

# The Last Duel: A True Story of Crime, Scandal, and Trial by Combat in Medieval France

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As the huge crowd seethed with pent-up excitement, the two deadly enemies studied each other intently, their breath hot behind their visors. Each sought the other's death as fire and water seek each other's annihilation. The walled field, at first a prison, now became a crucible where one man would be destroyed and the other purged in the name of justice. They would fight not only without quarter, but also without rules. And a horrible fate awaited the lady if her husband should lose . . .

The gripping, atmospheric true story of the "duel to end all duels" in medieval France: a trial by combat pitting a knight against a squire accused of violating the knight's beautiful young wife

In 1386, a few days after Christmas, a huge crowd gathers at a Paris monastery to watch the two men fight a duel to the death meant to "prove" which man's cause is right in God's sight. The dramatic true story of the knight, the squire, and the lady unfolds during the devastating Hundred Years War between France and England, as enemy troops pillage the land, madness haunts the French court, the Great Schism splits the Church, Muslim armies threaten Christendom, and rebellion, treachery, and plague turn the lives of all into toys of Fortune.

At the heart of the tale is Jean de Carrouges, a Norman knight who returns from combat in Scotland to find his wife, Marguerite, accusing Jacques LeGris, her husband's old friend and fellow courtier, of brutally raping her. The knight takes his case before the teenage King Charles VI, the highest judge in France. Amid LeGris's vociferous claims of innocence and doubts about the now pregnant Marguerite's charges (and about the paternity of her child), the deadlocked court decrees a "trial by combat" that leaves her fate, too, in the balance. For if her husband and champion loses the duel, she will be put to death as a false accuser.

Carrouges and LeGris, in full armor, eventually meet on a walled field in Paris before a massive crowd that includes the king and many nobles of the realm. A fierce fight on horseback and then on foot ensues during which both combatants suffer wounds-but only one fatal. The violent and tragic episode was notorious in its own time because of the nature of the alleged crime, the legal impasse it provoked, and the resulting trial by combat, an ancient but increasingly suspect institution that was thereafter abolished. Based on extensive research in Normandy and Paris, *The Last Duel* brings to life a colorful, turbulent age and three unforgettable characters caught in a fatal triangle of crime, scandal, and revenge. It is at once a moving human drama, a captivating detective story, and an engrossing work of historical intrigue.

ERIC JAGER holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and has also taught at Columbia University. An award-winning professor of English at UCLA, he is the author of two previous books, including *The Book of the Heart* (a study of heart imagery in medieval literature) and numerous articles for acclaimed academic journals. He lives in Los Angeles.

1

Carrouges

In the fourteenth century it took several months for knights and pilgrims to travel from Paris

or Rome to the Holy Land, and a year or more for friars and traders to journey across Europe and all the way to China along the Silk Road. Asia, Africa, and the still-undiscovered Americas had not yet been colonized by Europeans. And Europe itself had been nearly conquered by Muslim horsemen, who stormed out of Arabia in the seventh century, sailed from Africa to capture Sicily and Spain, and crossed swords with Christians as far north as Tours, France, before being turned back. By the fourteenth century, Christendom had faced the Muslim threat for more than six hundred years, launching repeated crusades against the infidel.

When not united against its common foe, Christendom was often at war with itself. The kings and queens of Europe, a large extended family of brothers and sisters and intermarried cousins, squabbled and fought with one another continually over thrones and territory. The frequent wars among Europe's feuding monarchs reduced towns and farmland to smoking ruins, killed or starved the people, and left rulers with huge debts that they paid by raising taxes, debasing the coinage, or simply seizing the wealth of convenient victims like Jews.

At the center of Europe lay the Kingdom of France, a vast realm that took twenty-two days to cross from north to south, and sixteen days from east to west. France, the forge of feudalism, had endured for nearly ten centuries. Founded amid the ruins of Roman Gaul in the fifth century, it had been Charlemagne's fortress against Islamic Spain in the ninth, and it was Europe's richest, most powerful nation at the start of the fourteenth. But within a few decades Fortune had turned against France, and the nation was now desperately fighting for its survival.

In 1339 the English crossed the Channel and invaded France, beginning the long, ruinous conflict that would be known as the Hundred Years' War. After cutting down the flower of French chivalry at Crecy in 1346, the English captured Calais. A decade later at Poitiers, amid another great slaughter of French knights, the English seized King Jean and took him to London, releasing their royal prisoner only in exchange for vast French territories, many noble hostages, and promises to pay a colossal ransom of three million gold  $\text{cus}$ .

Stunned by the loss of its king and what it cost to buy him back, France fell into civil war. Rebellious nobles betrayed King Jean and joined with the English invaders, peasants enraged by new taxes rose up to murder their lords, and the volatile citizens of Paris split into feuding factions and butchered one another in the streets. Chronic droughts and crop failures added to the misery of the people. And the Great Plague that carried off a third of Europe in 1348-49, leaving unburied corpses scattered over fields and stacked in the streets, kept returning every decade or so for another grim harvest.

As Death stalked the land, pictured by artists of the time as a shrouded skeleton wielding a great scythe, and as black warning flags flew from belfries in plague-stricken villages, God Himself seemed to have abandoned France. When the Great Schism shook Europe in 1378, dividing Christendom into two warring camps led by rival popes in Rome and Avignon, the Roman pope blessed England's cruel and mercenary war of conquest in France, as English clerics preached a new "crusade" and sold indulgences to finance the slaughter of

French "heretics."

Conquering English armies were followed into France by criminals and outlaws from all over Europe, bands of savage men known as routiers, or "the scourge of God," who roamed the countryside looting towns and villages and extorting tribute from the terrorized people. Amid the violence and the anarchy, France threw itself into a frenzy of fortification. Frightened villagers built earthen walls and dug defensive ditches. Desperate farmers surrounded their houses and barns with stone towers and water-filled moats. Towns and monasteries raised and thickened their walls. Churches were fortified until they resembled castles.

The bloodlust of war and the crusading spirit kindled by the Great Schism led to many atrocities. Not even nunneries were sacred. In July 1380 English troops mounted a brutal raid on Brittany during which they "stormed a convent and raped and tortured the nuns, carrying off some of the unfortunate women to amuse them for the rest of the raid." In the autumn of 1380 King Charles V died, leaving the realm to his eleven-year-old son, Charles VI. France was then just two-thirds its modern size and less a unified nation than a loose patchwork of separate fiefdoms. Large territories were held by the young king's five jealous uncles, who had been appointed regents during his minority; others were occupied by enemy troops. Burgundy belonged to Philip the Bold, the most powerful royal uncle and founder of a dynasty that soon would rival France itself. Anjou belonged to another royal uncle, Duke Louis. Provence was a separate county, not yet part of France, and parts of Guyenne were held by the English. Brittany was a nearly independent dukedom, while Normandy was also infested by the English, who used it to launch raids on the rest of France, recruiting many renegade Normans to their cause. The strategic port of Calais, long an English stronghold bristling with men and arms, was pointed like a dagger at the nation's heart, Paris.

Surrounded by rivals and enemies, the boy-king in theory ruled over about ten million people. His subjects belonged to three main estates or social classes--warriors, priests, and laborers, or "those who fight, those who pray, and those who work." The vast majority were laborers, some of whom lived in towns where they kept shops, but most of whom were peasants or villeins, farming the manorial estates of their local lords or seigneurs. In exchange for protection in time of war and a strip of land for their own use, they plowed and harvested their lord's fields, cut firewood for his hearth, and yielded up shares of produce and livestock. Bound to the land from birth, they spoke local dialects, lived by provincial customs, and had next to no sense of national identity.

As the peasant served his lord, so the lord in turn served his overlord. The minor lord might be a knight holding a fief or two, the greater lord a count or a duke with many fiefs--lands held in exchange for service. A vassal--any man sworn to serve another--bound himself to his lord by the act of homage and the oath of fealty.\* The vassal knelt with his hands clasped between his lord's, saying, "Lord, I become your man." Then he rose, received a kiss on the mouth, and swore to serve his lord for life. These rituals cemented the mutual bonds holding society together.

The lifelong bond between lord and vassal was based chiefly on land. As feudal law decreed, "No lord without land; no land without a lord." Land yielded life-sustaining crops as well as lucrative rents, in either coin or kind, along with levies of mail-fisted knights and men-at-arms. Land was thus the feudal nobility's main source of wealth, power, and prestige--and the most enduring thing a man could pass down, with the family name, to his heirs. Valuable and coveted, land was also the cause of many quarrels and deadly feuds. Nowhere did men fight over land more fiercely than in Normandy, a bloody crossroads of war since antiquity. The Celts had fought the Romans there; the Romans, the Franks; and the Franks, the Vikings, before the French and the English clashed there during the Hundred Years' War. The Vikings--or Northmen, Normanni--had eventually settled, taking Frankish land and wives and turning themselves into French-speaking Normans. The dukes of Normandy, a line founded in 911, became vassals to the kings of France.

In 1066 Duke William of Normandy crossed the Channel with an army of knights, fought and defeated King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, crowned himself king of England, and became known to history as William the Conqueror. As king of England, the Duke of Normandy now rivaled the king of France. For the next century and a half Normandy, with its prosperous towns and wealthy monasteries, remained a possession of the English crown.

In the early 1200s the king of France won most of Normandy back from the king of England in a hard-fought campaign. But English kings, being of Norman blood, still dreamed of Normandy. And many of Normandy's great families, Normans before they were French, kept an opportunistic eye toward England, always sniffing the air for winds of change.

When the Hundred Years' War began, and the English started reconquering Normandy, many Norman nobles betrayed the French king and allied themselves with the English invaders.

The loyal Normans who swore fealty to the young King Charles in 1380 included an old noble family by the name of Carrouges. Sir Jean de Carrouges III, by then in his sixties, had come of age near the start of the Hundred Years' War and fought in many campaigns against the English. The knight was a vassal to the Count of Perche, who had appointed him the military captain of Bellême, an important and coveted castle. He was also Viscount of Bellême, the king's local official--equivalent to an English shire reeve, or sheriff. In 1364 he had helped raise money for King Jean's ransom. The respected knight was married to Nicole de Buchard, a well-born lady with whom he had at least three children. The family's ancestral home was the fortified hilltop town of Carrouges, about fifteen miles northwest of Alençon.

According to legend, the Carrouges line was born of blood and violence. One story tells of an ancestor named Count Ralph who fell in love with a sorceress and kept trysts with her near a fountain in a forest glade, until one night his jealous wife surprised the two lovers there with a dagger. The...

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homônima de Ridley Scott para o cinema, estrelada por Jodie Comer, Ben Affleck, Matt Damon e Adam Driver. No século XIV, em plena Guerra dos Cem Anos entre França e Inglaterra, Jean de Carrouges, um cavaleiro normando recém-chegado das batalhas na Escócia, volta para casa e se depara com mais uma ameaça mortal. Sua esposa, Marguerite, acusa o escudeiro Jacques Le Gris – um velho amigo e companheiro de corte do cavaleiro – de estupro. Sem saída após Carrouges fazer um apelo formal, o tribunal decreta a realização de um julgamento por combate, o que também coloca o destino de Marguerite à prova. Se seu marido perder o duelo, ela será sentenciada à morte por falso testemunho. Enquanto tropas inimigas pilham o país, a loucura ronda a corte francesa, exércitos islâmicos ameaçam o cristianismo e pragas ceifam a vida de muitos, Carrouges e Le Gris se encontram equipados com suas armaduras em um monastério parisiense, alguns dias depois do Natal, em 1386. O que se segue é o último duelo autorizado pelo Parlamento de Paris, uma luta feroz com lanças, espadas e adagas – diante de uma multidão que incluía o próprio rei Carlos VI, entre outros membros da nobreza – que termina com os dois combatentes feridos, mas apenas um fatalmente. Baseado em ampla pesquisa realizada na Normandia e em Paris, O último duelo é o retrato vívido de uma era turbulenta e de três personagens inesquecíveis presos em um triângulo fatal de crime, escândalo e vingança. Uma narrativa sobre um drama humano comovente, a história real de um delito terrível e um trabalho envolvente sobre intriga histórica cujos temas, mesmo séculos mais tarde, ainda ecoam com força, tanto que baseou a superprodução homônima de Ridley Scott para o cinema, estrelada por Jodie Comer, Ben Affleck, Matt Damon e Adam Driver.

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