

# Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada

Journal of the  
Canadian Historical Association  
Revue de la  
Société historique du Canada

## “Cool courage should always mark me”: John Wilkes and Duelling

John Sainsbury

Volume 7, Number 1, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031100ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031100ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Sainsbury, J. (1996). “Cool courage should always mark me”: John Wilkes and Duelling. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 7(1), 19–33. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031100ar>

### Article abstract

The duelling activity of John Wilkes, the eighteenth-century English radical, has not received much attention from historians. Yet it tells us a lot about his career and the responses that it evoked from the public at large. Through allegiance to the honour code, Wilkes self-consciously sought to identify with the hegemonic aristocratic culture, an insight which renders problematic his frequent depiction as the champion of a bourgeois style of politics. At the same time, his duelling helped to elicit popular support because it defined a manly persona which could be contrasted with the effiteness of his political enemies, especially those who had allegedly betrayed England's patriotic interests in the country's struggle with France. Significantly, Wilkes's duelling career ended once he found sanctuary in London's civic arena, where the honour code was discounted in favour of demonstrations of political heroism that were not potentially fatal.

## **“Cool courage should always mark me”: John Wilkes and Duelling**

JOHN SAINSBURY

**J**OHN WILKES, THE CELEBRATED ENGLISH RADICAL AND RAKE, fought two pistol duels, and on at least one other occasion came perilously close to fighting a third. These affairs of honour are given minimal attention in scholarly accounts of Wilkes, which tend to focus on his substantive achievements (resistance to arbitrary legal process, the defence of electors' rights and the extension of press freedoms) or the socio-economic bases of his support.<sup>1</sup> This paper proceeds from the opinion that the comparative neglect of his duelling activity represents a lost opportunity to help locate the meaning of his remarkable career in eighteenth-century politics. Why men risk their lives in single combat is a question perhaps ultimately embedded in the complexities of sociobiology;<sup>2</sup> yet, as a growing number of studies now reveals, the duel, as a cultural phenomenon, is deeply inscribed by concerns of class, gender and politics and the discourses that pertain to them.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as these concerns are also central to any well-rounded understanding of Wilkes's conduct and public responses to it, an examination of his duels takes on a corresponding significance.

V.G. Kiernan has argued persuasively that the duel, with the protocols that surrounded it, was an important feature of the cultural hegemony of European

---

Research for this paper was supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

1 For example, George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763 to 1774* (Oxford, 1962); Peter D.G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (Oxford, 1996).

2 For some pertinent comments along these lines, see Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca and London, 1981), 79-80.

3 Significant publications on the duel and its contexts appearing in the last four years alone include Joanne B. Freeman, "Duelling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, 3rd Series (1996): 289-318; James Kelly, *That Damn'd Thing Called Honor: Duelling in Ireland, 1570-1860* (Cork, 1995); Kevin McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton, 1994); Cecilia Morgan, "'In Search of the Phantom Misnamed Honour': Duelling in Upper Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 76 (1995): 529-62; and Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York and Oxford, 1993).

aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> The code of honour defined and supported aristocratic status in a number of related ways. It elaborated standards of conduct from which the masses were excluded; it implied a privileged exemption from the full rigour of the criminal law; and it mandated displays of gracious courage which were the essential hallmark of a virile ruling caste. The corollary of the aristocratic associations of the duel is that its eventual disappearance, at least in England, was the result of an insurgence of middle-class values, which, in opposition to the honour principle, proclaimed "a new vision of society based on reasonableness, Christianity and commerce, in which duelling ceased to be practised . . . because it appeared incongruous and foolish."<sup>5</sup>

This campaign took several decades to achieve its ends, but it had already begun by the time that Wilkes fought his duels in the 1760s. Indeed, amid the growing number of press articles and pamphlets that condemned duelling as a violation of religious and secular law, it is difficult to find any that offered a principled, as distinct from a pragmatic, defence of the practice. Wilkes, though, was emphatic in his allegiance to the traditional aristocratic code, while seeking to extend its application to aspiring gentlemen, specifically himself. He had "never done any thing unbecoming a man of honour," he boasted on one occasion.<sup>6</sup> And he never betrayed any sense of being trapped between the imperatives of conflicted value systems as did another celebrated duellist-cum-politician, Alexander Hamilton.<sup>7</sup> This being the case, it is difficult to recognise Wilkes as being in the vanguard of the embourgeoisement of English political culture, where some, notably John Brewer (albeit with doubts and hesitations), have felt compelled to locate him.<sup>8</sup>

---

4 V.G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1988). Not surprisingly, defining the duel as quintessentially aristocratic becomes problematic in North American contexts: Morgan, "'In Search of the Phantom Misnamed Honour,'" 531; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford and New York, 1982), esp. 354-55. Interestingly, though, many of Wyatt-Brown's observations about duelling in a democratic society apply to English duelling in its terminal nineteenth-century phase.

5 Donna T. Andrew, "The Code of Honour and its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England, 1700-1850," *Social History* 5 (1980): 411.

6 *The Correspondence of the Late John Wilkes with His Friends*, John Almon, ed., Vol. 2 (London, 1805), 36.

7 Freeman, "Duelling as Politics," 290-93.

8 John Brewer, "The Wilkites and the Law, 1763-74: A Study of Radical Notions of Governance," in *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. John Brewer and John Styles, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1980), 128-71, and "English Radicalism in the Age of George III," in *Three British Revolutions, 1641, 1688, and 1776*. J.G.A. Pocock, ed. (Princeton, 1980), 323-67; Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca and London, 1990), esp. 172-75.

Yet, at the same time, it would be a mistake to see Wilkes, the son of a distiller, as an uncritical devotee of aristocracy. This paper will suggest that duelling provided Wilkes with an opportunity to emulate aristocratic style while challenging aristocratic authority. In some respects, Wilkes was a politicised prototype of those middle-class "dandelions on the field of honor," whose quest for honour, glory and social status actually produced a surge in the popularity of duelling, in defiance of the mounting opposition to it, before its sudden end in the 1840s. Typically, this new breed of duellist came from a commercial background, deriving from military commission an anxious claim to gentility that he sought to test by engaging in affairs of honour with the high and mighty.<sup>9</sup> Wilkes, a militia officer when he first entered the field of honour, likewise sought and expected social advantage from his duels. Yet it was a quest riddled with pitfalls. Wilkes exhibited many of the social insecurities of the parvenu; and his patrons, while amused and intrigued by their talented hanger-on, never admitted him unreservedly into their charmed circle. Significantly, as we shall see, it was delayed fallout from the first of his duels that widened a breach between Wilkes and his aristocratic friends and helped define him as a "man of the people."

The kind of status anxiety that first drove Wilkes to the duelling ground was compounded by the fact that he was not only a redcoat officer, but also a man of the pen, deeply engaged in political controversy. Cosmopolitan citizens of the republic of letters (as Wilkes liked to regard himself) had some claim in Enlightenment Europe to a degree of equality with the great, but it was a claim that the nobility of the ancien regime did not necessarily acknowledge, as even Voltaire discovered. At best, the social status of the man of letters tended to be a volatile one, contingent on a number of circumstances. Wilkes calculated, however, that courageous conduct in a duel could help surmount the gulf between despised Grub Street hack and literary man of honour.<sup>10</sup>

If duelling involved issues of class, it was also deeply connected with issues of gender. The observation that the formal duel was an exclusively male domain may seem trite, but it carries a weight of implied meanings. The mid-eighteenth century seems to have been a period of considerable anxiety concerning definitions of manhood. Among other effects, that anxiety drove an increasingly shrill campaign against those suspected of sodomy, who now stood

---

9 Antony E. Simpson, "Dandelions on the Field of Honor: Dueling, the Middle Classes, and the Law in Nineteenth-Century England," *Criminal Justice History* 9 (1988): 99-155.

10 For an interesting discussion of the intersections of newspaper controversy and the honour principle in the North American context, see Freeman, "Dueling as Politics," 289-318. Voltaire's problem was that a young noble antagonist (the chevalier de Rohan) haughtily refused to give him satisfaction in a duel: Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London, 1994), 97-98.

condemned, not simply for deviating sexually, but for compromising their manliness. One victim of this campaign was Lord George Sackville (later Lord George Germain), who was publicly villified for his allegedly "unmanly" conduct at the Battle of Minden in 1759. His critics, who included John Wilkes, explicitly connected the charge of cowardice with allegations of sodomy. Sackville's fecund marriage and virile and assertive demeanour proved no defence against such calumny; but, significantly, Sackville was able to redeem his reputation and re-enter public life in part through displaying grace and courage under fire in a duel that he fought in 1770.<sup>11</sup>

The case of Sackville hints at ways in which intersected discourses of class and gender were spilling out into the political arena. In the mid 1750s, a host of chauvinistic commentators blamed degenerate and Frenchified aristocrats for England's calamitous performance in the early phase of the Seven Years' War.<sup>12</sup> It was in this context that Wilkes entered public life, as the parliamentary protege and penman of the faction with the most vociferous claims on manly patriotism. The faction included Lord Temple, Wilkes's immediate patron; its stellar member was Temple's brother-in-law, William Pitt, who, once brought to high office, arguably turned the tide of war in Britain's favour. In 1757, Wilkes judged his party as "alone capable to avert the impending ruin," calling them the "holy Theban band," after the ancient Greek fraternity that stood apart from the degenerate oligarchs and saved their country from Spartan aggression. (Wilkes chose to overlook the inconvenient circumstance that the Theban band was as notorious for its homosexuality as it was renowned for its courage.<sup>13</sup>)

The connection with Lord Temple was relevant to Wilkes's duels with respect both to their origins and to the manner in which Wilkes and his supporters chose to represent them. Duels, though conducted in private, were necessarily public events to the extent that reputation underwrote the honour that was invested in them; but, with some initial difficulty, the Wilkites set out to

---

11 John Sainsbury, "Wilkes and Libertinism," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 26 (forthcoming); Randolph Trumbach, "Sodomy Transformed: Aristocratic Libertinage, Public Reputation and the Gender Revolution of the 18th Century," *Journal of Homosexuality* 19 (1990): 105-24; Adrian Hamilton, *The Infamous Essay on Woman: or John Wilkes Seated between Vice and Virtue* (London, 1972), 195; Kelly, *That Damn'd Thing Called Honor*, 104-105; Alan Valentine, *Lord George Germain* (Oxford, 1962), 88-89.

12 On fears of national degeneracy in the 1750s, see Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 185-205; and Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (New York, 1987), 63-84.

13 John Wilkes to George Grenville, 22 October 1757, Wilkes MS 4: letter 6, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. On the original Theban band, see Louis Crompton, "'An Army of Lovers': The Sacred Band of Thebes," *History Today* 44 (November 1994): 23-29.

make them political displays as well, characterising their champion's courageous conduct as the epitome of the manly patriotism to which his party laid claim.

Wilkes's first duel was fought on 5 October 1762, with William Lord Talbot, Lord Steward of the Royal Household. The cause for offence was an article in the *North Briton* – a periodical that assailed the dominant influence in government of the Scottish courtier Lord Bute, and that was written and edited by Wilkes and his friend Charles Churchill with nervous sponsorship from Lord Temple. In issue No. 12, Wilkes ridiculed Talbot, a Buteite, for an embarrassing display at George III's coronation the previous year. On that occasion, Talbot had attempted a show of horsemanship that involved backing his mount from the royal presence without exposing its rump to the king. The equestrian manoeuvre had gone comically awry. In defiance of its rider, Talbot's horse had turned around and projected its backside towards His Royal Majesty, maintaining this disrespectful posture to the undisguised mirth of the spectators. Talbot deemed himself "publicly affronted" at Wilkes's facetious reminder of his "dexterity" and demanded that Wilkes either avow or deny his authorship of the offending piece. This Wilkes refused to do, contesting Talbot's right "to catechise [him] about an anonymous paper," though from the first Wilkes declared that, "as a gentleman," he was "ready to give [Talbot] any other satisfaction."<sup>14</sup>

The two engaged in a blustering exchange of letters over the next couple of weeks until the terms of a duel were finally settled between their respective seconds. The appointed venue was Bagshot in Surrey, a relatively isolated spot where points of honour could be resolved without judicial interference. During the drawn-out preliminaries to the contest, Wilkes combined an attitude of teasing insouciance with a punctilious regard for the courtesies and protocols of the honour code. Consistent with the libertine ambience that often seemed to surround eighteenth-century duels, Wilkes mentioned on his arrival at the Red Lion Inn in Bagshot that he had come directly from a rakish gathering at Medmenham Abbey, "where the jovial monks of St. Francis had kept [him] up till four in the morning." He asked for a postponement of the engagement to the following day on the grounds that public opinion would turn against Talbot if it was suspected that he had fought a man who was assumed to be still drunk from the revelries of the previous night. Talbot, however, "in an agony of passion," demanded more immediate satisfaction. According to Wilkes, Talbot shocked the seconds by blurting out, in an obvious violation of the honour code, "If you kill me, I hope you will be hanged."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Letters between the Duke of Grafton, the Earls of Halifax, Egremont, Chatham, Temple, and Talbot . . . etc. and John Wilkes* (London, 1769), 8, 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

During the course of their heated exchange, Wilkes adopted a kind of mock deference towards Talbot's elevated rank, while insisting on the essential equality of gentlemen. Wilkes described himself as "a private English gentleman, perfectly free and independent," a condition that he held to be "of the highest dignity." He conceded that Talbot was his "superior in rank, fortune, and abilities," but his "equal only in honour, courage, and liberty." "God had given me a firmness and spirit, equal to his lordship's or any man's," he continued. "Cool courage should always mark me."<sup>16</sup>

The duel eventually took place under moonlight in a garden some distance from the Red Lion Inn. Talbot supplied the weapons (large horse pistols). Wilkes chipped in with a flask of powder and a bag of bullets. The combatants faced each other at a distance of about eight yards and, at the word from Wilkes's second, discharged their pistols. Both missed. With honour now apparently satisfied on both sides, Wilkes walked up to Talbot and avowed himself the author of the offending paper. Then followed the effusions of male bonding that typically punctuated non-fatal encounters. "His lordship paid me the highest encomiums on my courage," Wilkes reported, "and said that he would declare everywhere that I was the noblest fellow God had ever made." After further declarations of friendship, the parties returned to the inn where they shared a bottle of claret "with great good humour and much laugh" [sic].<sup>17</sup> The good fellowship did not endure, however. Later that same evening, Wilkes, in the first flush of what he clearly deemed a personal triumph, wrote his long and self-congratulatory account of the affair to Lord Temple in a letter that, when made public five years later under circumstances to be discussed below, would rekindle much of the acrimony of the original encounter.

Wilkes had not initiated the duel with Talbot, but with characteristic opportunism he sought maximum advantage from it. "I am surfeited with caresses," he reported. Lending some credence to the suspicions of moral reformers that when duels occurred debauchery was never far behind, he persuaded himself that his martial exploits had enhanced his sexual allure. "A sweet girl, whom I have sigh'd for unsuccessfully these four months, now tells me that she will trust her honour to a man who takes so much care of his own," he boasted to Charles Churchill. (Evidently, though, he was planning to violate the woman's "honour," as conventionally defined, not to protect it.)<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26-28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 30-32.

<sup>18</sup> Wilkes to Churchill, Winchester, 14 October [1762], *The Correspondence of John Wilkes and Charles Churchill*. Edward H. Weatherly, ed. (New York, 1954), 19. Wilkes had written in a similar vein about his plans for sexual conquest in a letter to Lord Temple: Winchester, 12 October 1762, *The Grenville Papers*, Vol. I. William James Smith, ed. (London, 1852-57), 485-87. On some of the libertine associations of duelling, see G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London, 1992), 80-81, and Kiernan, *The Duel in European History*, 183-84.

Equally gratifying to Wilkes, though in a different way, was the response of his patron, Lord Temple. "Firmness, coolness, and a manly politeness, make up the whole of this transaction on your part," Temple wrote to Wilkes, the day after the duel. Temple later referred to his protégé as "the gallant gay Lothario," a description presumably intended to flatter Wilkes's exploits on the field of honour, as well as in the boudoir. Wilkes clearly had some basis for believing that he was now more firmly ensconced than ever in the favour of a powerful magnate, but at the same time he ignored signals that Temple was becoming edgy about his protégé's compulsion to dip his pen in vitriol in ways that increased gratuitously the likelihood of future confrontations.<sup>19</sup>

With respect to wider reactions, Wilkes, in his post-combat euphoria, probably exaggerated to himself the extent to which the duel had enhanced his public stature. Acquitting oneself according to the rules of honour was not an automatic guarantee of popular favour. The duellist usually encountered a variety of responses, including indifference. And at first, the Wilkes-Talbot duel itself received only perfunctory attention in the press,<sup>20</sup> an indication that bloodless affairs of this kind were not in themselves especially newsworthy. Wilkes was not at this time a household name and simply engaging in a duel was insufficient to make him one.

The religious anti-duelling lobby could, of course, be expected to respond with alarm; and in this instance it included Wilkes's Presbyterian mother, who fretted dutifully about the state of her son's immortal soul.<sup>21</sup> Such concerns could be brushed aside by a hardened libertine like Wilkes, but more troubling was the opposite reaction of those sceptics who refused to take the duel seriously at all. Some contemporaries clearly found something inherently comical in contests initiated by a scribbling pen, and this one was no exception.<sup>22</sup> A damaging extension of this response was the suggestion that the Wilkes-Talbot duel was actually a fake, stagemanaged by its participants to enhance their reputations. This charge was implied in a satirical broadside poem, B[agsho]t H[eat]h: or, the Modern Duel, which included a picture of Wilkes and Talbot shaking hands while firing their pistols in the air.<sup>23</sup>

19 Temple to Wilkes, 6 October and 17 October 1762, *Grenville Papers*, Vol. 1, 478, 489.

20 *The Public Advertiser*, 7 October 1762.

21 See Wilkes's comments as recorded by James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica and France, 1765-1766*. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle, eds. (New York and Toronto, 1955), 55.

22 "A Speech of Falstaff," *St. James's Chronicle*, 9-12 October 1762; *Town and Country Magazine* (1770): 157.

23 *Guildhall Broadside* 20.143, Guildhall Library, London. (Cf. the comment in J.G. Millingen, *The History of Duelling*, Vol. 2 [London, 1841], 76 that the Wilkes-Talbot duel was "the result of fashion more than feeling.") The broadside suggests that the use of pistols rather than swords in the duel derived from a prudent desire to avoid injury. This suggestion is at odds with evidence that points to a significant increase in fatal injuries after the pistol became the weapon of choice in Britain: Simpson, "Dandelions on the Field of Honor," 109, 110-12.



Though Wilkes's encounter with Talbot at first attracted little serious attention beyond his immediate circle of friends and admirers, such was certainly not the case with his subsequent entanglements, because Wilkes in the meantime had become a national celebrity, whose comings, goings, doings and utterances were scrutinised daily through the medium of the press. His notoriety derived in the first instance from the publication on 23 April 1763 of the *North Briton* No. 45, in which Wilkes launched a bitter attack on the government ministers, headed by Lord Bute, responsible for the unpopular Peace of Paris that ended the Seven Years' War. This time his abusive polemic led him in short order, not to the duelling ground, but to confinement in the Tower of London, following his arrest for seditious libel on the basis of a controversial general warrant signed by a Secretary of State. While incarcerated, Wilkes was stripped of his cherished commission in the Buckinghamshire militia – an act that Wilkes's supporters represented as a despotic attack on true patriotism.<sup>24</sup> In the highly publicised court appearances that followed, Wilkes seized the opportunity to display qualities of cool courage, this time in judicial rather than mortal combat. He laced into his "cruel and implacable enemies" on behalf, not only of himself, but of all freeborn Englishmen, including those he dubbed "the middling and inferior class of people." And as Lord Chief Justice Charles Pratt discharged him from imprisonment on the grounds of parliamentary privilege, the rafters of Westminster Hall rang with the new plebeian cry, "Wilkes and Liberty." More equivocal in their support were the high-born leaders of the Whig opposition (including, ominously, William Pitt), though for the time being Wilkes still retained the overt allegiance of Lord Temple.<sup>25</sup>

The lionisation of Wilkes signalled a return to the bitter divisions that had attended the disastrous start to the Seven Years' War, when self-declared patriots had blamed degenerate grandees for England's peril. In the process, Wilkes's self-fashioned "manliness" intersected in the public sphere with patriotism under siege. Pressing home the connection, Wilkes published in the newspapers his exchange of letters with Lord Talbot and Talbot's seconds.<sup>26</sup> Despite, however, the obvious successes of Wilkite propaganda, there were risks in attempting to fashion a political reputation around a manly adherence to the honour code. Reputations so constructed were not permanently guaranteed; they could be deconstructed in their turn if not vigorously defended against challenge, especially a literal challenge from an aggrieved opponent.

This was precisely the situation that Wilkes confronted in August 1763 during a visit to Paris. While making his way to Notre Dame, he was confronted

---

24 See, for example, "Ode, to John Wilkes, Esq; on his Dismission from the Command of the Buckinghamshire Militia," *St. James's Chronicle*, 13-15 September 1763.

25 *Annual Register* (1763), 139; Horace Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes* (London, 1917), 91-113.

26 *St. James's Chronicle*, 14-17 May 1763.

by one Captain John Forbes, a Scotsman with a commission in the French army. Recognising Wilkes's distinctive features from William Hogarth's celebrated cartoon, Forbes upbraided Wilkes for his attacks in the *North Briton* on Forbes's fellow-countrymen and demanded instant satisfaction in a duel. According to his own account, Wilkes averted an immediate conflict by declaring that "a squabble on the streets was both unbecoming a gentleman, and an outrage to the laws of the country." He did, however, enable Forbes to pursue the matter by informing the Scotsman where he lodged. Having failed to find Wilkes at home that same day, Forbes arrived at Wilkes's apartment at six o'clock the following morning, still demanding satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

Wilkes deftly stalled the renewed demand; but whether he was motivated by a punctilious regard for the protocols of the code duello or by a cowardly desire to evade a legitimate challenge, became a matter of heated partisan exchanges in the London press. He followed his usual practice of refusing to avow authorship of anonymous writings, insisted that designated seconds would have to arrange the terms of any duel and refused, in any case, to fight until such time as he had settled "a previous account" with Charles Wyndham, the Earl of Egremont.<sup>28</sup> Egremont was one of the Secretaries of State involved in the arrest and imprisonment of Wilkes for his polemic in the *North Briton* No. 45, and throughout these proceedings he had treated Wilkes with a studied contempt, scorning his claims to gentlemanly status. But though Egremont's conduct had certainly offended, there was no corroborative evidence that Wilkes had issued a challenge or even contemplated doing so. Suspicion would linger that Wilkes had spontaneously concocted the story of a prior engagement with Egremont in order to avoid one with Forbes. Forbes himself, according to one published version, sarcastically asked Wilkes "if he came to Paris to fight Lord Egremont."<sup>29</sup>

At another interview the same day, Forbes again demanded immediate satisfaction and Wilkes again demurred. And this time Wilkes injected a new element into the confrontation by questioning Forbes's motives and gentlemanly credentials. "His proceeding had more the air of an assassin than that of a gentleman," said Wilkes.<sup>30</sup> According to another report (which panicky Wilkite scribes strenuously repudiated as an "absolute Fiction"), Forbes responded in kind by threatening that, should he ever encounter Wilkes on the street, he

---

27 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, 1992), 105-106; Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes*, 122-23. Wilkes's version of his encounter with Forbes (widely circulated in the newspapers) survives in manuscript: Guildhall MS 14176, Guildhall Library, London.

28 Guildhall MS 14176.

29 *Public Advertiser*, 20 September 1763.

30 Guildhall MS 14176.

would give him “a hundred strokes of a stick, as he deserved no more to be used like a gentleman, but as [an] eternal rascal and scoundrel.”<sup>31</sup>

That afternoon the possibility of a duel temporarily receded through the intervention of the French authorities, who, at this time, were zealous in preventing arranged duels. Wilkes gave his word before the marshals of France that he would keep the peace, and Forbes prudently went into hiding, before escaping to England. (Wilkes’s enemies, and even some of his friends, assumed that it was none other than Wilkes who had invoked the intervention of the authorities as a means of shielding himself from Forbes.<sup>32</sup>) There matters would presumably have rested had not the Earl of Egremont died unexpectedly a few days later. Wilkes managed an eloquent display of frustration at being deprived of the opportunity to engage his high-born oppressor on the field of honour. “What a scoundrell [sic] trick Lord Egremont play’d me,” he wrote to Charles Churchill. “I had form’d a fond wish to send him to the Devil, but he is gone without my passport.”<sup>33</sup> More ominously, the death of Egremont removed the chief obstacle to an engagement with Forbes.

Forbes, a professional soldier bent on revenge, could be expected to wield pistol or sword with more skill and determination than the directionally-challenged Lord Talbot. And the likelihood of a deadly encounter raised genuine anxiety among Wilkes’s friends back in England, who pleaded with him to pull back from the brink. Charles Churchill observed that, in France, Wilkes appeared to “live in Romance,” not “under the direction of . . . well-temper’d, cool, distinguishing Reason.” “Your Country Demands your Life,” he declared, and he urged Wilkes not to sacrifice it to “false principles of Honour,” assuring him that his engagement with Talbot had secured his reputation for “valour.”<sup>34</sup> Wilkes himself, though – with a clearer sense of the public mood than Churchill – recognised that a reputation for cool courage required periodic refurbishment, and that a refusal to fight Forbes might reduce him to the status of a cowardly and dishonourable scribbler. Doubtless influencing his decision was his receipt of unflattering press reports from London, one of which declared that “Mr. Wilkes had scandalously declined fighting the Scot, for which poltron [sic] Behaviour no Gentleman will now keep him Company.”<sup>35</sup> Facing up to the challenge (albeit belatedly) would not only redeem his honour

31 *Public Advertiser*, 20 September 1763, and 29 September 1763.

32 Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes*, 124; Charles Churchill to Wilkes, 1 September 1763, *Correspondence of Wilkes and Churchill*, 66.

33 Wilkes to Churchill, Paris, 29 August [1763], *Correspondence of Wilkes and Churchill*, 63.

34 Churchill to Wilkes, 1 September 1763, *Correspondence of Wilkes and Churchill*, 67-69.

35 *St. James’s Chronicle*, 25-27 August 1763. Wilkes made reference to receipt of this newspaper in a letter to his brother, Heaton: Paris, 2 September 1763, Wilkes MS 1: Fol. 52, William L. Clements Library.

but enhance it, according to Wilkes, who now dubbed himself "the guardian and protector of English liberty."<sup>36</sup>

Precluded from an engagement in France, Wilkes sent word through Forbes's seconds that he would meet his challenger at Menin, in Austrian Flanders, on 21 September. In the meantime, however, Forbes had set sail from London for Lisbon to take up a commission in the Portuguese army. Either he had experienced a change of heart about duelling with Wilkes or, more likely, word of the proposed rendezvous never reached him. The affair thus ended with Wilkes waiting at the duelling ground for an opponent who never showed up.<sup>37</sup>

Wilkes, then, with typical adroitness, had contrived an outcome that could be construed as redounding to his advantage, but troubling questions lingered about his conduct which provided openings for his political enemies. For one thing, the Forbes affair exposed contradictions among the various elements of Wilkite patriotism. A manly allegiance to the honour principle was at odds with the expressions of virulently anti-Scottish sentiment that had so offended Captain Forbes. The field of honour was unconfined by national frontiers,<sup>38</sup> and according to its etiquette, Forbes, though the son of a Jacobite, was entitled to recognition as a gentleman by virtue, if nothing else, of his military commission. So, although the kind of xenophobia that Wilkes displayed undoubtedly struck a popular chord, it was open to representation as an inappropriate attitude for an officer and gentleman.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, Wilkes's eventual agreement to fight did not entirely undo the damage to his manly persona. Even newspaper essays in his support struck a defensive note, conceding his initial prevarications while pushing the charge that Forbes was a hired assassin. "Is Mr. Wilkes Gladiatour [sic] to his Party?" asked one, rhetorically. "Is he a common Prize-Fighter, obliged to enter the Lists with every Jacobite Scot, every Creature of the Stuarts, that hopes to make his Fortune by killing him?"<sup>40</sup> Another gave Wilkes credit for behaving "prudently" (a word rarely applied to his conduct) in the face of Forbes's initial challenge and, with a different twist on gender, attributed his caution to "a true masculine Understanding."<sup>41</sup> Putting on a brave face, Wilkes himself claimed

---

36 Wilkes MS I: Fol. 52..

37 Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes*, 124-25.

38 Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, 12.

39 One newspaper essayist, in the wake of the Wilkes-Forbes affair, lectured young officers that "national reflections" were "unwarrantable": "Friendly Advice to a Young Officer with respect to Duelling," *Public Advertiser*, 24 September 1763. The Wilkite position was not to deny that Wilkes had insulted the Scots, but to argue that such "general abuse" was acceptable and an inappropriate basis for a challenge: "A Kneete of the Thussel," *St. James's Chronicle*, 13-15 October 1763.

40 C.D., *St. James's Chronicle*, 3-5 November 1763.

41 "A Stranger to Mr. Wilkes, but a Lover of Justice, my King and my Country," *St. James's Chronicle*, 3-5 November 1763.

that his "artless [i.e., sincere] story" of the whole affair had "put down" the hostile "scribblers," though he was plainly rattled by their allegations of "meanness and cowardice."<sup>42</sup>

Wilkes would not have to wait long for an opportunity to restore his tarnished reputation. It came on the heels of some dramatic events in both Houses of Parliament. On 15 November 1763, the Commons condemned the *North Briton*, No. 45 as "a false, scandalous, and seditious libel," and ordered it burnt by the Common Hangman. During the preceding debate, Samuel Martin, a former Secretary to the Treasury, complained that he had been libelled in the *North Briton* as "a mean, abject, low-lived and dirty fellow." Glaring directly at Wilkes, he declaimed that "a man capable of writing in that manner, without putting his name to it and thereby stabbing another in the dark, is a cowardly rascal, a villain, and a scoundrel." Wilkes at first ignored the studied provocation. He was moved to action, however, when told that, at the same time as the Commons was condemning him for the *North Briton*, No. 45, the House of Lords, having deviously secured a copy of his obscene satire *An Essay on Woman*, was denouncing him as both a pornographer and a blasphemer.<sup>43</sup>

Wilkes was "thunderstruck" by this sudden and unexpected turn of events. "Now perfectly indifferent [to] what he did, or whether he lived or died," according to his friend John Almon, Wilkes wrote to Martin early the following day, acknowledging himself as the author of the insult in the *North Briton*.<sup>44</sup> A duel was the predictable outcome, but this one was highly unusual in that mutual rage pre-empted the traditional proprieties demanded by the *code duello*. It was fought in London's Hyde Park within hours of the combatants' exchange of letters. No seconds were present. It ended with Wilkes writhing on the ground, a bullet from Martin's pistol lodged in his groin.<sup>45</sup> Despite the irregularities of the duel itself, in its sequel both men conducted themselves according to the honour code. Martin lingered at the scene until Wilkes was carried home safely. Wilkes meanwhile called on Martin to make his escape, declaring him a man of honour. The following day he returned Martin's compromising letter of challenge, and the two would later exchange pleasantries in France.<sup>46</sup>

Although, in a formal sense, honour was now satisfied between the contestants, the duel's circumstances and implications resonated loudly in the

42 Wilkes to Temple, 1 October 1763, *Grenville Papers*, Vol. 2, 131-32.

43 Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes*, 132-35.

44 [John Almon], *The History of the Minority; during the Years 1762, 1763, 1764, and 1765* (London, 1765), 234.

45 Martin, perhaps in anticipation of legal action, left a very detailed account of the duel: British Library Add. MS 41354, Fols. 75-85. It differs in some details but not in substance from other accounts, e.g., [Almon], *The History of the Minority*, 235-37.

46 Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes*, 136-37; British Library Add. MS 41354, Fol. 11.

public arena for many months to come. For one thing, it helped to dispel the doubts about Wilkes's courage engendered by his vacillations in the face of the challenge from Captain Forbes. "That WILKES will fight, the *Scots* deny; / But MARTIN finds the *Scots* can lie," declared one jingle.<sup>47</sup> And while Wilkes (as daily bulletins announced his medical condition) was being compared with other martyred heroes in the Whig pantheon,<sup>48</sup> Martin was subjected to unflattering scrutiny. There were damaging allegations that he had spent several months engaged in target practice before demanding satisfaction for Wilkes's insults.<sup>49</sup> If true, the charge against Martin constituted a serious breach of the honour code, because the pistol duel was intended as a ritualised display of courage under fire, not as an opportunity to kill or maim one's opponent. Martin's suspicious conduct also heightened the fear, first voiced during the Forbes affair, that Wilkes was the object of a government-sponsored assassination attempt.

Charles Churchill's poem "The Duellist," offered the most elaborate and nightmarish expression of Wilkite fears. In it he suggested that Wilkes was the intended victim of a plot concocted by a sinister high-born triad: William Warburton, the Bishop of Gloucester (Wilkes's principal antagonist in the *Essay on Woman* affair); Sir Fletcher Norton, the Solicitor-General; and the Earl of Sandwich, a former libertine companion of Wilkes, and now a Secretary of State. Together, they sought "... to work the bane / Of one firm Patriot [Wilkes], whose heart tied / To Honour, all their pow'r defied."<sup>50</sup> Wilkes, in Churchill's schema, thus embodied the aristocratic virtue of honour that an effete aristocracy, personified by Lord Sandwich, had abandoned. Elsewhere, Churchill referred repeatedly to the "damn'd aristocracy."<sup>51</sup>

Later, an outlaw in Paris and feeling abandoned by his high-born friends, Wilkes appropriated the phrase "damn'd aristocracy" and vowed never again "to receive a favour from any of the great . . . whom I hate and despise."<sup>52</sup> He kept a link, however, with his long-suffering patron Lord Temple until that too was permanently damaged by delayed recriminations over the Wilkes-Talbot duel. Determined to return to England, but concerned that his lustre was dimming in the eyes of a fickle public, Wilkes bombarded the London press with material designed to raise his stature. It included his long letter to Temple in

---

47 The *St. James's Chronicle*, 17-19 November 1763. Cf. the following in the same newspaper's edition of 24-26 November 1763: "In Spite of Art, in erring Scotchman's Spite./One truth is clear - Jockey Wilkes will fight."

48 For example, John Hampden, *St. James's Chronicle*, 17-19 November 1763.

49 Raymond Postgate, *That Devil Wilkes* (London, 1930), 90-91.

50 Charles Churchill, "The Duellist," *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*. Douglas Grant, ed. (Oxford, 1956), 261-89.

51 For example, Churchill to Wilkes, [Feb. 1763?], *Correspondence of Wilkes and Churchill*, 44.

52 Wilkes to Humphrey Cotes, Paris, 17 February 1764, *Wilkes Correspondence*, John Almond, ed., Vol. 2, 56-57.

which he mocked Talbot while congratulating himself on his own courage and coolness.<sup>53</sup> Its publication caused a minor sensation; as a result Talbot was “consigned to eternal ridicule,” according to one observer.<sup>54</sup> Outraged by the letter, Talbot rather perversely demanded immediate satisfaction from its recipient, the physically frail Temple, and only swift intervention by their fellow peers prevented a sword fight. Wilkes’s brother, Heaton, judged that the publication of the letter had “done [Wilkes] a great deal of Harm,” by which he specifically meant harm to Wilkes’s connection with Lord Temple, who, much embarrassed by the whole affair, now pointedly distanced himself from his troublesome client.<sup>55</sup>

When Wilkes returned to England in 1768, it was to the “middling and inferior class” of London and its suburbs, not to the Whig nobility, that he turned to for political support, successfully as things turned out. Following election as Member of Parliament for Middlesex, he was elected successively as an alderman, sheriff, Lord Mayor, and chamberlain of the City of London. He would not fight any more duels, evidence of an incremental shift in his conduct that accorded with the opportunities and imperatives of the new political environment in which he now operated. When, for example, he faced the wrath of an elderly City father, whose wife Wilkes had allegedly seduced many years before, Wilkes recognised that this was one affair of honour that would not redound to his advantage, and he took considerable pains to ensure that knowledge of the incident was kept well concealed from an inquisitive public.<sup>56</sup>

Wilkes, it is true, never entirely discarded his flamboyant patrician persona, but displays of martial valour (like gallantry in the boudoir), having served to enhance his reputation among some members of his plebeian constituency, seemed less appropriate or necessary in the political and social context of London civic life. In 1771, he was challenged to a duel by Lauchlin Maclean, a disgruntled creditor and former friend. Wilkes refused the challenge, but on this occasion his reputation suffered only minimal damage, which

---

53 The letter was first published in *St. James’s Chronicle*, 14-17 May 1767, and was widely reprinted after that.

54 Sir N. William Wraxall, *Historical Memoirs of My Own Time* (reprinted, London, 1904), 269.

55 Heaton Wilkes to John Wilkes, 31 May 1767, British Library Add. MS 30869, Fol. 125. John Almon echoed Heaton Wilkes’s comments, but that did not prevent him from publishing the controversial letter in his own periodical, *The Political Register*: Almon to Wilkes, 3 July 1767, British Library Add. MS 30869, Fol. 139. The final rupture between Wilkes and Temple came in 1769 when Wilkes delivered a pamphlet attack on George Grenville, Temple’s brother, with whom Temple had been reconciled after a long and bitter political conflict. Temple’s last service to Wilkes was to provide him with a qualifying freehold to enable him to contest the Middlesex elections in 1768: Thomas, *John Wilkes*, 97, 245 n. 12.

56 Accounts of the incident are contained in Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes*, 247, 294-96, and Louis Kronenberger, *The Extraordinary Mr. Wilkes: His Life and Times* (London, 1974), 115, 161-62. The documentary evidence is in British Library Add. MS 30880 B, *passim*.

was, in any event, quickly repaired by his bold stand on behalf of the City in the so-called "printers' case." This *cause célèbre* effectively secured the right to publish parliamentary debates. And Wilkes's urban followers much appreciated the striking of this important blow in favour of press liberty.<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, civic life yielded opportunities for a species of heroism that, unlike duelling, was not life-threatening, an appropriate circumstance for a political adventurer now well advanced into middle age. There was a certain irony in this turn of events. The middle-class commercial culture from which Wilkes had once sought to ascend, in large measure through exhibitions of valour on the duelling ground, would in the end provide him with political vindication and sanctuary, in striking contrast to the bitter fruits of his anxiously sought connection with the Whig aristocracy.

---

57 James N.M. Maclean, *Reward Is Secondary: The Life of a Political Adventurer and an Inquiry into the Mystery of "Junius"* (London, 1963), 258-74; Thomas, *John Wilkes*, 125-40.