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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Boxing

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Mots-clés

Rules

Sports

Résumé

The popularity of boxing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is attested by the great number of publications and debates about the sport. Pugilism, in spite of its violence, was progressively presented as a sociable entertainment, a disciplined pastime, that allowed the cultivation of manly virtues. To legitimize boxing, various discourses shaped it as a science and as an art in the context of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Boxing became increasingly associated to a conservative and nationalist perception of Englishness as conservatives and radicals perceived the potential of the pastime to educate the mob and to cultivate a disciplined violence useful to maintain a pugilistic spirit in times of peace.

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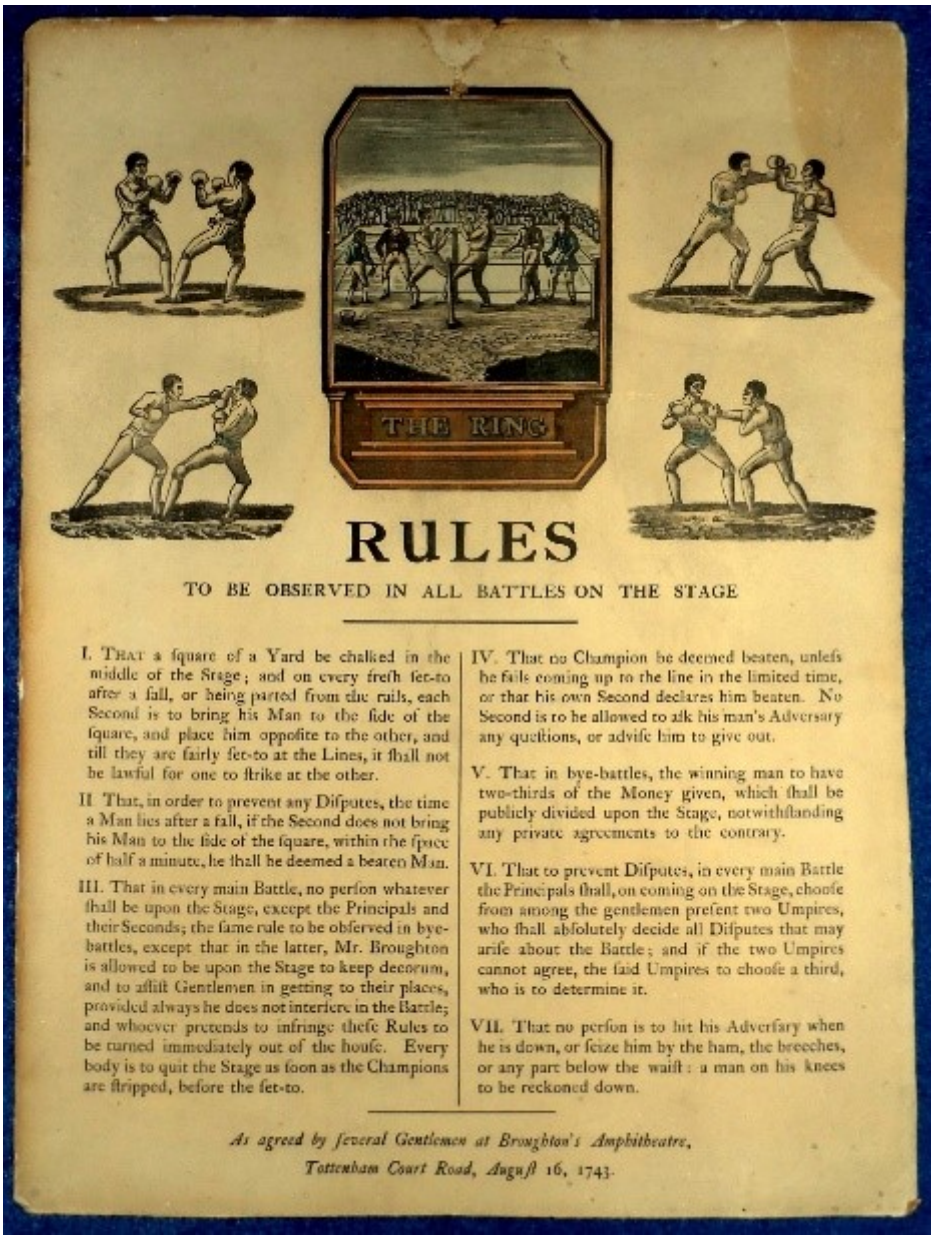
allowed the cultivation of manly virtues. To legitimize boxing, various discourses shaped it as a science and as an art in the context of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Boxing became increasingly associated to a conservative and nationalist perception of Englishness as conservatives and radicals perceived the potential of the pastime to educate the mob and to cultivate a disciplined violence useful to maintain a pugilistic spirit in times of peace. In that perspective, boxing acted as a counter-model to the Enlightenment values of sociability based on a belief in the benefits of trade and luxury in polishing national manners. Furthermore, pugilism often used the egalitarian argument as many pugilists came from the lower orders, and the fancy – the crowd that gathered to watch the boxing match – enabled the confusion of social classes, the middling-class mixing with the rank-and-file.

Boxing as an art & a science

The rules of prizefighting

The growing popularity of boxing in the mid-eighteenth century coincided with a global movement to codify the practice and to turn it into a proper sport with its set of rules that could guarantee a fair opposition between the two contesters. Even though bare-knuckled boxing had been practised for quite a long time in Britain, the first attempt at setting precise rules was recorded in 1743, when Jack Broughton, a famous boxer who organised fights in his amphitheatre, published his *Rules to be observed on all battles of the stage*.1



The seven rules presented boxing as a spectacle to be enjoyed by a gentlemanly society, and aimed at domesticating the inherent violence of the sport by imposing strict limitations between the fighters and the audience, both qualified as ‘gentlemen’. There was no time limit for rounds, and no limited number of rounds. The winner was, in other terms, the last man standing.

The rules organizing prizefighting did not change that much for several decades, as the London Prize Ring Rules, which were adopted in 1838, drew heavily on Broughton’s rules and aimed at disciplining both the fight and the bets surrounding it. Boxing was therefore framed as a social practice, a spectacle and a gambling opportunity. The tension between the violence allowed by the rules and the sometimes rowdy nature of audience participation, on the one hand, and the aspiration to a polite sociability brought about by the gentlemanly

spectacle was only solved in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the promotion of the so-called Marquess of Queensberry Rules. Theses rules, written in 1865 by John Graham Chambers, and published in 1867 under the patronage of the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, are still the foundation of the contemporary sport of boxing as they called for the use of gloves, for three-minute rounds, and for the ten-second countdown to declare a fighter knocked out.

Throughout the long eighteenth century, boxing was therefore often discussed and debated. Its supporters presented it as a noble art and a science fit to teach young men discipline and to make them into good soldiers.2

Print culture and pugilism in the late 1780s.

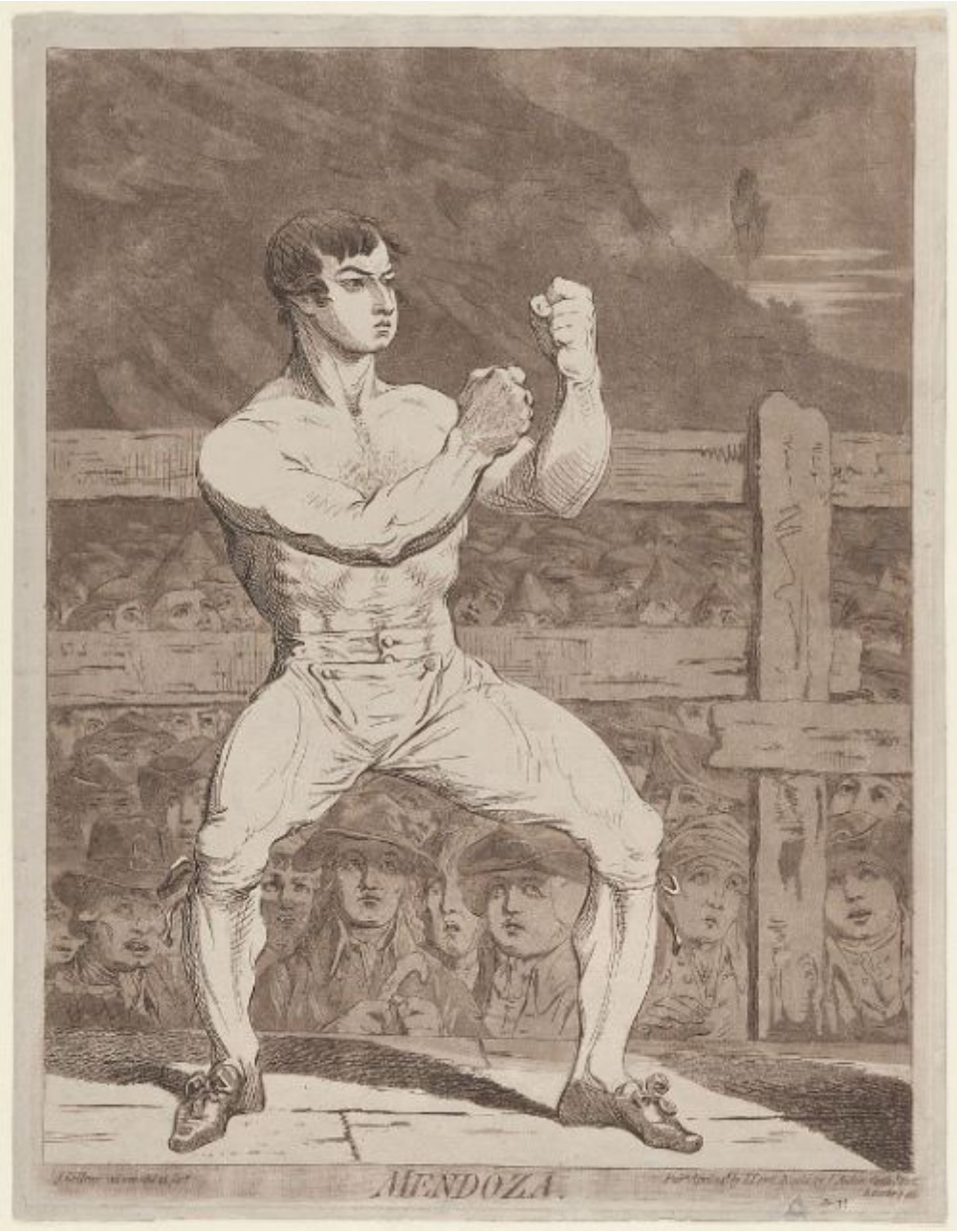
If the codification of boxing secured its status, its popularity was enhanced by the dramatization of boxing matches in the press. Those which opposed Daniel Mendoza, also called the 'Jew', to Richard Humphreys, the 'Christian' from Clapham from 1788 to 1790, gained public notoriety because they were recounted as performances, the accounts detailing the blows given and received but also the talent, skill and courage displayed.

The first match that opposed Humphreys to Mendoza (9 January 1788 at Odiham, Hampshire) originated from a dispute that was detailed in the newspapers. The antipathy that animated both men on the ring was an important aspect of the narrative: '[…] in the countenance of Mendoza there was a kind of contemptuous laugh; on that of Humphreys there appeared as implacable an hatred of his adversary'.3 Press articles hooked the attention of readers by giving them not only the account of a physical and violent fight, yet framed by rules and values, but also the context of the dispute between the two contestants, thus creating a narrative thread between boxing encounters. Indeed, prize fighters would invite their contesters to a new boxing match through the newspapers.

Newspaper discourses played an important part in shaping the nineteenth-century boxing culture as a manly yet respectable and artistic endeavour. References to antique culture would seep their way in the description of the sport to morally legitimize it. However violent the contest between the two fighters, accounts also emphasized the elegance and expertise of contenders:

> In point of manly and fine attitude, every posture of Humphreys was grace itself; and if ever the character of the English Boxer, like that of the Roman Gladiator, is to be transmitted to posterity, the eye, the countenance, the posture, and the nerve of Humphreys, should be selected for that picture, to succeeding times. (H.C., 21 January 1788)

Prints of boxers were also used to promote the image of pugilists. Below for instance is an aquatinted image of Mendoza by James Gillray that anticipated Mendoza's fighting Humphreys.



James Gillray, ‘Mendoza’, *Met Museum*, 66.683.9, 1788.

Mendoza won the second and third matches against Humphreys, although the bets had been on the former. Accounts praised the superiority of his skill, his endurance and rapidity. Some press articles though decried the brutality of the game and warned against the example being set. Such debates would usually occur after a tragic event. This was the case during the Stilton match (6 May 1789) opposing Mendoza and Humphreys. William Ward, a pugilist, had travelled to Stilton with his fraternity to watch the boxing match but was challenged to fight by a drunken blacksmith. The death of the blacksmith under the fists of Ward provoked an outcry of indignation, the *Scots Magazine* advocating for instance ‘a total stop to such savage *amusements*, unworthy a civilised and Christian nation’.4

'The infamy of boxing': preaching against pugilism

Eighteenth-century debates around boxing were not simply questioning the lawfulness of a sport, debates extended to the values it conveyed, the effects on lower orders and whether a civilized culture could really accommodate pugilism.

In 1789, Daniel Mendoza published *The Modern Art of Boxing,* a guide for scholars detailing how the sport was practiced by famous pugilists (Mendoza, Humphreys, Ward …). In the preface, he argued that the three requisites for a good boxer were strength, courage and art, and the purpose of his treatise was to teach the third. In the wake of Broughton, new manual guides teaching the science conferred to boxing a new legitimacy. Furthermore, Mendoza received royal patronage from the Prince of Wales. It was then fashionable for young Whig aristocrats to mingle with prize-fighters from the lower orders. However, some pamphleteers frowned upon a practice which transgressed social boundaries, a sign for them of moral degeneracy.

Edward Barry's *A Letter on the Practice of Boxing* published in 1789 was one among many calls to ban pugilism during the revolutionary decade. Barry, a medical writer and one of the most influential preacher in London, wrote this letter in reaction to the increasing popularity of boxing and to oppose the arguments of amateurs who insisted that boxing enhanced the courage of Englishmen. Crossing lines of class and race, the amateurs were intent upon showing that boxing redefined Englishness as both virtuous and pugilistic.5

Offended by the proliferation of semi-naked portraits of boxers in print-shops and of pamphlets transforming an unruly sport into an art, Barry debunked all the arguments of boxing amateurs. Using physiological arguments, he suggested that the lure of boxing de-humanized the lower orders and distorted the meaning of courage: '[…] let not the infamy of boxing prostitute longer the name of courage, *that* is a virtue of the mind, and does not exist in gigantic form, or muscular power, else the ox and the ass would claim a superiority'.6 For Barry, boxing 'promise[d] nothing less than rendering more *callous* the feelings, and making still more *dissolute* the manners of the lower order of the people, as well as the gradual extinction of that *bravery*, and h*umanity*, which at present so much adorn the British character […]' (32).

A national and manly entertainment

***William Cobbett 'In Defense of Boxing'* (1805)**

During the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the debates on boxing and its effects on the national character became even more strident. Political pamphleteers, conservative or radical, saw the amazing potential of boxing - as a sport witnessed by a crowd (the 'fancy') - to

educate and socialise the mob, and thus to inculcate, through the medium of collective sympathy, the values of courage, strength and stamina, crucial for the nation in times of war. Boxing indeed implied various forms of socialisation: through schools, boxing manuals and public matches. The physiological argument was thus raised by some newspapers:

> It is not very extraordinary, that, after so long a war, the elegant amusement of boxing should become popular. People have been so much accustomed to battles and bloodshed, that they cannot brook a sudden stoppage of these interesting details. Boxing and bull-baiting afford tolerable substitutes.7

The legalization of boxing was hence argued for, using the specificity of the English character forged through centuries of conflicts and wars with its European neighbours: '[T]he whole object of the war has been to accumulate a vast mass of pugnacious matter, which, like our army and navy, cannot be disbanded without great risk' (*Spirit of The Public Journals* 155).

The English journalist and pamphleteer William Cobbett (1763-1835) was an ardent supporter of boxing. For Cobbett, boxing was part of an English culture endangered by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of hedonist consumerism. In 1805, the death of a tradesman following a pugilistic fight triggered a new controversy and led Cobbett to write a set of articles entitled 'In Defence of Boxing'. His eulogy of the sport was as much a celebration of rural traditions than a ferocious attack against the 'system of effeminacy' stimulated by Pitt's social and economic policies. According to him, the state control of the lower orders was carried out with policies meant to hinder sociable practices through 'the suppression of mirth as well as hardy exercises, and […] of everything that tends to produce relaxations from labour and a communication of ideas and independence amongst the common people'.8 Cobbett believed that the restriction of mirth and sociable practices was nothing less than an attack on their liberties, an argument also to be found in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations.*

Pierce Egan and Boxiana (1813-1829)

The patriotic argument was repeatedly used by journalists and pamphleteers. Boxing could prepare the mind and the body of the Englishmen to acts of bravery. If a soldier could be admired on the battlefield, why not a prize-fighter in the boxing ring? And indeed, Pierce Egan (1772-1849) popularized the genre of sports writing thanks to a muscular style, blending 'inventive imagery and linguistic exuberance'.9 Egan, in keeping with his conservative political views, considered boxing as a national sport that should be promoted as it helped Britons cultivate their manly and patriotic virtues. The insistence, throughout the pages of *Boxiana*, on the vivid vulgarity of boxing is in direct relationship with Edmund Burke's glorification of Britons as 'men of untaught feelings' :

> To those, Sir, who prefer *effeminacy* to hardihood – *assumed refinement* to rough Nature – and to whom *a shower of rain* can terrify their *polite* frames

> suffering from the unruly elements – or would not mind Pugilism, if Boxing was not so shockingly *vulgar* – the following work can have no interest whatever. But to persons, Sir, who like yourself, feel that Englishmen are not automata, and however the advantages of discipline may serve for the precision and movement of great bodies, that it would ultimately lose its effects, were it not animated by that native spirit, which has been found to originate, in a great measure, from what the fastidious term – *vulgar Sports*, BOXIANA will convey amusement, if not information.10

Boxiana constantly characterizes boxing as the British national sport as it is both gentlemanly and vulgar, violent and well-regulated. Egan clearly links the fighting spirit that British soldiers showed on the battlefields and on battleships during the Napoleonic wars with the practice of boxing. Moreover, Egan explicitly presents boxing as a school for gallantry, in which Britons learn to fight bravely, but by the book.11 The deeds of boxers therefore participate in a new national mythology, in which the succession of fights and championships seems the peaceful double of the kings and battles.

Egan is well aware of the reputation of prize-fighting and wishes to defend it as a polite entertainment above all, in spite of the violence and the gambling. He even goes further by suggesting that boxing is, at least, far from the usual hypocrisy concerning gentlemanly past-times. As ‘thieves and women of the town are to be found in churches’, and as gentlemen ‘lay wagers on the election of any particular parson’, there is nothing particularly immoral in betting on boxing matches and in giving a reward to the winner (*Boxiana*, vol. III, 5-6). Egan uses the jargon of boxers throughout his five volumes of *Boxiana* since he believes that the use of *flash*, with all its unrefined vitality, is the best way to describe the quintessential contradictions of his favourite sport and, more generally, of the British nation. Egan’s writings were great commercial successes in the last years of the Napoleonic Wars and after the battle of Waterloo.

Radicals and boxing after Waterloo

Even if boxing was mostly defended by supporters of the Tory government, its ability to unite both gentlemen and working classes also attracted democrats and radicals. However, the constant patriotic recuperation of the sport was also often satirized by writers for political reasons. Among the poets devoted to ‘the fancy’, Lord Byron was known for training regularly with John Jackson, a former prize-fighter, and one of Byron’s closest friends, the Irish poet Thomas Moore, shared this passion with him. Moore, however, parodied Egan’s *Boxiana* in a little-known satire published in 1819, *Tom Crib’s Memorial to Congress*,12 in which the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle is described like a boxing match opposing ‘Long Sandy’, that is, Tsar Alexander I, to ‘Georgy the Porpus [*sic*]’, the Prince Regent, who had been caricatured as ‘the Prince of Whales’ due to his corpulence.

Moore clearly shows in his satire that he had read Egan, yet he ironically mentions his proximity with the ‘Millenarians of the Holy League’, i.e. the allied monarchies that defeated Napoleon.13 The poem, its notes and appendixes aim at ridiculing the idea that international relationships are more genteel after the defeat of the French emperor. The boxing match between the Russian Emperor and the British Regent becomes grotesque and ‘Georgy’’s beating is thoroughly described. Boxing therefore serves as a metaphor for the hypocrisy of European powers in the so-called ‘Concert of Europe’. For Moore, in spite of all the congresses and of all the declarations that suggest that international diplomacy is now based on gentlemen’s agreements, the law of the strongest remains the only valid rule. By exploiting the ambiguities of boxing, which could be perceived as war continued by other, and more civilised means, Moore lampoons the diplomatic failures of the British government at Aix-la-Chapelle, as the Russians managed to impose their views on a softer treatment of France.

The ambiguities of boxing after the Tory backlash following Waterloo were also pondered by William Hazlitt in two essays published in *the New Monthly Magazine* in 1822 and 1825.14 In the essay entitled ‘The Fight’, Hazlitt explains how he attended a boxing match with a Friend and tries to reconcile his love for the manly entertainment with his sentimentality and his political sympathies by showing that one can paradoxically enjoy both a boxing match and reading Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse*, as boxing is, all in all, less violent than love:

> Ladies! it is to you I dedicate this description; nor let it seem out of character for the fair to notice the exploits of the brave. Courage and modesty are the old English virtues; and may they never look cold and askance on one another! Think, ye fairest of the fair, loveliest of the lovely kind, ye practisers of soft enchantment, how many more ye kill with poisoned baits than ever fell in the ring; and listen with subdued air and without shuddering, to a tale tragic only in appearance, and sacred to the Fancy! (Hazlitt, ‘The Fight’, 1)

Hazlitt describes the fight as if it were an epic battle that Dante could have evoked, and constantly compares pugilists to knights rather than contemporary soldiers. As David Higgins wrote, ‘Hazlitt is trying to find an ideal of masculine Englishness that can contain his Jacobinical political views and the confessional writing with which they were associated’ while being wary of ‘pugilism's association with the crudest nationalism and monarchism’.15

A few years later, Hazlitt dedicated an essay to the entertainments of the English people, and once again elaborated on boxing. According to the writer, it is an English national sport, but not because it creates gentlemanly soldiers ready to fight and die for King and country, but rather because it embodies what he considers as the contradictions of the national character:

> [...]they [the English] have that sort of intermittent, fitful, irregular gaiety, which is neither worn out by habit, nor deadened by passion, but is sought with avidity as it takes the mind by surprise, is startled by a sense of oddity

> and incongruity, indulges its wayward humours or lively impulses, with perfect freedom and lightness of heart, and seizes occasion by the forelock, that it may return to serious business with more cheerfulness, and have something to beguile the hours of thought or sadness. I do not see how there can be high spirits without low ones; and every thing has its price according to circumstances (William Hazlitt, 'Merry England', 16).

Boxing, with its winners and losers, its codes and its brutal violence, its public made of ruffians and gentlemen, mirrors the ambivalence of British sociability in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The debates around boxing bear witness to the role it played, along with other sports and leisure amusements, in the redefinition of the national character during the revolutionary decade. Enmeshed in discourses on refinement and polite culture, modern consumerism, the amusements of the lower orders and increasing Gallophobia, the debated values of boxing reflected the effects of a rapidly changing culture on the perceptions and representations of the British character.

1. Rules to be observed on all battles of the stage, 1743.

2. '[…] but never let Britons be ashamed of science;– yes A SCIENCE that not only adds generosity to their disposition – humanity to their conduct – but courage to their national character.' Pierce Egan, Boxiana; or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Puglism, vol. 1 (London, Sherwood, Jones and Co., 1823 [1812]), p. 2.

3. Hampshire Chronicle, 21 January 1788.

4. The Scots Magazine, 01 March 1789.

5. See Daniel O'Quinn, 'In the Face of Difference: Molineaux, Crib, and the Violence of the Fancy', in Race, Romanticism, and the Atlantic, ed. Paul Youngquist (Surrey: Ashgate 2013), pp. 213-235.

6. Edward Barry, A Letter on the Practice of Boxing (London: A. Grant, 1789), p.28.

7. 'Boxing and Bull-Baiting', The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1802, vol. VI (London: Ridgway, 1803), p.151.

8. Cobbett's Political Register, vol. VIII. From July to December 1805 (London: Cox and Baylis), p. 201.

9. David Snowdon, 'Drama Boxiana: Spectacle and Theatricality in Pierce Egan's Pugilistic Writing', Romanticism on the Net, Number 46, May 2007.

10. Pierce Egan, Boxiana, vol.1 (London: C. Baynes, 1830), p. iv, v.

11. 'To your Lordship, who has gloriously contributed in person to earn the most splendid laurels for England, it mus be well known, that no soldiers or sailors, from one end of the globe to the other, show so much mercy to a fallen foe as the British; and I hope, my Lord, it is not too much to infer, that they owe that "doubly blessed" quality to their early acquaintance with the Ring, the principle of which is not to strike an opponent when he is down.' Pierce Egan, Boxiana, vol. 3 (London, G. Virtue, 1829 [1821]), p. vi.

12. Anonymous [Thomas Moore], Tom Crib's Memorial to Congress. With a Preface, Notes, and Appendix. By One of the Fancy (London, 1819).

13. Moore clearly shows in his satire that he had read Egan, yet he ironically mentions his proximity with the 'Millenarians of the Holy League', i.e. the allied monarchies that defeated Napoleon

14. William Hazlitt, 'The Fight'[1822], and 'Merry England' [1825], in A. R. Waller and Arnold Glovers (eds), The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, vol. 12, (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1904), pp. 1-26.

15. David Higgins, 'Englishness, Effeminacy, and the New Monthly Magazine: Hazlitt's 'The Fight' in Context', Romanticism (vol. 10, n° 2 (2004)), p. 186.

Citer cet article

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