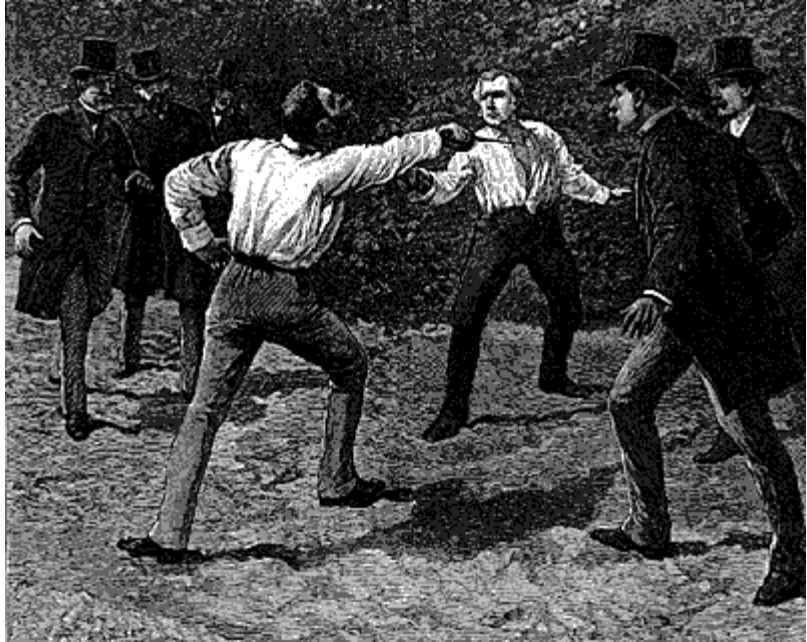


## Reading a Paragraph from *The Banquet Years*

Here is a typical passage from the first chapter of *The Banquet Years*:

"Honor was something out of a Corneille tragedy, and dueling perfectly suited to the mood and the times. 'On the field of honor' one could go beyond words to settle personal differences by serious dramatics. The papers carried announcements of each day's *affaires d'honneur*, with lengthy procès-verbaux drawn by the seconds to establish how settlement had or had not been made. Engagements were fought until the first blood flowed, and afterwards the combatants sometimes walked off the field arm in



Floquet, Prime Minister of the French Republic , and General Boulanger, on Friday, July 13 , 1888

Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp.13-14.

arm. Fatal encounters were rare. When an important duel was to be fought, numbers of spectators tried to follow the participants to the chosen spot on the outskirts of Paris. Journalists, who outdid one another in writing slanderous articles, constantly had their friends up at dawn to serve as seconds, and many doctors began their day by dressing a sword wound. Catulle Mendès almost lost his life defending Sarah Bernhardt's right to play the role of Hamlet. Duels were fought on the slightest provocation, and no effective attempt was made to outlaw the custom, so

typically  
exhibitionistic, until  
after World War I."

### **What Don't You Need to Know to Get Essence of this Paragraph?**

**You do not need to be able to read French (i.e. to be able to translate *affaires d'honneur* or *procès-verbaux*) or know who Corneille, Catulle Mendès, or Sarah Bernhardt were to get the basic point Shattuck is driving at.**

### **What Is Important to Forget When Reading this Paragraph?**

**There are far too many details here to memorize, and even if you could they would almost all be useless in this course. I can absolutely assure you that at no point in this course will you be asked: "Catulle Mendès almost lost his life fighting a duel to defend the right of what person to play Hamlet? or What did Parisian doctors do in the early morning? The description of dueling may be interesting (and, in fact, recently there have been several fascinating historical studies linking the resurgence of dueling in this period with a new aggressive notion of male sex roles), but these details are not particularly relevant to the the specific questions you are to answer this week.**

### **So What Should You Be Getting Out of Reading This Passage?**

**Throughout this section of the book Shattuck is presenting his thesis that in the decades immediately preceding the First World War life in Paris had become**

**very theatrical. Even what might seem a very private or spontaneous act – settling a dispute through violence – was elaborately staged and presented to the public.**

**Moreover, he is implicitly presenting the pre-World War I era as one that was both more innocent and more frivolous than the subsequent decades, in which war and the rise of fascism made everything a matter of life and death.**

**Finally, he is describing a particular relationship between the media and the society in which every detail of the lives of the “rich and famous” are devoured by readers.**

**All of these elements help set the stage for his presentation of the lives and work of Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie, and Alfred Jarry. For each of them, he argues, the boundaries between life and art, seriousness and play, and private and public have begun to disappear. And all of these elements are of clear relevance to the central questions for the week.**

***Therefore, in reading this passage your goal is not to memorize the details, but rather to use them to understand and to evaluate Shattuck's larger argument.***