

The Old World from A - Z

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D is for Duellist

Why a Be a Duellist?

There is probably no more dashing a figure in contemporary high society than the duellist, a master of arms, fashion, and witticism. A recent invention of the last century or so, they have seized the imagination of people from of all walks of life for their flashy sword and gun play, their trend setting apparel and their mastery of repartee. They earn the envy and admiration of most, yet others fear them too. For despite their finery they are among the quickest and most deadly of fighters. Their skill, while called an art, has reached a high level of sophistication and complexity with few rivals.

They are modern figures, heralds of a new age, one fueled by the opulence of the nobility and their detached sensibilities. Duellists carry the finest weapons manufactured by a small and select group of artisan armorers, and their apparel is no less expensive or rare and changes seasonally with the whims of fashion. Thus it is the ambition of most nobles with an interest in the martial skills to aspire to the duelling arts; a noble unable to deal is seen as provincial and unsophisticated, an outcast in noble society.

For those wanting to enter the genteel classes, duelling is one of the few means of entering it. Many of the duelling teachers are famed warriors who fought their way to positions of prominence, others seek to earn the respect of the nobility by rivaling them in duelling skills, thus many merchants and others hire the same teachers as do the nobles. To become a duellist is to earn the respect and awe of society as a whole.

It is important to note that many of the wealthy have training in dueling including nobles, merchants, students and physicians. Knowing how to duel, even if one never does, is considered a sign of sophistication. Not everyone who duels and duels well is a duellist. Rather, duellists are those who wholly embrace the art of duelling or earn an income from their skills as a duellist.



The Duellists' Roles in Society

The role of the Duellist is deeply rooted in the traditions of the upper classes, and in particular high society. While the nobility have always been known for their martial traditions, their stability, wealth, and power tends to distance the nobility from their proud and sometimes violent past. The art of the duel and its prominence in genteel society ensures that the nobility can still embrace their taste for blood in a refined and highly cultured manner.

In the north, Duellists have a long history, but many of the refinements and the sophistication that the art now enjoys is the result of developments in the Southern and Western Old World. It was in the courts of cultured Estalia and Tilea where the art of the duel first emerged and rapidly was seized upon by the Breton court which added to the art its more refined rules of decorum and outrageous sense of fashion. The Estalians and Tileans perfected the practice, the Bretonnians invented the performance, and the Empire has begun to ape their more polished peers.

The rise of towns and cities in the world and the movement of nobility from their country estates to cosmopolitan areas fuel the success of duelling. It is here where wit and fashion reign supreme and conflict remedied by either a duel of wits or blades. The Duellist is an extension of these ancient martial traditions and the contemporary duellist is just as skilled in their own way as the archaic mounted lord of the past. Duelling serves as a way of keeping one fit and skilled while gaining prestige for both. Rather than warring against one another on the field of battle, nobles and their ilk settle their differences in a more efficient and stylish manner. For less pressing issues, duelling serves as a means of harnessing the more aggressive instincts of nobles and provides them with a socially acceptable outlet for their personal foibles.

Advances in duelling happen at a remarkable rate for there is a large network of traveling professionals throughout the Old World constantly competing against each other and perfecting their skills. Thus it requires constant training and practice to retain one's skill. The imperfect art of duelling with firearms is rapidly changing as well as the demands of duelling call for greater accuracy and dependability. A whole group of elite artisans who specialize in hand-crafting the finest in duelling pistols has emerged, thus spurring a greater sophistication in

firearms.

It might seem strange, maybe more important than one's skill at arms is a mastery of the laws of duelling. The rules surrounding duelling are extensive and varied and it may take years, or even decades, to master them as each school of fencing, each culture, and even each court has its own particular customs, laws, and standards regarding duelling. Even if one were to win a duel but do it in an uncouth fashion, they could be mocked and ridiculed mercilessly.

At its rawest, the duel has only two combatants, but to be legal it requires a judge or witness. To be socially acceptable, a duel requires far more than these basic measures. A respectable duel requires two seconds who each assist the duellist, two cartelbearers, one for each duellist who communicate with their equal to negotiate which rules are in use, and a physician to care for any injured or dying. The most absurd of duels involve numerous onlookers and their entourage, servants for all involved, the personal trainers and armourers of the duellists, and even musicians to keep the crowd entertained while negotiations are being exchanged.

The image of a duellist is a romantic one, but the truth is that the art is just as enmeshed in the excesses and extravagance of the wealthy. The studies of the art are prohibitively expensive, thus undergoing training is as much a mark of social prestige as the finery and jewels a noble wears. It is yet another means to distinguish oneself from their rabble below and thus epitomizes the elitism that the wealthy lord over others. For an art, its participants spend a shocking amount of time parading about and putting on performances. So great are the changes that many of the old practitioners see modern duelling as trivializing what is an honorable practice, turning it into something as trite, superficial and innocuous as a garden party.

There is a dark side to duelling as well. The more dangerous and psychotic of sorts use it as a means to carry out murder and terrorize the countryside by relying upon the rules of duelling to shield them from prosecution. Some simply use duelling as a means of dispensing with their enemies in the bloodiest if somewhat socially acceptable manner, and in this manner many have increased their power and squashed their rivals. A successful and bloodthirsty duellist can terrorize their peers with little effort. Others use the duelling laws to commit acts of murder under the premise that the murder took place under a duel. Others challenge hapless victims to a duel to the death for some perceived injustice and then extort a high fee out of them to avoid the duel and thus death. There are also those devious and dishonest sorts who will do anything to win a duel: twisting the rules to their favor, conspiring against the other duellist, resorting to poisoned or sabotaged weapons, or mischievous seconds who may distract rivals.

Its a Living

The Duellist is not reckoned by any as a mere profession or craft, but a title or artistry to be aspired to. A person purporting to be a duellist is not proclaiming a profession, but rather declaring their title as a person worthy of an equally skilled and entitled rival.

Nonetheless, there are those who make a living off their role as a duellist. Mostly these are foreigners who serve as teachers, or those so instructed by foreign teachers. These duelling teachers are people of professional background, rarely nobles, for a noble would be disdainful to be paid by another noble. Thus the snobbery of nobility towards each other allows people of humble origins but refined tastes to serve as teachers to the nobility. The poorest of these teachers are those who teach poorer nobility at their country estates or who teach modest merchants, in which case they usually charge one to twenty gold pieces per lesson, a lesson being an hour or two in duration.

The more successful teachers serve a large pool of nobility, allowing them to earn astonishing wages, make countless social connections, and become familiar and accepted figures in the court. For these lucky few, they can earn anywhere from twenty to one hundred gold per lesson, a price the nobility are eager to pay. It is a mark of prestige to be trained by a popular teacher whose exorbitant fees are widely known, thus broadcasting the noble's wealth.

The finest masters of duelling though rarely have to stoop to this level, for they are retained as teachers by patrons. A wealthy noble wants to be taught exclusively by their own teacher, thus their teacher's secrets are their own and not shared by rival nobles. These masters are not hirelings given a hourly wage, they are lavishly treated. They are given the finest and most fashionable of clothing, the finest of weapons, become part of the noble's entourage and are even considered the peer of the noble, and are in fact treated with respect and deference by the nobles themselves. There are few people of non-noble birth treated with such high respect, and the cost of maintaining such a duelling teacher costs is sometimes measured in the tens of thousands per year.

For those who practice duelling in a less professional manner, duelling is merely one aspect of their life, albeit an important one. Thus they retain their incomes and status from whatever their birth afforded them. Nobles will continue to use the proceeds from their holdings to support their training as duellists, merchants will continue their commerce, and so forth.

Who Would Become a Duellist?

It is a rare thing, some say a joke by Ranald, but a handful of the finest and most renowned of duellists had modest beginnings as highwaymen. Among the brigands and outlaws of the Old World, the highwayman is the noblest, a breed apart. It is natural for those who adopt the finery, firearms, and form of the nobility and duellists to be drawn to duelling, and a successful career as a highwayman affords a lucky few to purchase their way through ill-gotten gains into fashionable society. The Highwayman is in fact inspired by the art of duelling and is in some small way a tribute to it, no matter how criminal. Still, most highway men, while aspiring to the ideal of the duellist are little more than poor imitations.

Before duelling, it was traditional to resolve disputes through the employ of Judicial Champions, who would fight on behalf of the nobility, a tradition still popular and in some cases mandated by law. However, the cavalier nature of Duelling insists that sometimes a noble must fight for themselves, and not leave issues of weight import up to a hireling no matter how skilled, thus duelling has been able to compete to some extent with the trial by champion. Not surprisingly, many Judicial Champions have taken advantage of this to become Duellists themselves. The transition is not too difficult and many simply function still as Judicial Champions, duelling on behalf of the nobles, others serve as teachers, and a few lucky ones have earned titles and entered the nobility where they can practice duelling freely and independently.

However, the most common duellist are those who are Nobles of one rank or another. It is the nobility, with the wealth, leisure time, and distinct sub-culture that make duelling possible for it is their practice and patronage that forms the underpinning of duelling society. Duelling is an extension of their own particular means of conflict resolution and their martial heritage, and it is they who have so heartily embraced the art and spend so lavishly in the pursuit of it. Some say most nobles simply practice duelling due to social pressures, but a handful of nobles are deeply committed to it and are as competent and skilled as any.

While for many nobles, duelling is a hobby, for some, bloodletting is a trade. For the Protagonist, who lives by their skill with blade and fist, the opportunity to enter the duelling world is the greatest desire for many. Acceptance into the art of duelling allows them to advance socially, make more money, and carry on fighting in a socially acceptable manner that even earns them great prestige. Protagonists are often hired as muscle by nobility to carry out various deeds, and a quick-witted Protagonist can take this opportunity to earn the trust and respect of a noble and instruct them in some of the finer points of fighting. Many nobles seek out Protagonists in such a manner, for the noble can control and use the Protagonist to their own ends, using them to carry out any dirty work and using their past as a means of carefully controlling them.

Moving On...

As seductive as the art of duelling is, there are many other things in the world that demand the attention of the nobility and their entourages. For others, more pressing business means that they must put aside their practice, or at least share their devotion to it with something else.

For some, killing becomes easy, and profitable. A duellist is a person known for their skill and their cool, and those abilities can be put to other uses if the price is right. Thus some duellists, wittingly or unwittingly may serve as an Assassin to a noble who serves as their patron, carrying out the dirty work of a noble. For example, many protagonists, who through the patronage of a noble become duellists, are often beholden to their noble patrons and eventually come to serve their noble in a more secretive fashion.

Fate can be a fickle thing, and sometimes the world turns upside down, and a king becomes a peasant, and a peasant a king. Duellists, despite their position in society are not necessarily above the law and many find themselves outlaws, becoming Highwayman, acting as thieves but insisting on carrying on as if they were nobles. Other nobles, drawn to the allure of a life of crime, secretly carry on a double life as a noble-duellist by day and a gallant Highwayman by night.

Of course the art of duelling has always drawn those interested in all things military, and some duellists return to the military or seek fulfillment through a commission in the military. Thus with their money from duelling or whatever previous livelihood they had, many duellists gather together a mercenary company to test their fortunes in the world. In a way, the art of war is similar to the art of dealing, with laws and rules of its own and being a Mercenary Captain is duelling on a much grander scale, a concept that appeals to many nobles and the like. Of course, most who practice duelling are nobles and have no interest in being anything else other than a noble. The art of duelling, if one is adept at it, does much to further one's social agenda. A popular and powerful duellist can easily influence and sway a court, gaining great prestige and honors through their expertise, even to the extent of increasing their family's fortunes by gaining titles and land through their reputation and connections.

Adventure Seeds

Bring Me Don Carlos!

A rival noble has just hired the famed Estalian duellist Don Jose, and the PCs or their patron noble are caught off guard, for now their rival is all the talk of the court. The only way to remedy the situation is to get Don Jose's rival, and some say superior, Don Carlos. Thus the PCs are off to Estalia, Tilea, or Bretonnia where Don Carlos is at, insinuate themselves into a foreign court and find a way through intrigue to bring Don Carlos to their own court and under their patronage. Don Carlos, of course, is very pleased with his current circumstances and will need considerable effort to be convinced to leave. This affords the opportunity to travel and engage in some courtly intrigue.

Bullied!

A honest but simple merchant is in a dilemma, a more powerful and wealthy merchant, trained in the art of duelling has cunningly maneuvered the poor merchant into a duel to the death. The powerful merchant has no less than two duelling teachers, one from Estalia and the other from Tilea, and is well known for his skill at arms. The honest merchant, shocked at the challenge was unable to turn it down before the wealthy merchant stormed off gleefully. This terrified merchant doesn't want to die and turns to the PCs for help in some fashion to overcome this obstacle. There are a number of ways the players can undertake this task. First they can seek out by lawyers and others and find a legal means to send in a substitute, change the duel, or some other legal ploy. Less successful, they might try to hurriedly train their friendly merchant, although this probably will not be sufficient. They can undertake a means of discrediting or blackmailing the rival merchant, or even find a way to disable him before the duel or weaken the rival merchant before the duel. Ingenious PCs may find other ways of dealing with the issue as well.

Cursed!

Baron Kaltstein, a duellist known for the sheer number and violent nature of duels he has fought has gone into hiding. He hires the PCs or calls upon them as friends to help him, where he swears them to secrecy before showing them his withered right hand. He suggests Sorcery as the cause, or could it possibly be a mutation instead?. He wants the situation remedied and who ever responsible found. The PCs may just seek out a cure, but due to the number of duels the Baron has fought he has a number of enemies that could be investigated. Worse still, the Baron is an oppressive lord and some investigation at his distant estate reveals that the disgruntled inhabitants there know of the affliction, apparently a wise woman told them? Does she know through divination? Or is she responsible? And maybe the world is a better place with a disabled Baron? To make this scenario different, the Baron's affliction may not be physical, the curse could be mental. His hands shake and he can't wield a rapier or a gun. Once again, he claims it is sorcery, but perhaps he has a minor mental illness? Maybe its guilt from the number of people he killed? Perhaps those he killed haunt him in his sleep? Or more mundanely, perhaps he drinks too much, or is addicted to drugs? Despite any obvious answers to the contrary, the Baron is certain that the cause is magical and there nothing wrong with him or his lifestyle. The large sum of money he offers to make things right should be a good enough incentive.

A Dead Man's Pistol

Vlad Boroshkin, ex-patriate Kislevite and its only noted duellist has died recently in a fencing match, many suggest witchcraft was to blame for his failure, but others suggest that it was his love of drink that resulted in his demise. Regardless, his finely crafted gun, reputed to have been enchanted so as to never miss, has gone missing or its ownership is in dispute. If missing, someone at the duel is believed to have stolen it and thus the investigation is on. If in dispute, the rival who slew him owns the gun. His Imperial mistress claims the gun is his, a famed armorer claims that the gun was never fully paid off, and no less then three members of his family demand the gun as part of their inheritance. The current owner refuses to give up the gun and challenges any claiming possession to a duel - by pistol of course! None want to challenge the victor to a duel by pistol, as its powers are widely known. Furthermore, precedence suggests that should the gun's current owner be defeated in a duel, the victor might very well have legal claim to possession of the gun considering the current terms under which the gun is possessed. Thus the players on their own behalf or on the behalf of the other parties must find a means to legally or illegally acquire the famed Boroshkin pistol!

A Difference in Opinion

The player is challenged to a duel. Before the duel begins however, a dispute emerges over the rules of the duel. Their opponent insists that a certain set of rules be followed that happen to benefit that Duellist, and they list a series of rules and produce even a small handbook on the matter. The players may dispute those rules, call upon other witnesses, call upon their teacher, and enter into a battle over the conditions of the duel. Of course everyone has an opinion, and strangely enough there may be two dozen different versions of what should or shouldn't be done. Onlookers may themselves demand duels from other angry onlookers. The player may have to fight half a dozen duels with their opponent over which rules should be used before the real duel may officially begin!

Outclassed!

One of the PCs is challenged to a duel that day, against one or more superior opponents, known for their skill and ruthlessness. Clearly the PC(s) are in trouble with only a few hours before the duel. The players must find a way of ensuring their own victory. This can be attained by poisoning or weakening their challengers, altering the duelling weapons (or poisoning them), finding some legal loophole to give the player an edge ("A-ha! von Ludwig's Law states that all Red-heads must fight left handed! And blindfolded!"), visiting the dueling site and arranging things to benefit the PCs, or the use of magic to ensure victory. Resourceful players may, after investigating the strengths and weaknesses of their rival come up with other clever schemes as well.

Treachery!

The PCs arrive to late for their noble friend's duel, to discover that their friend is on their death bed. Upon their arrival their friend insists that treachery was involved in the defeat, and before the executor of his estate, claims that the estate will not be passed on until he is put to rest. Without giving any further clues he dies. The estate is substantial and the executor upset about the condition, and puts pressure on the players to make a cursory investigation that exonerates all. However, something might suggest otherwise: poison in the dead friend's body? Or a small poison dart at the back of his neck... something to suggest foul play. Over two dozen people witnessed the duel so there are plenty of witnesses, some may want to hide the truth, others might have valuable information that player's can piece together. Was there a conspiracy involved between the other duellist and some of the onlookers? Were any of the inheritors involved in plotting the death? The friend won't rest until their death is avenged and the players may very well be haunted by the shade of their friend who appears to them late at night, urging them silently onward in the investigation.