

SATIRE



Hugh H. Brackenridge

(1748-1816)

Modern Chivalry (1792-1815)

INTRODUCTION

On the frontier of Pennsylvania, our hero the reasonable and accomplished gentleman Captain John Farrago is making a horseback tour of the countryside with his servant Teague O'Reagan, an illiterate Irish immigrant. Brackenridge reverses the roles of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (1605), satirizing the excesses of "romantic" Democracy--in particular the common prejudice against or disregard of merit and the elevation of incompetent people like Teague far above their abilities.

The following passage in its aesthetics illustrates pure Neoclassicism. The satire proceeds by embodying reason in the Captain, who declines a challenge to a duel because it is simply irrational. Dueling was a ritual deriving from the romanticism of aristocracy--an anachronism more dangerous than Quixote's tilting at windmills. Brackenridge is here rejecting aristocratic Europe and affirming America as more rational and progressive. Mark Twain, his American successor as a satirist of Europe, considered dueling a symptom of the "Sir Walter Scott disease." At the same time, Brackenridge is realistic enough to satirize the Captain too, for his faith in the social power of reason, given human nature and lack of education. Miss Fog is a stereotype of irrational womanhood pervasive during the patriarchal Age of Reason. However, her preference for a younger man seems natural, and the Captain, while he is rational about dueling, is an unromantic fool about women.

Michael Hollister

from *Modern Chivalry*, Book IV

Detaining some time in a village, there was a great deal said about a certain Miss Fog, who was the belle of the place. Her father had made a fortune by the purchase of public securities... She had become the object of almost all wooers. The Captain, though an old bachelor, as we have said, had not wholly lost the idea of matrimony. Happening to be in a circle, one evening, where Miss Fog was, he took a liking to her,

in all respects save one, which was, that she seemed, on her part, to have taken a liking to a certain Mr. Jacko, who was there present; and to whose attention she discovered a facility of acquiescence. The Captain behaved, for the present, as if he did not observe the preference; but the following day, waiting on the young lady at her father's house, he drew her into conversation, and began to reason with her, in the following manner:

"Miss Fog," said he, "you are a young lady of great beauty, great sense, and fortune still greater than either." This was a sad blunder in a man of gallantry, but the lady not being of the greatest sensibility of nerve, did not perceive it. "On my part," said he, "I am a man of years, but a man of some reflection; and it would be much more advisable in you to trust my experience, and the mellowness of my disposition in a state of matrimony, than the vanity and petulance of this young fop Jacko, for whom you show partiality." The color coming into the young lady's face at this expression, she withdrew, and left him by himself. The Captain struck with the rudeness, withdrew also, and, calling Teague from the kitchen, mounted his horse and set off. [Next morning, the Captain receives a challenge to a duel from Jacko delivered by his second, and he replies]:

Sir,

I have two objections to this duel matter. The one is, lest I should hurt *you*, and the other is, lest you should hurt me. I do not see any good it would do me to put a bullet through any part of your body. I could make no use of you when dead, for any culinary purpose, as I would a rabbit or a turkey. I am no cannibal to feed on the flesh of men. Why then shoot down a human creature, of which I could make no use. A buffalo would be better meat. For though your flesh might be delicate and tender, yet it wants that firmness and consistency which takes and retains salt. At any rate it would not be fit for long sea voyages. You might make a good barbecue, it is true, being of the nature of a raccoon or an opossum, but people are not in the habit of barbecuing anything human now. As to your hide, it is not worth taking off, being little better than that of a year old colt.

It would seem to me a strange thing to shoot a man that would stand still to be shot at; inasmuch as I have been heretofore used to shoot at things flying, or running, or jumping. Were you on a tree now like a squirrel, endeavoring to hide yourself in the branches, or like a raccoon, that after much eyeing and spying I observe at length in the crotch of a tall oak, with boughs and leaves intervening, so that I could just get a sight of his hinder parts, I should think it pleasurable enough to take a shot at you...

As to myself, I do not much like to stand in the way of anything that is harmful. I am under apprehensions you might hit me. That being the case, I think it most advisable to stay at a distance. If you want to try your pistols, take some object, a tree or a barn door about my dimensions. If you hit that, send me word, and I shall acknowledge that if I had been in the same place, you might also have hit me.

J. Farrago