

SPACE AND MEDIA STUDIES

Science Versus Size: ‘Science’ as a Key Word in the Newspaper Debate over Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting

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When John Morrissey defeated John Heenan on October 20, 1858, for the ham-knuckle prize fighting Championship of America, he did so, claimed Frank Queen’s weekly journal of sports and theatre, the *New York Clipper* because Morrissey possessed “a thorough knowledge of the science of offence and defence.” The *New York Tribune* on the other hand, railed against the ring’s “show of science,” asserting that scientific pretensions masked sheer brutality. Queen argued that ‘scientific pugilism’ checked the “untutored rage” of fighting; the *Tribune* and other mainstream newspapers saw only the rage.

‘Science’ was a key word in the larger cultural debate over the values of prize fighting, and this paper is a close-textual analysis of how the term was used in the context of coverage of the Morrissey-Heenan bout. In particular, this paper focuses on a ‘chant,’ or ballad, printed in the *Clipper* of November 6, 1858, that was titled “Science Versus Size.”

The ‘chant’ is an interesting development in the ongoing debate for a number of reasons: It makes manifest in print a product of and the values associated with a predominantly oral saloon culture; it delineates the virtue of ‘scientific’ pugilistic training; it goes beyond the traditional arguments of improving recreation to provide a social context that has meaning for the everyday lives of the *Clipper’s* working-class readers, that is, the physical setting of the ballad’s action is a saloon brawl, and, most significantly, it serves as what Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* calls a cultural “turnabout” in which the normal hierarchical social order is reversed. In “Science Versus Size,” an upper-class gentleman picks a fight with what he feels is a working-class dandy in order to teach him his proper place in society only to find that he has encountered a “regular Scienced sporting” man. At the end of the ballad, it is the upper-class gentleman who is beaten and who learns a social lesson; and the action ends in triumph for the working-class man who has achieved a true “turnabout.”