

**A Plague on Both Your Houses:
The Duel in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama**

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Introduction

I made a thrust at my enemy, but was short; and on drawing back my arm I received a great wound therein... which passed both through my body and almost to my back; and there we wrestled for the two greatest and dearest prizes we could ever expect trial for, honour and life.

(Sir Edward Sackville on his duel with Lord Edward Bruce, 1613)

Why should man,
For a poor hasty syllable or two,
And vented only in forgetful fury,
Chain all the hopes and riches of his soul
To the revenge of that, die lost forever?

(Captain Ager in *A Fair Quarrel* by Middleton and Rowley 1617, III.i.81-5)

The first of these epigraphs comes from a first person account of a historical duel; in the second, a character argues against the validity of the dueling system. In the first case, Sir Edward Sackville, even as he describes a terrible wound, places his honor and his life on equal footing. In the second, Captain Ager questions risking the well-being of body and soul to protect honor from trivial insult. These two quotes represent the gamut of sentiments on the duel, from dogmatism to doubt, but both speakers demonstrate the imaginative and material appeal the duel held for the noble gentleman (as well as for the general public) in early modern England.

These two excerpts raise some important questions. What role did the duel play in the society of early modern England, especially given social and economic changes such as the rise of the middle class and the reshaping of the aristocracy in relation to the nation state? What range of meanings could the practice of dueling encompass? What arguments were made in

opposition to and in defense of the practice? As a way to approach these questions, I will begin by asking another: what can we learn about the operations of the duel from the drama of the period and what function does the duel perform in the plays in which it appears?

The duel distinguished itself from other forms of violence primarily by a formal challenge, which preceded a later meeting to fight. In addition, it was limited to two people, it included the risk of death or injury, and it was fought without public authority. Dueling treatises set forth detailed rules on who could fight and the proper procedures for insult, challenge, and combat. The duel drew on the tradition of the medieval trial by combat but was also a product of the Renaissance theory of civil courtesy, as I will discuss further later in this paper.¹

Our information on the duel, particularly the duel in early modern England, is limited. The duel was illegal in England and often had to be fought in secrecy or abroad, which discouraged comprehensive records. We have a few accounts of duels, such as the one Sackville provides, as well as mentions of dueling in letters and court records, but scholars debate even such fundamental information as the number of duels that occurred in the period.² Further information appears in dueling treatises or in polemics against the practice, but both of these sources are flawed; the former idealizes the duel, while the latter demonizes it. There is little empirical evidence about how the duel really transpired or the ways in which people imagined it.

I would like to submit the importance of theatre as a cultural text to the scholarly study of

1 Peltonen, *Duel* 3-4

2 Low 55

the duel. While Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre does not always depict the duel in a strictly realistic manner, it displays a range of ways the general public could imagine quarrels. In fact, drama gives us a broader sense of the duel than even treatises can, because theatre sells to a more diverse audience. The theatre is an art form distinctly susceptible to the whims of public opinion. The duel loomed large in the early modern English imagination, and drama made thorough use of it.

Playwrights did not necessarily need to write realistic duels, but they did require an understanding of the connotations of the duel in order to use it effectively. A particular representation of a duel onstage does not necessarily mean that a duel ever happened in that manner in real life. However, it does indicate that the audience could imagine it happening. The audience could, for example, accept a duel outside its usual social context (as they must do for *The Roaring Girl*). Nevertheless, even that topsy-turvy duel relies on common beliefs and assumptions. The theatre condenses and heightens but still gives us a sense of what is possible to imagine.

Playwrights wrote for a wider audience base than the authors of fencing treatises. Alfred Harbage, author of a comprehensive study on the composition of early modern English audiences, claimed that “the theatre was a democratic institution.”³ The theatre drew a large—Harbage estimates roughly 13% of the London population attended in any given week—and

3 Harbage 11

economically diverse crowd.⁴ The penny tickets were cheaper than other commercialized pleasures, calculated to what workmen could afford.⁵ Audiences mostly consisted of craftsmen, journeymen, apprentices, and shopkeepers—the middling sort—but also included gentry and nobility.⁶ Both men and women attended.⁷ While fencing treatises targeted an upper-class male reader who already believed in the worth of the duel, playwrights appealed to a much broader population.

In the case of popular imaginings of the duel, “plays of the late Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline eras... make vivid the ambivalence and oppositions.”⁸ Drama imagines the duel in innumerable different ways. The three plays I will examine—*A Fair Quarrel* by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Roaring Girl* by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, and *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare—provide a good sampling of the diversity of depictions in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. *A Fair Quarrel* demonstrates that the duel could be imagined in its ideal form, the way that treatises of honor prescribed it. *The Roaring Girl* plucks the duel from its usual social context to protest the abuse of wealthy male privilege against a background of comedy. Finally, *Romeo and Juliet* enacts the worst fears of the duel’s critics by presenting it as a proscriptive and destructive social script which dooms the main characters to tragedy. Ira Clark argues that

4 Harbage 41, 64

5 Ibid. 60, 64

6 Ibid. 60, 64, 63

7 Ibid. 74

8 Clark 121

Although a few plays through the period seem to support dueling and a large assortment seem ambiguous about it, the preponderance of plays join in a qualified resolution of the dueling issue: they condemn dueling's disruptions and destructions at the same time that they acknowledge dueling's potent appeal as proof of manhood and gentility.⁹

Each of these three plays presents an aspect of that ambiguity.

In addition, we can understand a play more fully by considering the work the duel performs in it. The duel is a ritual, cultural symbol, and literary trope as well as a real world practice. Rituals map the social world in miniature and condense social norms. The duel, as a ritual of conflict, sets social norms (such as values of honor in opposition to those of moderation) against each other. In *A Fair Quarrel*, the duel is the mechanism to accomplish the happy ending. The duel in *The Roaring Girl* validates the play's thematic argument. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it turns the play from comedy to tragedy. Appreciating the implications of the duel deepens our understanding of the play as a whole.

Considered as a set, these three plays demonstrate the power of the duel as both a symbol and a plot device. In all three, the duel plays a fundamental role in shaping the plot and argument of the play. These three pieces present the duel as an, if not exactly contradictory, at least multivalent practice. Furthermore, these plays demonstrate that the duel was not the prerogative of the aristocracy, but part of the cultural consciousness of the general theatre-going public.

Theatrical representation and actual dueling practice inform each other. Not only does

9 Clark 130

theatre give us an idea of the range of cultural imagination, it also plays a role in creating that imagination. Theatre and culture are mutually producing. People look to theatre and other cultural productions to find scripts by which to create and tell their own lives. Art acts as both a mirror to and a propagator of culture.

The purview of my study is London from 1594 to 1618. These years span the period from the translation of the first Italian fencing treatise to the publication of an important tract supporting King James's ban of dueling. The drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods was marked by large outdoor theatres (as well as smaller, more expensive, indoor venues), daylight performances, and all-male casts. This period experienced great social changes in class structure, ideas of nobility, and the duel. From the rule of Henry VIII onward, England became an increasingly state-dominated society, a transition that threatened noble privilege.¹⁰ From the other direction, the rising middle class in London obscured social distinctions based on wealth.¹¹ The aristocracy became courtiers and state bureaucrats rather than knights.¹² At the same time that economic and political conditions were changing the definition of nobility, the English were importing new ideas about honor and the duel from Renaissance Italy.¹³ Honor became an amalgam of different discourses, often irreconcilable and yet held simultaneously. The idea that honor was one's reputation among one's noble peers (as opposed to being a measure of personal virtue) gained increasing sway. The duel, newly introduced to England from continental Europe,

10 James 11

11 Wrightson, *Social* 200

12 James 2; Orgel 14

13 Holland 23

gained purchase in the notion of honor-as-reputation as a way to maintain status in the face of insult. The increasing frequency of duels prompted challenges from those who argued that honor should be based on Christian virtue and moderation.

Each of these profound cultural shifts underlay the debate over the duel. Was combat a necessary way for a gentleman to defend his good name or an act of wasteful bloodshed? Could it offer the nobility a distinction to set them apart or was it threatened by an increasingly unstable class and gender system? Could the carefully scripted dueling procedure adapt to the demands of a shifting cultural milieu? These questions remained contested in this period, and we can find explorations of each of them in the three plays examined here.

Chapter 1:

Paradoxical Defense—Elizabethan Dueling Treatises as Conflicted Texts

I finde a verie ill custome generally followed in quarrelles, where...
Gentlemen are rashly carryed to take weapons in hand, not
considering first if it bee a lawful quarrell, or such as may deserve a
Combat.¹⁴

(Vincentio Saviolo's fencing treatise, 1595)

This noble science is not to cause on[e] man to abuse another
injuriously but to use it in their necessyties to defend them in their
Just Causes & to maintaine their honour & Credits.¹⁵

(George Silver's fencing treatise, 1599)

The preceding quotes from two different Elizabethan treatises on the “noble science” of swordplay demonstrate the complex relationship between the theory and practice of the duel. Each writer attempts to negotiate the fine line between teaching sword fighting and ascribing limits to the proper place, time, and method for its use. In England at the turn of the 17th century, the larger cultural shift of early modernity also revolutionized the way that the nobility used swords. The fencing treatises of the Italian Vincentio Saviolo in 1595 and the Englishman George Silver in 1599 give written form to two competing strands of sword technique and their contrasting roles within the shifting cultural milieu. In addition to advocating profoundly different fighting techniques, they also reflect different national and ideological interests and audiences. Although these two authors are in many ways antithetical to one another, they negotiate similar difficulties in adapting honor theory to the practicalities of the duel. In

14 Saviolo 386

15 Silver, *Bref* 581

particular, they struggle to reconcile the duel's stated purpose—to reveal divine truth—with the need for skill and caution in sword play. Dueling treatises, although the scholar's most direct point of access to the practice, are fundamentally conflicted texts. Given this, it is more fruitful to consider the range of cultural imaginings of the duel rather than attempt to circumscribe it as a homogeneous practice. In doing so, we can better understand the duel as it was situated among competing ideals.

In early modern England, shifting notions of class, nationhood, and proper behavior converged in a struggle over changes in sword technique. Italian émigrés brought the rapier (along with Renaissance conceptions of honor) to England where native teachers responded by appealing to national pride in traditional martial practices. The competition between English and foreign teachers of swordplay reveals deeper divisions in who used the weapons and to what purposes.

The traditional English structure for teaching sword play targeted the common man and aimed primarily at self defense. Henry VIII incorporated the English Masters of Defence to teach swordplay and other weapon styles. This group of teachers set standards for student testing and attempted to monopolize the teaching of defense.¹⁶ However, in the 1580s and '90s, Italian teachers were particularly effective at defying this monopoly and the popularity of the English Masters declined.¹⁷ Part of the Italian teachers' success was their ability to attract a new and

16 Anglin 396

17 Turner 1

higher class student population. The English schools tended to teach the yeomen class, who might have needed weapons training for military or personal self-defense.¹⁸ In early modernity, the ideals of personal combat shifted to become increasingly a mark of the aristocratic gentlemen. Italian teachers espousing new humanistic ideas taught swordplay as a way to demonstrate status and honor, as well as for bodily protection.¹⁹ The Italian teacher Rocco Bonetti displayed the coats of arms of his students upon his classroom wall to advertise the nobility of his clientele.²⁰

Finally, the conflict between English and foreign teachers took on a nationalistic valence. Those who were attracted to the new rapier style flocked to Italian teachers, while the English Masters appealed to xenophobia to keep their students.²¹ George Silver goes so far as to claim that training in Italian-style combat is a foreign ploy to weaken England by convincing its aristocracy to kill each other.²² The larger question of the place of the rising nation state in the European cultural community played out in microcosm in styles of sword technique.

The fencing treatises of Giacomo di Grassi and Vincentio Saviolo give written articulation to the Italian ideas of fence that were on the rise during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Di Grassi published *His True Arte of Defence* in Venice in 1570 and in 1594, “I. G. Gentleman” published a translation in England, demonstrating the demand for Italian texts on the duel.²³

18 Anglin 395-6

19 Turner xx

20 Silver, *Paradoxes* 562

21 Peltonen, *Duel* 86

22 Silver, *Paradoxes* 555

23 Jackson v-vi

Vincenzio Saviolo published *His Practise in Two Bookes* in 1595. The first book is a dialogic explanation of fighting with a rapier and dagger, while the second delves into the etiquette of the duel.

The differences between Saviolo's and di Grassi's rapier techniques and the traditional English style of fighting cannot be overstated. The Italian style favored faster, smaller, motions which set a premium on technical skill. The Italian style was more precise and aggressive with a focus on counterattack that in its purest form did not include blocking with the sword at all, only avoidances or redirections. English forms focused on stronger slashing cuts and often used a shield in the left hand to block. Rapier “demanded a new approach to fighting—a more studied one—resulting in new techniques and theories of defense that were based in greater measure on well-formed tactics and strategy.”²⁴ The new style was one that favored those who could commit significant leisure time to study of the weapon and maintain a calculating mindset in a fight. The new definition of a skilled fighter paralleled new ideas about the attributes of a gentleman, for example, those found in Castiglione's *The Courtier*.²⁵

The reformulation of fighting technique rested on the new sword technology of the Italian rapier. Commentators in Elizabethan London tell us that gentlemen began primarily carrying the rapier rather than the shorter English sword in the late 16th century.²⁶ By the 1590s, the rapier was ubiquitous enough that the translator of Di Grassi's book wrote an introductory note to

24 Turner xxiv

25 Clark 106; Turner 11

26 Turner xiv

specify that he was using the word “sword” as a better translation of the Italian, but that the rapier was “a weapon more usuall for Gentlemens wearing.”²⁷ Nevertheless the rapier or rapier with dagger did not entirely replace the sword or sword with buckler. Instead, both existed concurrently and were favored at different times for different purposes by different classes, a matter as much of fashion and social position as practicality.²⁸

The rapier remained a specifically aristocratic weapon while the short sword was more common to the “middling sort” and lower classes, even though the rapier did not have the same cost barrier as the knight’s suit of armor. The divide over weapon style is symptomatic of class negotiations at the time. The aristocracy, having lost much of its role in the military and land management, struggled for a way to define itself.²⁹ In addition, nobles were often no longer able to use wealth as a distinguishing marker, given the rise of the “middling sort” of businessmen and professionals. Instead, the nobility sought to attach distinctive social signifiers to rank. Thus, the rapier, although relatively democratic in terms of price, nevertheless remained strongly associated with the nobility and gentry by convention.

Just as the English sword stayed in use even as the rapier gained in popularity, so too the changes in combat style were not universal. Teachers of traditional English sword play did not passively accept new and competing ideas. George Silver voiced their concerns in his tract, *Paradoxes of Defence*. Published four years after Saviolo’s, his book is primarily polemic rather

27 Di Grassi 9

28 Turner 99

29 Marston 32-3

than practical. Silver attempts to prove the value of the English short sword over the foreign rapier and to defend the English style of fence. Silver's primary argument is against the rapier itself. He dubs it an imperfect weapon because it is too long and consequently awkward to use to block. Silver delves further into the details of his own techniques in another manuscript that he prepared but never published, *Bref Instructions upon my Paradoxes of Defence*, discovered in the British Museum in 1898. In his theory, Silver makes a valiant effort to prove that the cut with the edge of the sword is in fact faster than the thrust with the point.³⁰ While this piece of his argument is doomed by geometry, he nonetheless makes a good case for a fighting style based on quick blocks and counterattacks. Silver's primary interest is technique, but he sees technique in national and ideological terms. His insistence on traditional English styles demonstrates that the discourses on technique were as multivalent as those on the reasons to fight.

In order to further illuminate the differences between Silver's and Saviolo's writings, it is useful to take a moment to consider the original purpose of fencing treatises in general. The use of the word treatise is important. These texts are commonly referred to as fencing manuals, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines manual as having connotations of a concision or compendium, kept at hand for reference.³¹ On the other hand, the *OED* defines a treatise as a book or writing that treats of a particular subject with the implication that it contains "a formal or methodical discussion or exposition of the principles of the subject."³² The issue of genre is

30 Jackson 519

31 "manual, adj. and n." OED Online. Oxford University Press. December 2012.

32 "treatise, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press. December 2012.

important because it relates back to the critical question of readership. These books on fencing theory are not manuals because they are not a source from which the uneducated could learn a skill. As modern difficulties in recreating historical techniques demonstrate, these books were not intended for the uninitiated. Instead, a treatise was a condensation of a master's work and a statement of his position on the debates within fencing theory. They were meant primarily to be read by a master's own students or by fellow teachers and were thus, in a sense, preaching to the choir.

Because they were targeting their own students, Silver and Saviolo were also speaking to audiences of different statuses who held different value systems. Silver's tract would have spread among the English Masters of Defence and their more middle-class students. Saviolo's book was intended for gentlemen who valued progressive Italian Renaissance ideals and to whom the discussion of gentlemanly conduct would have been relevant.

However, marking a simple class, national, and ideological dichotomy between Silver and Saviolo is an oversimplification. Both texts are conflicted and the authors influenced each other's ideals in ways that they do not necessarily recognize or acknowledge. One example is the set of reasons each implies for the use of sword play. In general, Silver promotes learning fencing for self-defense and as exercise to stay strong, healthy, and mentally sharp.³³ He decries duels and the quarrels over honor that prompt them as tending "only to villayne & distruction as

33 Silver, *Paradoxes* 500

hurtyng, Maymyng & Murthering or kylling.”³⁴ However, Silver later says that the sword should be used to maintain unblemished honor, a phrase reminiscent of the ideas behind the practice of dueling.³⁵ Saviolo teaches the proper time and manner of the duel, but, since his noble readers were already invested in a notion of honor that required defense by the sword, he spends much of his second book urging restraint within this framework. He argues that not all insults are worthy of a response and urges his readers to consider first whether an argument can be solved without the sword.³⁶ Even reading treatises on the subject, the question of when one should use one’s sword remains murky.

Despite their rival views on fencing technique, Silver and Saviolo make essentially the same self-contradictory assumptions about the practice of the duel, which was itself rife with contradiction. The two authors are equally unclear on the ideal outcome of a duel, both advocating for more effective and dangerous techniques while simultaneously seeming to prefer a duel in which neither party is killed. Silver argues that one of the disadvantages of the rapier is that in a duel with rapiers both parties “are most commonly sore hurt, or one or both of them slaine.”³⁷ He implies by this criticism that he would prefer an outcome in which neither is hurt. In his *Bref Instructions*, Silver reinforces this point by claiming that if both combatants have the perfect fight, both will leave the field unhurt.³⁸ On the other hand, Silver disapproves of the

34 Silver, *Bref* 578

35 Ibid. 580

36 Saviolo 320, 392

37 Silver, *Paradoxes* 501

38 Silver, *Bref* 578

Italian practice of wearing armor to a duel, despite its advantages for safety. Saviolo says that to force one's opponent "to acknowledge his fault... is more honorable than a bloody victory."³⁹ Earlier, however, Saviolo advises his students to fight to kill rather than just to wound.⁴⁰ These authors find themselves in this difficult position because the duel is most importantly a device to reveal the truth. The matter of personal survival is, in theory, less important than defining a clear winner (and thus a clear truth). In practice, however, each teacher has a stake in urging his students to promote their personal survival.

Both authors found themselves similarly torn between their ideals of who ought to win a duel and the recognition that those with the most skill generally did. Saviolo argues that the duel is a form of the trial by combat, in which God favors the combatant in the right and therefore a victory is proof of truth.⁴¹ Nevertheless, he recommends that one seek to address one's wrongs in the civil law courts first because "the triall of the sworde being doubtfull and the civile certaine, the civile is that way by which every man of reckoning and reputation ought to justify himself."⁴² If a man had a moral cause, he would certainly prefer a system of trial decided directly by God (combat) rather than one decided by a human judge and jury, but Saviolo must acknowledge the practicalities of the situation. Silver is similarly divided, although in his case the ideal he is advocating is that of traditional English valor. Despite Silver's insistence that an English fighter using his natural instinct will always defeat an Italian fencer, he cannot deny that

39 Saviolo 253

40 Ibid. 219

41 Holmer 180

42 Saviolo 381, 366

technique makes one more likely to win a duel.⁴³ Silver believes that the English sword will always prevail over the Italian rapier, but also insists that without knowledge of his techniques, a fight will be “imperfect.”⁴⁴ Saviolo and Silver must acknowledge that the skilled fighter is likely to win the duel, even as they attempt to prove that the honorable fighter or the English fighter will always triumph. This conflict over the duel as trial by combat is rooted in the much larger debate between man’s free agency and God’s predetermination of earthly events. Neither Silver nor Saviolo is in a position to take a stand on this much more deeply rooted question and consequently cannot avoid some contradiction within his theory.

It is no surprise that Silver and Saviolo take inconsistent positions on exactly when it is necessary to duel. Conflicting forces drove the inherently contradictory culture of dueling. Silver and Saviolo were also motivated by oppositional market forces. Without the practice of dueling, there would be no need for fencing teachers. On the other hand, both writers needed to keep their readers alive and a duel was highly risky to both parties. If duels had been fought at every insult and every fight had ended in one or both combatants dead, soon the culture of dueling would have died out entirely, and with it, the market for fencing instruction. Under these same conflicting pressures, Saviolo and Silver had little choice but to be paradoxical in similar ways. Silver's and Saviolo's treatises are ultimately conflicted texts from which we cannot draw a single ideal image for how the duel actually occurred.

43 Silver, *Paradoxes* 500, 522, 569

44 Silver, *Paradoxes* 555; Silver, *Bref* 583

In addition, our evidence of historical duels is limited. In the 1610s there were 33 duels and challenges recorded, but scholars debate whether this number indicates a high or low level overall.⁴⁵ It seems that duels rose in late 1500s; according to Lawrence Stone, “the number of duels and challenges mentioned in newsletters and correspondences jumped from five in the 1580s to nearly twenty in the 1590s.”⁴⁶ Some make the case that dueling was relatively infrequent in England, certainly in comparison to the rest of Europe.⁴⁷ Pollock, for example, writes that “the evidence we have testifies to the infrequency of duels in England” and that “most English gentlemen would have had no experience of dueling.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, Turner and Soper argue that the situation in England was “probably comparable” to that of France, where from 1590 to 1610 a third of the nobility (approximately 4000 men) died in private duels.⁴⁹ Holmer agrees that “dueling was a daily reality for the Elizabethans.”⁵⁰ The scholarly community has not reached a consensus on the subject.

Given our inconclusive evidence about how duels occurred in reality, and the conflicted nature of the texts we have on dueling practice, it does not make sense to search vainly for a single image of how the early modern English duel occurred. When fencing treatises offer a number of different possibilities for the duel, it makes sense to instead think in terms of the range of ways it could be imagined. Silver and Saviolo's treatises gives us a sense of that range, from

45 Peltonen, *Francis* 9

46 Ibid. 10

47 Marston 25

48 Pollock 7-8

49 Turner 6

50 Holmer 178

the duel fought unwisely over petty insults to the duel fought to defend honor. The drama of the period offers a valuable access point to the duel for a modern scholar. Drama offers a clearer view of the public imagination. The stage imagines a wider range of manifestations of the duel than a fencing treatise can and gives us a better sense of the implications of the duel in the cultural imagination.

Chapter 2: ***A Fair Quarrel* and Honor Theory**

Drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period contains a wide range of perspectives on and uses of the duel. A logical starting point for my sampling of this range is *A Fair Quarrel*, a play that provides the clearest example of a duel well fought. Fredson Bowers argues that *Fair Quarrel* “treats more seriously and with infinitely more detail than any other play of the period, the important Jacobean problem of the private duel.”⁵¹ In addition, it is helpful to begin with a depiction of the duel that is closest to that imagined by the treatises discussed in the previous chapter.

A Fair Quarrel, written in 1617 by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, reifies the theory of the duel by one degree, taking it from the page of the treatise to the boards of the stage. The play uses a combat perfectly fought (at least according to the dictates of honor theory) to engender the happy ending and promote social cohesion. In the main plot, which involves the quarrel between Captain Ager and the Colonel over the honor of Captain Ager's mother, the duel facilitates the smooth functioning of aristocratic society and promotes values of virtue over specious concerns with reputation. The play promotes a more moderate and less bellicose version of virtue but also uses the duel as a tool to encourage proper behavior.

The narrative of the quarrel between Ager and the Colonel gives the reader a nearly complete explanation of dueling theory and the controversy over honor inherent to it. The play

51 Bowers 40

opens with the importance of comparisons to personal reputation. In the first scene, a companion of the Colonel and one of Captain Ager's friends enter the merchant Russell's courtyard in the midst of an argument over the relative merits of their friends. In early modern England, comparisons between gentlemen were a critical and contentious matter. The Colonel's friend is appalled at the idea; "Compare young Captain Ager with the Colonel!" he cries (I.i.38). Ager's friend is willing to risk his life over the issue, exclaiming, "His worth for me" (I.i.49). When the Captain and Colonel themselves enter to break up the fight and wish to know the matter, Russell explains that the argument is over comparisons:

Here has been such a stormy encounter
Betwixt my cousin Captain and this brave Colonel
About I know not what—nothing indeed;
Competitions, degrees, and comparatives
Of soldiership. (I.i.150-154)

Russell, outside the world of nobility, dismisses the notion of "comparatives" as unimportant. Here the play suggests that measuring reputation in relation to one's peers was a specifically aristocratic preoccupation.⁵² This scene indicates that, for the early modern aristocrat, good deeds were not sufficient for honor; instead, they measured worth relatively.

One theory of honor proceeded from the importance of comparisons to the conclusion that honor was equivalent to reputation; consequently what others said about a person became the primary currency of gentlemanly status. In *A Fair Quarrel*, the Colonel represents this aspect of honor theory. He abides by a notion of honor in which all that matters is the opinion of one's

52 Nicol 436

noble peers, not any intrinsic personal virtue.⁵³ When the Colonel finds himself compared with the younger and lower-ranked Captain on an equal scale, he is aghast at the insult to “My fame, / Life of the life, my reputation,” affirming that equivalence with a mere Captain is tantamount to social diminishment (I.i.105-6). Honor theorists at the time professed this same sentiment. For example, James Cleland in 1607 wrote, “honor is not in his hand who is honoured, but in the hearts and opinions of other men.”⁵⁴ This notion connects to the theory of civil courtesy, that dictates that one's reputation among one's peers (i.e. one's honor) can only be known or measured in terms of others' behavior.⁵⁵ Therefore, courtesies paid to a nobleman are a mark of honor and any outward discourtesy is a kind of performative utterance that immediately strips the nobleman of his position.⁵⁶ Scholar Markku Peltonen argues that honor-as-reputation migrated to England from Renaissance Italy and then adopted the chivalric tradition as a way to gain legitimacy.⁵⁷ This hypothesis unifies honor-as-reputation, the theory of civil courtesy, and the practice of dueling as all imports from the Italian Renaissance. The Colonel's adherence to the definition of honor-as-reputation makes him especially sensitive to a breach of courtesy and prone to leap to a duel, as we shall see shortly.

A different strand of honor theory holds that honor is virtuous behavior, a perspective which Captain Ager embodies. When compared to the Colonel, Ager attempts to cut the matter

53 Bowers, 51-2

54 James 4

55 Peltonen, *Duel* 36

56 Ibid. 36, 42

57 Ibid. 12

off with a polite expression of friendship:

Why, sir, twixt friend and friend
There is so even and level a degree
It will admit of no superlative. (I.i.70-72)

Clearly, Ager is aware the comparisons matter, but he attempts to resolve the contention by politely making the two men equals, a response which according to courtesy theory should have ended the matter had the Colonel not been so especially prickly. Ager is certainly conscious of his own reputation, but he is also praised for his moderation and slowness to anger. When a friend of the Colonel's sneers at Ager's youth, his friend defends him thus:

That which you now produce for his disgrace
Infers his nobleness, that, being young,
Should have an anger more inclin'd to courage
And moderation than the Colonel
A virtue as rare as chastity in youth. (I.i.40-44)

In this theory of honor, other men's opinions mattered, but not as much as virtuous behavior based on Christian values such mercy, moderation, and chastity, and and on service to the state. Both the Christian value of peace and the civic value of obedience warned against the duel. Saviolo also admonishes his reader not to take up petty causes merely as an excuse for blood.⁵⁸ Therefore, this theory of honor-as-virtue allowed some room for moderation in the approach to the duel—moderation that Ager exhibits.

The gentry and nobility of early modern England gave both of these theories of honor credence, often simultaneously. Rather than seeking one true definition of honor, many

58 Clark, 111

historians now read it as “a multiplicity of overlapping discourses.”⁵⁹ Richard Cust says honor was a blend of one discourse about lineage, another about status that stressed personal virtues, and a third that emphasized service to commonwealth and crown.⁶⁰ At the time, the aristocracy was struggling to redefine itself and its values. The resulting tensions tested the limits of honor theory by bringing the various aspects into conflict with each other. *A Fair Quarrel* balances several of these different ideas and sets them against one another in the conflict between Ager and the Colonel.

To greater and lesser extents, both the Colonel's theory of honor-as-reputation and the Captain's idea of honor-as-virtue are based on a horizontal notion of honor. Peltonen uses the term horizontal to refer to honor which can be lost but not gained and is consequently always in peril.⁶¹ Even a single insult can obliterate a lifetime of virtue.⁶² Since a dishonored man cannot then regain his reputation, this type of honor is very perilous. In order to prevent the loss of honor, every insult must be met by a duel to prove it false. English courtesy books that promote this theory argue that the threat of the duel keeps people courteous and reduces the overall level of violence.⁶³ Critics of the duel, such as Sir Francis Bacon, argue that the notion of horizontal

59 Pollock, 5

60 Ibid. 6

61 Peltonen argues that there are two types of honor, which he terms vertical and horizontal. One can gain vertical honor by virtuous actions. If it is lost through some shame, such as losing a duel, future positive action can recover it (Peltonen, *Duel* 20, 37). It is helpful to distinguish the two by imaging vertical honor as a ladder on which one can move up and down based on one's actions. Horizontal honor is a flat surface and consequently once one has fallen from it there is no access back up. Both honor-as-virtue and honor-as-reputation are types of horizontal honor.

62 Peltonen *Duel* 37

63 Ibid. 55-6

honor (although they do not use this exact term) precipitates violence since each discourtesy has the chance to spiral into full blown combat.⁶⁴

The Colonel believes absolutely in horizontal honor, which causes him to be at risk of losing the good reputation for which he has worked his entire life in the single moment of being compared to the Captain. At first the Captain seems less beholden to horizontal honor, but (as we soon see) he also feels compelled to defend his honor from direct insult. It is the horizontality of honor which necessitates the duel. We see in *A Fair Quarrel* that both honor-as-virtue and honor-as-reputation are degrees of horizontal and therefore root causes of the duel.

With the different notions of honor established, and the problem of comparisons broached, the play next shows us the process by which an insult instigates an official challenge. Just as the conflict between Ager and the Colonel reaches a tipping point, Jane, Russell's daughter, and her sweetheart Fitzallen enter to request Russell's blessing to marry. Ager, cousin of Jane, and the Colonel, kinsman to Fitzallen, temporarily lay aside their squabble to support the match. But Russell provokes the Colonel's ire anew by having Fitzallen arrested on a false charge of debt. The Colonel retaliates by calling Russell a "blood-sucking churl" (I.i.336). Ager steps in to defend his uncle with "Sir, you do wrong mine uncle," a mild phrase meant to give the Colonel a chance to retract (I.i.339). Instead, the Colonel elevates the level of verbal wrong with "Pox on your uncle and all his kin" (I.i.339-340). The insults escalate to the point when the level of verbal attacks necessitates moving on to physical confrontation.

64 Peltonen, *Francis* 15

Here the text makes a slight and important digression from the dueling code. At this point, Ager would be justified in immediately calling the Colonel a liar and progressing from argument to challenge. The fact that he does not emphasizes Ager's calm deliberation. It makes him even more irreproachable and allows him to respond later to an even greater insult.⁶⁵ Instead, Ager replies with the relatively minor insult, "You're a foul-mouth'd fellow" (I.i.341). Already, the process by which the insults escalate establishes Ager as the calm moral center of the play, especially against the foil of the hot-tempered Colonel.

From this point, the play makes clear that the Colonel is unreasonably belligerent because he responds immediately to Ager's relatively minor accusation with a grave insult, calling Ager the "son of a whore" (I.i.342). This insult is particularly unmerited because it attacks Ager's mother who, as a woman, is unable to defend herself and will therefore require Ager to fight on her behalf. Moreover, it is an insult to Ager directly, since it brings into doubt the hereditary basis of his noble status. As Ager says later:

There is not such another murdering piece
In all the stock of calumny; it kills
At one report two reputations,
A mother's and a son's. (II.i.2-5)

The seriousness of the Colonel's insult makes it impossible for Ager to avoid the duel given a horizontal notion of honor.

In a second digression from dueling etiquette, Ager again does not respond to this insult

65 Bowers 46

by calling the Colonel a liar and provoking a challenge. Here, the lapse demonstrates that Ager is too aghast to respond with the proper phrase. Even without the counter insult that would normally be necessary, the Colonel skips directly to delivering the challenge by saying, “On thy life I’ll prove it” (I.i.349).⁶⁶ Ager implies agreement when he asks, “We shall meet, Colonel?” (I.i.362). It is important that Ager immediately proposes a later meeting because it distinguishes the duel from a mere street brawl. While the Colonel is willing to skip steps of the formal insult process and move directly to the physical conflict, Ager maintains social decorum by asking for a later meeting.

Next the play introduces the strand of honor theory that understood the duel as a trial by combat in which God would determine the victor. It is belief in this system which prompts Ager to take the extreme step of asking his mother to assure him that his cause is true. Saviolo draws on this notion when he says that the outcome of a duel is “evermore directed by the secret will of God, and are the executions of his hidden judgements.”⁶⁷ Clearly, the Colonel does not adhere to this theory or he would not have offered to duel over the honor of a woman he did not know. However, the play encourages the audience to empathize with Ager's view when he says he is

So careful of my eternity, which consists
Of upright actions, that unless I knew
It were a truth I stood for, any coward
Might make my breast his footpace. (II.i.11-14)

While Ager has some doubt that he has truth on his side, he is reluctant to fight. Therefore, he

66 Bowers 47

67 Jackson 202

goes home to seek his mother's assurance that she has indeed never merited the name whore.

Lady Ager is far more willing than Captain Ager to sacrifice her reputation rather than risk his life. Lady Ager, although on the opposite end of the spectrum from the Colonel in terms of support for the duel, shares his lack of faith in God's intervention on behalf of the virtuous party. Fearing her son will die if he fights, she manipulates Ager's belief in the duel as a trial by combat to take away his "righteous cause" by belying her own honor (II.i.131). She pretends that she was indeed unfaithful to Captain Ager's father, knowing that her son will not fight for an untrue cause, no matter the shame. Blind to her ploy, Captain Ager is devastated by the idea that his mother has been unchaste. If the Colonel's insult is true, Ager has lost his noble status in a number of different ways. He no longer possesses inherited aristocratic status, nor can he fight to defend his reputation in the eyes of the world.⁶⁸ He tells his mother:

Oh, were you so unhappy to be false
Both to your self and me, but to me chiefly?
What a day's hope is here lost, and with it
The joys of a just cause! Had you but thought
On such a noble quarrel, you'd ha died
Ere you'd ha' yielded. (II.i.192-197)

In giving up her own honor, Lady Ager has managed to even more powerfully destroy her son's.

When Ager's friends arrive to take him to the field of combat, Ager cannot bear to tell them the truth and instead calls on details of dueling etiquette to avoid the fight. He begins by arguing that he is not truly fighting over "the lie," a concept of great importance particularly to

68 Bowers 47; Pollock 21

English dueling theory. “Giving the lie” was the technical term for calling someone a liar and it was the worst verbal wrong one man could do another.⁶⁹ Because steadfastness to one's word was critical to the chivalric notion of honor, giving the lie questioned another man's status as a gentleman.⁷⁰ Duels were supposed to be fought specifically over the lie.⁷¹ Segar, in *The Booke of Honour and Armes*, says that a challenge should be reached thus: A insults B and B gives lie, which frees B from dishonor and gives infamy to A. A is now the injured party and responds with the challenge.⁷² Ager argues that because the lie was only implied, it is insufficient for a duel, especially in England:

That ordinary commotioner, the lie,
Is father of most quarrels in this climate
And held here capital, and you go to that. (II.i.221-3)

Ager's friends dismiss this argument as mere technicality because the insult “son of a whore” was the worst kind of lie.

Unable to avoid fighting on a technicality, Ager next turns to arguments for moderation, many of which the treatises on the duel also expressed. Saviolo says that “people should fight only in cases of necessitie for the defence of just causes, not for insolencies and injuries but only to defend their honour and others.”⁷³ Ager uses these arguments when he finds himself in a

69 Peltonen, *Francis* 9

70 James 15; Jackson 343

71 Saviolo comments: “The summe of all therefore, is in these cases of honour, that hee unto whome the lie is wrongefullie given, ought to challenge him that offereth that dishonour, and by the swoorde to prove himselfe no lyer” (341).

72 Bowers 48

73 Saviolo 193

position where he cannot justify fighting. He tells his friends to

Consider, then, the man, the Colonel
Exactly worthy, absolutely noble,
However spleen and rage abuses him;
And 'tis not well nor manly to pursue
A man's infirmity. (II.i.231-5)

He goes on to question the wisdom of risking one's life over a slight matter:

Why should man,
For a poor hasty syllable or two,
And vented only in forgetful fury,
Chain all the hopes and riches of his soul
To the revenge of that, die lost forever? (III.i.81-5)

In these two passages, the play gives yet another perspective on the duel, but the fact that Ager does not truly believe his own words subtly implies just how little weight these arguments hold for those who adhere to the notion of horizontal honor.

Accordingly, Ager's friend uses the principles of horizontal honor to reject Ager's plea for moderation. He argues that if Ager refuses to fight now, he will lose his honor irrevocably:

If you fail virtue here, she needs you not
All your time after; let her take this wrong,
And never presume then to serve her more. (III.i.20-22)

Moreover, the honor he has accrued thus far will be lost: "Good captain, do not willfully cast away / At one hour all the fame your life has won" (III.i.28-29). Appeals for moderation have no impact on Ager's friends when the insult is serious enough to imperil horizontal honor.

Pressured by these arguments, Ager goes along to the battlefield but remains unwilling to

fight. Instead, he is forced to offer the humiliating olive branch while avoiding saying why. The Colonel, astounded at Captain Ager's passivity, declares him a coward and turns to leave. Ager is overjoyed to at last have an insult which he knows to be untrue.

Oh, heaven has pitied my excessive patience,
And send me a cause; now I have a cause!
A coward I was never.—Come you back, sir! (III.i.112-114)

Ager imagines that God has vindicated him for staying true to his beliefs by now allowing to him to give the lie: "It must home again with you" (III.i.117).

In this moment, the grounds of the fight change. Now the question becomes whether the Captain is a coward, not whether Lady Ager is a whore. On the other hand, if Ager were to defeat the Colonel, then the Colonel would lose his honor for having impugned Ager's courage. Consequently, the Colonel's other claims would lack merit, and the charge of bastardy would lose its teeth.⁷⁴ With a true cause reached, the fair quarrel can commence.

Key to the role of the duel in this play is that it is "fair" in every sense of the word. For example, Ager fights only to first blood, rather than killing the Colonel. Saviolo says that a vanquisher should be esteemed and honored if he contents himself with victory and "dyd not seeke or desire cruelly to imbrue his handes in his enimies bloud."⁷⁵ Not fighting to the death prevents one duel from spiraling into a cycle of revenge. Moreover, at the end of the duel, the Colonel recognizes Ager's valor and repents his hasty words. In doing so, he makes clear that he

74 Bowers 63

75 Saviolo 421

has converted to Ager's notion of honor-as-virtue and the duel as a trial by god:

Oh, just heaven has found me,
And turn'd the stings of my too hasty injuries
Into my own blood! (III.i.174-176)

The reformation of the antagonist allows for the ideal happy ending. The duel restores social order, which the Colonel cements by betrothing his own sister to Captain Ager. The play closes with the two men reunited and the Colonel exclaims, "Fair be that quarrel makes such happy friends" (V.i.440). The idea of friendship which was previously so offensive to the Colonel has become a cause for celebration, given the perspective he has gained.

When considering the play as a whole, we must ask how the other two plots reflect on the question of the duel. There is a great deal of debate over whether the subplots further glorify or parody the aristocratic notions expressed by Captain Ager in the main plot. David Nicol claims that the play is more sympathetic to the values of the gentry in the subplot than the aristocratic notions of masculine and feminine honor held by Captain Ager.⁷⁶ I disagree with this conclusion; the existence of other virtuous characters does not diminish the way the duel establishes Ager as the play's moral center. Instead, each parallel plot advocates its own complementary, class-specific morality. The parallel structures support the argument that Ager is the moral center of his plot.

The main plot is an aristocratic drama that contrasts different perspectives on honor and concludes by advocating Ager's notion of honor-as-virtue. During the Tudor and Stuart

76 Nicol 428

monarchies, the aristocracy attempted to redefine itself beyond its traditional role as the wealthy and landed.⁷⁷ As the distinction between the gentry and the lower orders became increasingly hazy, the English nobility sought to distinguish itself socially through rules of courtesy and honor. Ager's dilemma over the defense of his honor is not parodic; the problems he faces were serious concerns for the gentlemen in the audience. This play offers a range of perspectives on aristocratic morality, from Lady Ager, who values her son's life over his reputation, to the Colonel, who is so hypersensitive that he distorts the true notion of honor. Between these two, Ager, steadfast to his principles, is the locus of virtue in the play.

In the subplot, Jane is the moral center as the action prioritizes love and loyalty over money and reputation. She wants to marry her love, the noble but poor Fitzallen, but her father, Russell, betroths her to the wealthy but ridiculous Chough. Jane seeks help from a physician to hide the fact that she is already pregnant with Fitzallen's child. When the physician threatens to expose her indiscretion unless she sleeps with him, Jane sacrifices her reputation rather than surrender to his blackmail. Fortunately for Jane, when Russell hears the physician's claim and realizes she may no longer have any marriage prospects, he gives her to Fitzallen with a generous dowry. Jane and Russell represent "the middle sort" that was developing rapidly in early modern England. This loose collection was "a composite body of people of intermediate wealth, comprising substantial commercial farmers, prosperous manufacturers, independent tradesmen and the increasing numbers who gained their livings in commerce, the law and the

77 James 43

provision of other professional services.”⁷⁸ Russell, in valuing money over his own daughter's happiness, embodies one extreme of the new middle-class moral system. At the end of the play however, Russell is not only forced to accede to his daughters' wishes, he loses money by offering Fitzallen a generous dowry. By remaining committed to Fitzallen, Jane avoids a terrible marriage as well as damage to her reputation. The play's resolution tells us that Jane is the moral center for choosing love and loyalty over both money and excessive care for her reputation.

The final plot is a farce set in the London underworld in which Chough and his servant learn to swear, argue, and deal with whores. This plot truly does parody the other two by turning the middle- and upper-class values on their head. The clownish protagonist Chough adopts an attitude even more mercenary than Russell's and more bellicose than the Colonel's.⁷⁹ Although personally wealthy, Chough inhabits the world of the “meaner sort,” a term from the time that referred generally to the laboring poor, tenant farmers and the denizens of the seedy London underworld.⁸⁰ The farce of the “lower sort” imagines Chough as the protagonist and whoring, bragging, and fighting as his values.

Rather than undermining the importance of Ager's duel, the other two plots instead work in concert with the first to promote class-specific moralities. Richard Levin argues that the way these three plots are placed in conversation with each other is integral to the meaning of the play as a whole. Levin first points out structural elements in common: each plot has an insulter, a

78 Wrightson, *Earthly* 200

79 Holdsworth xxxiv, Levin 220

80 Wrightson, *Social* 191

woman and a defender and each plot plays a variation on the basic theme of the “fair quarrel.” For example, the women in each plot have different relationships to the accusation of sexual incontinency; Lady Ager is perfectly chaste, Jane occupies a liminal position between faithful marriage and sin, while Priss is a literal whore who demands that her pimp defend her “good name.”⁸¹ Each plot makes a different person (the insulter, woman and defender) the locus of virtue. By analogy, the Jane and Ager plots make the ideals of love and honor equivalent.⁸²

Although Jane values strict adherence to honor less than Captain Ager does, and Chough’s antics make a mock at both of their moral systems, the three plots do not contradict each other. Nicol claims that Jane’s choices make Ager’s ideals seem like mere “sophistry” and that Jane’s happy ending makes Ager’s seem awkward, misogynistic, and socially exclusive in comparison.⁸³ I argue that Jane’s virtue does not lessen Ager’s, but rather points out the place that each morality holds in a specific class ideology. Moreover, Chough’s parody does not attack the dueling code as a whole. Instead, as Levin agrees, the Chough scenes parody specifically “the abuse of this code exemplified in the main plot by the Colonel.”⁸⁴ The play equates the romantic love ideal of the middle sort with the honor-as-virtue ideal of the gentry and the proximity of the plot resolutions supports this analogical relationship.⁸⁵ The end of the play rewards each virtuous person with the thing he or she values (honor and love) and additionally

81 Levin 220

82 Ibid. 228

83 Nicol 435, 428

84 Levin 226

85 Ibid. 228-9

consolidates his or her material position.

The play does more than support Ager's moral code over the Colonel's; it also recognizes the place of the duel within this moral code. Fredson Bowers argues that, in this play, Middleton and Rowley criticize the duel while upholding the theory of honor, but I do not believe that this argument holds up since the duel is the method by which the correct theory of honor is implemented and spread. The duel rectifies the Colonel's false notion of honor, arranges the happy ending, and promotes further ties of social cohesion. Regardless of speculation on Middleton's and Rowley's personal opinions, in the play the properly-fought duel provides the happy ending.

The critical piece of evidence that *A Fair Quarrel* adds to the dialogue on the early modern duel is that English audiences could imagine a duel occurring in the manner that the treatises dictated. As was articulated earlier, theatre defines the range of popular imagination. *A Fair Quarrel* is evidence that audiences could believe in a duel fought according to the rules. In addition, people could accept the premise of honor treatises that a "fair" duel, fought for a true cause, would reveal the truth and promote social cohesion. The duel in *A Fair Quarrel* is more than plausible; it is laudable. Then, as now, audiences could cheer for a hero fighting for a just cause, and in the case of *A Fair Quarrel*, honor-as-virtue is the right cause.

Nevertheless, and importantly, both honor-as-virtue and honor-as-reputation are types of fragile, horizontal honor. Ager's concept of honor allows him to display some righteous

moderation in the face of insult and renders him unable to fight for an unjust cause. Nevertheless, his idea of honor continues to necessitate the duel. This tells us that a wider audience than those who personally participated in a duel would have paid for a ticket to *A Fair Quarrel* in which the duel is imagined as necessary. The idea that the duel is integral to honor must have been more widespread than written records of actual duels are able to tell us. *A Fair Quarrel* makes the fundamental argument that the correct conception of honor contains a place for the duel.

Chapter 3: ***The Roaring Girl*, Satire and the Duel Taken out of Context**

Moll Frith swaggers, roars, jests, and fights her way through *The Roaring Girl* and into modern scholarly debates over early modern gender identity and power structures. But despite the fact that Moll fights a duel at the center point of the play, scholars have neglected *The Roaring Girl* as a source when considering the duel and the duel as a trope when reading *The Roaring Girl*. Authors who debate the relative radicalness of the play and its main character skim over this moment with the briefest of comments. I hope to rectify this lapse because the connotations of the duel support the play in its progressive argument against coercion and hypocrisy that cuts across class and gender divisions. Furthermore, Moll's fight marks the duel as a dramatic trope which authors can remove from its real-world contexts to serve a thematic purpose: in this case, to argue for a more accepting and just society.

Moll, the roaring girl, links the two primary plots of Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's comedy. In the first, Sebastian enlists Moll's help in overcoming his father's disapproval to marry his love Mary Fitzallard. In the subplot, a group of merchants' wives conduct affairs with a collection of dissolute gallants who intend to use the wives to cheat the husbands of their earnings. When Laxton, one of these gallants, plans a sexual rendezvous with Moll, she instead comes to beat him in a duel. At the end of play, deceptions give way to truth, the husbands reconcile with their wives and fathers with their sons, and Moll entertains the gathering with her viol.

The primary scholarly debate in analysis of this play focuses on exactly how radical or powerful a figure Moll is and whether she retains that power at the end of the play. Jean Howard reads Moll as a subversive agent for social change, while Jane Baston argues instead that the prevailing social norm at the end of the play contains and even rehabilitates Moll.

Those who make the case for Moll as a radical challenge to patriarchy can use a number of different analytical approaches. For example, a close reading of the title, *The Roaring Girl*, demonstrates the playwrights' concerns with the thematic issues Moll raises, despite the fact that she is a plot facilitator rather than the literal protagonist. Furthermore, the term "roaring girl" is rife with oxymoron. A "roaring boy" was a young profligate, usually of the noble or gentry class. He was associated with such riotous behavior as visiting taverns, whoring, racking up debts, and getting into fights, all of which were seen as natural (if uncivil) assertions of male aristocratic privilege.⁸⁶ The roaring *girl* turns this male privilege on its head, especially since Moll is also lower class. Finally, roaring implies speaking loudly, in defiance of the fact that "any woman whose mouth is opened in public spaces, in particular, is read as whorish, as incontinent with other bodily orifices as much as with the mouth."⁸⁷ Moll, as a roaring girl, contradicts notions that a woman should be seen but not heard.

Even setting aside the power of her voice, Moll's challenge to traditional social hierarchies is stitched into the clothing she wears: a mix of male and female pieces as suits her

86 Orgel 13

87 Howard, *Sex* 181

fancy. Considerations of *The Roaring Girl* frequently point out the challenge crossdressing presented to the Jacobean social system in which clothing was supposed to signify hierarchies of class and gender.⁸⁸ Already, increased economic mobility and the growth of the “middle sort” strained traditional class definitions.⁸⁹ The nobility pushed back against the burgeoning power of the middle class with sumptuary laws that kept the economic classes visually distinguished.⁹⁰ In an analogous situation, women were gaining power in London due to their economic roles as producers and consumers.⁹¹ Just as rich merchants dressing like nobles implied a challenge to class hierarchy, women who dressed as men or adopted more masculine fashions demonstrate the instability of the gender system.⁹² Although there were no laws against it, society stigmatized women who encroached on the realm of masculine privilege by making whorishness the only alternative to femininity.⁹³ Sebastian’s father, Sir Alexander imagines Moll as monstrous, beyond the realm of human, calling her: “a thing / one knows not how to name” and “this strange thing” (I.ii.128-9, 133). Sir Alexander’s repulsion at Moll’s seeming hermaphroditism inspires Sebastian to pretend to woo her, hoping that his father will come to see Mary Fitzallard as an appropriate choice in comparison (I.ii.128-9, 133).

Other instances of women dressing as men in contemporary plays, famously Viola and Rosalind (among others) from Shakespeare, tend carry socially conservative messages. These

88 Howard, *Crossdressing* 318

89 Wrightson, *Social* 180

90 Orgel 14

91 Howard, *Crossdressing* 422

92 Ibid. 425

93 Ibid. 424

women only don men's clothes for protection in their quest for a proper marriage. When they find a husband, they doff their masculine garb and return to their rightful role as the subordinate wife. Moll's case is markedly different, as she is a “vocational” rather than “strategic” crossdresser.⁹⁴ She wears male garments not as a disguise but to inform people of who she truly is: a powerful and independent subject.⁹⁵ Although Moll is not deceiving anyone with her clothing, her actions are even more transgressive. Other female characters only disguise their surface appearance with their male garb, but Moll’s clothing displays her essential being. Unlike many other crossdressing heroines, Moll does not give up the practice at the end of the play.⁹⁶ In this way, Moll distinguishes herself from the tradition of socially conservative comedy. By remaining outside of the marriage fold and in her male garments, Moll demonstrates the continued feasibility of the independent woman. Even more than that, “*The Roaring Girl* uses the image of the crossdressed woman to defy expectations about woman's nature and to protest the injustices caused by the sex-gender system.”⁹⁷ By wearing men's clothing and proving that women can be both virtuous and powerful, Moll contradicts the polemics of social conservatives in Jacobean England.

A historicized analysis considers the contemporary figure upon whom the character Moll is based—Mary Frith (known as Moll Cut-purse). Records of the real woman come primarily from the courts, which tried her for stealing purses and public misbehavior. In a letter to Sir

94 Schneider 1

95 Howard, *Crossdressing*, 429, 436-437

96 Ibid. 429, 436

97 Ibid. 438

Dudley Carleton in 1612, John Chamberlain describes an incident in which Frith was sentenced to public penance, but made a mockery of the proceedings by showing up drunk and attracting a crowd to watch her antics rather than attend to the preacher's sermon. Mary Frith appears three times in Middlesex Sessions court rolls from 1600 to 1608, accused of stealing purses.⁹⁸ Additionally, we know that she gave at least one public performance. The epilogue of *The Roaring Girl* promises the audience that "The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence, / Shall on this stage give larger recompense" (Epilogue 35-6). Corroborating evidence of this performance comes from ecclesiastical court records in which Frith confessed that she appeared on the stage of the Fortune Playhouse in men's apparel with a sword to play a lute and tell bawdy jokes.⁹⁹ Frith was a woman who lived in defiance of the social norms of her time and Moll's proponents claim that knowledge of the real woman lends power to the character's words.

Baston argues against this interpretation of Moll as a radical social figure. Instead, she claims the play reinvents the historical figure "to be contained, enervated, and eventually incorporated into the prevailing social apparatus."¹⁰⁰ The play has taken care to de-tooth Mary Frith's fictional counterpart. This Moll is not a thief, drunk, or sexual profligate as the real woman may well have been. When Sir Alexander sets a trap for her on the assumption that she will attempt to rob his house, she instead warns him to guard his possessions more carefully (IV.i. 135-140). Orgel comments that, in comparison to records of the real person, the character

98 Baston 318

99 Orgel 12

100 Baston 319

Moll seems “radically revisionist.”¹⁰¹ Baston acknowledges Moll’s and radical sentiments and actions early in the play, but believes that the end reduces Moll to a mere clown. While Mary Beth Rose argues that the final scene of the play leaves Moll out of the “tolerant new society,” Baston says Moll is “rehabilitated into a society which is neither new nor tolerant.”¹⁰² At the end of the play, the older generation reestablishes its power over the younger and matrimony places the women back under the rule of the man. Rather than resisting this neat ending, Moll plays matchmaker to Sebastian and Mary and merely placates Sir Alexander. Although she opts out of marriage personally, she does so because she believes “a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I’ll ne’er go about it” (II.ii.39-40).¹⁰³ Generally, society punished women who stepped outside the fold either legally or verbally, with the label of whore. Baston argues that *The Roaring Girl* goes further than this by rehabilitating rather than punishing Moll. Rehabilitation normalizes the deviant by extending authority over what was previously outside it. For example, Sir Alexander’s sexual innuendos verbally confine Moll to a debased position in which her formerly deviant behavior becomes merely comical.¹⁰⁴ Baston claims that Moll’s resistance earlier in the play, peaking in act III, only lends credibility to the reinforcement of the status quo at the end.¹⁰⁵ Orgel concurs with Baston to a certain extent, saying that the character Moll is not truly of the underworld but rather is “an honourable, comic,

101 Orgel 20

102 Baston 320

103 Ibid. 325-6, 328

104 Baston 323

105 Ibid. 329-330

sentimental peacemaker, who does not take purses, but recovers them.”¹⁰⁶ In this reading of the text, Moll's role as a comic figure makes her powerless as a revolutionary one.

Although Moll is a contradictory character, I argue that lack of modern psychological consistency does not prevent her from being radical. Howard expresses it best when she says that it is impossible to specify “the ‘real’ Moll (a task that assumes she is a self-consistent representation of a unified psyche)” because “her representation is enmeshed in contradictions, a sure sign it is doing the work of mediating complex social tensions.”¹⁰⁷ For example, Moll sees marriage as too restrictive for herself but promotes it for other women. In the merchants' plot, Moll corrects the behavior of the gallants who are not masculine enough and chastises the shopkeepers wives when they flirt with the men. Moll uses male behavior and dress to gain economic and sexual independence, but is also resolutely chaste. Howard points out that Moll's chastity can either demonstrate that sexuality should not be displayed outside marriage or interrupt “that discourse about women which equates a mannish independence with sexual promiscuity.”¹⁰⁸ All told, Moll “is made up, textually, of competing ideological strands.”¹⁰⁹ Although Moll is a contradictory character, the play can still make a unified argument.

In this case, the powerful implications of the duel tip the balance of argument to make Moll a radical figure. Scholars have given a great deal of attention to Moll's longest and most progressive monologue in which she explains her reasons for fighting Laxton. However, they

106 Orgel 22

107 Howard, *Sex* 183

108 Howard, *Crossdressing* 437

109 Howard, *Sex* 179

ignore the implications of the duel she then fights on the statements she has just made. She begins by condemning Laxton's tendency to view every woman as a whore and protests the fact that many women who remain virtuous nevertheless have their reputations shamelessly abused by self-promoting men:

How many of our sex by such as thou
Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name
That never deserved loosely?" (III.i.81-83)

Moll argues that women should be allowed to be congenial without being labeled whores and that her sense of fun does not merit a bad reputation: "I'm given to sport, I'm often merry, jest? / Had mirth no kindred in the world but lust?" (III.104-105). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Moll makes a critique of "the specific material institutions and circumstances which oppressed women in early modern England."¹¹⁰ She theorizes that women fall into illicit behavior not because of an all-consuming sexual appetite (as was the prevailing notion at the time) but because economic hardship drives them to it:

Distressed needlewomen and trade-fall'n wives.
Fish that must needs bite or themselves be bitten.
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
By a worm fastened on a golden hook. (III.i.95-98)

This is a "refreshingly economic explanation for prostitution and a stunning declaration of Moll's own freedom from the economic necessity that drives some poor women into the flesh trade."¹¹¹

Moll's essential message is a protest against the abuse of power. A man should not use his power

110 Howard, *Sex* 180

111 *Ibid.* 183

of speech to destroy a woman's reputation. Neither should the rich abuse their purchasing power over those who have no other options available.

Next, Moll makes it clear that in fighting Laxton she is actually fighting against all men who abuse their power over women to exploit them sexually. Moll tells Laxton, "In thee I defy all men" (III.i.92) and that she will use him to send a message:

But howe'er
Thou and the baser world censure my life,
I'll send 'em word by thee, and write so much
Upon thy breast. (III.106-109)

Moll is angry about more than an insult to her personal reputation; she is expressing "discourses of radical protest" to fight on behalf of all women.¹¹²

Scholars have neglected one aspect of this monologue: that Moll follows it by fighting and *winning* a duel. Moll's ability to use a sword places her above Laxton, her supposed class and gender better. The duel's association with the trial by combat gives the ring of truth to the statements she has just made. Finally, the fact that the duel does not manage to teach Laxton his lesson only reinforces the notion that the intended target of Moll's monologue is really the play's audience.

Several of the scholarly approaches previously discussed, most particularly gender- and biography-based analyses, deepen our understanding of the duel scene. Like the clothing Moll dons to fight, the duel was a gender specific institution. While other female characters wore

112 Howard, *Sex* 182

swords, they could not use them (for example, Viola's abortive duel with Sir Andrew Aguecheek). The fact that Moll actually fights (and knows how to win) a duel distinguishes her from other heroines. Like her male attire, her choice to wear a sword is no mere disguise, but an indication of real difference. Her ambiguous gendering in the play allows her to assume male privilege, complete with the phallic sword. Many of the arguments made about the clothing Moll wears work equally well for the duel she fights.

The use of the duel also connects the character back to the contemporary figure, Mary Frith, because Chamberlain's letter mentions that she "challenged the field of divers gallants." Orgel interprets this piece of evidence to mean that she challenged them in the contest of fashionable dress.¹¹³ Orgel's is clearly a misreading because the words "challenged" and "field" are technical terms associated with the duel. This statement can mean little else than Mary Frith challenged several different men to duels. The fact that Chamberlain says, "she challenged the *field*," instead of just, "she challenged," implies that at least some of these challenges went to the actual field of combat.

The duel scene can provide a microcosm of the play and Moll's position in it as a whole. The connotations of the duel validate the radical social argument Moll makes. At the same time, other connotations of the duel make the situation in which Moll presents her ideas farcical. The contrast between the quality and the context of the speech marks this scene as a piece of satire, furthering our understanding of Moll as a radical figure. Although the duel itself is comic, Moll's

113 Orgel 22

reasons for fighting are in deadly earnest.

The satire of the duel scene allows the play to encase the bitter medicine of Moll's socioeconomic argument with a candy coating of farce. In this case, I am using the term satire to refer to a work of comedy which expresses a progressive message but uses either verbal irony or juxtaposition to a ridiculous situation to defend against critique.¹¹⁴ In this way, satire protects itself from those in power because they cannot criticize it at face value although it expresses dissatisfaction with a current public norm.¹¹⁵ Reading the play with this lens maintains Moll's power throughout. Her existence and choices are the social message, juxtaposed against the comic background of the world of the play. The neat ending of marriage and reconciliation is a defensive cover for the true message that hypocrisy and abuse of power know no class boundaries and that an egalitarian approach is necessary to regain moral balance.

An awareness of the social connotations of the duel turns this scene into a prime example of this type of satire. The scene follows the etiquette of the duel quite closely, thereby legitimizing Moll's cause. At the same time, a lower-class woman fighting a gentleman—and winning!—reverses expectations to humorous effect. In addition, Laxton's blindness to Moll's true purpose heightens the humor but aligns the audience with Moll. The comedy of the situation

114 Although Blanchard notes that Renaissance satire resists easy definitions, Quintero observes several key characteristics (Blanchard 135). Satire is distinguished from lampoon by being directed at a behavior rather than an individual (5). Satire is driven by indignation at some aspect of the status quo and engages the reader critically to propose an ideal alternative (1, 3). Satire is distinguished from insult by being “tonally ironic and metaphorically playful” and often includes such devices as “radical juxtaposition, visual metaphor” and “ironic debunking” (6, 5, 3).

115 Quintero 1-2

is a generic disguise which allows Moll to articulate her protest of sexual and economic coercion.

The duel in the play follows the particulars of etiquette closely while nevertheless keeping Laxton comically in the dark. The quarrel begins with the insult when Laxton implies that Moll is a whore by giving her money as advance payment for a later sexual encounter (II.i.273). Ordinarily, Moll would immediately give the lie, but (as in the ideal duel of *A Fair Quarrel*), it remains implied for dramatic purposes. In this case, Moll wishes Laxton to continue to misconstrue their later meeting as a planned *tete-a-tete*. Moll implies agreement to the challenge by consenting to meet at a later time, thus classifying their fight as a duel. Since she has given the lie, Moll is the challenged party and has the right to choose time and place, which she does (II.i.280, II.i.284). When the two meet, Moll turns the money which Laxton paid her into a wager to be collected by the winner, as was common in duels (III.i.66-67). Finally, this duel (similarly to *Fair Quarrel's*) ends with no fatalities. When Laxton begs for his life, Moll grants him mercy: “I scorn to strike thee basely” (III.i.123). This duel follows the treatises' preference for a fight in which both parties survive. The play carefully arranges the small details in order to stress the legitimacy of this duel.

On the other hand, the duel is also distinctly ridiculous. The duel was a sex- and class-specific practice meant only for men and the upper class. Here, the lower-class woman beats the gentleman—not the expected outcome. Moreover, there is humor in just how long it takes Laxton to realize what sort of meeting Moll intends. While Moll follows the script for the duel,

Laxton is following another social script entirely. Moll does not deceive Laxton explicitly but she leads him along with punning double meanings before she finally draws her sword. For example, Moll says, “you shall know me now,” a phrase that works equally well as a challenge or (as Laxton hears it) in the Biblical sense (III.i.55). Moll's deception does not detract from the legitimacy of the duel; it encourages the audience to align itself with Moll in feeling superior to Laxton.

Moll is not fighting Laxton specifically, but is rather using the duel's teleological focus on the truth to prove a point. The fact that Laxton does not reform his ways after his defeat only reinforces that the play's true intention is to prove point to the audience. Moll uses the duel in a similar way as Captain Ager, as a trial by combat rather than to exact personal revenge. In this case, Moll goes to great lengths to explain exactly which truth she wishes to put to the test of the sword. She tells Laxton she is using him to send a message, but Laxton does not reveal his humiliation to anyone else during the play. Therefore, the play's intended audience for Moll's speech must be the one standing in the theatre.

Baston would argue that the sentiments Moll expresses before her fight are nullified by her conservative statements nearer the end of the play. But the fact that Moll fights a duel directly after this monologue changes the relative weight of these ideas. The moral authority the duel confers on the winner applies even to a woman. In addition, Moll's ability to win a duel is in itself evidence for her argument that women are capable of independence. By refusing to

prostitute herself to Laxton because she does not need to, Moll proves that other women would only be driven to such an act out of economic necessity. The connotations of the duel lend credence to the monologue.

The argument Moll makes with her sword supports the play's championship of honesty and moral rectitude in opposition to hypocrisy and coercion at all class levels. Middleton and Dekker depict deceit and the abuse of power in every social category, most vividly in the partnership formed by the noble Sir Alexander and the criminal Trapdoor to attack Moll. In the subplot, Laxton manipulates Mistress Gallipot's desire for him to cheat her of her money, while she is even more inventive in her lies to her husband on Laxton's behalf. Moll fights back against these societal ills on all class levels. For example, she rescues the gentleman Jack Dapper when his father punishes him with false arrest (III.iii). Later, she dismisses an attack by a gang of cutpurses who are overawed by her reputation (V.i). By the end of the play, each of these groups chooses to reform. Their circumstances don't change (for example, Sir Alexander allows Sebastian to marry Mary Fitzallard without an increase in her dowry); instead, a more just mindset triumphs over the base impulses of greed and lust.¹¹⁶ Unlike *A Fair Quarrel*, which locates morality in a class-specific context, *The Roaring Girl's* moral code is universal. Moll herself is comfortable in every class context, from canting with Trapdoor, to playing the viol in the home of Sir Alexander.

The play makes a similarly inclusive argument about gender relations. Moll encourages

116 Mulholland 40

women to submit to their husbands but argues that they will be more able to do so when they have personal agency. Moll argues that women cannot be expected to be honest (both verbally and sexually), until they have the economic and social power to resist dishonest men who slander or coerce them. Moll upholds the social order but also takes a more egalitarian approach to gender. Her own hermaphroditic body, seen as a proxy of London society at large, “represents an inclusive, nonhierarchical model for the City.”¹¹⁷ Although the play certainly does not promote Moll's behavior for others (she is an outlier), it does present her as a model for a more equal and just society.

The play's argument that a less coercive society is a more honest one synthesizes its seemingly contradictory elements. At the beginning of the play, misuse of words and power pervert the social balance. As a comedy, the play resolves the challenge to the traditional hierarchy and is therefore socially conservative. However, it does so by making society more egalitarian, both in terms of class and gender. Sir Alexander must accept his son's marriage to the poorer Mary Fitzallard. The gallants must give up their pursuit and extortion of the citizens' wives. All must recognize Moll's virtue and value, despite the fact that she refuses to join the mainstream social order.

In a similar manner, the duel offers scholars a method to integrate the contrasting aspects of Moll's character. The economic explanation Moll gives for women's sins is progressive, but her ultimate goal is to prevent immoral behavior. Moll crosses boundaries of class and gender to

117 Knowles xl

fight a duel in order to defend feminine virtue and chastity. The play strikes a delicate balance between mainstream society and its transgressive elements in which neither can exist without the other.¹¹⁸ Moll maintains this balance in her use of the duel.

Act III scene 1 of *The Roaring Girl* demonstrates that the duel was as much a literary trope as a real practice. *The Roaring Girl* imagines the duel not quite realistically (although still plausibly, if Mary Frith also fought duels). The duel in *The Roaring Girl* tells us that art could use the duel as a cultural trope even out of its real context of sex and class. We know that the duel had strong associations with upper-class gentlemen, both from treatises and because *The Roaring Girl* relies on these associations for its humor. But we also know that people could, in the case of this comedy, imagine the duel outside of these social contexts. Because the duel was a literary trope as well as a practice, it could not remain exclusive to noblemen. Just as the forces of social mobility in Jacobean London obscured other signifiers of gender and class, such as clothing, so they co-opted the duel. The trope and the cultural practice were certainly interrelated; the logic of the play depends upon the widely understood social logic of the duel. Nevertheless, the way that *The Roaring Girl* transforms the duel means that it was more than a practice that occurred; it was an important cultural idea which writers could transform to their purpose.

118 Knowles xxxvii

Chapter 4:

“A Word and a Blow”—*Romeo and Juliet* and the Jacobean Anti-Dueling Campaign

Shakespeare effects just such a transformation when he adopts a critical view of the duel in his tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. He argues that the outdated, rigid scripts of patriarchal society—exemplified by the duel—prevent the young lovers from finding new, improvisational ways of living and loving. Shakespeare points out the negative potential of several different social scripts, but the duel is a particularly apt example, both in its homosocial misogyny and its rapid degeneration into violence. The duel epitomizes the problems of patriarchy because it is so prescriptive—the verbal path to the duel is formulaic rather than communicative. In addition, the duel is an especially efficacious script; it turns the play into tragedy because it is too powerful for Romeo to resist. Through the character of Escalus, Prince of Verona, Shakespeare taps into a contemporary discourse on the impact of the duel on political authority and the ways political authority can contain the duel. These same questions informed the later anti-dueling campaign of King James I, so that much of the way James treated the duel came to resemble the view *Romeo and Juliet* takes on the problem.

The play opens with a brawl between the Montague and Capulet servants, which, despite its comic facade, introduces the duel's major thematic work in the play: the power of the feud to reinforce patriarchal familial identifications; the links among homosocial relationships, misogyny and violence; the use of meaningless honor jargon as an excuse to fight; a critique of the duel through a fight that is not a duel in the strictest sense; and political authority's attempts

to constrain the violence. The opening brawl establishes a world in which even the families' servants are drawn into a conflict without any real substance. Fighting exists for its own sake rather than marking any meaningful division.

First, the servants, as their masters' "children," use the duel as a way to identify themselves with the patriarchal structure to which they belong.¹¹⁹ As the Capulet servant, Gregory, puts it, "The quarrel is between our masters and us their men" (I.i.16). The feud socializes them as patriarchal subjects by pitting them against another paternal household.¹²⁰ Second, Samson and Gregory's phallic competitiveness uses language of sexualized violence against women to establish their masculinity. Samson promises, "[to] push Montague's men from the wall and thrust his maids to the wall" and, "Me they shall feel while I am able to stand" (I.i.14-15, 23). The homosocial relationship between the two Capulet servants is premised on misogyny to women and violence to other men.

Third, Samson and Gregory speak in the jargon of honor but lack any commitment to the ideal of a just cause. Instead, they overemphasize the technicalities of the duel, even consulting each other to make sure they are doing it properly. Samson evokes the idea of horizontal honor when he imagines that biting his thumb at the Montague servants "is a disgrace to them, if they bear it" (I.i.35-36). After some debate in which each party attempts to get the other to officially initiate the conflict, the servants speed through the giving of the lie and directly into the fight.

119 Kahn 7

120 Ibid. 6

None of these servants has any honor to defend, but they parrot the language of the nobility because that language is the path towards violence, their true aim.

Although the lower-class status of the participants and public setting of the brawl prevent it from being a duel by the most exact definition, Shakespeare uses specific references to dueling etiquette to make the duel (not the more generalized problem of street violence) the subject of discussion. Shakespeare's interest is on the use of dueling language (“quarrel,” “disgrace,” “better”) as a path to violence (I.i.41, 34, 47). By placing this fight in a public setting, Shakespeare is not avoiding the issue of the duel, instead he is commenting on its ineffectiveness as a script to control violent impulses. The servants brawl is marked as a duel by the use of particular patterns of language but no longer abides by the sentiments of the honor treatises.

Finally, Escalus, Prince of Verona, enters to break up the fighting. Shakespeare uses the fictional Escalus to explore political authority's role in limiting the duel; later King James I attempted to realize this course of action in a manner reminiscent of the way the play imagines the duel. In the 1610s, James came to view the duel as an outgrowth of a deeper social script, just as Escalus eventually realizes at the end of the play. In act one, Escalus claims that the Capulets and the Montagues, by fighting amongst themselves, have become enemies to their own state. He addresses them as “rebellious subjects, enemies to peace” (I.i.72). He accuses them of causing unnecessary bloodshed. Finally, he promises that “If ever you disturb our streets again, / Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace” (I.i.87-88). This decree must have been widely

published because later Romeo says, “the prince expressly hath / Forbidden bandying in Verona streets” (III.i.80-81). Escalus's words tap into anti-dueling discourses current in Shakespeare's London.

James I, twenty years after the writing of *Romeo and Juliet*, issued similar proclamations against the duel. In 1613, James published, “A Proclamation prohibiting the publishing of any reports or writings of Duels,” reasoning that reports of duels offered incentive.¹²¹ In 1614, he issued a proclamation against dueling directly.¹²² During James' reign, the Star Chamber tried 200 cases that involved challenges or duels.¹²³ In this campaign, James was heir to the same sentiments that inspired Shakespeare's writing of Escalus.

However, Escalus has no power against the strength of the patriarchal scripts which limit the younger generation's opportunities to replace violence with more meaningful forms of communication. Romeo and Juliet attempt to create new adult identities by “manipulating the verbal signifiers” of their reality.¹²⁴ Juliet asks, “What's in a name?” and decides that, “Thou art thyself, though not a Montague” (II.ii.43, 39). Romeo in turn promises, “Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; / Henceforth I never will be Romeo” (II.ii.50-51). Coppelia Kahn argues that they are prevented in this transformation by the feud between the families: an expression of patriarchal society “which Shakespeare shows to be tragically self-destructive.”¹²⁵ Romeo and

121 Peltonen, *Duel* 87

122 Ibid. 89

123 Ibid. 82

124 Kahn 11

125 Ibid. 5

Juliet successfully move from old to new scripts for love. However, other powerful scripts of patriarchy, most particularly the duel, prevent them from living by these new methods for very long.

Romeo and Juliet each begin the play following an outdated and less effective script for love. Romeo is at first a stereotypical Petrarchan lover, languishing for a woman whom the play has so little interest in distinguishing from the sex in general that Romeo's reply when asked whom he loves is merely: "I do love a woman" (I.i.191). In Petrarch's sonnet model,

the woman who is ostensibly the object of the poet's longing is entirely the product of the discourse in which she is placed, and her primary function is to offer an opportunity for the poet-lover to rehearse the turmoil and anguish of his own eloquence.¹²⁶

Romeo wants to be in love, but following this outdated and formulaic model, he is only able to suffer for love.

Lord Capulet initially compels Juliet to follow a similarly old-fashioned model of marriage as property transfer. Paris asks Capulet for Juliet's hand before meeting her and Capulet's considerations are only to produce an heir for his lands: "She's the hopeful lady of my earth" (I.ii.15). Juliet's mother also imagines Juliet only as a silent cover to beautify the "book" of Paris. Juliet herself struggles to find agency.

When Romeo and Juliet meet, they embark on a new form of love: not pre-scripted but instead dialogic, improvisatory, and equal—the opposite of the language form used by the duel.

126 Callaghan 15

When the two first encounter each other, Romeo begins a sonnet he has probably already prepared, but after the first quatrain, Juliet joins in, stymieing Romeo's plans and forcing him to improvise until the two complete the sonnet form together. As the play progresses, Harry Levin points out that the lovers move from conventional and formal language to “simple organic expressiveness,” that contrasts with the verbal rigidity of the rest of Verona.¹²⁷ Romeo and Juliet replace a patriarchal monologue form, in which the man suffers and the woman is only an object, with a dialogue which gives both of them agency. Shakespeare was radical in validating adolescent, sexual and reciprocated love.¹²⁸

This new notion of love is able dislodge Romeo's adherence to painful and pointless Petrarchan love and give Juliet a measure of agency, but is tragically unable to overcome other outdated but powerful social scripts. Romeo and Juliet's hopes are dashed by the duel, in particular the aspects that tap into discourses of reputation and homosocial misogynistic relationships. Tybalt and Mercutio's fight brings these discourses to the fore, and the conflict between the two men drags Romeo back into the feud.

Tybalt creates the primary obstacle to the lovers in his blind adherence to the script of the duel. Tybalt represents the continental duelist, up to date with the latest fashions, but (at least in Mercutio's opinion), overly precise. Scholars debate the exact style of Tybalt's fence. Soens argues that Tybalt is a Spanish-style fencer, based on the treatise by Jeronomi de Carranza's *De*

127 Kahn 14

128 Bate 3

la Philosophia de la Armas.¹²⁹ Soens cites Mercutio's description of Tybalt as “a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic” as a reference to Carranza's Euclidean theories of rapier play (III.i.89).¹³⁰ Holmer argues that Tybalt fights in the Italian style and that when Mercutio calls him, “the very butcher of a silk button,” he references the Italian teacher Bonetti (II.iv.21).¹³¹ Regardless of exact style, Tybalt embodies the foreign duelist, whom the English saw as overly bellicose and sensitive of their honor.¹³² Shakespeare creates Tybalt as a recognizable type to make him unsympathetic to the audience.

Tybalt is so bound to the script of the duel that he lacks the ability to speak originally. When he comes seeking Romeo, he has clearly prepared his words in advance. Meeting Benvolio and Mercutio instead throws him off. In response to Mercutio's witticisms, Tybalt is at a loss and must fall back on the script: “Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo” (III.i.36-7). Despite the fact that Tybalt is so bound by the specific language of the duel, he does not attach any of the meaning they are meant to carry. Instead, words are merely the path to blows, procedural rather than communicative. We hear from Lord Capulet himself that Tybalt has no true grounds to quarrel with Romeo. Tybalt has attended to the formalities of the duel, such as sending a written challenge in advance, but cares little for the actual circumstances or justification for the fight. In Tybalt, Shakespeare points out that those who adhere most closely to the jargon of the duel are quickest to dispense with the true meaning of honor.

129 Callaghan 197

130 Soens 124

131 Holmer 188

132 Pollock 7

Mercutio is not a consummate duelist like Tybalt, nevertheless, his adherence to an outdated script of homosocial misogyny involves him in the duel. Mercutio bases his friendship with Romeo on linguistic misogyny that depicts women only in sexual terms. Speaking to Romeo of Rosaline, Mercutio vulgarly exclaims “O, that she were / an open-arse, and thou a poppering pear,” fruits that represent the female and male genitalia respectively (II.ii. 38-39). Mercutio dismisses Romeo's romantic notions: “Laura to his lady was but a kitchen wench... Dido a dowdy, Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots” (II.iv.34-36). When Romeo complains of being pricked with the pangs of love, Mercutio responds with coarse language, “If love be rough with you, be rough with love; / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down” (I.iv.27-28). Mercutio cements his friendship with Romeo in acts of verbal and physical violence, tying the two together indelibly. Smith asks if Mercutio is “an exemplar of male violence and misogyny? A martyr to male friendship? A victim of sexual desire that he cannot, will not, or must not acknowledge directly? Mercutio is all three.”¹³³ Mercutio denies any potential for a positive and equal relationship with women, exactly the type Romeo and Juliet attempt to forge together. Mercutio does not see that Romeo is no longer invested in this outdated notion of masculinity. Outraged by Romeo's “calm, dishonorable, vile submission,” he takes up the quarrel with Tybalt on his friend's behalf (III.i.64).

The duel is a misogynistic script in similarly homosocial and violent ways. Although Mercutio is not a stereotypical duelist, his misogynistic view of the world fits the duel's theories

133 Smith 63-4

equally well. While Tybalt represents the aspects of the duel based on honor-as-reputation, Mercutio embodies those elements that were intensely homosocial and also violent. Just as the play *Romeo and Juliet* blends violence and love, so the duel cements the male community with performances of aggression. Given the play's mixture of aggression and desire, the duel is not contradictory in being both violent and also homosocial.

Mercutio's death at the hands of Tybalt turns the play from comedy to tragedy. At this point Romeo has to

choose between being a man in the sanctioned public way, by drawing a sword upon insult, or being a man in a novel and private way: by reposing an inner confidence in his secret identity as Juliet's husband.¹³⁴

Tragically, the facets of the duel that Tybalt and Mercutio represent are too strong for Romeo to resist. First, he is drawn back in by his love for his friend Mercutio: "My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt / In my behalf" (III.i.97-98). Next, he is reminded of the threat to his honor from Tybalt's insult: "my reputation stained / With Tybalt's slander" (III.i.98-99). In this moment, he chooses to value his relationship with Mercutio and his own honor over his new love for Juliet. He cries,

O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
And in my temper softened valor's steel. (III.i.100-102)

Having made this choice, Romeo resolves against his chance at peace: "Away to heaven respective lenity, / And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now" (III.i.110-111). In this moment of

134 Kahn 7

peripeteia Romeo is

caught between his radically new identity as Juliet's husband, which has made him responsible (he thinks) for his friend's death, and his previous traditional identity as the scion of the house of Montague.¹³⁵

Romeo chooses his old identity and the script of the duel when he kills Tybalt. In doing so, he loses his chance to form a new identity with Juliet.

Although neither the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio nor the one between Tybalt and Romeo is a duel in the strictest sense, Shakespeare makes clear that he is specifically discussing the problem of the duel, not any more generalized form of violence. References to the tropes of the duel (such as the written challenge Tybalt has sent in advance) allow Shakespeare to use a fight in the “public haunt of men” to criticize duel in specific (III.i.41). Although the feud has perverted the duel from its true form, its defenders cannot avoid criticism by simply excluding it from their categorization.

Kahn argues that the strength of the feud, as the vehicle by which patriarchal society asserts its control, overwhelms Romeo's desire to forge his own identity. I agree, but wish to point out that the duel specifically is the tragic agent. Although the feud as a whole is a problem, the duel is the way the younger generations continue to perpetuate that problem. Shakespeare chooses the duel specifically (as opposed to a multitude of other actions which could have resulted in Romeo's banishment) because the duel unites the homosocial and honor discourses of Mercutio and Tybalt into a single script.

135 Kahn 8

Romeo and Juliet advocates for improvisatory dialogue over pre-scripted forms, of which the duel is a particularly good example because it uses such specific language. *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about language, contrasting older monologic forms (poetry, essays, novels) with more improvisatory and dialogic forms, such as drama. The play turns to tragedy when destructive scripts restrict the young lovers' own words. The duel is the epitome of these confining forms of language because the treatises specify word choice so minutely. The duel is a social script, but it is also a literal script, in that it dictates specific words and actions in order.

Just as Escalus cannot prevent the duel by royal fiat, King James also met with limited success. In London, covert duels continued with little effective control by the government.¹³⁶ We can see something of the challenges James faced in Escalus's speech upon learning of Mercutio's and Tybalt's deaths. He is angry, both politically and personally, being a kinsman to Mercutio: "My blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding" (III.i.180). However, he is unable to simply mete out the death penalty he had earlier promised. Pressured on both sides by the feuding houses and faced with a complex blend of personal revenge and enacted justice, Escalus must content himself with "so strong a fine / That you shall all repent the loss of mine" and banishing Romeo (III.i.181-182).

When he tries to confront the issue of the feud directly, Escalus has only limited success. At the end of the play, gesturing to the bodies of Paris, Romeo, and Juliet, he realizes that "I for winking at your discords too / Have lost a brace of kinsmen: all are punish'd" (V.iii.294-295).

136 Turner xxiii

Faced with a similar realization, James shifted his approach from a focus on the action of the duel itself to one that addressed the root cause. In the process, he importantly shifted his thinking on the nature of honor and its relationship to the duel. The problems that Shakespeare grapples with through the character of Escalus finally provoke a change in policy under King James.

Initially, James followed the advice of Henry Howard, earl of Northampton. Northampton upheld the notion of honor, and considered the duel to be a separate problem. Northampton himself came from an important noble family and was an avid student of theories of honor, as the extensive notes he wrote in his copy of Castiglione's *The Courtier* demonstrate.¹³⁷ Northampton promoted the right of the gentleman to defend his honor and “accepted the notions of courtesy, honour and insult underlying the duelling theory but still wanted to abolish duelling.”¹³⁸ The solution he proposed was a court of honor which would settle disputes previously put to the sword. Northampton led one important branch of anti-dueling rhetoric by upholding the notion of honor while rejecting the duel as a destructive practice.

Another of King James' advisors, the lawyer Sir Francis Bacon, disagreed with Northampton that a court of honor could simply replace the duel while men still believed in horizontal honor. He argued that the notion of honor itself was to blame for the duel and ought

137 Peltonen, *Francis* 12

138 Ibid. 1

to be discredited. The best method to avoid quarrels was to simply ignore the meticulous rules of courtesy.¹³⁹ Bacon consequently argued that Northampton's solution of a court for matters of honor was counterproductive because it validated the "intellectual framework on which duelling rested."¹⁴⁰ Bacon's campaign against the duel focused on the underlying motivation rather than the literal practice.

Although James I outlawed dueling as early as 1614, he shifted his rationale between 1614 and 1618 from Northampton's position to Bacon's. In 1614 James I issued "A proclamation against private challenges and combats" which acknowledged that being insulted, especially being called a liar, was a grave injury to reputation.¹⁴¹ Northampton's treatise, *A publication of his majesties edict, and severe censure against private combats and combatants* was published alongside this proclamation to make the case at greater length.¹⁴² The proclamation was designed to discourage the duel both with fear of punishment and also with the offer of alternative methods of satisfaction. Bacon continued to advocate for a rejection of the code of courtesy entirely until King James came to his position and published a treatise entitled *The peace-maker: or, Great Brittaines blessing*.¹⁴³ Thomas Middleton wrote it but the king licensed it and many assumed he wrote it personally.¹⁴⁴ It argued that:

The wise and understanding man is not subject or exposed to any of these Injuries

139 Peltonen, *Francis* 15-16

140 Ibid. 1

141 Ibid. 1

142 Ibid. 1

143 Peltonen, *Duel* 142

144 Ibid. 142

whatsoever;... whatsoever injuries are attempted against a wise man, returne without effect... And for words of contumelie, it is held so small, and so sleight an injurie, as no wise man complaines, or revengeth himself for it: therefore, neither does the Lawes themselves prefixe any penaltie thereunto, not imagining that they would ever be burthensome.¹⁴⁵

Although neither James nor Escalus had complete success in preventing violence, they both came to realize that they needed to address the underlying problem of the feud and notion of honor, rather than simply proscribing the act of the duel. In doing so, they share Shakespeare's perspective on the duel as an outdated script by which one reaches violence, rather than an expression of relevant sentiments.

Romeo and Juliet played an important role in the shift of anti-dueling discourse. More than pastors, polemics or politics, plays harness the power of empathy in shaping public opinion. This play leaves us with an ending image of two young lovers who previously had so much hope, killed by the power of outdated scripts. It points to the duel as particularly destructive. *Romeo and Juliet* gave the ideas of the anti-dueling campaign a body and voice.

145 Middleton, *Peace Image* file 11

Conclusion

Taken together, these three plays have a great deal to tell us about the range of ways the duel could be imagined, as well as the different types of work it could perform in a play. The duel could act as either a hindrance to or promoter of social cohesion. It could teach a villain the true notion of honor, or destroy the happiness of a young lover. The duel could act as a literary trope even outside of its usual realistic contexts to validate the thematic drive of a play. The duel is an efficacious plot device and a potent symbol, shaping the themes and plot of a play in a fundamental manner. In none of these works is the duel unimportant or uncomplicated. As a set, these three plays have the potential to offer a narrative of the duel in early modern England. In my theatrical production of the dueling scenes from these three plays, this narrative emerges in a way that is impossible in an academic paper. I would like to give my last few pages over to considering the story these plays tell as a set.

As a series, *A Fair Quarrel*, *The Roaring Girl*, and *Romeo and Juliet* (in this order) strip away questions of honor and details of etiquette to unveil the violence fundamental to the duel. *Fair Quarrel* turns upon competing notions of honor and advocates honor-as-virtue over honor-as-reputation. Nevertheless, Captain Ager's equivocations over cause may be a mere cover for his real desire to defend his status. Moll stands up for all women in her fight against Laxton, but Laxton is such a pitiful example of manhood that it is possible her victory holds little meaning. Mercutio and Tybalt are adolescents narrow-minded enough to ruin their own and others' chances

for happiness. Over the course of these three plays, the delicacies of insult, counter insult, challenge, and meeting condense down into the mere desire for violence. At the same time, the consequences for the violence become harsher. In *Romeo and Juliet*, we finally see the duel take a life (as well as four more by the end of the play). The duel has failed in its expressed purpose to establish truth and create a well-defined order.

The previous chapters of my paper tell this narrative primarily through the order in which I have placed them. I have chosen to study social topic in chronological order by discussing plays in reverse chronology. I unpacked theories of honor expressed by treatises from the 1590s with the narrative of *A Fair Quarrel*, a play performed in 1617. I studied economic and social trends that strained gender and class hierarchies in the early 1610s particularly through the lens of the 1611 play, *The Roaring Girl*. Finally, I used *Romeo and Juliet*, a play written before 1597, as an access point to the Jacobean anti-dueling campaign of 1613 to 1618. These plays serve these purposes because they all either anticipate or recall social movements of a different period. They thus prove a useful lens for issues not of their own time. Nevertheless, the narrative that unveils the violence underneath the duel is only possible by going backwards in time from play to play.

My staging of these three plays further augmented the story of the duel unraveling. I ordered the scenes as I have in this paper, from *A Fair Quarrel* through *Roaring Girl* to *Romeo and Juliet*. Furthermore, in my selections of which scenes to perform (I.i, II.i and III.i in *A Fair*

Quarrel, III.i in *The Roaring Girl* and III.i in *Romeo and Juliet*), I narrowed the focus thematically down to the duel. In the cases of *Roaring Girl* and *Romeo and Juliet*, I even eliminated the scenes that offer the original point of insult, making the justification for the fight seem even less important than in the complete play. Finally, we presented these different duel scenes as a single piece, with a single message.

Our aesthetic choices in the design amplified this message by moving the setting towards the present day and stripping down its elegance. Our chronological inspirations for costuming moved from the Jacobean era in *A Fair Quarrel* to the 1920s in *Roaring Girl* to the present day in *Romeo and Juliet*. At the same time, the set, costumes, and lighting became more urban and grungy until *Romeo and Juliet*, which offered the most modern and relatable aesthetic. The modernity of the design gave *Romeo and Juliet* more weight in the thematic balance.

Furthermore, my actors and I looked for character motivations with relevance to a modern performer and thus a modern audience. The use of the duel as a trial by god is no longer very accessible. Instead, actors found more personal and emotional reasons for coming to the duel. The actors playing the Colonel and Ager fought for the respect of the other man rather than on behalf of ideas of honor. The actress playing Moll discovered more range and depth if she approached her duel with Laxton from a place of vulnerability to his slanders rather than as a one-dimensional champion of the truth. Even Tybalt became a more compelling character when his re-entrance after killing Mercutio was motivated by fear, shock, and indecision rather than

cold-blooded dedication to honor. In summary, the actors found emotional motivations for the fight more compelling than the justifications for the duel given by fencing treatises. It was our hope that audiences would sense these deeper emotional truths, rather than taking the characters' adherence to honor at face value. The actors' process was one more piece of evidence that the way the duel is theorized by the treatises is not emotionally honest to the actual circumstances of its enactment.

If the plays were put in chronological order, the narrative would be rather different. Layers of theory would gradually cover the duel and separate the insult from the fight. Justifications for the violence would build from the mere excuse Mercutio and Tybalt need, to the point Moll wishes to prove, to Captain Ager's single-minded insistence on a just cause. This chronological narrative would support the proponents of the duel who claimed that it was a civilizing force that restricted the use of violence.

It is at first surprising (given the Jacobean anti-dueling campaign) that depictions of the duel in these three plays would become more positive from 1595 to 1617. Perhaps the answer lies in Peltonen's theory that the duel was imported from Italy. In 1595 the duel in England was still relatively new and subject to more scrutiny (and xenophobia). But the mid-1600s, the struggles of the anti-dueling campaign proves that the duel had become more deeply entrenched in English culture. Perhaps the later plays are motivated by nostalgia for an idyllic past that did not in fact exist in the world to which *Romeo and Juliet* responds.

Some scholars would argue that the chronological narrative is more accurate. After all, the narrative that entrenches the duel further into culture persists in the present day. The notion that violence is necessary to maintain honor has not lost its grip on Western culture. Perhaps it is more historically accurate to tell a story in which the duel is romanticized despite the protests of the Francis Bacons of the world who scoffed hypersensitivity to honor.

Nevertheless, I believe this is a fundamentally deceptive narrative. A story which supports the proponents of the duel is problematic. The duel killed thousands; even the less deadly pistol duel of the 18th century harmed a third of all participants.¹⁴⁶ The advent of the duel did not end senseless violence. Nor were people's true motivations necessarily “Valour's advancement, and the sacred rectitude / Due to a valorous cause”, as Captain Ager's friend claims (III.i.5-6). Furthermore, the duel's romanticization blinds us to its modern relevancies, which I believe to be of the greatest significance.

The theories which justified the duel continue to carry weight in our modern society. The opinions of our peers often motivate our actions more than our own sense of personal virtue. Furthermore, the link between violence and masculinity remains prevalent. Honor is still a gendered concept—chastity for women, aggressive protection of reputation for men. Current trends in violent acts mirror the statistical information we have on the duel in early modern England. Numerically, both behaved in much the same manner as epidemics, rising and falling on a bell curve. In the present day, suicides, school shootings, and gang violence all follow this

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pattern. When studying the Elizabethan duel, it is important not to see it as a great and noble fight for honor and goodness. Instead, we should read it as a social expression of violence analogous to modern forms. There the subject has the potential to offer us insight into our own society.

Anger is an impulse, but violence is a choice and the way that we enact violence is scripted and shaped by culture. Consequently, it is informative to study how one culture (particularly the direct predecessor to our own society) expressed that anger. After all “whether for war or honor, personal combat has been as much a subject of fashion as efficiency.”¹⁴⁷ The early modern duel offers particularly valuable insights because artists and authors of the time applied such intense scrutiny to it. Modern forms of violence do not receive the same kinds of written attention the duel did; we do not have manuals telling us when and in what manner violence should be conducted. On the other hand, art continues to give us cultural scripts of behavior. We should continue to examine the ways in which art both shapes and is shaped by cultural practices of violence.

Ultimately, we can condense this debate down to the basic question of justification for violence. Society gives us scripts that say when violence is justified and when not. It is important not to take these for granted but to carefully consider their validity and origins. We must question the ways in which our art manipulates these scripts.

Which leads me to the question: what, fundamentally, is the duel? I maintain in this

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paper and in my production, that the duel is just one more powerful cultural script which justifies the drive to violence. For this reason, I organized my narrative to strip away the layers and reveal the truth underneath. This is what we must see.

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