

Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Sarah (2015) "*The Captain's Daughter* and the Dual Relationship of Dueling and Honor in Historical Times of Europe,"
ESSAI: Vol. 13, Article 30.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol13/iss1/30>

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The Captain's Daughter and the Dual Relationship of Dueling and Honor in Historical Times of Europe

by Sarah O'Connor

(History 2225)

Russian author Alexander Pushkin, in *The Captain's Daughter*, made dueling to protect a gentleman's honor an important part of his historical novel and considered a code of honor and dueling as an integral part of life in the 1770s. Historians Andrew, Nye and Reyfman reaffirmed that the dual relationships of a code of honor and dueling existed in the continent of Europe. Andrew acknowledged the code and dueling existed even as early as the late sixteenth century in England. Schneider offered that the history of dueling continued well beyond the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Reyfman, however, stated that it was the late eighteenth century before Russia established a dueling code to resolve conflicts of honor. Reyfman's opinions were in keeping with events in Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter*, first published in 1836. Ironically, Pushkin himself died in Russia in 1837 in a duel fought to protect his honor.

According to Andrew (413), Nye (108), Reyfman (26-27) and Schneider (180), duels were fought to protect a code of honor. They were often used for resolving conflicts, both serious and trivial. The duels could be fueled "from quarrels over official business, to confrontations caused by social inequality within the nobility, to clashes brought about by sexual rivalry, cheating at cards, an awkward word, a joke, a scowl, a frown, and so on" (Reyfman 26). Schneider said the real costs of civil disruption and the numbers of lives lost made dueling a major concern of governing bodies in the early seventeenth century Europe (181). Despite the efforts of monarchs to outlaw duels, private duels flourished even throughout early modern Europe (Nye 108). "In Europe as a whole, the duel, despite its illegality and its ultimately violent nature, reflected the complexities of masculine honor..." (Nye 110). According to Reyfman, a special type of reckless duelist, a *bretteur*, emerged and proliferated not only among the favored military youth but also among the intellectuals. This duelist was ready to fight at the slightest provocation (26).

Such was the case in *The Captain's Daughter*, where a *bretteur* named Alexey Ivanitch Shvabrin had been dismissed as an officer of the Guards and relegated to a remote regiment because he had murdered a lieutenant during a duel with swords (Pushkin 33-34). Shvabrin was quick to demand a duel with Piotr Andreitch Grineff, the main character in *The Captain's Daughter*, when Shvabrin and Grineff shared a rivalry over the affections of a young woman, a captain's daughter, Maria Ivanovna. When Shvabrin made insulting remarks about Maria, Piotr accused him of being a liar. "You lie, scoundrel! You lie in the most shameless manner" (Pushkin 43). According to Andrew, "a gentleman's word was his honour, calling him a liar questioned both his courage and his status as a gentleman" (411). Andrew quoted from a fellow historian Joseph Addison saying, '...therefore telling a Man he lies, is touching him in the most sensible Part of Honour, and indirectly calling him a coward' (412). Accusing a man of lying was a discredit to a gentleman's personal honor and was a genuine cause for a life-threatening duel because "life without honor was not worth living; a public retreat from an affair of honor was usually an instantaneous sentence of social death" (Nye 108).

Reyfman said a sense of injured honor was not enough cause for a duel to be carried out, however, and that established rules for dueling had to be in place (33). These established procedures required duelists to have friends called "seconds" on hand to make sure that duels were fought adhering to the rules (Andrew 412). These duels, according to Andrew, were usually fought at a spot

well secluded from the public eye to escape detection and arrest, were usually held at dawn or dusk on the day following an insult, and that everyone on hand during a duel was subject to arrest and prosecution (412) because the duel of honor was always legally condemned (410). Andrew also said that “if one of the duelists was mortally wounded, it was expected that he freely pardon and absolve his opponent of all guilt” (412).

In *The Captain's Daughter*, a novel dedicated to the events of the Pugachev's Rebellion in Russia in 1773-1775 (Pushkin 2), Alexander Pushkin, who was considered Russia's greatest poet and author of lyrics, plays and prose (Senechal 1251), maintained historical accuracy by having Piotr attempt to follow the established rules for dueling. Piotr asked the captain's lieutenant, Ivan Ignatich, to be his “second” and witness a duel with Shvabrin which would be held early the next morning at a hidden location. It was interesting to note that Piotr's adversary, Shvabrin, did not want to follow established rules by having “seconds” present for the duel. He told Piotr not to require Ignatich to be on hand (Pushkin 43-45). This dishonorable request perhaps came because Shvabrin did not want any witnesses present since he was still being punished for a duel five years earlier where he murdered a lieutenant with two witnesses on hand (Pushkin 33-34).

Even though Piotr requested no “seconds”, Ignatich and five soldiers stopped Piotr and Shvabrin's duel before it commenced, and the two were reprimanded for disobeying the law. Regardless, Piotr and Shvabrin made plans for another duel, one where no witnesses would again be present. Pushkin maintained historical accuracy by having Piotr contend that duels must be fought to preserve honor. Piotr said, ‘Our business cannot end in this manner,’ to which Shvabrin replied, ‘Certainly not, your blood shall answer for your insolence to me’ (48). Historian Schneider indicated support of this kind of behavior and conversation, saying in social interactions among gentlemen that “honor aggrieved could only be satisfied with blood ...and that once committed to a duel, a gentleman must not fail to demonstrate his courage” (180). Pushkin again kept historical accuracy by having Piotr, who was wounded by Shvabrin during a second duel, reconcile with Shvabrin during the first days of Piotr's convalescence. “Not being by the nature of a rancorous disposition, I readily forgave him [Shvabrin] the quarrel which he had caused between us, and the wound which I had received at his hands.” Piotr said, “In his slander I saw nothing but the chagrin of wounded vanity and slighted love, and I generously extended pardon to my unhappy rival” (54). In spite of Piotr's forgiveness, for the remainder of Pushkin's novel Shvabrin tried at every opportunity to cause the death or imprisonment of Piotr, Shvabrin's sexual rival and the discreditor of Shvabrin's honor.

In the end, it was Shvabrin's aggrieved code of honor from the sexual rivalry of a woman as described in *The Captain's Daughter* by Pushkin—who ironically died in Russia in 1837 two days after a duel brought about by sexual rivalry between Pushkin and exiled French Baron Georges Charles d'Anthes, who was having an affair with Pushkin's wife, Natalia Goncharova (Senechal 1253)—that made Shvabrin try everything to prevent Piotr from ever enjoying the affections and marriage to the captain's daughter Maria. It was Shvabrin's aggrieved code of honor, perhaps better called his “code of dishonor,” that caused him to experience continued defeat of his efforts and an eventual lifetime imprisonment. It was Piotr's code of honor that allowed Piotr to survive and enjoy freedom and the love of Maria. It was Piotr's code of honor that allowed him to be saved from hanging by the rebel Cossack leader and czar impostor, Pougatcheff, who in spite of Shvabrin's hateful words, recognized Piotr (Pushkin 81) as the man who had given him a sheepskin coat as repayment for safe passage during a snowstorm (27). It was Piotr's code of honor that allowed Piotr to be saved from arrest and imprisonment by Ivan Ivanovitch Zourin because Major Zourin recognized Piotr (Pushkin 133) as the young officer he had tricked into playing billiards for money, but who had nonetheless paid Zourin the gambling debt (13). It was Piotr's code of honor that caused him to join Zourin's detachment to seek the downfall of rebels fighting against the Russian empire (Pushkin 135). And last of all, it was Piotr's code of honor and the recognition of the purity of his honor by his love Maria that she unknowingly appealed and just explained Piotr's innocence to the

Russian Empress Catherine II (Pushkin 150), who later released Piotr from prison, where he was being held as a spy against Russia, according to accusations from his principal enemy, Shvabrin (Pushkin 144-145).

Alexander Pushkin's novel, *The Captain's Daughter*, first published in 1836, portrayed and discussed duels in Russia during the 1770s. Numerous historians provided supporting evidence reflecting the duel's prominence in both early and contemporary society on the continent of Europe and beyond and the importance of the idealism of duels and the codes of honor. Pushkin and historians cautioned for the need to exercise controls on codes of honor and the resulting duels when honor is attacked. Ironically, Pushkin himself died two days after fighting a duel in Russia where he was defending his honor. In the example of Piotr and his malicious rival Shvabrin it is apparent that a lifelong adherence to a code of honorable behavior will survive tests of strength and moral character over time.

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