CAPTAIN FARRAGO'S LETTER ON DUELLING AND JUDGE JOHN BRECKINRIDGE OF KENTUCKY

JOSEPH H. HARKEY

In the late 1790's, Judge John Breckinridge of Kentucky, the grandfather of Vice-President John C. Breckinridge (1857-1861), was challenged to a duel by a British officer. Instead of picking up the gauntlet, however, Judge Breckinridge fired off a satirical reply.¹

First he cited two objections to the duel: "The one lest I should hurt you; the other, lest you should hurt me." Continuing, he saw no advantage to killing his challenger, since his corpse would serve no "culinary purpose," as would a rabbit or turkey. The officer's flesh, he explained, "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." Breckinridge admitted that his would-be adversary might barbecue well, "being of the nature of a raccoon or an oppossum," but said that barbecuing was out of fashion.

After commenting on the small value of a human hide (especially that of a British officer, one infers), the Judge got to the topic of his real concern — the officer might kill him. "As to myself," he wrote, "I do not much like to stand in the way of anything that is harmful. I am under the apprehension you might hit me. That being the case, I think it most advisable to stay at a distance." A sporting man, he suggested an alternative — that his antagonist choose a tree, a barn door, or some other object of dimensions roughly approximate to those of the Judge, and shoot at it. If he hit it, the Judge would acknowledge "that if I had been in the same place, you would have killed me in a duel."

If this delightfully satiric — and reasonable — reply to a duelist's challenge sounds familiar to lovers of early American literature, it could hardly be a coincidence. Several years before the Kentucky Judge Breckinridge "wrote" it, his namesake, Pennsylvania's Judge Hugh Henry Brackenridge, had printed it in his novel, Modern

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¹ Reprinted in The Age of Firearms, by Robert Held and Nancy Jenkins (New York, 1957), 168. Judge John Breckinridge was to become Attorney-General in Jefferson's cabinet, a post he occupied at his death in 1806.
Chivalry (1792). The original letter had been a reply to Mr. Jacko, who took umbrage with the attentions of Captain Farrago, Brackenridge's quixotic hero, to Miss Fog. Before writing the letter, however, Farrago had frightened Jacko's second by telling him that he had always planned to do violence to any second who conveyed a challenge to himself.

... Be under no apprehensions, said the Captain; I shall use no unfair method of biting, gouging, or wounding the private parts. Nay, as you appear to be a young man of a delicate constitution, I shall onlychoak[sic]a little. You will give me leave to take you by the throat in as easy a manner as possible. (p. 48)

Meanwhile, the second, horrified at being expected to fight himself, and in such an undignified manner, ran for the door, only to be intercepted by Captain Farrago.

In an instant, [the second] was seized by the neck, and the exclamation of murder which he made at the first grasp, began to die away in hoarse guttural murmurs of one nearly strangled....

The Captain, intending to alarm more than injure, "dismissed him with a salutation of his foot on the backside, as a claudostium, as he went out."

Brackenridge, who just previous to this incident had written of his inclination "to an ironical, ludicrous way of thinking and writing" (p. 43), thus used this opportunity to show his contempt not only for duelling, which violated his eighteenth-century notions of moderation and reason, but also for seconds, who blithely went about expediting duels, with all their carnage of maiming and death. Of major interest here, however, is the fact that a prominent Kentucky judge of Brackenridge's day would so unabashedly pluck Farrago's letter from Modern Chivalry and use it as his own. Perhaps he felt no deceit, for the book was so popular on the frontier as well as elsewhere that most of his literate friends probably would have recognized it as Farrago's letter. Indeed, in Recollections of Persons and Places in the West (1834), Henry Marie Brackenridge gave us testimony of the popularity of his father's novel. Everywhere Henry Marie went he found the book a favorite of long standing; and one Mississippian loved the novel so that he loaned the young Brackenridge a horse, with little assurance that he would ever see it again, out of deference to the Judge. Anyway,

2 See page 52 of Claude M. Newlin's edition of Modern Chivalry (New York, 1962), the most accessible unabridged version of the book. The letter constitutes Ch. iv of Book IV of the first volume. The men may have been distantly related. Brackenridge noted in Modern Chivalry (758) that his father had spelled his name Breckenridge, like the Kentucky family. At that general time the Kentuckians changed it again, to Breckinridge.
Judge John Breckinridge evidently admired the letter enough to overcome any reluctance he might (or might not) have felt in borrowing it, and he used it almost verbatim.

Judge Breckinridge did make two fairly large omissions. He deleted Farrago's remark that the writer was no cannibal and his rhetorical question of why therefore shoot a human creature he could not use. Farrago noted that a "buffaloe" would offer better meat. The other major omission was an entire paragraph, which gibed at the unreasonable practice of presenting oneself a stationary target in a duel.

It would seem to me a strange thing to shoot at a man that would stand still to be shot at; in as much 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 racoon, 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. But as it is, there is no skill or judgment requisite either to discover or take you down. (p. 52)

The purloiner of Farrago's letter made various minor editorial changes, such as saying that "people are not in the habit of barbecuing anything now" instead of the original "any thing human now." Basically, however, he reproduced word for word, and these changes may be a result of a corrupted text. Once Brackenridge sent an installment to the printer, he felt no desire to exert control over that or any subsequent printing.

Judge John Breckinridge's letter today is a reminder of how popular Modern Chivalry once was. Certainly his kind of emulation has to be flattering. Of course, the satiric missive may well have given him a reputation-saving way of avoiding the duel as well. At any rate, however, today we can read it and remember that a much-ignored American classic embodied the neo-classical, satirical spirit of its age.