur*. In Book XVIII, chapter three (of the Caxton Printing), the Queen is accused of treason by Sir Mador, who claims that she tried to poison several knights. King Arthur states “some good knight shall put his body in jeopardy for my queen rather than she be brent in a wrong quarrel.” (790)

The only way the queen can be cleared of the charges brought against her is for

a knight to fight for her and win, otherwise she will be executed. This is an occurrence that remains intact through the history of the duel. Even in the eighteenth century, if a woman’s reputation was questioned, a man would have to

duel for her with the individual who put her reputation in question in order for

her honour to be restored. Although judicial combat was open to anybody, it was

more likely that to be practiced by the knightly and noble classes, for they are

the ones who would be trained in and accustomed to using weapons. With the

tapering off of chivalry, judicial combat moved from the religious to the secular and evolved into the duel. In his book *That Damn'd Thing Called Honour*,

James Kelly states “” though the ritualized, sanctioned combats of the middle ages declined, the sentiments that impelled them remained vibrant”

(9). In the midst of civil war, religious strife, and reformation, the

aristocracy took on the duel as an identifying marker of its class. Kiernan states “ It was amidst the chronic warfare of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the modern duel took shape” (6). With the reigns of the law in the hands of the monarchy, an increasingly more powerful middle class, and an

increasingly less powerful noble class, the aristocracy created its own code of

honour to define itself by. Kiernan also states “ Dueling provided a warrant of aristocratic breeding.... a certificate of legitimate descent from the nobility from the nobility of the sword of feudal times” (53). With the

reformation, the aristocracy found the lines between classes blurring. Dueling

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was created among the ‘ true’ noble class at a time when the middle classes were

gaining money and prestige and dueling established a distinction between lineage

or lack of. Kiernan reflects upon this when he states “ the noble class

announced its solidarity by insisting on the privilege – or liability – of its

members to exchange blows with one another” (53). This strife between

classes can easily be found in the literature of the eighteenth century. The

middle classes, who were trying to move up in the world, specifically into the

noble classes, emulated the aristocracy in their actions, including that of

dueling. For a true noble to duel with a member of a lower class was not

honorable, but a man had to consider all aspects carefully before he refused.

As

Kiernan states “ A man of good standing challenged by one of dubious status

might hesitate to decline, for fear of being suspended of a discreditable

motive” (103). This situation is found in Tobias Smollett’s novel The

Expedition of Humphry Clinker. Smollett creates a contrasting pair of

situations. The first occurs when a Jerry Melford discovers that his sister is

receiving letters from an actor, Wilson, a man definitely below her in status.

Jery has words with Wilson and offends him, causing Wilson to challenge Jery to

a duel. Jery writes a friend about this stating “ Though his rank in life

(which by the by, I am as ashamed to declare) did not entitle him to much

deference; yet his behavior was remarkably spirited, I admitted to him the

privilege of a gentleman” (8). Jery could decline the duel since Wilson is

below him, but to do so may harm Jery’s reputation more than duelling with him.

The duel would have preceded if not for the intervention of Jery’s uncle, Matt

Bramble, who informs the mayor so that he may “ interpose as a

magistrate” (13). When the mayor finds them, Wilson is taken into custody,

but Jery is not. This is presumably because of the difference in the status of

the two men, for Bramble writes “ the mayor observed that it was great

presumption in Wilson, who was a stroller, to proceed to such extremities

with a

gentleman of family of fortune” (13). Jery is not thought any less of

because of his decision to duel Wilson, but Wilson definitely is. The second

situation in Humphry Clinker is the opposite of the first. This occurs after

Jery and Bramble meet Lord Oxmington and accept an invitation to dine at his

house. At dinner, Bramble takes offense after the Lord, who is described as prideful to the point of fault, dismisses them without courtesy. Bramble issues

a challenge to the Lord for insulting their honour. When the Lord learns of this, he cries “ What! A commoner send a challenge to a peer of the realm! – Privilege! privilege!” (283). In this instance the Lord believes that he is above Bramble and that Bramble is the one being presumptuous, just as they

thought Wilson was earlier in the novel. In this case, the Lord does not duel with Bramble; instead he sends apologies to the offended party as they stalk around his house. In this situation, it is clearly the honour of the Lord that has suffered. As Kiernan states “ To shirk a duel rendered an individual no longer worthy of his class” (15). It is clear that the Lord exhibited cowardice in his treatment of the challenge, just as Jery Melford does not in the first incident. Several important changes occurred in the transformation of

the duel from something medieval to modern. Perhaps the two most important

changes were that it was no longer a legal practice and that it was no longer sanctioned by the church. As Truman states “ duels, which had hitherto been fought under judicial appointment, were freely indulged in without the interpretation of juris-prudence” (11). The nobility had created their own practice to which their governments often turned the other cheek. As Kelly states “ the dissemination and embrace of the values of the code of honour and the rules of duelling were facilitated by the disinclination of European monarchs to take punitive action against those of their nobility that dueled” (17). Literally, the nobility could get away with murder. Some were prosecuted though and there was always the fear of that. It was basically left in the hands of the victims family if they wanted to push the law into punishing the victor and this was not an entirely likable choice. To do so would mean another fall in honour for the victim of the duel. This situation occurs in Choderlos de Laclos’ novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* after the Chevalier Danceny

kills the Vicomte de Valmont in a duel. Valmont's aunt, Madame de Rosemond,

wants to press charges against Danceny, stating in letter 164 “ the

severities of the law cannot be too stringently invoked against this relic of

barbarism which still infects the age” (372). In letter 164, Monsieur

Betrand replies to this, stating “ the complaint you intend to lodge against

Monsieur Danceny would be equally injurious to the memory of Monsieur  
your

nephew” (375). For Madame de Rosemond to go against the social codes of

duelling, would be to go against one's own class and the institution that it

upheld. This action would be harmful to the honour of Valmont. The next  
letter

after Monsieur Betrand's reply to Madame de Rosemand is an anonymous  
letter to

the Chevalier Danceny, which states “ Although this sort of affair is

normally looked upon with indulgence, there is always, none the less, a  
certain

respect due to the law” (376). This letter prompts Danceny to write Madame

de Rosemond and work things out privately with her. For Valmont to have died in

a duel is honorable, but to bring the law into it would betray these ethics and strip Valmont of his honour. Even though Valmont has been a key antagonist throughout the novel, he is at least partially redeemed by his death.

Valmont's

female counterpart, the Marquise de Merteuil, does not have this option and the

bulk of the blame for the dishonorable actions of the pair eventually rest

mainly on her. The fact that Danceny convinces Madame de Rosemond not to

prosecute, not only saves the reputation of Valmont, but of the whole class, who

sanctioned duelling. Madame de Rosemond's initial reaction to the institution of

duelling, calling it "barbaric", reflects the dichotomy in the

opinions concerning duelling in the minds of the nobility. There was a hypocrisy

which prevailed in the minds of the very peoples that sanctioned the phenomenon.



The biggest influence on this split opinion was the church, God's edict

"vengeance is mine", providence (in the fact that it was believed to

be wrong to speed up providence which is exactly what the duel did if one

believed that the just party prevailed), and a general disdain for anything

medieval. Billacois states "Churchmen saw duelling as a manifestation of

infernal libertinism" (87). and "To set oneself up as a judge in place

of the law-giving King and God of Justice was a profoundly impious act"

(101). These sentiments are clearly demonstrated in the literature of the

eighteenth century. It is fitting that Valmont dies in a duel, for he is a

relentless libertine. The same is true of Robert Lovelace in Samuel

Richardson's

novel *Clarissa*. If this appears to be a paradox, that is because it is. There is

an irrefutable gap between a general disapproval of duelling and the

obligation

to participate when it was one's own honour at stake or somebody close.

This

catch-22 in the eighteenth century mind can be found in almost every piece

of

literature that duelling is a part of, no matter how small a part that may be.

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In *Clarissa*, Lovelace's participation in a duel with Clarissa's brother (who is also a scoundrel) is strongly held against him. Yet, at the end of the novel, the doomed Clarissa, who is taking on saintly proportions by this point, implores her cousin, Colonel Morden, not to seek vengeance on Lovelace. Despite

this, Morden is moved by principle and by Clarissa's honour and kills Lovelace

in a duel. Morden is clearly justified in doing this and is not brought down or thought less of for the altercation. Another example of this dichotomy comes from Oliver Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*. In this novel, the Vicar's

oldest son, George, fights a duel under the employ of Squire Thornkill. After this happens, Thornkill sends George to Sir William, Thornkill's uncle, to supposedly be rewarded. Instead George receives a strict rebuke for having participated in a duel at all. Sir William calls George "the instrument of Thornkill's

vices" (125), for Thornkill is a conscientious opponent to the duel.

George's parent's are equally shocked to hear of the incident. Despite this,

later in the novel, after George's mother believes that Thornkill has ruined her

daughter, George's mother orders him to challenge Thornkill for her daughter's

honour. The duel never takes place because Thornkill has his men seize George.

When Sir William learns of this, he again scolds George, but the more serious of

his rebukes goes to his nephew, about whom he states " I find his present

prosecution was dictated by tyranny, cowardice, and revenge" (187), for it

is a greater crime in Sir William's eyes that his nephew did not respond

honorably to the challenge. Thornkill's honour is clearly at a greater loss for

having dishonorably backed out of a duel (by having his men seize George), then

George's honor is for having participated in a duel at all. Dueling was a

complicated and intricate event, much more then it would appear to be at first

glance in literature. Yet, when one looks closely into the literature it is

possible to see a different story emerging; one that was torn between love and

hate for the duel. It are these split sentiments that cause Viernan to call the eighteenth century “ an era of divided souls” (165), for even those individuals who spoke adamantly against the duel would become participants under

the proper circumstances. Kiernan also reflects this when he states “ There could be respect for a man who took the field only on valid occasion; and a properly conducted duel was orderly and dignified, perpetuating a privelege of

blue blood without harming anyone else. It might stir curiosity, even admiration, rather than dislike” (167), but the problem was, who decided which duel was honorable and which one was not? As seen in literature, it often

seemed to depend whether the offended party was a close family member or a

stranger. Other unwritten rules of the duel are found in the literature of the eighteenth century; such as dueling between classes, and codes of honour. It is

through literature that the reader can see the unwritten codes and begin to

understand the complexity and complications of the eighteenth century society

that claimed the duel as its own.