

Honor Codes in Modern France

A Historical Anthropology

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Historians have traditionally considered codes of honor as creations of the old regime that did not prosper in modern industrialized society, surviving, at best, as cultural anachronisms in a vestigial aristocracy. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have found ample evidence of honor cultures in contemporary Mediterranean societies, which suggests some continuity with the old regime. This paper investigates the historical transmission of codes of honor from noble to bourgeois culture in the form of the *point d'honneur* governing the duel. This feature of male honorability flourished in France at least until World War One.

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My aim here is to provide an account of the way that male codes of honor have worked to shape and reflect male identity and ideals of masculine behavior in modern France. It is my assumption that masculinity, like most human traits, is primarily a cultural construction that changes over time, not an “essential” or “natural” feature of men. I acknowledge the distinction, therefore, between “sex” and “gender” as an analytically useful one to the historian¹. An important corollary of this assumption is the recognition that within these “sex/gender” systems masculinity and femininity are defined conceptually in terms of one another, in the manner of a binary opposition². This feature of sex/gender systems means that individuals in a society governed by such a system will usually define the “other” sex in either “opposite” or “complementary” terms. Changes in the meaning of one term will therefore provoke adjustments in the other, producing moments of crisis and cultural negotiation of interest to the historian. The focus of this paper is on masculinity, but, as we shall see, a reciprocal femininity is seldom far from view as an actively influential aspect of masculine “nature”.

The question I wish to pose is how were codes of honor that were fashioned in the martial

and hierarchical social order of the old regime transformed into components of urban, commercial, bourgeois civilization? The assumption that informs this question is that honor codes survived the abolition of feudalism and the birth of a new political order in 1789. While they did not survive the Revolution with all their forms and functions intact, codes of honor helped shape the behavior and ideals of upper and middle-class French men well into the twentieth century. I am particularly interested here in the duel, which was governed, both in the old regime and the post-Revolutionary era, by the rules of the so-called *point d'honneur*. It is my contention that dueling rituals were an intrinsic part of the prevalent male honor code and may thus provide important insights into the scope and function of those codes in historical societies.

Anthropologists have long recognized the role of such codes in their treatments of Mediterranean societies regulated by “honor and shame” (Campbell 1964; Gilmore 1987; Pitt-Rivers 1961). The functions of honor and shame are many, but they operate primarily to regulate the relations between the sexes, families, and clans, to distribute prestige (and therefore status) among them, and, finally, to

promote social cohesion through the "shaming" of individuals who forfeit their honor by failing to respond when it is challenged (Gilmore 1987; Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 1–27). On the more positive side, Pitt-Rivers has argued that honor provides "a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them" (Pitt-Rivers 1977: 36; Campbell 1964: 274–91).

In "honor and shame" societies, men are the "active" and women the "passive" principle. Both sexes are attributed a measure of honor at adolescence, but women's honor is primarily sexual in nature and consists first of her virginity and later her strict marital fidelity. Women can only lose their honor, but men are permitted to accrue to their honor in the "public" realm by seeking glory and distinction. Men, however, may also lose their honor in a variety of ways, suffering a kind of "annihilation" and social death. They might act in a cowardly or fearful manner, commit civil crimes, break a betrothal, engage in unprovoked violence, or fail to oversee and protect the honor of the women of their family. This list is only partial, and the extraordinary subtlety of the discriminations in attributions of honor and shame may only be suggested here.

For my purposes it is of particular interest that the honorable man aspires to a manliness that "subsumes both shame and masculinity" (Peristiany 1961: 22). A man's masculine sexual identity, and, by implication, his sexual behavior, is thus a key element in his social identity as a man of honor and legitimizes his claims to the worldly honors he may have won. A man whose wife cuckolds him is assumed to be lacking the usual marital authority because he is in some sense deficient as a man. Various insults in rural Andalusia locate willpower in the genitals, and there is a widespread fear in "honor and shame" societies of impotence³. Effeminacy is deplored, and is invariably linked to cowardice, both of which are incompatible with masculine honor. The irony of male authority in such societies is that the considerable power males possess by virtue of their masculinity is of a fragile sort, is open to con-

stant challenge, and produces keen feelings of vulnerability in men.

I do not wish to argue here that one may directly apply the anthropological concepts of "honor and shame" to an understanding of historical societies in which honor codes played an important role; these modern Mediterranean societies and the codes that regulate them are themselves the product of a long historical evolution⁴. But there are some features of these concepts that I believe offer rich interpretive possibilities to the historian. The chief benefit may be that since honor provides a crucial connection between sexual and social identity, the historian may get a better fix on how men have related to and judged other men *and* on male-female relations, because a single system of honor regulates both. I rely on the fact that in these "honor-shame" systems, rules of behavior, sanctions, and rewards must be public to be effective; they are thus visible to all, including the historian (Speier 1969: 37–9; Pitt-Rivers 1968: 510).

If we now have a general idea how honor *works*, we yet need to understand how honor codes *evolved* historically in early modern France up to 1789, when the modern history of these codes begins. The etymological dictionaries give us an excellent sense of the changes of meaning in "honor" over the sweep of the centuries. In the era prior to the fifteenth century, "honneur", in its ancient spelling, signified the feudal possessions, fiefs or benefices possessed by a noble man. The reverence or respect he enjoyed in the world depended on these "marks and attributes of his dignity" (Godefroy 1885: 224–5). A man's wife was one of these possessions, and the term appears to have acknowledged her only in that capacity.

By the Sixteenth century the term attaches more closely to the noble individual himself, to his reputation, beauty, and personal character. It was a "natural" quality of *noblesse*, however, because it slipped away from those who sought it, while adhering to those who appeared least concerned with it (Huguet 1980: 497–8). By this time the words "honte" and "honteux" have developed from the same root, meaning, essentially, "modest" or "chaste" and applying,

in this form, to women as individuals for the first time. It is clear that *honneur/honte* have not yet been organized as a binary. The Littré of 1863, drawing its examples from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, recognizes "honor" as applying wholly to personal characteristics, including virtue, courage, and the desire for distinction, terms reflecting aristocratic preoccupations. The *point d'honneur*, which governed personal combat, resolved disputes pertaining to the possession of these qualities. The obligation for a man to defend a woman's chastity is maintained, and "honor" and "shame" have now become a binary, the latter meaning "dishonor", "humiliation", or the fear of that condition, and applying now to men as well as women (Littré 1863: 2040–5).

Modern usages drawn from the period after 1800 acknowledge decisively the rise of bourgeois society. Honor now refers to the "sentiment one has of one's moral dignity as it depends on the consideration of others", and usages denoting notions of contractual or personal integrity now fall within the range of the term: thus, "*parole d'honneur*" dates from 1806, and "*sur l'honneur*" from 1835 (Grand Larousse 1973: 2449–2450). "Honte" is not simply the mere absence of honor, its negation, but a quality in itself inviting "disdain, scorn, mockery, dishonor ... indignation". It is a "bitter sentiment of weakness, indignity, baseness according to one's own conscience and in the eyes of others".

There are several themes of interest here. First, the etymological evolution reveals that honor became an increasingly important feature of *individual* identity. Secondly, the content of honor became more clearly moralistic in nature without altogether breaking its ties with the martial virtues of strength and courage. Thirdly, the *male* members of the bourgeoisie have gained the capacity to possess honor, and to lose it, though this privilege is still denied to women. It is my argument here that the history of these usages argues strongly against the notion that honor in the modern world is merely a survival of the old regime, and that it weakened gradually in the nineteenth century as the power and numbers of the aristocracy declined, whether in France

or elsewhere⁵. We must instead consider the likelihood that honor was transformed to suit the needs and functions of the new social order, while exerting, as a body of beliefs and practices, an influence over its possessors that ensured the vitality of much of its traditional *ethos*.

Honor was the most important concept to have survived the decline of medieval chivalry in the fifteenth century. Chivalry emphasized military valor and courage to a high degree, but it also cherished virtue, which comprised charity and protection of the weak (including women). Indeed, all these qualities were privileged over noble birth, because the chivalrous man did not rest on his laurels but acted incessantly in behalf of honor (Keen 1984: 249–53). The foremost *practices* of honor, where honorable behavior was ritualized and dramatized for the edification of all, were the tournament, which replaced the bloody *melee* in the fourteenth century, the various ordeals, including trial by battle, and the elaborate etiquette of courtly love.

There is a considerable historical literature devoted to these practices and their influence on the primacy of honor. Keen appears to favor the tournament as the primary influence, but most commentators prefer to focus on the *duel judiciaire* as the *ur-ritual* in the emergence of the concept of personal honor (Morel 1964; Kiernan 1988; Billacois 1986). The so-called "ordeal by battle" was a literal judgement of guilt or innocence in a matter of difference between two noble individuals. It was highly ritualized, often presided over by prince or monarch, and was initially favored by the church as a secular representation of divine justice. Unless the monarch intervened, such combats were usually to the death, with the presumption of innocence falling to the victor, no matter how weak his case or how much stronger his skill at arms.

Resistance by the church to the trial by ordeal, and a growing sensitivity to its contradictions gradually ended the public legal status of such proceedings in the fifteenth century. But in France the combats themselves persisted as *private* duels of honor presided over by the King, not in his capacity as first *magistrate*,

but as first *gentleman* of the realm. These combats were apparently as bloody as before, but they differed in recognizing no winners or losers, attributing no innocence or guilt. Instead, such occasions put a premium on a display of valor and prowess in weapons; the blood that was shed was said to “wash” the stain of an affront from the insulted man, and the charge of having lied from his accuser. In the last of such bastard combats presided over by a French monarch, that of the *sieurs* Jarnac and La Chataigneraye in 1547, the latter was killed, but was judged to have preserved his honor (Billacois 1986: 89)⁶.

For the balance of the sixteenth century, and until the reign of Louis XIV began, the duel became what Billacois has called (borrowing the phrase from Marcel Mauss) a “total social phenomenon”: an institution, a criterion of social differentiation, a political manifestation, an esthetic, and a desacralized religious ritual (Billacois 1986: 7). It was a kind of “touchstone” which expressed the multiple significations of the system of honor that regulated social relations and distributed power within the French nobility. This phenomenon coincided with the religious civil wars, which divided Protestant and Catholic nobles, and with a rapid period of growth in the centralized monarchy, which promoted further cleavages by pitting aristocratic clients of the King against defenders of regional or local autonomy.

The grid of personal loyalties that developed in this era was predictably complicated and unstable, and alliances were unusually ephemeral. Kristen Neuschel has argued convincingly that the system of honor that undergirded these alliances made of each man a power unto himself, so that any claim to political autonomy was made “by virtue of their personal identity” (Neuschel 1989: 15–7). If one man swore loyalty to the cause of another, his steadfastness was dependent not so much on the fortunes of the other’s cause, or his skill as a leader, as on his patron’s formal and personal demonstrations of gratitude and appreciations of his client’s dignity and independence. In her words, “Some of the events of great significance to nobles were seemingly trivial

moments of personal insult or self-aggrandizement. The importance attached to such incidents was, in turn, simply one expression of a general tendency to weight moments of action – personal arguments, triumph in battle, and other incidents of honor and shame – as the building blocks of political life” (Neuschel 1989: 18).

Both Billacois and Neuschel emphasize the fact that in this largely oral culture, gestures, formulas of polite expression, and active displays of generosity and hospitality were burdened with such a heavy political significance that no action escaped scrutiny and no affront, real or imagined, went unchallenged (Neuschel 1989: 197–208; Billacois 1986: 218–9). Political alliances, even those reinforced by the solidarity of co-religionnaires, foundered with ridiculous ease, and duels between gentlemen became universal.

The situation was further complicated by the campaign of the French crown to limit the political and juridical authority of the regional nobility, a campaign that reached a successful conclusion only in the reign of Louis XIV. Richelieu and his successors issued a series of edicts punishing the duel, which they rightly took to be an expression of the nobles’ symbolic flouting of the crown’s claim to a monopoly of violence⁷. These were largely ignored, despite the willingness of the crown to carry out the death sentence. Billacois explains aristocratic attachment to the duel in the face of this repression as a contradiction between the “situation” of the nobles, who were at the summit of society, “but who felt themselves to be strangers there. The recourse to the duel was thus for them a return to a state of nature, a nature that was both edenic and conflict-ridden...” (Billacois 1986: 209).

Though illegal, the duel was not uniformly prosecuted and pardons were frequent. Estimates of duels and dueling fatalities are thus educated guesses pieced together from contemporary observations. The highest figures suggest as many as 10,000 deaths occurred between 1589–1610 in affairs of honor (Billacois 1986: 114–22). By the seventeenth century there were a number of printed dueling codes and a body of accepted procedures for regu-

lating duels that participants believed to have the force of law. Transgressions of these codes became the source of challenges by interested parties who regarded themselves to be enforcing a legal right. The crown reinforced this belief in turn by only prosecuting those who violated the "law" of the *point d'honneur* (Cuénin 1982: 30, 60).

Though a nobleman who engaged in a duel was defending his personal identity, *his* claims to independence, he was simultaneously defending a collective monopoly of his class. The duel operated effectively as a barrier to social intrusions from below, at least until the eighteenth century. But the criterion for entitlement to duel was not simply noble *race*. Nobles themselves rarely insisted on this criterion; they stressed instead the requisite qualities of character, life-long familiarity with arms and military service (Schalk 1986: xiv). Bourgeois commentary on the duel wavered between a putative disgust and open fascination. The *mentalité* of bourgeois jurists disposed them to applaud any trend toward less bloody combats, and to exploit the growing legalism of the duel as a means of bringing it under state control. Billacois argues that Pascal's disgust at the bloody prodigality of the duel is further proof of this *mentalité*, since he was, "In the middle class manner, in favor of economies and opposed to all waste" (Billacois 1986: 239).

By the eighteenth century there existed fully articulated rival aristocratic and bourgeois discourses that celebrated and condemned the duel and the system of honor of which it was the symbol. Montesquieu was the principal apologist for an aristocratic monarchy in which "Honor sets in motion all the parts of the political system; it links them through its action so that each contributes to the common good, while believing to follow his particular interests" (Montesquieu 1973 vol I: 32). By pursuing glory in war, seeking offices and preferences in peace, and defending personal honor in private life, the nobleman both animated the state and regulated the civil society of the old regime.

It was customary for bourgeois critics of the feudal order to oppose the idea of honor to that of virtue, which evoked for many of them both

the grandeur of the classical republic *and* the virtuous bourgeois, "who was a worker and useful to the nation" (Pappas 1982: 35). Rousseau became the spokesman for and the personal exemplar of virtue in the last quarter of the century. Under the aegis of Jean-Jacques, the concept of virtue took on a moralizing signification, the better to contrast it with the heartless and licentious personal behavior of kings and aristocrats (Blum 1986: 25–7). A chief complaint of those attracted to this outlook was the "scandal" of the *point d'honneur*, which was "regarded by enlightened spirits as one of the worst running sores of *féodalité*..." (Kelly 1980: 241; Pappas 1982: 38–40; Kiernan 1988: 155–171).

Despite this apparently one-sided rhetoric on honor and the duel, most rich bourgeois seemed bent on living nobly. They abandoned "dishonorable" trades, bought fiefdoms and ennobling offices, and they (or their sons) took up the sword and the responsibilities this entailed (Lucas 1976). The dueling rate had certainly declined from its height in the first third of the seventeenth century, but there is evidence that the practice was ramifying within the non-noble elite and even spreading to lower domains (Kelly 1980: 240; Cuénin 1982: 227–40; Billacois 1986: 243–45). It seems clear that social promotion and the acquisition of honor were closely related in an era when the crown was unusually dependent on the sale of patents of nobility and ennobling offices for its income.

In the last decades of the century there was a more or less concerted effort to find a legal definition that would distinguish noble from non-noble, in order to preserve the rights and privileges that much of the elite perceived to be under attack. Ironically, robe nobles, particularly those in the magistracy or the *parlements*, were often the most vigorous in behalf of this cause. They argued for a reversal of the traditional formula in which virtue achieved nobility, so that nobility, particularly inherited nobility, brought virtue, not the other way around (Schalk 1986: 117). This strategy had the disadvantage, however, of making honor more vulnerable to attacks from proponents of virtue. In the radical phase of the French Revo-

lution it was commonplace for writers like Mercier to contrast the principle of "public virtue" with the "feudal concept of honor", or for Robespierre to proclaim a new regime "where distinctions arise only from equality itself. In our country, we wish to substitute morality for egoism, probity for honor, principles for conventions, duties for propriety, the role of reason for the tyranny of fashion" (Blum 1986: 144; Hampson in Foot 1973: 209 and Lucas 1988: 134–6).

Shifts in discourse of this suddenness have been offered as proof that the French Revolution reflected (or produced) decisive historical ruptures in cultural systems and the meanings of their linguistic constituents. This is a position often identified with Michel Foucault, who has done studies that date important epistemological breaks at the Revolution – *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Nye 1984: 10–15). The fact that dueling virtually disappeared during the decade of the 1790's lends even greater credence to the notion that the Revolution erased the aristocratic ideal of honor and replaced it with a Robespierriest concept of austere political virtue (Kelly 1980: 251–253; Best 1980: 18–36). But neither the duel nor honor disappeared. Both underwent changes that adapted them more smoothly to the requirements of bourgeois society. These changes, moreover, had long been underway in France; the Revolution simply gave them an institutional and legal environment in which they could prosper.

It will be helpful at this point to consider the historical evolution of bourgeois sensibility in broad perspective. A very useful starting-place is Norbert Elias' remarkable *The Civilizing Process*. Elias' masterwork is an ambitious effort to apply the phylogenetic "law" of evolutionary biology to an account of European social evolution since the late middle ages. The relentlessly deterministic qualities of Elias' work are not to everyone's taste, but it offers a schematic picture of the interaction between social and psychic structures that stresses the importance of codes of politeness and courtesy. Elias maintains that an analysis of handbooks on courtesy and manners published since the

Renaissance reveals a historical advance of the "threshold of shame", in that readers are enjoined to behave at table more decorously, confine spitting and nose-blowing to private moments, and speak in polite formulas designed to put companions at ease (Elias 1978: 84–160).

Elias explains the advance of this shame threshold as a product of enhanced "drive-control" in individuals whose social aspirations required them to adjust their behavior to the standards of "good" society. This desire for distinction also operated socially by propelling the uppermost aristocratic layers of society to higher and higher levels of refinement in manners in order to separate themselves from the vulgar layers beneath. The latter historical stages of this process took place in court society, Elias argues, where leisured nobles competed for preferences from all-powerful monarchs (Elias 1983). The model, of course, for this court society was the Versailles of the "sun king", who had forced the once-rebellious French nobility into orbits that obeyed the laws of his own gravitational field.

This state-building process was a crucial stage in the evolution of the sentiment of shame, which first arose, according to Elias, as a natural human response to the persistent threat of physical violence common in pre-modern societies. Honor might have been the name given to the efforts men made to defend themselves and keep shame at bay. As the state gained a monopoly on the exercise of violence, the diminished threat to personal security encouraged the internalization of shame, so that violent impulses were progressively regulated and repressed by a social superego rather than exploding in bloody rituals, executions, personal combat, and the like (Elias 1982: 292–300).

The bourgeoisie acquired its distinctive sensibility as a consequence of two things. First, out of a desire for social advancement bourgeois individuals emulated the manners and comportment of the aristocratic strata within the scope of their ambition. They thus contributed to the upward spiral of refinement in manners until the Revolution destroyed the court and hence the motor for the whole process. Elias holds it was this historical interpen-

etration that made the French bourgeoisie unique, because it allowed them to continue "the models, the drive-patterns, and the forms of conduct of the courtly phase more undeviatingly than any other bourgeois class in Europe" (Elias 1982: 319).

Elias lays great stress on the assimilation of aristocratic manners by bourgeois *milieux*. He does, however, acknowledge a second mechanism that distinguishes them from the *noblesse*, and which divides their social world up into separate "professional" and "private" spheres. As he explains it:

"In courtly society, and partly in English society too, this division of human existence into professional and private spheres does not exist. As the split becomes more general a new phase begins in the civilizing process; the pattern of drive control that professional work necessitates is distinct in many respects from that imposed by the function of courtier and the game of courtly life. The exertion required by the maintenance of bourgeois social existence, the stability of the super-ego functions, the intensity of the drive control and drive-transformation demanded by bourgeois professional and commercial functions, are in sum considerably greater, despite a certain relaxation in the sphere of social manners, than the corresponding social personality structure required by the life of a courtly aristocrat" (Elias 1982: 307).

This is, in general, a very useful analysis of the French bourgeoisie because it recognizes that two overlapping processes were at work in shaping the *mentalité* of its members. The first of these may have generated the nostalgia for the manners and usages of an aristocratic way of life that has continued to stir the imagination of a substantial portion of the French middle classes since the Revolution. Since dueling and the *point d'honneur* were a firmly-established tradition of the old regime nobility, their later emulation by middle-class men should not surprise us. Thus the growth of interest in the duel in the second half of the nineteenth century does not exactly meet the criterion of A. J. Hobsbawm's "invention of tradition", be-

cause this tradition, for one, had never truly died (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The second process, which encouraged members of the bourgeoisie to place a high premium on self-control and the regulation of instinct, helped make bourgeois sociability unusually tense and complicated, notwithstanding the generally democratic attitude that prevailed toward participation in its rituals.

There are two things the historian encounters on examining the forms of male bourgeois social relations. First, codes of honor had a clear impact on the forms of *politesse* observed by upper class men in settings varying from the public arena of politics to the private social circle. Secondly, honor codes provided the usages to follow when conflicts arose between men over breaches of polite form or more serious matters. The duel that sometimes resulted played a complex role in male society, serving as *exemplum*, a symbol of solidarity, and as a marker on the boundaries of social cleavages. Evaluations of honorability allowed bourgeois men to discipline the unscrupulous or the wayward and present a solid image to their clients and to the rest of respectable society.

In all these matters the criterion of honorability played both an inclusive and exclusionary role. The presumption of honor allowed a man full relations of equality with his peers, but there were formidable barriers placed in the path of a man who was judged to be without this quality, either on account of his humble social origins or, worse, through having forfeited his honor in shameful acts⁸. A man in this latter condition, a jurist wrote in 1890, might "survive yet physically, to his discredit, but he exists no longer for society, because that society will have no dealings with him in the future, nor ask him to do anything of a productive nature" (Worms 1890: 146).

It is hardly necessary to say that the criterion of honor utterly excluded women from all of these venues; for most of the nineteenth century they were barred from the [all-male] professions, the [all-male] clubs and organizations, and, for a longer period, from the arena of political life, where public utterances were credible only to the extent that a man was willing to physically defend them against chal-

lenge. A woman could not trade on her private sexual honor to gain a foothold in the sphere of public life. Though a sexual misstep might tarnish her social reputation, it was the honor of a woman's husband or father that was damaged by her indiscretions.

In the world of bourgeois sociability, a remarkable continuum existed between honorability and the deceptive rigors of male *politesse*. Maurice Agulhon has written that the new bourgeois *cercle* "opposed itself to the [aristocratic] salon as a new form of purely masculine sociability against a sociability that included both men and women" (Agulhon 1977: 52). The bourgeois "circle" proliferated in Paris and the provinces during the Restoration, offering upper-middle class men a setting for discreet conversation, reading, and light recreation. The forms of politeness observed in such settings were in keeping with the social egalitarianism of the new regime. A leading manual of the era proclaimed that in social life, "all men are equal, as in the first article of the civil code" (Raisson 1853: 41; Emeric 1821: 23).

A condition for being admitted to this realm of equality was mastery of a quality of manners beyond the attainments of the masses, but a typical statute for one of these circles also insisted that admission be contingent on a man's prior "honorable existence" and on his willingness to abide by a "most rigorous *politesse* which excludes injurious remarks having the object of wounding the self-esteem or reputation of someone" (Agulhon 1977: 40–43). Thus, the use of respectful forms of address, a care in avoiding certain inflammatory topics, and sensitivity to another man's personal dignity were the ways bourgeois men affirmed their own honorable behavior and acknowledged the honor of other men⁹.

The emphasis placed here on politeness and good form appears to disregard the content of honor, the aspects of character that, after all, made a man honorable. But to look for certain intrinsic qualities in the honorable man is to miss the point that attributions of honor were made about men on the basis of public actions that could be squared with previous observations. Honor was not an ontological essence men possessed by nature; it was attributed in a

process consisting of successive judgements that men made about themselves and others in light of consistency of behavior. One considered whether or not actions corresponded to stated intentions or expectations, and weighed this in turn against one's situation in the world. Sincerity, candor [*franchise*], and loyalty [*loyauté*] were thus the measures of men's honor, and these were measured in words and deeds, for which good form was a convenient if occasionally misleading shorthand (Worms 1890: 15–17; Terrailon 1912; Barthou 1923: 52). There was, in this important respect, a remarkable similarity in the evaluations of honor men made about one another in the old regime and in the modern era.

Inevitably, men were judged by other men to have departed in some way from behavior that was expected of them. If such a judgement was made in public, even if it took the form of an observation rather than a rebuke, the man under scrutiny might have felt his honor had been put in question. He then had three choices: he might ignore his "accuser", thereby risking being judged a coward, a man without honor; he might call his accuser a "liar", an insult that impugned the accuser's honor, thus transferring the decision to take more drastic action to the latter; or he might simply send his card [*cartel*] or his seconds [*temoins*], demanding satisfaction from his antagonist in a duel¹⁰.

The modern duel, as in the old regime, was thus a natural extension of the received forms governing polite male society; it adjudicated disputes arising from breaches of these forms, and "saved" the honor of men who obeyed its rules and acted with courage and *sang-froid*. Arguing from mostly British sources, Michael Curtin has noted that in the era around 1800 "etiquette" books replaced the older tradition of "courtesy" books as primers for the upwardly mobile. In the older genre, aimed largely at masculine readers, "individuals were considered volatile, not vulnerable", while the new genre addressed female audiences, and dealt primarily with domestic arrangements and the comportment of ladies (Curtin 1985: 420–422). Etiquette books appeared in France at about the same time, but the tradition of courtesy books was vigorously maintained in the form of

dueling manuals, suggesting that the lines between male and female society were more sharply drawn there than in England. Moreover, the English duel expired in the 1840's, leaving Englishmen only the courts as a remedy for personal satisfaction (Simpson 1988).

One cannot, however, treat the continuation of the duel in France as a "survival" *tout court*, an "adventitious prop" for an aristocracy out of the mainstream of modern life (Kiernan 1988: 261). Dueling was democratized in the course of the century, so that by the 1880's most bourgeois men had access to the duel if they wished to learn its rituals, a development in keeping with the principle of social equality. This is not to say that the duel did not continue to demarcate class lines, as it had in the old regime. One could refuse to deal with a man who was *indigne* or socially unsuitable without fear so long as one's peers also regarded him as such, but as class barriers became blurred or more easily surmounted in the nineteenth century the pool of honorable men enlarged apace.

A corollary of the belief that the duel was an aristocratic survival is the conviction that dueling declined and finally disappeared, as it did in Britain, because it was shunned by the now-dominant and peace-loving middle classes. One of the problems with the numbers on dueling is the absence of criminal statistics, either from the time of Richelieu to the Revolution, when the duel, though illegal, was sporadically punished, or after the enactment of the Napoleonic code, which did not recognize dueling as a criminal offense. Our best guess is that the number had fallen to about 100 per year in the last years of the old regime, a rate that was maintained into the 1830's, with about a third of these fatal (Chesnais 1981: 126). These numbers may have fallen slightly over the next thirty years, but in the late sixties there was an explosive increase in duels to between 400 and 500 per year. This rate, with some fluctuation, was continued until World War I (Desjardins 1890; Thimm 1896; Tarde 1892). The Elias thesis on the historical decline of brutality is right in one respect: late-century duels were rarely fatal. But the prospect of facing three feet of naked steel or a ball fired from an unrifled pistol was a daunting one, and

must qualify by any measure as a violent encounter.

The bourgeois nature of the modern duel is apparent also from its highly legalistic quality. Though the duel was not illegal under statutory law, there was a considerable nineteenth-century jurisprudence which punished duelers who violated the "laws" of the duel by acts of "disloyalty" or "treachery". The trials that resulted when this occurred clearly reveal that dueling manuals served as the quasi-legal reference books for dueling-ground propriety, and noted duelers and fencing-masters did duty as expert witnesses. Dueling was thus a legally protected domain regulated by private law; public authorities intervened only on appeal. Predictably, from the appearance of the first of the nineteenth-century dueling manuals in 1836 to the last in 1906, there is a gradual growth in their size, in their reliance on precedent and other legal principles, and in the development of an increasingly elaborate protocol, the observance of which protected each dueler from the charge of capricious or disloyal conduct, and thus from prosecution (Chatauvillard 1836; Tavernier 1885; Duverger de Saint Thomas 1887; Letainturier-Fradin 1890; Croabbon 1894; Bibesco and Féry d'Esclands 1900; Bruneau de Laborie 1906). In these duels, honor was declared satisfied if two balls were exchanged at thirty paces, whether or not either man was struck, or, in the case of the *épée* duel, which was by far the most common, if some blood was shed and one of the men was declared to be at a disadvantage.

In effect, men dueled to protect their honor in matters where they could not obtain satisfaction at law, or where the publicity of a trial would reveal unwanted private details, especially in *affaires de coeur*. For example, a new Press law on slander and libel of 1881 set out penalties most men regarded as derisory, inadequate satisfaction for the impugnement of honor and reputation. Frenchmen attacked in the press, Parisians in particular, shunned the courts and flocked to the dueling grounds, where no man was dishonored who showed courage, *sang-froid*, and a thorough knowledge of the code of the duel. In the 1840's the literary critic Jules Janin had argued that the

duel was necessary in civilization because “it makes of each of us a strong and independent power...; it takes up the cause of justice the moment the law abandons it; alone it punishes what the laws are unable to punish, scorn and insult (Bibesco and Féry d’Esclands 1900: 131–2).

The duel prospered in the social and political conditions of the early Third Republic (1870–1914). After twenty years of repression in the Second Empire, the rise in dueling rates reflects the deeper political meaning attached to the duel in this era. The duel served to dramatize and symbolically represent the principal ideological components of Republican ideology – liberty and equality – and therefore helped universalize and popularize the civic virtues of Republicanism (Nye 1990). Any man, no matter what his class or income, could in theory fight a duel, and each man was held fully responsible for his actions. On the other hand, at least in principle, no man could decline to fight with a legitimate challenger at the risk of public shame and ridicule. A world which recognized no social boundaries in the delivery or acceptance of dueling challenges was a male social universe of perfect individualism and equality. Codes of honor have always possessed this radical potential. It was Huizinga who wrote that “the idea of chivalry implied, after all, two ideas... namely that true nobility is based on virtue and that all men are equal” (Huizinga 1954: 63–4).

Cloaked as it might have been in glorious chivalric trappings and a rhetoric of democratic individualism, the modern duel was nonetheless a strategy of social advance like many others. It benefitted fledgling politicians, junior officers, ambitious journalists, and unpublished authors, the most common kind of duelers. This mode of self-promotion was not without its perils. A man had to choose his causes carefully, so as not to die over a trifle or be regarded as a bully. But the popularity of the duel clearly reveals the high social exchange rate in French culture of physical courage and a kind of manliness that celebrated grace under pressure. On his entry into the Académie Française just before the war, Edmond de Rostand praised the glories of French

“panache”, which he called “the modesty of heroism”, in which “to make jokes in the face of danger is the supreme act of politeness, a delicate refusal to yield to the tragic...” (Halkin 1949: 443).

In a sense the duel was a rite of passage, though one of an exclusive kind. It created for its participants a liminal moment when, in the face of possible injury or death, they were suspended between honor and dishonor, depending on how their nerves and luck held out. To live and to have shown *sang-froid* affirmed a kind of corporate male solidarity that built durable bonds, even between antagonists, who, as often as not, clasped hands warmly only moments after trying to cripple or kill one another. But, as Victor Turner has pointed out, the experience of *communitas* that accompanies the liminal rite of passage is offset by a dialectic in which hierarchy and structure reassert their rights (Turner 1969: 94–97). Some fail the rites, and are barred from the community. Others do not know the rites, so they are excluded by their ignorance, as were the lower-class men, peasants, and factory workers for whom the rituals of the duel were a mystery. Still others did not qualify *by nature* for the rite. Jews fought duels in the nineteenth century in the teeth of vociferous opposition (Birnbaum 1989: 230–237). There is no record of a woman having fought one¹¹.

Despite the clearly discriminatory nature of the modern duel, the men who favored retaining this ancient ritual were neither unregenerate old-regime nobles nor political reactionaries. They were solid, respectable bourgeois whose progressive outlook was joined to patriotism in the manner of the buoyant liberalism of the nineteenth century. By engaging in affairs of honor as principals or seconds, or by merely speaking in public in favor of this manner of resolving differences, men could express their identity with an historic French ritual, claim their right to membership in a democratic civil order, and display their manliness in a public drama fascinating to their contemporaries.

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Notes

1. The clearest account I have found on this distinction is one by the anthropologist Harriet Whitehead. She writes: "When I speak of cultural construction of gender, I mean simply the ideas that give social meaning to physical differences between the sexes, rendering two biological classes, male and female, into two social classes, men and women, and making the social relationships in which men and women stand toward each other appear reasonable and appropriate" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 83). Other strong statements in behalf of the "cultural construction of gender" may be found in (Caplan 1987: 1–30 and Scott 1986: 1053–75).
2. Both anthropologists and historians have employed these binary terms to understand societies (Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Campbell 1964; Gilman 1985; Bloch and Bloch and Jordano in McCormack and Strathern 1980: 25–41; 42–69).
3. Among the Sarakatsani, argues J. K. Campbell, an man "must be well-endowed with testicles and the strength that is drawn from them (1964: 270). Stanley Brandes argues similarly for the men of Andalusia (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 230). Gilmore summarizes the relation between *machismo* and genitalia thusly: "A macho, then, is a virile, sexually insatiable stud. Potent as a bull, lascivious as a billy goat, he unhesitatingly obeys the commands of the *cojones* (testicles)" (1987: 132).
4. Some very interesting anthropological and historical work has been done in France using old folklore collections, testamentary records, judicial records, and oral history. These provide the historian some information about the way systems of honor, vengeance, and the sexual division of labor operated in traditional societies. Though these examples are not historically germane to aristocratic and bourgeois concepts of honor, they are important because they reveal that France has until recent times shared in the Mediterranean traditions of "honor and shame" societies, and that in all these examples sex has been a crucial determinant of gender roles (Segalen 1983; Castan 1974; Claverie and Lamaison 1982; Verdier 1979; Wilson 1988).
5. The thesis that displays of honor are largely vestigial and aristocratic (or aristocratizing) has been presented most recently in V. G. Kiernan

- (1988). But see also Mayer (1981) and Girouard (1982).
6. Henri II was the king who presided over this duel. Billacois devotes a brilliant chapter to its analysis. He argues it was the last public duel in France and the first duel of the *point d'honneur* principally because Henri II, who had just assumed the throne, refused to conciliate the two in an essentially futile difference, or hurl his baton into the dueling terrian to end the conflict before its bloody conclusion. He thus *abdicated* royal intervention in a *genre* of dispute that became thereafter wholly private and unregulated by the state. There is sentiment for dating the cleavage between honor and victory to the remark of Henri II's predecessor, François I, who is said to have proclaimed after his defeat at the battle of Pavia in 1525, "All is lost save honor" (Halkin 1949).
 7. This is discussed by Schneider (Bright and Harding 1984). Richelieu confided to his political testament that "Frenchmen hold their lives in contempt... They have fancied that it was more glorious to violate such edicts, demonstrating by so extravagant a gesture that they valued honor above life itself" (Richelieu 1961: 22).
 8. In the classic analysis of the modern French bourgeoisie, Edmond Goblot treats bourgeois society as a structure of "barriers" and "levels", which regulate access to the class and guarantee uniformity of behavior and outlook. For Goblot, the polite signs of "consideration" are crucial to the sense of equality that reigns on the "level". There may exist "enormous differences in worth [in individuals] if one goes to the bottom of things; however, usages do not permit us to do this, but require instead that we treat everyone alike..." (1925: 15). Certain "shameful" acts were, however, inexcusable, including civil crimes and certain sexual "crimes" or perversions, which automatically excluded individuals from honorable status (Nye 1989a, 1989b).
 9. In the words of a contemporary, "Politeness is the simulacrum of love of one's neighbor, a tacit truce between all-consuming self-esteem and the silence of egoism, an involuntary respect for human dignity. It has been invented to reestablish in this world the appearances of equality (Alletz 1837 vol I: 107).
 10. The legalistic features of the modern duel are obvious in this terminology. In the old regime, a cartel was an often lengthy list of charges against an adversary, replaced in the nineteenth century by a man's calling card. *Temoin* means "witness", a modern transformation of the older "second", who was expected to fight alongside his champion, unlike his modern counterpart, who was expected to defend the rights of his client and enforce the rules of the *point d'honneur*.
 11. In an incident in September, 1890, the feminist journalist Séverine wrote an article in the paper *Gil Blas* which the Boulangist politician, A. Mermeix, deemed insulting. He issued a challenge to Séverine's editor, Georges de la Bruyère, who was badly wounded in the subsequent duel. Astié de Valsayre, the permanent secretary for the most important voting rights league for women, published an angry denunciation of Séverine, arguing that she had betrayed her responsibility to women by behaving in such a way as to require a man to come to her defense. See *L'Escrime Française* (Sept. 5, 1890).