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THE TAMING OF THE DUEL: MASCULINITY, HONOUR AND RITUAL VIOLENCE IN LONDON, 1660–1800*

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ABSTRACT. *Over the course of the ‘long’ eighteenth century the nature and significance of duels fought in the London area changed dramatically. Pistols replaced swords, seconds took on a new role as mediators, and new conventions reduced the violence. Consequently, injuries and fatalities decreased significantly. The purpose of fighting duels also shifted from the defeat of one’s antagonist to a demonstration of courage. Although duels continued to occur, growing opposition meant that the audience of people who supported duelling became increasingly limited and duels took place in places far from public view. At the same time, both the press and the courts provided alternative strategies for defending reputations. These changes cannot be attributed to technological developments, official attempts to prevent duelling, or the embourgeoisement of the duel. Rather, they resulted from a series of interlinked cultural changes, including an increasing intolerance of violence, new internalized understandings of elite honour, and the adoption of ‘polite’ and sentimental norms governing masculine conduct. These eighteenth-century changes shed new light on the reasons for the final end of duelling in England in 1852.*

The duel had a long history, but it was a malleable custom, and has been variously described as fundamentally feudal, early modern, and modern.¹ Although traceable back to medieval tournaments, feuds, and judicial combat, the single combat to resolve questions of honour developed in the sixteenth century in several European countries, arriving in England in the 1570s. Over the next two and a half centuries in England, and a further half a century on the continent, the forms and meanings of this custom changed significantly. Recent scholarship has concentrated primarily on the nineteenth century, focusing on the decline of duelling in England and its increased popularity on the continent, and little attention has been paid to the earlier transition from the early modern to the modern (nineteenth-century) duel.² During the

* I would like to thank Wendy Bracewell, Philip Carter, Michèle Cohen, Malcolm Fare, David Hayton, Tim Hitchcock, Lawrence Klein, and the participants in the International Conference on the History of Violence (Liverpool, July 2001) for valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ Ute Frevert, *Men of honour: a social and cultural history of the duel* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 3–5.

² The best treatment of duelling in eighteenth-century England is still Donna Andrew, ‘The code of honour and its critics: the opposition to duelling in England, 1700–1850’, *Social History*, 5 (1980), pp. 409–34, which focuses on attitudes towards duelling, but see also V. G. Kiernan, *The duel in European history: honour and the reign of the aristocracy* (Oxford, 1988), chs. 6–10.

eighteenth century the nature of the combat, the weapons, and the role of seconds were transformed, and fatality rates declined considerably. At the same time, the role of the duel within the honour culture of elite men was transformed. As such, the history of the duel in this period is emblematic of broader changes in English society: the decline of public violence, the changing ways in which reputations were established, the development of reformed norms of masculine conduct, and the growing role of print culture in conducting disputes. The dramatic changes that occurred in English duelling in the 'long' eighteenth century highlight important aspects of these broader transitions.

As a crucible of these social and cultural changes, London is an appropriate place to study the transformation of the duel. From the late sixteenth century with the establishment of the 'London season', English gentlemen and noblemen spent increasing amounts of time in the metropolis. With the 'urban renaissance' of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, such men enjoyed an expanded range of cultural opportunities, and their conduct came to be judged by new standards of behaviour, centred around the notion of 'politeness'. Although these changes affected both men and women, they demanded particularly dramatic changes in male behaviour. The hunting, drinking, gaming, and womanizing gentleman of the Restoration period was expected to reform his manners.³ Concurrently, new architecture and urban planning, cleaner and better paved streets, and more regular policing transformed London's public spaces, and Londoners of all classes became less willing to conduct their disputes in public.⁴ In this context, the pressures on elite men to reform, if not eliminate, the duel were considerable.

Yet this is not a simple story of the decline of duelling and the triumph of the civilizing process. The pressures in favour of maintaining this custom (and, indeed, increasing fatalities) were considerable. With the development of the *urban* gentleman, whose status depended on his money, appearance, and conduct, rather than land and a coat of arms, many men, particularly the military officers whose numbers increased so dramatically in the eighteenth century, sought to confirm their membership in elite society – and the duel provided a means of demonstrating that status. Moreover, technological changes encouraged greater bloodshed as weapons became more lethal. From

³ Peter Borsay, *The English urban renaissance: culture and society in the provincial town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989); idem, 'The London connection: cultural diffusion and the eighteenth-century provincial town', *London Journal*, 19 (1994), pp. 21–35; Philip Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society, Britain, 1660–1800* (Harlow, 2001); Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the interpretation of the British eighteenth century', *Historical Journal* (forthcoming); G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The culture of sensibility: sex and society in eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), chs. 2 and 5; Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven, 1995), ch. 16.

⁴ Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of modernity: London's geographies, 1680–1780* (New York, 1998), ch. 3; Robert B. Shoemaker, 'Public spaces, private disputes? Conflict on London's streets, 1660–1800', in T. Hitchcock and H. Shore, eds., *The streets of London, 1660–1870* (forthcoming); idem, 'The decline of public insult in London, 1660–1800', *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), pp. 97–131; idem, 'Male honour and the decline of public violence in eighteenth-century London', *Social History*, 26 (2001), pp. 190–208.

the introduction of the sharp-pointed 'small sword' after the Restoration to the increasingly accurate duelling pistol of the late eighteenth century, the possibility of death or injury was ever increasing, in spite of changing attitudes towards violence. The history of the duel in eighteenth-century London was the product of these conflicting pressures.

I

It is of course impossible to chart precisely changing levels of duelling, since no systematic record was kept of duels fought. It was those involving the most well-known participants, and which resulted in injury or death, which were most likely to be recorded. But the available evidence suggests that after the introduction of the duel in England in the 1570s, duels apparently peaked in the early 1600s, when they prompted attempts by James I to suppress them. Apparently duelling experienced a decline under Charles I and during the Interregnum, only to revive during the Restoration.⁵ Throughout the eighteenth century complaints were made that duelling had become fashionable. According to Antony Simpson's tally of duels fought in Britain and by Britons overseas between 1785 and 1850, the number fought peaked in the 1790s, and then declined gradually, falling sharply after 1842.⁶ The last recorded duel in England was fought in 1852,⁷ though the practice continued into the twentieth century on the continent, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy.⁸

Despite the difficulty in determining how many duels were fought, it is possible to conclude that dramatic changes occurred in the *ways* in which duels were conducted in this period. The following is based on statistical analysis of a sample of surviving accounts of 206 duels (a substantial fraction of those recorded) which took place in London and its environs, combined with qualitative analysis of these and a wide range of other contemporary sources.⁹

⁵ Lawrence Stone, *The crisis of the aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 243-4; John Cockburn, *The history and examination of duels, shewing their heinous nature and the necessity of suppressing them* (London, 1720), pp. 351-2.

⁶ Antony Simpson, 'Dandelions on the field of honour: duelling, the middle classes, and the law in nineteenth-century England', *Criminal Justice History*, 9 (1988), pp. 106-7.

⁷ Kiernan, *Duel in European history*, p. 218.

⁸ Frevert, *Men of honour*, chs. 3-5; Pieter Spierenburg, ed., *Men and violence: gender, honor, and rituals in modern Europe and America* (Columbus, OH, 1998), chs. 1-3; Kiernan, *Duel in European History*, chs. 11, 15-16, 18.

⁹ The accounts analysed were derived from a thorough survey of all relevant pamphlet literature; *Gentleman's Magazine* (using the contemporary index); the Verney correspondence (Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Seventh report*); Samuel Pepys's diary, John Evelyn's diary, Narcissus Luttrell's *Brief historical relation*, and Horace Walpole's correspondence (all using the modern indexes); *The Times* between 1785 and 1800 (using Palmer's Index); and a one year in ten sample of the published *Old Bailey Proceedings* and a major London newspaper (*London Journal* (1721, 1731), *London Evening Post* (1741, 1751, 1761), *General Evening Post* (1771, 1780)).

Due to the uneven coverage of these sources, the chronological distribution of cases is skewed towards the end of the period: 33 from 1660 to 1700, 14 from 1701 to 1725, 11 from 1726 to 1750,

All the evidence indicates that between 1660 and 1800 the violence in duels became much more limited and ritualized and consequently the chances of fatalities decreased considerably. The most important change was a shift in the weapons used. At the start of our period swords were the typical weapon, although occasionally pistols were also used in duels fought on horseback. The first duel involving pistols in the London area took place in Tothill Fields in 1711 between Colonel Richard Thornhill and Sir Cholmley Deering,¹⁰ but pistols were not commonly used until the early 1760s. Swords were then relatively quickly abandoned: few were used in the London area after 1785. This change led to a huge reduction in the mortality rate. More than a fifth of the 105 participants in sampled sword duels were killed, and another quarter were wounded; only half (51 per cent) of the participants escaped without significant injury. (Of course, these statistics almost certainly exaggerate fatalities, since those not resulting in death or serious injury were less likely to be recorded.) In contrast, based on the same evidence (with the same limitations), only 6.5 per cent of the 214 participants in pistol duels were killed, and 71 per cent escaped without any injury. The switch to pistols thus improved the chances of surviving a duel by a factor of approximately three, and also improved the chances of escaping without injury. These findings call into question Simpson's argument that the use of the pistol 'made the encounter more deadly'.¹¹ A similar shift in weapons, and consequent reduction in mortality, took place in mid eighteenth-century Ireland.¹²

After the transition to the pistol was completed in the late eighteenth century, a contemporary commentator explained this 'fortunate circumstance' as the result of three objections to the use of swords:

Every swordsman knows how rarely the parties are of equal skill, and if it should be so, what a number of wounds may be received on both sides, before the conflict is ended. Every surgeon also knows the ugly consequences of all such wounds, their extremities being often so deep and small as hardly to be come at.¹³

The first point was crucial. The wearing of swords on a regular basis went out of fashion in the 1720s and 1730s in London,¹⁴ and there is some evidence that

36 from 1751 to 1775, and 112 from 1776 to 1800. Not every account provides information on every aspect of the duel; the statistics provided below are based on those cases where the information is known.

¹⁰ *The life and noble character of Richard Thornhill, esq. who had the misfortune to kill Sir Cholmley Deering, Bart. ... in a duel in Tuttle-Fields, on Wednesday 9th of May, 1711* (London, 1711); *A true account of what past at the Old Bailey, May the 18th, 1711 relating to the tryal of Richard Thornhill, esq. indicted for the murder of Sir Cholmley Deering, Bart.* (2nd edn, London, 1711).

¹¹ Simpson, 'Dandelions on the field of honour', p. 114.

¹² James Kelly, *'That damned thing called honour': duelling in Ireland, 1570-1860* (Cork, 1995), pp. 81-2.

¹³ *Advice to seconds: general rules and instructions for all seconds in duels. By a late captain in the army* (Whitehaven, 1793), p. 22.

¹⁴ Shoemaker, 'Male honour', p. 205.

training in fencing may also have declined. There were complaints in the 1720s that gentlemen were failing to learn how to fence. An observer complained in 1728, 'tis certain, that there is no employment of less esteem in the world, than teaching to fence, and no persons treated with greater contempt, than common fencing masters'.¹⁵ Although there was a renaissance of fencing in the late eighteenth century, as discussed below the skills learned became less suitable for duelling.

The duel was meant to place both participants on an equal footing, but unevenness in levels of swordfighting skills between the participants undermined that equality. It was considered 'base, for one of the sword, to call out another who was never bred to it, but wears it only for fashion's sake'.¹⁶ Consequently, another weapon had to be used. Whereas the small sword required long practice in order to master it, one could learn quickly how to fire a pistol. When Captain Richard Jasper challenged Joseph Brice in May 1761 in a coffeehouse, Brice said he 'did not wear a sword nor understand it'; they fought their duel with pistols.¹⁷ Five years later, when John Knill sent a written challenge to a Mr Stephens, he wrote 'As I suppose neither you nor I know enough of sharps to risque anything upon 'em I fancy implements which may be carried in the pocket will suit better'.¹⁸ It was thought that using pistols ensured equality and prevented potential duellists from the 'false pride' that their 'strength or agility' would ensure victory.¹⁹ Of course the pistol was not the only possible alternative weapon. Among the lower classes, boxing (without gloves) was the preferred method of settling disputes, but this was deemed unsuitable for gentlemen. Although around mid-century even 'men of the first rank' engaged in 'the manly art of boxing', by the end of the century it was deemed 'vulgar', and 'could never be reconciled to the ideas of a gentleman, whose manners are refined by education and habit'.²⁰

As the second and third objections in the quotation cited above suggest, considerations about the injuries received in sword duels also played a crucial role in the triumph of the pistol, suggesting that the latter was adopted as part of a conscious attempt to reduce the carnage. In fact, even before the

¹⁵ *Self-murder and duelling the effects of cowardice and atheism* (London, 1728), p. 68. See also [Louis de Muralt], *Letters describing the character and customs of the English and French nations ... translated from the French* (London, 1726), p. 6; [William Hope], *Swordsman's vade mecum: or, a preservative against the surprize of a sudden attaque with sharps* (Edinburgh, 1705), p. 3.

¹⁶ Cockburn, *History and examination of duels*, p. 137.

¹⁷ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), Accession 1268, 17 May 1761.

¹⁸ Public Record Office (PRO), KB 33/17/2, Trinity 6 Geo. III. As the indictment goes on to say, he was therefore challenged to fight 'with pistols'. See also W. S. Lewis, ed., *Horace Walpole's correspondence* (48 vols., London, New Haven, and Oxford, 1937–83), xvii, p. 246, xxiii, p. 255.

¹⁹ *The British code of the duel* (London, 1824), p. 44.

²⁰ *A hint on duelling, in a letter to a friend. To which is added the bruiser, or an inquiry into the pretensions of modern manhood* (2nd edn, London, 1752) pp. 32–7; Abraham Clerke, *A home-thrust at duelling, intended as an answer to a late pamphlet intituled, a hint on duelling* (London, 1753), p. 21; Samuel Stanton, *The principles of duelling; with rules to be observed in every particular respecting it* (London, 1790), p. 27. For popular boxing matches, see John Beattie, *Crime and the courts in England, 1660–1800* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 91–4. I intend to discuss non-elite duels elsewhere.

introduction of the pistol, growing sensitivity to bloodshed appears to have led sword fights to become less lethal. Mortality rates in the sword duels sampled declined slightly from 28 per cent (five of eighteen participants) in the first quarter of the eighteenth century to 18 per cent (four of twenty-two) after 1750. In part, this is because fencing was reinvented as a defensive art, and as a skill that contributed to the development of a polite gentleman. John Locke argued that fencing ‘is a good exercise for health, but dangerous to the life’. Perhaps in response to such criticisms, in 1707 William Hope, the deputy governor of Edinburgh Castle, introduced a ‘new method of fencing’, which prioritized defence and rendered ‘the offensive part or pursuit more slow’, explicitly in order to allow a duellist ‘a fair opportunity, both as a man of honour, of defending himself, and as a good Christian, of saving his adversary. (Honour, as well as religion, obliging him to both.)’²¹ Judging by the outcomes, this new method – or something similar – was adopted, and duellists became more likely to stop at the first sign of blood, or when an opponent was disarmed, rather than fight until serious injury or death.

While throughout the century fencing masters continued to argue that the skill was essential for self-defence, fencing was increasingly promoted as worth practising for its own sake. In his letters to his son, Lord Chesterfield wrote that ‘your exercises of riding, fencing, and dancing will civilize and fashion your body and limbs, and give you, if you will but take it, “l’air d’un honnête homme”’, but he also recognized that ‘to fence well may possibly save your life’. Domenico Angelo, whose school of fencing established at Carlisle House in 1763 and publication *L’école des armes* (1763, English translation 1787) did much to increase its popularity, emphasized the civilizing benefits of fencing for persons of rank, ‘giving them additional strength of body, proper confidence, grace, activity, and address; enabling them, likewise, to pursue other exercises with greater facility’.²² These changes, with fencing becoming more rule-bound and adopting ‘polite’ objectives, made sword fights less lethal, but they may also have contributed to the declining willingness of gentlemen to use swords in duels. The rules that all hits should strike the opponent’s breast and that time had to be allowed for one’s opponent to recover after a lunge,²³ for example, were likely to inculcate habits which undermined one’s ability to triumph over a less-refined antagonist. Indeed, from early in the century there was concern among fencing masters that the skills they taught were perceived as no longer suitable for life-threatening combat.²⁴

²¹ [John Locke], *Some thoughts concerning education* (London, 1693), p. 238; William Hope, *Hope’s new method of fencing* (2nd edn, Edinburgh, 1714), pp. 18, 40.

²² Bonamy Dobrée, ed., *The letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth earl of Chesterfield* (6 vols., London, 1932), III, p. 1171 (21 June 1748), IV, p. 1732 (16 May 1751); Domenico Angelo, *The school of fencing* (London, 1787), preface; J. D. Aylward, *The small-sword in England: its history, its forms, its makers, and its masters* (London, 1960), pp. 107–10; idem, *The house of Angelo* (London, 1953); Arthur Wise, *The history and art of personal combat* (London, 1971), chs. 7–8.

²³ Aylward, *House of Angelo*, p. 29.

²⁴ William Hope, *A vindication of the true art of self-defence* (Edinburgh, 1724).

Another factor that led to a reduction in fatalities from sword duels was a change in the role played by the seconds. Although these were not consistently used in the early part of the period, when they were present they often joined in the fight.²⁵ In the late seventeenth century many duels were actually group battles. As a commentator wrote in 1680, ‘the mode nowadays, is for all the seconds to draw at once with the principal, and among them the engagement is as vigorous as if each were the very person that first gave the affront’.²⁶ In 1668, a duel involving the duke of Buckingham and two soldiers on one side and Lord Shrewsbury and two others on the other was fought in the ‘French style’, in which the two groups of three lined up opposite one another, and at the signal ‘came together with clashing blades’. All six participants were wounded, and two died. The seconds on both sides were reputed to be chosen on the basis of their fighting skills, and the duel was thought to be the result of a plot to assassinate Buckingham.²⁷ In the notorious duel between Lord Mohun and the duke of Hamilton in 1712, the seconds (who had had their own differences in the past) drew their swords against each other simultaneously with the principals, and clashed, wounding one, Colonel Hamilton. (Allegations that Mohun’s second, Lieutenant-General Maccartney, also stabbed the duke appear unfounded.)²⁸ In contrast, most reports of sword duels from the 1730s to the 1770s do not indicate that any seconds were present, let alone participated in the fights. When seconds once again became popular in the 1780s, their role had changed significantly, as discussed below.

II

But why did the introduction of pistols lead to a further dramatic reduction in the level of fatalities? One could advance a technological explanation, that early pistols were inaccurate. In 1692, Hope advised duellists on horse who fought with pistols to ride up so close that ‘you may almost with the fire of your pistol, singe your adversaries doublet or coat’ before they fired; whereas this method ‘will hardly ever fail to do execution’, shooting at a greater distance

²⁵ Seconds played a similar role in early modern France and Germany: François Billacois, *The duel: its rise and fall in early modern France* (New Haven, 1990), p. 65; Ute Frevert, ‘The taming of the noble ruffian: male violence in early modern and modern Germany’, in Spierenburg, ed., *Men and violence*, pp. 39–40.

²⁶ *Honour’s preservation without blood: or, sober advice to duellists* (London, 1680), p. 24.

²⁷ R. Latham and W. Matthews, eds., *The diary of Samuel Pepys* (11 vols., London, 1970–83), ix, pp. 26–7; J. H. Wilson, *A rake and his times: George Villiers, second duke of Buckingham* (London, 1954), pp. 93–8. For other late seventeenth-century group duels, see Latham and Matthews, eds., *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, iii, pp. 170–1; Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), *Seventh report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. Part I. Report and appendix* (London, 1879), pp. 469, 479, 494, 497.

²⁸ British Library (BL), Add. MSS 52474, fo. 56; Victor Stater, *Duke Hamilton is dead! A story of aristocratic life and death in Stuart Britain* (New York, 1999), pp. 234–6, 246–70; H. T. Dickinson, ‘The Mohun–Hamilton duel: personal feud or Whig plot?’, *Durham University Journal* (June 1965), pp. 159–65.

was described as firing ‘at random’.²⁹ With the introduction of the duelling pistol around 1770 and a series of refinements over the ensuing decades, however, pistols quickly became much more accurate. The duelling pistol was lighter than earlier pistols, with a curved stock that fitted easily into the hand and which meant that the barrel lined up naturally as an extension of one’s arm. Adjustable hair triggers, roller bearings, gold-lined touch holes, water-proof pans, and the patent breech all caused faster firing and straighter shots.³⁰ Such technological improvements may have been responsible for a slight, but temporary, increase in the mortality rate of duels in the early nineteenth century.³¹ But while gunsmiths competed to produce ever more deadly weapons, cultural constraints severely reduced the likelihood that duellists would actually hit their antagonists. Some technical improvements were forbidden: although rifling was becoming an effective means of ensuring a straight shot during the eighteenth century, it was considered inappropriate to use rifled pistols in duels. Similarly, sights were discouraged, which made pistols difficult to aim.³² But in a context of ever more sophisticated weaponry, the real reason injuries became less common was the distinctive ways in which pistol duels were conducted (though we should not forget that almost a third of all the participants were still harmed in some way). These practices suggest that, as with the sword, it is changing attitudes towards violence and ideas about the purposes of duels which explain why the level of fatalities declined so dramatically. According to Abraham Bosquett (writing in 1817), although duelling was becoming ‘so much a science in some men’s hands’, ‘it is gratifying to reflect, that, of late years, the conciliating manners, and mildness of temper, characteristic of the true gentleman, have generally prevented these rencontres from being carried to deadly extremes’.³³

In comparison to the sword duel, pistol duels were more likely to take place after a delay; typically, after a quarrel had taken place and a challenge had been issued, the participants fought their duel early the next morning. Although not all participants could wait that long, some kind of delay was necessary, since gentlemen were not in the habit of carrying a set of pistols around with them. In contrast, early in our period gentlemen normally carried swords, so the delay between the initial quarrel (when, many times, swords were actually drawn) and the actual duel was often minimal.³⁴ The delay

²⁹ William Hope, *The compleat fencing-master: in which is fully described the whole guards, parades and lessons, belonging to the small-sword* (London, 1692), pp. 124–5.

³⁰ John A. Atkinson, *The British duelling pistol* (London, 1978); J. N. George, *English pistols and revolvers* (Onslow County, NC, 1938), pp. 68–76.

³¹ Simpson, ‘Dandelions on the field of honour’, pp. 106–7.

³² Robert Baldick, *The duel: a history of duelling* (1965; reprint edn, London, 1979), p. 42; *Art of duelling*, p. 49.

³³ Abraham Bosquett, *The young man of honour’s vade-mecum, being a salutary treatise on duelling* (London, 1817), pp. 88, 91.

³⁴ See, for example, *The proceedings of the King’s commission of the peace ... held ... in the Old-Bailey ... on ... the 11, 12, 13, and 14th days of October, 1699* (London, 1699), trial for the murder of John Blisset; Shoemaker, ‘Male honour’, pp. 193–8.

between the challenge and the actual duel allowed tempers to cool (and the participants to sober up), and gave friends and seconds a chance to settle the dispute before shots were fired.

Even more importantly, unlike the sword duel, the pistol duel was not meant to be a trial of skill between the participants. When given a chance to aim and shoot deliberately, Lieutenant Samuel Stanton commented in 1790, even a poor marksman had a five to one chance of either wounding or killing his adversary.³⁵ But developing conventions prevented duellists from benefiting from the increasing accuracy of their pistols, and any skills they possessed. It was actually considered bad form consciously to aim the pistol, or to practise beforehand.³⁶ After Captain Edward Clark shot Captain Thomas Innes in a duel in Hyde Park in 1750, Innes complained that ‘he did not think [Clark] behaved very honourabl[y], for he took full aim at him, [and] fired before I was ready’. Duellists were expected to point their pistol at the ground until just before firing. As Stanton advised, ‘it is highly improper for any person to put the pistol across his arm, or to be longer in taking aim than is necessary; a moment or two is full sufficient to view your object, and fire’.³⁷ Consequently, the duel turned into an exercise in which the chances of death depended on the inadequately directed paths of the bullets, and were thus essentially equal on both sides. Of course, none of this actually prevented the participants from practising beforehand, or of increasing their chances of survival by tactics such as standing sideways to their antagonist, or of attempting to increase their chances of hitting their opponent by measuring in advance the ‘dispart’ or throw of their pistols, and learning how to load them correctly.³⁸ No doubt some people tried to improve their chances in such situations; what is impressive is how robust the rules for maintaining fair play and reducing the bloodshed actually were.

As an illegal activity, duels were regulated only by the expectations of the participants themselves (and their seconds), and especially in the early years of the pistol duel there was considerable choice concerning the procedures to be followed: should the participants fire together, or in turn; what distance apart should they stand; and how many shots should they fire? In 38 per cent of the sixty-one duels for which this information was reported the participants fired together, and of the remainder, the most common procedure was for the challenger – the person whose perceived injury led to the duel – to fire first. (In other cases the parties tossed for the privilege, or it was the person challenged who fired first.) Firing by turn, what one author called ‘cool, alternate firing’, was more commonly used in the early years of the pistol duel (when pistols were less accurate), but later authors argued that because this allowed the

³⁵ Stanton, *Principles of duelling*, p. 69.

³⁶ Simpson, ‘Dandelions on the field of honour’, p. 113.

³⁷ *The trial of Captain Edward Clark ... for the murder of Captain Thomas Innes ... in a duel in Hyde Park, March 12, 1749: at Justice-Hall in the Old Bailey* (London, 1750), p. 7; Stanton, *Principles of duelling*, p. 77.

³⁸ Bosquett, *Young man of honour's vade-mecum*, pp. 7–10.

participants too much time to aim, it led to excessive fatalities: one wondered 'if ever there was a more bloody system introduced into the world'. In contrast, by shooting on an agreed signal such as dropping a handkerchief, the participants were forced to take their eye off their opponent until the moment of firing. By 1824, firing on signal was 'pretty generally determined' to be the best procedure.³⁹

The choice of a distance may have evolved in a similar way to reduce the carnage. In the duel between Deering and Thornhill in 1711 the parties initially stood apart, and then 'came up like two lions, and with their pistols advanced, when within four yards of each other each discharged'; another account says they fired when their 'pistols near touched'. Unsurprisingly, one (Deering) was killed.⁴⁰ As pistols became more accurate, distances appear to have become longer. In the second half of the century distances ranged from four to fifteen paces, with a median figure of ten (definitions of a pace varied, but were most commonly between two and a half and three feet.) A commentator in 1793 complained of 'the bloody distances sometimes given; eight and seven yards are not infrequent ... which, when the parties come to present, will of course bring the mouths of their pistols to no more than four or five'. This was referred to as 'such a cool, diabolical design as to bring certain death'. From the 1790s most commentators advised ten paces or yards, or twelve in the case of 'trivial disputes'. According to a pamphlet published in 1836, nineteenth-century distances were even further apart: 'Duels are generally fought at 10, 12, and 14 paces.'⁴¹

The number of shots fired on each side ranged from one to six, but in 92 per cent (seventy-two of seventy-eight) of the duels sampled the participants fired only one or two shots. Although serious injury to a participant occasionally forced the issue, the small number of shots fired is another crucial factor in explaining the low mortality rate of the pistol duel, and provides a significant contrast to the duel by sword, which normally only ended with an injury or the disarming of one's opponent. Pistol duels ended when one of the principals refused to fire, or fired in the air, or the seconds interfered. In 1793 duellists were advised not to fire at all if they were in the wrong: 'if any clear and decided injury has been done by either of the parties to the other, he will only present [his pistol], in order to interrupt the aim of his adversary; on receiving his fire, he will instantly recover, and then submit himself to the generosity of his enemy'. This is the procedure adopted when Colonel Harvey Aston met Major Picton in 1799 over a comment made by Aston in a private letter that the major had 'acted rather illiberally' toward one of their officers. As the wounded party, Picton fired first; although his pistol snapped, 'the seconds

³⁹ *Advice to seconds*, pp. 28–33; *British code of the duel*, p. 48.

⁴⁰ *A true account ... relating to the tryal of Richard Thornhill*, p. 9; *An account of the life and character of Sir Chomley Deering* (London, 1711), p. 5.

⁴¹ *Advice to seconds*, pp. 24–5; *Art of duelling*, p. 49; *British code of the duel*, p. 47. Bosquett, however, argued that a pace was five feet: *Young man of honour's vade-mecum*, p. 101.

decided that this was equal to a fire'. Aston then fired his pistol into the air, 'declaring that he had no quarrel with Major Picton'. At this point, according to *The Times*, 'mutual explanations took place, and they shook hands'.⁴²

The role of the seconds was another vital aspect in reducing bloodshed in pistol duels. The 'éclaircissement', the process of defusing an affront and reconciling the parties, became a key role played by seconds. In contrast to their role in late seventeenth-century duels discussed earlier, seconds in the late eighteenth century were expected to try and prevent the duel from taking place at all, and, if this was unsuccessful, to stop the duel after as few shots were fired as possible. In the dispute in 1773 which came to be labelled the 'Vauxhall Affray', the seconds, having 'reduced the causes of [the] quarrel and defence to writing, the better to understand what ground they were to stand upon', concluded 'from the particulars they had heard on both sides, a trifling acknowledgement that each was wrong would be best, [and] recommended it to the parties'. This temporarily ended the dispute, but the settlement subsequently unravelled and a duel took place.⁴³ As noted in the *British code of the duel* (1824), the use of pistols, unlike the sword, allowed, between shots, a 'positive pause to the seconds for conciliation ... when the honour of both parties may have been mutually satisfied'.⁴⁴ In the duel between Prime Minister William Pitt and George Tierney fought on Putney Heath in 1798, occasioned by a speech Pitt made in the Commons, both parties fired twice, with Pitt firing his second shot in the air. As *The Times* reported, 'the seconds then jointly interfered, and insisted that the matter should go no further, it being their decided opinion that sufficient satisfaction had been given, and that the business was ended with perfect honour to both parties'.⁴⁵ As many commentators noted, the role of the seconds was crucial in determining the outcome of a duel: they could exacerbate the conflict by encouraging the principals to fight on, or, as seems to have been most often the case, they could encourage a quick settlement. They could also subvert the intentions of the principals by loading their guns with insufficient powder (thereby weakening the force of the shot), or even by loading them with powder only and no ball. According to one humorous account of a duel in 1771 between 'two Hibernian hairdressers', the seconds 'charged their pistols, unknown to them, with potatoes half boiled'. Reporting yet another duel which ended after each party fired one shot (and one of those was in the air) in 1790, *The Times* commented, 'according to the system of modern duels, neither party received any injury'.⁴⁶

⁴² *Times*, 11 June 1799.

⁴³ *The Vauxhall Affray; or the macaronies defeated* (2nd edn, London, 1773), p. 7; Clare Brant, 'Duelling by sword and pen: the Vauxhall affray of 1773', *Prose Studies*, 19 (1996), pp. 160–72. Because Bate was a clergyman, he could not use a pistol or sword, and a boxing match occurred instead.

⁴⁴ *British code of the duel*, p. 43.

⁴⁵ *Times*, 28 May 1798.

⁴⁶ *London Evening Post*, 22 Oct. 1761; *General Evening Post*, 14 Mar. 1771; *Times*, 23 Aug. 1790.

III

These changes in the way duels were conducted not only help explain the decline in mortality rates, they also suggest important changes in the reasons why duels were fought. They suggest that the point of participation in a duel was increasingly focused on a demonstration of courage, and far less stress was placed on a test of fighting skills and the ability to inflict injury on one's opponent. In his *Discourse of duels* in 1687, Thomas Comber explained that 'the acceptor of the challenge comes prepared to kill the challenger if he can, and hopes to get the reputation of a braver man by doing so'.⁴⁷ A century later the emphasis had shifted subtly from the more active assertion of 'bravery' to the more passive demonstration of 'courage', of standing firm in the face of fire. Lord Talbot fought a duel with John Wilkes in 1762 because Wilkes refused to state whether he had written an attack on Talbot in the *North Briton*. After they exchanged shots, Wilkes immediately acknowledged authorship. According to Wilkes's account of the duel, Talbot then 'paid the highest encomiums on my courage', and Talbot's second, Colonel Berkeley, told him he 'admired my courage and coolness beyond his farthest idea; that was his expression'.⁴⁸

The key point was to demonstrate courage, and many duellists refused to apologize until after they had received their adversary's fire, to avoid any implication that they apologized through cowardice. Similarly, many duels were fought because the challenger felt that not to issue a challenge, after an insult, would be taken as a sign of cowardice. In 1786, Major General Stuart challenged Lord Macartney to a duel, in order to 'give him satisfaction ... for offence taken at my public conduct; and to evince that personal safety is no consideration with me'.⁴⁹ In 1804, when a dispute arose between Lord Camelford and Captain Best, 'several overtures were made ... to effect a reconciliation', but they were vehemently rejected. As the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported, 'The fact was, his Lordship had an idea that his antagonist was the best shot in England, and he was therefore extremely fearful lest his reputation should suffer, if he made any concession, however slight, to such a person' in order to avoid having to fight a duel.⁵⁰ What drove men such as Camelford to fight duels was a desire not so much to redress an injury or affirm their honesty, as to demonstrate their courage. This was one reason why the parties were not allowed to fight when inebriated: 'no man's courage is the better established by anything he does in such moments'.⁵¹ In 1791, two attorneys, who were friends, got into an argument while drinking 'freely' and used some 'abrupt language'. Despite the fact the cause of the quarrel was thought to be trivial, and efforts

⁴⁷ Thomas Comber, *A discourse of duels, shewing the sinful nature and mischievous effects of them* (London, 1687), p. 51.

⁴⁸ Raymond Postgate, 'That devil Wilkes' (London, 1930), p. 49. See also accounts of the 1779 duel between Charles James Fox and William Adam: *Gentleman's Magazine*, 49 (1779), p. 610; John A. Atkinson, *Duelling pistols and some of the affairs they settled* (London, 1964), pp. 115–16.

⁴⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 56 (1786), p. 523; *The Daily Universal Register (Times)*, 9 June 1786.

⁵⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 74 (1804), p. 285.

⁵¹ *Advice to seconds*, p. 21.

were made to reconcile them, the duel proceeded, a product, the *Gentleman's Magazine* noted, of 'an absurd unwarrantable fear of what might be said and thought, if they did not expose their lives to each other'.⁵²

This raises the question of who the audience was for duels, *whom* fighting a duel was meant to impress, and how *public* duels were. And here we face a paradox: although duels were apparently fought to defend reputations, they were increasingly fought in private. Throughout this period the majority of duels were fought away from the public eye, in out of the way places such as 'the backside of Southampton House'.⁵³ None the less, as efforts to prevent duels increased, they were increasingly fought outside the built up area of the metropolis, in Hyde Park or in the heaths, commons, and fields surrounding the metropolis. In contrast, during the Restoration favourite locations included the public squares of Covent Garden and Lincoln's Inn Fields.⁵⁴ Whereas more than a third of the thirty-four duels sampled in the period from 1660 to 1724 were fought within the city, inside houses, taverns, and coffehouses, or in streets, squares, and alleys such as 'old Pall Mall', Covent Garden, or Falconbridge Court near Soho Square,⁵⁵ by the last quarter of the eighteenth century only 7 out of 100 duels took place in an urban location, with the rest occurring outside the built up area.

This secrecy is not simply explained by practical considerations such as the fact that pistol shots attracted attention and endangered passers-by, and that duelling was illegal and the participants could be arrested merely for attempting to fight a duel. In practice few people suffered serious legal penalties for duelling; as long as the rules of honour had been followed, those duellists who killed their antagonists and were prosecuted for murder were invariably pardoned or convicted of manslaughter and given token punishments.⁵⁶ Even though, as discussed below, the courts offered an increasingly attractive service as arbiters of disputes, judges and juries in this period never viewed duelling as a sufficiently threatening offence to subject duellists to capital punishment. The real problem was that significant numbers of people in London, from all social classes, sought to prevent duels from taking place. The duel between Lord Mohun and Duke Hamilton was almost prevented by the various actions of a footman, tavern drawer, labourer, and hackney coachman.⁵⁷ When Captain John Laverick and Captain John Dawson quarrelled in 1748, and Dawson attempted to issue a challenge, they encountered numerous obstacles. The messenger bringing the challenge was told by a woman that she thought he 'might have something better to do than

⁵² *Gentleman's Magazine*, 61 (1791), p. 672.

⁵³ *The proceedings on the King's commission of the peace ... held ... in the Old-Bayly, on ... the 14th, 15th, 17th, 18th, and 19th days of January, 1697* (London, 1698), trial for the murder of Christopher Ludbrook.

⁵⁴ Baldick, *The duel*, p. 69.

⁵⁵ Latham and Matthews, eds., *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, III, p. 170, VIII, p. 363; *The Weekly Journal*; or, *Saturday's-Post*, 28 Jan. 1721.

⁵⁶ Simpson, 'Dandelions on the field of honour', pp. 121–33; Andrew, 'Code of honour', pp. 412–13.

⁵⁷ Stater, *Duke Hamilton is dead!*, pp. 218, 229–34.

bring messages to set gentlemen to fighting'. A maid subsequently persuaded Dawson 'to be cool, and alter his purpose', and she sent a message to Laverick not to come home (so he would not receive the message). Despite these attempts to subvert the planned duel, it started anyway, but a second, two passing gentlemen, and a servant attempted to beat down their passes. Although in the end Dawson was killed anyway, the extensive efforts to prevent this duel are none the less impressive.⁵⁸ Similarly, when two Americans duelled in Hyde Park early one summer morning in 1796, around ten people, including a servant to a herbseller, happened to be bathing in the Serpentine. According to the servant, when he saw the gentlemen 'he put on his shirt and ran towards them; several others went naked'. Before they got there, however, the parties exchanged shots and one was killed.⁵⁹

In the 1780s and 1790s ordinary Londoners' attempts to prevent duels were supplemented by the efforts of 'thief-takers' based at rotation offices such as the one at Bow Street. Possibly tipped off by friends of the participants – or even one of the principals themselves – thief-takers occasionally managed to prevent duels by showing up at the appointed time and arresting the would-be participants. In March 1796, two men agreed to fight a duel, but 'the affair was so well known to their friends' that warrants were secured from both the Bow Street and Marlborough Street offices, and the affair was 'amicably settled' by 'the good offices of the sitting magistrate'.⁶⁰ These efforts supplemented longstanding official attempts, which date back to the Restoration, by magistrates, the king and his ministers, and the houses of parliament to prevent duels involving prominent figures.⁶¹

There was, therefore, considerable unofficial as well as official opposition to duelling, and this is why duellists attempted to conduct their activities in private, whispering challenges, fighting behind locked doors in taverns, or fighting at dawn in out of the way places. When John Wilkes and Samuel Martin fought in 1763, they went to Hyde Park with their pistols concealed, but when some people walked by them in their chosen location it became 'necessary to retire to a more private place'.⁶² Those who received wounds in duels frequently refused to divulge the cause, or lied about it, even to their near relations. After he was wounded in 1718, William Bowen initially refused to tell his father what had happened, but three days later 'thinking he should dye of the said wound', he explained that he had been in a duel with a Mr Quin.⁶³

⁵⁸ *The case of Captain John Laverick, relating to the killing of Captain John Lawson* (London, 1748), pp. 6–9; LMA, MJ/SP/1748/04/54–9.

⁵⁹ *Times*, 24 and 25 Aug. 1796.

⁶⁰ *Times*, 24 Mar. 1796.

⁶¹ Latham and Matthews, eds., *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vii, p. 343; HMC, *Twelfth report, appendix, part VII. The manuscripts of S. H. Le Fleming, Esq.* (London, 1890), pp. 100, 299; HMC, *Seventh report*, pp. 466, 469, 470, 494, 506; Narcissus Luttrell, *A brief historical relation of state affairs* (6 vols., Oxford, 1857), ii, pp. 628–9; *Horace Walpole's correspondence*, xxxviii, pp. 227n, 243, 313.

⁶² BL, Add. MSS 41354, fo. 82.

⁶³ Corporation of London Record Office, Sessions Papers, May 1718, depositions concerning the death of William Bowen.

Such deception was often motivated by a desire to prevent one's antagonist from being indicted for murder should the wound prove fatal, but given that even close relations were deceived it also suggests concern that friends and family would have disapproved of such behaviour.

One should not, therefore, conclude from the fact that duelling persisted for so long that it was universally or even very widely supported. Although duels formed a vital element of contemporary gossip and were widely reported in the newspapers, such reports were not infrequently negative in tone. Horace Walpole often mocked the alleged bravery and honour of the participants in the duels he wrote about in his correspondence.⁶⁴ There had long been opposition to duelling among some sections of the gentry and nobility, as a recent examination of the debate on duelling during the reign of James I makes clear. Critics, from Francis Bacon in 1614 and Richard Steele in the *Tatler* and *Spectator* in 1711 to the editors of the *Gentleman's Magazine* from its inception in the 1730s, claimed that the notion of honour on which duelling was based was 'false' and dependent on fashion and the fear of shame, as opposed to 'true' notions of honour based on virtue and Christianity. As John Cockburn wrote in his *History and examination of duels* (1720), 'things are honourable and base by virtue of their intrinsic nature, however men may judge them'.⁶⁵ From the 1770s, critics of the duel stepped up their attack by promoting a new vision of society based on evangelicalism and middle-class values, further undermining the heart of the code of honour, the passion for social approbation.⁶⁶ The topic of duelling was hotly debated in London's debating societies in the last quarter of the century, and, judging by newspaper reports, the prevailing sentiment was clearly against the practice.⁶⁷ Support for duelling in elite society was thus limited. When Lord Byron was tried for the murder of William Chaworth in a duel in 1765 resulting from an argument over who had more game on their estates, it is not surprising that Walpole reported that 'the bitterness of the world against [Byron] has been great'.⁶⁸

Those who participated in duels were thus performing to an increasingly narrow audience. Even in 1680 duellists were referred to as 'hectors', who 'are forced to content themselves with the applause of two or three of their brethren, and the submissive respect of some few of their creatures'.⁶⁹ There is evidence that support for duelling was confined to a subculture in the accounts of the dispute between Charles James Fox and William Adam in 1779. After Adam

⁶⁴ Horace Walpole's correspondence, xviii, pp. 191–2, 202; xx, p. 486; xxii, pp. 181–4.

⁶⁵ Markku Peltonen, 'Francis Bacon, the earl of Northampton, and the Jacobean anti-duelling campaign', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), pp. 1–28; Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Tatler* (3 vols., Oxford, 1987), 1, pp. 192–5 (no. 25, 7 June 1709), 211–19 (nos. 28–9, 14–16 June 1709); idem, ed., *The Spectator* (5 vols., Oxford, 1965), 1, pp. 359–60 (no. 84, 2 June 1711), 418–19 (no. 99, 23 June 1711); *Gentleman's Magazine*, 6 (1736), p. 272, 25 (1755), pp. 112–13, 31 (1761), p. 57, 58 (1788), p. 1039; Cockburn, *History and examination of duels*, p. 156.

⁶⁶ Andrew, 'Code of honour', p. 420.

⁶⁷ Donna Andrew, ed., *London debating societies, 1776–1799* (London Record Society, vol. 30, 1994), passim.

⁶⁸ Horace Walpole's correspondence, xxxviii, p. 535.

⁶⁹ *Honour's preservation without blood*, pp. 3–4.

found comments Fox made in the Commons insulting, Fox assured him no offence was intended. Although Adam initially accepted the explanation, he later said 'his friends were not satisfied', and insisted that Fox publish a letter exonerating him. It was Fox's refusal to do this that led to the duel. In his correspondence reporting the affair, Walpole emphasized the point that it was Adam's *friends* who demanded satisfaction.⁷⁰

The most important constituency for duelling was of course the military, which accounted for a third of all duellists sampled in the period up to 1774, increasing to 44 per cent in the last quarter of the century. The pressure on military men, particularly officers, to partake in duels (when challenged) in this period was notorious. Faced with the obligation of leading their men into battle, officers' courage had to be beyond question. An officer who refused a challenge was 'sent to Coventry' by his brother officers, meaning they refused to associate with or speak to him, except on duty.⁷¹ But even among military men not everyone was willing to subscribe to the code of honour. It was argued in 1753 that duelling should not be considered a 'military custom', but, like swearing and drinking, it was 'generally to be found amongst the worst and most worthless of every sect or body of men upon earth'.⁷² In some cases, soldiers even attempted to stop duels, or apprehend duellists after the fact. When George Townshend and Lord Albemarle were about to fight a duel in Marylebone in 1760, a Captain Caswell, who had been tipped off, stepped out from a coach 'and beg[ged] their pardon, as his superior officers, but told them they were his prisoners'. He sent them home by separate coaches, and acquainted the king, who appointed a mediator.⁷³

Concluding his recent study of the 1712 Mohun–Hamilton duel, Victor Stater argued that 'through their violent antics [duellists] proclaimed independence from a society where moderation and civility were slowly becoming the standard of gentlemanly behaviour'.⁷⁴ By the very act of duelling, elite men stressed their independence from legal and cultural constraints, but such men were becoming increasingly isolated. Not only was the audience of those who were impressed by duelling diminishing, but the way duels were conducted became extremely unsociable, as if the duellist was performing primarily for his own benefit, to convince himself of his own honour and courage. In his *Dissertation on duelling*, published in 1784, Richard Hey complained about 'the haughty self-importance ... the selfish and excessive regard, paid by the punctilious duellist to his own private feelings of disgrace'.⁷⁵ Contact between duellists largely disappeared: challenges now emerged out of exchanges of written correspondence,⁷⁶ and when they reached the field they

⁷⁰ *Horace Walpole's correspondence*, xxiv, pp. 537–8, xxviii, pp. 481–2. See also the sources for this duel listed in n. 48.

⁷¹ John Trusler, *A system of etiquette* (Bath, 1804), pp. 64–6; Shoemaker, 'Male honour', p. 196.

⁷² *A home-thrust at duelling*, pp. 47–52. ⁷³ *Horace Walpole's correspondence*, ix, pp. 318–19.

⁷⁴ Stater, *Duke Hamilton is dead!*, p. 288.

⁷⁵ Richard Hey, *A dissertation on duelling* (Cambridge, 1784), pp. 95–7.

⁷⁶ For examples, see the indictments in PRO, KB33/17/1–2.

stood apart from their antagonists and attacked each other at a distance. At a time when taciturnity emerged as an emblem of male self-discipline and strength among gentlemen,⁷⁷ reports suggest that many duellists hardly spoke to each other, with communication taking place almost entirely through their seconds.

IV

How do we explain these dramatic changes in the way duels were conducted? Important changes were taking place before the pistol replaced the sword, so a technological explanation cannot be adopted. Moreover, duels became more restrained at a time when the weapons themselves were becoming increasingly lethal. Rather, it was the changing rules for conducting duels that limited the damage, and these were the product of broader cultural changes, notably the development of reformed expectations governing men's conduct and changing understandings of male honour. This was a time when, judging by recorded patterns of homicide, overall levels of public violence by gentlemen were declining dramatically in London.⁷⁸ Violent behaviour was increasingly condemned in urban gentry culture. Gentlemen became subject to the ideals of politeness, in which men were expected to control their emotions and be generous and complaisant towards those with whom they interacted. From the 1760s and 70s, the ideals of sensibility required men to show even greater sensitivity and sympathy to other people's feelings.⁷⁹ Reflecting these new values, those who criticized duels evoked the sentiments which would be experienced by duellists who killed their opponents: 'the pangs of self-reproach for having sacrificed the life of a fellow creature to a punctilio ... [and having ruined] an innocent family by the brutal deed'.⁸⁰ The fact that duellists stood apart from each other and communicated through their seconds may have represented a strategy for avoiding becoming aware of their opponents' feelings.

In this new cultural regime, anger was for the first time defined as a particularly male vice and deemed especially inappropriate for gentlemen. According to Elizabeth Foyster, 'for those who aspired to be regarded as gentlemen, angry behaviour was to be avoided at all costs'.⁸¹ It is thus

⁷⁷ Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning masculinity: national identity and language in the eighteenth century* (London, 1996), pp. 104–5; Paul Langford, 'Manners and the eighteenth-century state: the case of the unsociable gentleman', in J. Brewer and E. Hellmuth, eds., *Rethinking Leviathan: the eighteenth-century state in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 298–301.

⁷⁸ Shoemaker, 'Male honour', p. 205.

⁷⁹ Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society*; Klein, 'Politeness'; Barker-Benfield, *The culture of sensibility*, ch. 2.

⁸⁰ *Cursory reflections on the single combat, or modern duel* (London, 1773), p. 14.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Foyster, 'Boys will be boys? Manhood and aggression, 1660–1800', in T. Hitchcock and M. Cohen, eds., *English masculinities, 1660–1800* (London, 1999), pp. 151–66, quote at p. 162; [William Webster], *A casuistical essay on anger and forgiveness, wherein the practice of duelling, and some defects in our laws ... are considered* (London, 1750); John Fawcett, *An essay on anger* (Leeds, 1787), pp. 56–61.

unsurprising that critics of the sword duel emphasized duellists' failure to rein in their passions, condemning them as 'being full of rancour and wrath', and characterizing them as men who 'strike and thrust in passion and fury'. But as we have seen, courage continued to be seen as important, and men were not expected to avoid expressing anger simply out of fear.⁸² The pistol duel was perfectly suited to these apparently contradictory prescriptions, since it required both courage and the control of one's emotions. Duellists stood still in the face of fire, and only fired when permitted. As Kiernan commented, the use of pistols 'favoured the ritualising of the duel into a calm, passion-free encounter'.⁸³

As men were told to control their emotions, and taciturnity became a male virtue, the duel was further transformed by changing understandings of the nature of male honour. As we have seen, critics of duelling attempted to redefine honour as an internal Christian virtue, as opposed to a quality achieved in the court of public opinion. That public performances did indeed become less important to gentry honour is evident in the changing character of homicidal violence committed by gentlemen over the century. Whereas at the start of our period gentlemen used such public violence to assert their distinctive gender and social identity, by the end of the period the limited amount of violence which remained had moved indoors, out of public view, much like the duels which so often took place in remote locations. This was part of a broader shift in the nature of honour and the role of public reputation in metropolitan society, reflected also in the concurrent decline of the public insult. For many, honour became a matter of individual conscience. For others, establishing a good reputation remained important, but in late eighteenth-century London reputations tended to be established in more narrowly circumscribed contexts such as the workplace or in clubs and societies, and not on the public streets.⁸⁴

For those still keen on a public affirmation of their honour, alternative strategies became more attractive. Towards the end of this period participants in duels, or would-be participants, increasingly used the medium of print to defend their reputations, apparently believing it would be more effective. The 1762 duel between Wilkes and Talbot was preceded by a formal exchange of letters between the two; the correspondence, plus an account of the duel, were subsequently published by Wilkes, thereby ensuring that it was Wilkes's reputation which gained most from the affair.⁸⁵ In the 'Vauxhall Affray' in 1773 both participants used the press to state their versions of the events that transpired, both in Vauxhall Gardens and in the subsequent boxing match between Reverend Bate and Captain Miles in Richmond Park. In their letters

⁸² Cockburn, *History and examination of duels*, p. 190.

⁸³ Kiernan, *Duel in European history*, p. 145.

⁸⁴ Shoemaker, 'Male honour'; idem, 'Decline of public insult'.

⁸⁵ *The North Briton. To which is added, by way of an appendix, the letters which passed between the Rt. Hon. Earl Talbot, etc. and John Wilkes, esq.* (2 vols., Dublin, 1763), 1; Postgate, 'That devil Wilkes', pp. 44–50.

to newspapers, both sides consciously submitted their case to 'the tribune of the public'.⁸⁶ It will be recalled that the duel between Fox and Adam in 1779 was fought not because Fox refused to apologize, but because he refused to do so in print; one reason Adam made this demand was that 'he had read a very injurious detail of the affair [Fox's speech] in the newspapers'. Despite Fox's refusal, accounts of the negotiations that preceded the duel were, as in other cases, published in newspapers.⁸⁷ Similarly, it was not uncommon for seconds to submit accounts of duels to the papers to ensure that the public was informed of the honourable conduct of their principals.

Another option was the law. The courts had always been an avenue for redress when one experienced an affront, but their popularity among gentlemen appears to have increased. As the Reverend John Trusler wrote in 1804, 'I am happy to find that gentlemen, men of honour, and even military men in some cases, appeal to the civil laws of their country, when challenged, instead of the sword; and they appear to be countenanced in so doing.'⁸⁸ Another observer wrote in 1790 that since men began to use the courts for revenge in cases of adultery, 'lighter matters alone are productive of the duel'.⁸⁹ Even though cases of criminal conversation prosecuted in the civil courts increased considerably at the end of the century,⁹⁰ this observation was over-optimistic; at the end of our period duels arising from cases of adultery still occurred.

None the less, the duel by itself was increasingly considered an ineffective method of conducting disputes and maintaining honour. A long-running dispute between Colonel Thomas McCarthy and Lieutenant Patrick Leeson in 1790 started in a playhouse when McCarthy publicly affirmed that he had seen Leeson acting as a servant, and Leeson responded by pretending to strike him. The incident led, in succession, to a court case, a duel, a brawl, and at least two further court cases, interspersed with several letters to *The Times* by the two parties and their friends. The duel, which was not fought according to accepted rules, only exacerbated the tensions. The press and the courts offered better prospects. As McCarthy commented in his 'final' letter to *The Times* in October, 'I shall wave ... any farther contest with such opponents, and confidently rest my cause on the public judgement. I am the more inclined to do this as the principal facts will receive a speedy elucidation in a *Court of Justice*.'⁹¹ In 1800, *The Times* carried a letter from an 'anti-duelist' congratulating Lord George Cavendish for responding to an insult by prosecuting his antagonist in the court of King's Bench.⁹² Duelling continued into the

⁸⁶ *The Vauxhall Affray*, p. 26; Brant, 'Duelling by sword and pen', pp. 163–5.

⁸⁷ *Horace Walpole's correspondence*, xxiv, pp. 537–8. ⁸⁸ Trusler, *A system of etiquette*, p. 68.

⁸⁹ Charles Moore, *A full enquiry into the subject of suicide* (London, 1790), p. 253, cited by Brant, 'Duelling by sword and pen', p. 165.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Stone, *Road to divorce: England, 1530–1987*, (1990; pb. edn, Oxford, 1995), pp. 247, 255–6.

⁹¹ *Times*, 14 Sept. to 8 Dec. 1790, passim, quote from 7 Oct.

⁹² *Times*, 12 Feb. 1800.

nineteenth century, but for those opposed to it other methods of responding to affronts were increasingly adopted.

V

Although the duel prospered in the long eighteenth century, the forms and meanings of this ritual were fundamentally altered. The ways in which duels were conducted became sufficiently rule-bound to reduce significantly the amount of overt violence and the level of fatalities incurred. And while those engaged in duels clearly continued to do so in order to defend their sense of honour, that notion of honour had become subtly modified, based as it was increasingly on demonstrations of the participants' courage, and the public whose views conferred that sense of honour was increasingly limited. The modernization of the elite duel was thus part of some important historical trends: an increasing intolerance of violence and desire to avoid bloodshed; the adoption of ideals of politeness by elite men; the internalization of notions of honour and individual identity, thereby reducing the need to establish one's reputation through public display; and the increasingly important role played by the law and print culture in the conduct of social relations. Arguably all these trends were most marked in the rapidly growing metropolis, where new ideas spread quickly and new patterns of social relations developed which altered the way reputations were established.

On the other hand, other features of modernization and the 'civilizing process' commonly identified by historians, such as the increasing role of the state, the growth of the middle class, and industrialization, appear to have had little direct role in the taming of the duel in London. It was ordinary Londoners and friends of the participants who were primarily responsible for discouraging duels from occurring, or stopping them after one or two shots were fired, not agents of the state, who had been unsuccessfully trying for centuries to curtail this custom.⁹³ London's evolving police force played a very limited role, and then usually when others tipped them off, while attempts to punish duellists in the courts made little headway. In contrast to arguments that the embourgeoisement of the duel altered its form and ultimately led to its demise,⁹⁴ this study has found little evidence, beyond complaints in *The Times*, that the social composition of duellists changed significantly over this period.⁹⁵ In the last quarter of the eighteenth century only 6 per cent of the 218 duellists sampled came from identifiably middle-class occupations (this figure rises to 16 per cent if professionals such as lawyers and doctors are included). Although this represents an increase from 2.4 per cent (7 per cent including professionals) of

⁹³ For an argument about the role played by the state in the reduction of violence and aggression, see Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: the history of manners and state formation and civilization* (1939; reprint edn trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Oxford, 1994), pp. 192, 201, 443–50.

⁹⁴ Simpson, 'Dandelions on the field of honour', p. 138; Kiernan, *Duel in European history*, pp. 102, 198–9, 204–22; Kelly, 'That damned thing called honour', esp. pp. 222, 283; Frevert, *Men of honour*, esp. pp. 124–50; Billacois, *The duel*, pp. 32–3.

⁹⁵ *Times*, 28 July 1787, 5, 8, 16 Dec. 1789.

85 duellists in the period 1660 to 1724, the vast majority of duellists remained from the nobility, gentry, and military. Moreover, there is no evidence that the few middle-class men (primarily merchants and bankers) who duelled had any significant impact on the ways in which duels were conducted; in fact their duels resulted in proportionally more injuries than those conducted by elite duellists. And, beyond encouraging the development and sale of ever more deadly weapons (duelling pistols appear to have become a fashion item), economic forces played no identifiable role in shaping changes in duelling customs. These were rendered less lethal not by the growing importance of commerce in society or by technological developments, but by the evolving rules shaped by the participants. It was the changing cultural and social contexts in which gentlemen lived which shaped how this ritual evolved in the eighteenth century.

Judging by the number that took place, the duel remained a healthy custom at the turn of the nineteenth century. Indeed, by reducing fatalities, the changes discussed here arguably encouraged the custom to flourish in spite of widespread criticism. But at another level the duel was a pale reflection of its former self. Men's emotional involvement was much reduced, and the central actors in the ritual became the seconds. The honour affirmed had changed its meaning, and had a much more restricted constituency. The duel would not disappear from English soil for another fifty years, but arguably within a metropolitan context it was fatally undermined in the eighteenth century by changing understandings of the role of violence and honour in definitions of elite masculinity. The short-term causes of its decline in the 1840s were changing judicial attitudes, a change in the law of libel, a revision of the Articles of War, and a policy of refusing to give pensions to the widows of officers killed in duels. Referring to the latter development, which allowed military men to refuse a challenge on the grounds of concern for the welfare of their wives if they were killed, Simpson remarks upon 'the speed with which men of all classes took advantage of this chance to ease the duel into retirement'. As he rightly concludes, this 'suggests strongly that the earlier acceptance of its form concealed unacted-upon distaste for its practice'.⁹⁶ The seeds of the nineteenth-century demise of duelling in England were sown in the social and cultural transformations of the previous century.

⁹⁶ Martin Wiener, 'The Victorian criminalization of men', in Spierenburg, ed., *Men and violence*, p. 204; Simpson, 'Dandelions on the field of honour', p. 140.