Among the achievements of Louis XIV, celebrated on an inscription in an equestrian statue of the king dedicated in the Place des Victoires in 1686, was the abolition of dueling. Louis’ ordinances, however, were neither the first nor the last attempts to abolish the practice, which was already illegal in almost every country in western Europe. Using swords and then pistols, duelists continued to kill one another in the 18th and 19th centuries.

John Leigh, a lecturer in modern and medieval languages at Cambridge University, demonstrates that the duel was a staple of literature in Europe and the United States. “It took so long to laugh the practice into extinction,” he argues in “Touché,” because many people viewed the duelists’ “playful adherence to form, even in mortal danger, as redemptively gallant, knowing, and above all touching” — and often laughed with them, rather than at them.


For centuries, Leigh points out, dueling set the aristocracy apart from other social classes. To deem it ridiculous, noblemen insisted, betrayed a failure by critics to understand the meaning of honor. And to appreciate an action “not tainted by self-interest or darkened by the shadows of calculation.” The bourgeoisie, who “disdained the antiquated prerogatives of class” and preferred spontaneity to ritual, were, of course, far less hospitable to duels. The Romantics “were too impulsive and impatient, their feelings too urgent, to fight duels.”

And yet, Leigh indicates, for some writers the duelist represented self-reliant individuals, willing to defend themselves and their interests, in sharp contrast to a society where influence derived “from
lending and borrowing the power of others,” where the state was invisible and omnipresent. In the 19th century, he writes, the duel was “loosely tied to notions of liberty and opportunities for self-expression.” With the notable exception of the Three Musketeers (and D’Artagnan), duelists in literature were older, “weary, reluctant participants, paying a debt to the past. Their bouts are all the more perversely honorable for having been fought without any belief in their essential meaning.”

The mass slaughter that characterized World War I, Leigh reminds us, invited contrasts between 20th century combat and a practice, with unbending rules, elaborate rituals, and obligations, “in which the death of even one human being was endowed with some significance.” Nonetheless, those who survived the Great War, Leigh concludes, had no patience for anyone who would throw his life away on a self-indulgent whim.

“What would you do if you were challenged to a duel?,” Guy Crouchback is asked in Evelyn Waugh’s “Officers and Gentlemen,” (1955). His answer: “Laugh.”

But he — and we — also look back on dueling with some nostalgia. And, Leigh suggests, we sometimes seek surrogates for it in shoot-outs in Western movies and ersatz duels in the summer and winter Olympics.

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