“Affairs of honor,” which were contests between gentlemen of the 18th and 19th centuries, often ended with physical violence in the form of dueling. Such was the case in the notable showdown between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr in 1801. These affairs were products of the code di duello, an intricate series of social rules and expectations through which adversaries negotiated their dispute. In this article, we examine the similarities between such “affairs” and the modern issue of “cyberbullying.” We compare disputes conducted under the code di duello to those which regularly occur in modern adolescents’ on-line lives while also considering the relevance of studying this topic in social studies classrooms.

Keywords: duels, dueling, “affairs of honor,” cyber-bullying, social media, American history

Introduction

In 1801, a lawyer named George Eacker gave a speech praising President Thomas Jefferson. It was an unremarkable speech, fairly typical in its praise of the President. The only notable feature of this speech was a verbal assault against Alexander Hamilton, the former Secretary of the Treasury under George Washington (as well as the de facto leader of the Federalist Party). Eacker claimed that Hamilton had raised an army with the intent of suppressing the Republican party—a common enough slur at that time, with regard to Hamilton—and went on to suggest that the "General" might stage a coup d’état (Miller, 2004).

Several months after giving the speech, Eacker was verbally abused by two young men (both probably drunk) in his box at the Park Theater in New York City. Eacker responded by publicly branding the intruders “damned rascals,” an epithet—mild, at worst, by modern standards—that was sure to provoke a response in the eighteenth century. A challenge was given and accepted, seconds were appointed, weapons and the site of the challenge were determined (all in accordance with time-honored tradition), and, on November 23, 1801, the duel was held. Because dueling was technically illegal in New York City, the engagement occurred across the Hudson River in Weehawken, New Jersey. It was a rare occurrence that such “affairs of honor” went as far as actual gunfire, but tempers in this instance were slow to cool. Shots were fired; and George Eacker shot and killed 19-year-old Phillip Hamilton, the son of Alexander Hamilton, who would himself die three years later, at the same place, in nearly the same manner, even wielding the same pistol as his son (Fleming, 1999).

Americans are only passingly familiar with the deaths of Alexander and Philip Hamilton. Teachers rarely address the topic of dueling in their classrooms. Given the enormity of topics to cover in a limited period of time, and the emphasis on standardized core knowledge (Pearcy & Duplass, 2011), it’s not surprising that “affairs of honor” like the Hamilton-Burr incident are absent from our curricula. Yet, behind the history of dueling is a legacy of social distinction that
defined the early Republic. Distressingly, the circumstances which led to the death of both Hamiltons are not so unfamiliar to students today.

In March 2010, Alexis Pilkington, a high school student from West Islip, New York, committed suicide. She had been socially popular, academically successful, and inclined towards sports, even earning a college soccer scholarship. She had been subjected to online rumors from classmates, and though the role of such taunting in her death is unclear, the appearance of vicious and hateful comments on the Internet was testament to the brutal insensitivity inherent in “cyberbullying” (Hampson, 2010). The dangers of public scorn and ridicule are not unfamiliar to today’s adolescents.

The factors that led to duels in early America are still present in our students’ lives and, more disturbingly, they lack the social structure that often insulated nineteenth-century Americans from the dangers of dueling. This article explores the reasons for studying duels in the early republic, as well as considering the similarities between “affairs of honor” and student interactions that occur in the new digital age.

**Affairs of Honor and the “Doing” of History**

Dueling, as a historical topic, may serve to cheapen the mythic image of the founding generation, with the display of what Joseph J. Ellis (2007) described as “fragile and throbbing egos,” as American officers at Valley Forge bickered over whose horses should be fed first (p. 70). Why should we devote time to behavior we should hardly wish our students to emulate?

Figure 1: Duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr (J. Mund). From Beacon Lights of History, Volume XI, by John Lord

Effective social studies instruction often is hindered by the tendency to think of our subject areas, in what Wineburg (1997) described as a "binary" fashion—"breadth/depth, content/process, declarative/procedural—as if knowledge cannot be packaged in a form more complex than an either/or" (p. 256). This is a particular feature of history classrooms, where traditional pedagogy focuses on the delivery of informational content, the dreaded "names, dates, and places." This focus limits the presence of “historical thinking” and instead emphasizes passive rather than active learning (Estes, 2007). When teachers manage to emphasize historical thinking, it often can result in faulty, poorly-considered student outcomes. Our attempts to encourage students to understand the role of perspective in history often
backfires, leaving students with a paralytic tendency towards presentism (Wineburg, 1999). This occurs because thinking “historically” is hardly an instinctive act. Students, understandably, tend to think of historical figures as more or less like themselves; that they are “much like characters from a James Michener novel who happen to dress funny but whose behavior and mannerisms are those of our next-door neighbors” (Wineburg, 1999, p. 285). This assumption carries with it a disabling tendency. when we presume historical characters possess beliefs similar to ours, rather than attempting to understand the foreign historical universe of logic and motivation they inhabited, we “do history” inaccurately (Wineburg 1999).

One strategy for dealing with this tendency is to be less concerned with the delivery of unquestioned facts, and instead aim at the critique of historical world-views, where students work to inhabit those (often) contradictory views. In a traditional classroom, students may be told that Abraham Lincoln was “the Great Emancipator” and will discern little intrigue in such a proclamation. If we ask students to contrast Lincoln’s anti-slavery beliefs with his statements in the 1858 senatorial debates—“very frankly, I am not in favor of negro citizenship” (cited in Zarefsky, p. 268)—students will have to grapple with the complex reality of Lincoln’s own perspective and his presidential policies. Students should understand the historical environment that produced America’s founding generation. Through the practice of “historical thinking,” students can more fully grasp a moral culture that esteemed liberty alongside public killing. More importantly, students can connect the world-views behind such acts to a troubling contemporary reality; the presence of online taunting, bullying, and harassment which, in the modern world, sometimes explodes into violence.

“A Dangerous Man”

The duel, despite its technically illegal status, held a recognized place in American society as a method “to demonstrate a man’s readiness to verify the sincerity of his opinions by risking his life” (Fleming, 1999, p. 9). Conducted with a heavy reliance on the code duello, a 1777 set of rules “covering the practice of dueling and points of honor” (Larkin, 1988, p. 290), dueling became common among all “men of honor” after the Revolutionary War (Isaac, 1982, p. 242).

“Affairs of honor” were quite common, though they rarely resulted in gunfire or death. By one study’s count, fewer than 20 percent of dueling participants were killed; by another, no more than one out of seven died (Larkin, p. 290). Duels were precipitated by insults considered dire and provocative at the time. Calling some one “coward”, “liar”, or even “puppy” could result in a life-threatening challenge. Joanne Freeman, in Affairs of Honor (2001), showed that the actual duel may be considered a failure of the process. If a duel actually took place, the social machinery regulating the affair had broken down. There were various public outlets for an affair of honor including public and private letters, defense pamphlets, broadsides, even the use of competing newspapers with which to publicly assault the reputation of one’s antagonist.

The steps of the code duello were precise. Upon receiving an insult, the offended party would issue a challenge to the offender, who would often consult with a colleague or friend on his next step. If the challenge was not accepted (or if the proffered apology did not amount to the offended party’s satisfaction), the gentleman offering the challenge could choose to
publicly brand his opponent, through use of a public document, such as a broadside, or a
publicly disseminated private letter.

The challenged party often would respond with a defense of his own behavior. A
defense pamphlet was aimed at a wide audience of influential elites, the people that mattered
in public life, the “thinking part of the nation,” in Jefferson’s phrase (Oberg & Looney, 2008).
These people controlled public opinion, which was without question, the most important factor
in any affair of honor. Such a pamphlet was a tacit admission that an apology to the aggrieved
party was not forthcoming. A duel then became more likely, and generally was followed by the
selection of “seconds,” who delivered the formal challenge and served as intermediaries.

The Hamilton-Burr duel followed a similar path. The Vice-President—who had achieved
a reputation for rapacious personal ambition—was aggrieved by a letter published in the April
24, 1804 issue of the Albany Register, in which an ally of Hamilton claimed the “General” had
denounced Burr as a “dangerous man,” one “who ought not to be trusted with the reins of
government” (Fleming, p. 281). Burr dispatched his friend, William P. Van Ness, to give
Alexander Hamilton a letter demanding a retraction. Hamilton’s response—that the term
“despicable” was too general and undefined to warrant explanation—underscores the delicacy
involved in ascribing offense under the code duello.

The seconds tried to pin down whether or not offense was meant or justified. The
complex interplay of gossip, rumor, and insult is hard to square with the almost Olympian view
most Americans have of the founding generation; though it is not hard to see the correlation
between the behavior of “gentlemen” and that of modern adolescents. As eighteenth-century
men of culture grappled with each other in words and with weapons over their places in
society, teenagers today are forced to reckon with an on-line experience strikingly similar
in behavior, decisions, and consequences.

Dueling in Cyberspace

The study of “affairs of honor” has a particularly relevant role in the digital spaces our
students inhabit daily, in the form of cyberbullying. Collier (2008) aligned on-line harassment to
“offline” bullying, a feature of public schools since their beginning. There has been no end to
the efforts to limit its damage, even by the government (Davis, 2011; Safe Schools
Improvement Act). Nancy Willard (2006), representing the Center for Safe and Responsible
Internet Use (CSRIU), asserted that “cyber bullies post angry and vulgar messages...assaulting
the reputations and already fragile egos of their young victims.” What is most disturbing is how
easy such slights are to disseminate amidst a given audience, as "savvy students are using
Instant Messaging, e-mails, chat rooms and websites they create to humiliate" others (I-Safe

High-profile tragedies, such as the suicides of Alexis Pilkington in 2010, have drawn
attention to the devastating impact of cyberbullying, not only for the victims themselves but
their families and loved ones (Martinez, 2010). As duelists of the early national period relied on
broadsides and pamphlets to mount their assaults, students today can use Facebook™, IM™,
Twitter™, or any number of on-line outlets. Even worse, the ubiquity of technology makes
these acts just as serious, given the potential size of the audience. Text messages, digital
pictures, and all other personal correspondence can be easily and rapidly shared with a student’s peer group, class, or school with a single keystroke.

One recent survey indicated that 35% of students have been threatened on-line, and 42% had been bullied (I-Safe Incorporated, 2008). Another study (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007) reported that 32% of teens have either had a rumor spread about them online, have received threatening or aggressive emails, instant messages, or texts, or have had an embarrassing picture of them posted on-line without their permission. With the growth of social media, what had often been one-to-one harassment becomes exponentially more available to the public. Such activity and “the damage done...is no less real [than physical abuse], and can be infinitely more painful” (I-Safe Incorporated, 2008).

"To Hazard Much, and Possibly Gain Nothing"

The possibility for public shaming inherent in cyberbullying also was a standard feature of an eighteenth-century affair of honor. The final act before a duel often was a broadside, which was used to openly brand an adversary as a coward (Freeman, 2001). Once a broadside was published, a violent confrontation was almost a certainty.

Seconds would meet again to determine the particulars of the “interview”. Because many municipalities and states had outlawed dueling, the challenges were often were held at specific locations well-known to the aristocratic class. In the case of Hamilton and Burr, the two would meet at Weehawken (where Hamilton’s son Philip had died, in his own duel). The night before, Hamilton wrote a letter in which he conceded that Burr’s challenge compelled him to "hazard much, and...possibly gain nothing" (“Explorations: Duel between Hamilton and Burr,” 2011). In spite of his reluctance, Hamilton claimed the duel was "impossible" to avoid. His public reputation was riding on the outcome, as was Burr’s. If either flinched, their status as leaders of their respective parties and as gentlemen of honor would be open to question. Ironically, such motives, and the destructive behavior that often follows, are hardly alien to today’s students.

Figure 2: a broadside from 1839.
The parallels with historical duels are evident in the coded language used by participants. Just as the term “scoundrel” invited angry retribution in the 18th and 19th centuries, more modern epithets are loaded with vituperative subtext for adolescents. Though violence is not always the end result, in some extreme cases, intense public harassment has led to suicide and even murder (Monti, 2008; Neff, 2005). Worse still, current technology allows for communication to occur in digital spaces far removed from adults on the school grounds. Though the issues involved may seem trivial to adults, the stakes to teenagers are high, with the constant potential for violence, much like duels.

“If We Were Truly Brave”

A few weeks after the Hamilton-Burr duel, Hamilton’s colleague, Gouverneur Morris, reflected on the manner of his death: “if we were truly brave we should not accept a challenge; but we are all cowards.” Though he felt keenly the tragedy of the event, Morris saw its inevitability, as few gentlemen, in his estimation, “would so far brave the public opinion as to refuse a challenge” (Morris & Morris, 1970, Ch. XIV).

This disapproval of dueling joined with a sense of its inevitability, from a modern perspective, could lead to the conclusion that gentlemen of this era were hypocrites, willingly bound to a set of archaic rules that they privately disdained but were loath to publicly flout. But, students may see more relevance and a deeper connection to their own lives when affairs of honor are viewed through the lens of modern student relationships in a digital universe. The art of dueling, with its highly precise code of conduct, calibrated and used to protect public reputation above all else, bears a startling resemblance to student on-line behaviors.

There are several chief advantages to teaching “affairs of honor” to students, in relation to their on-line lives. First and foremost, students can learn that the founding generation, so often venerated as almost godlike in their virtue, were above all human beings capable of
pique, offense (both giving and receiving), and behavior we would consider, in any age, less than savory. Gouverneur Morris’ point was that it took great personal courage to flout public expectations, greater than many of our “great men” possessed. The failure of so many “gentlemen” of the early national period to show such bravery is a fact that our students should know. “Historical thinking” is deeply connected with being able to successfully understand the behavior of historical individuals, which is only possible when we humanize our perception of historical actors. Students should be made aware of the conclusion that our nation’s founders were often faced with difficult and traumatic scenarios which they navigated imperfectly and, sometimes, unsuccessfully.

Second, students should see the intricacies of “affairs of honor” less as the affectation of an era more focused on politesse than modern Americans, but instead as a bulwark against irresponsible actions. In truth, physical violence was not the common solution to perceived insult. Aaron Burr’s public reputation, not particularly unsullied before the Hamilton duel, was further dimmed by persistent questions about his conduct at the duel. A turn to violence was a systemic failure at the various levels of the code duello. What adolescents lack in their on-line disputes—an established code of conduct that applies to all—is a failing that contributes to the escalation of such disputes.

The contentious relationship between public reputation and private affairs has not changed since the days of Hamilton and Burr. What has changed, however, is the medium through which slander, recrimination, and vengeance may flow. When duels were fought in the 18th and 19th centuries, the disputes leading to them were conducted in front of the political and social elite of early America. Today, through the digital spaces which our children inhabit daily, they are acted out in front of an exponentially larger and often anonymous audience. Technology has turned an arena of hundreds into one of millions, as social media becomes more entrenched in our daily lives. As bizarre as it may seem, duelists of the early national era had a singular advantage over modern teenagers. With the code duello, gentlemen of that era could be certain of their options and choices. In the absence of a modern, digital code duello, teachers must strive to provide a framework for students to safely and effectively navigate the inevitable virtual conflicts they will encounter.

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