Men's identification with violence is hardly a new topic and was certainly not the creation of feminists in the 1970s. It has long been assumed that men have a special tendency to exercise force, to carry out disputes aggressively, and to advance their interests through violence. But opinions differ widely as to whether this behavior is an anthropological constant and unalterable fact attributable to genes or hormones (e.g., too much testosterone) or not. Much evidence, however, favors social and cultural factors as decisive in how often and how far aggressive tendencies (which are innate in both genders) are manifested. Some societies strictly forbid men violent conduct, whereas others highly reward brash and dashing behavior as well as a readiness to use force. Some societies differentiate male aggressiveness according to age group or class, and some provide reserved areas such as the army or sports where men can practice violent activities in a controlled and authorized setting.

One such setting was the duel: a ritualized act of force between two men for the purpose of reciprocal preservation of honor. Here I will
examine dueling as a phenomenon that sheds light on how Central European societies dealt with male violence and how and why they accepted it as long as it was practiced by the social elites according to certain rules. I will also analyze for what reasons violence was individually acted out and what functions it performed across time. Quite obviously, the duel was subject to change, both in its forms and in its performers. In this, it clearly reflected the transition from aristocratic to bourgeois society. Throughout the early modern and modern periods, however, it exemplified masculine values par excellence, values which were and remained closely tied to the exhibition of violent behavior.

**Violent Men and the Point d’Honneur in the Early Modern Period**

As a new form of single combat between males, the duel established itself in the sixteenth century, first in Spain, Italy, and France, and then in the German territories after the Thirty Years’ War. Unlike the chivalrous tournament of the late Middle Ages, the early modern duel was not a fighting game but a serious armed confrontation in which the life of both combatants was at stake. While the tournament was an officially arranged courtly ceremony with hundreds of knights participating, a duel never took place without a specific personal cause. In this it was similar to the feud, but it differed from the feud in its adherence to certain rules and the fact that it generally did not extend to third parties. Such had also been the case for the judicial single combat of the Middle Ages, although the duel was an unofficial rather than an official conflict and thus did not have any legal bearing.

The conflict was generally triggered by an insult or an offense to one’s honor, the definition of which might depend on the individual involved. The early modern period was marked by extreme sensitivity in the perception of such offenses and a constant readiness to injure the moral and physical integrity of an opponent. This combined with a generally pugnacious culture, and the period abounded with single combats of a wide variety, including surprise attacks, spontaneous clashes, and carefully arranged duels. Consequently, the borderline between a duel and a mere scrap was not always clear, although the deciding trademark of a duel was that it involved the use of potentially deadly weapons such as sabres, rapiers, or pistols. Thus fistfights or fights with sticks were not regarded as duels but as “scraps” or “scuffles.” Furthermore, the duel included a
formal ritual; it had to be preceded by a challenge, and seconds had to be involved. Seconds arranged the place and conditions of the duel and were present when it was carried out.

The purpose of such rules was to elevate the single combat of honor above ordinary quarrels and to give it a certain outward dignity. They formed part of a program of controlling emotions and compulsive actions that accompanied what Norbert Elias has called the “process of civilization.” This program—if one can call it that—did not put violence in the pillory of public virtue and political morality. Rather, violence was considered necessary and indispensable to solve certain conflicts and to demonstrate power. However, this violence needed to be predictable, calculable, and limited. It had to be rationalized and disciplined, objectives which were accomplished by the duel—or at least supposedly accomplished by the duel. Many cases from the early modern period show how difficult it was for contemporaries to obey the rules. In France, the historian François Billacois even sees a deregulation of the duel emerging around the turn of the seventeenth century. Contrary to the duels of the 1550s, which were still carried out in the tradition of judicial combats and chivalrous tournaments and which took place in a highly official and controlled setting—the king himself decided whether a duel was legitimate, set the time and place, and was personally present during the fight—duels in the following decades took on increasingly chaotic and violent traits.

Ironically, this growing violence seems to have been prompted by efforts to control the duel. To the same extent that the secular authorities, following the example of the church, began to forbid and punish the duel, public control and regulation dropped. The threat of punishment by the state led to secrecy, and even though certain forms of the previous ritual were maintained, they did not suffice to prevent the transformation of the duel into a murderous hand-to-hand fight full of thirst for vengeance. Armor was used less and less, and the swift and agile rapier gradually replaced the heavy sword. The fight was carried out in an aggressive manner; its aim was the death or at least the injury of the opponent.

Even the introduction of seconds could not fundamentally “civilize” the single combat of the early modern period. They did not just enforce the rules and ensure the fairness of the fight, as later became the custom. On the contrary, the seconds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries understood themselves to be allies and protectors of their clients, and they actively intervened in the encounter. Sometimes each duelist brought
along three or four seconds, who at first fought each other and then joined their respective principals. These customs also are a reminder of the medieval feud, which focused on two opponents but also included their followers. Only gradually did the rule gain acceptance that each opponent was allowed a single armed second, who could only intervene in the fight when he saw a serious breach of the rules that posed a threat to his client.²

The increasing regulation and civilization of the duel served not only to contain and control violence. They also had the function of separating the rituals of violence of the nobility from the kind of encounters found among the lower social orders. Discipline and rationalization were to be or become the distinctive traits of the aristocracy. This message was often disregarded by the nobles themselves and by the men of other classes in the early modern period. Around the middle of the seventeenth century there were an increasing number of cases in Hamburg in which “people of ordinary ranks, following the example of the upper classes” sent out challenges and fought duels.³ In 1699 there was a duel in Werl between a member of the renowned Erbätzler guild and an officer in the service of Denmark during which the guild member was killed. Artisans of the seventeenth century also carried rapiers, allowing them to carry out conflicts according to the noble example in a “passage at arms.”

However, this was not at all in the interest of the sovereign ruler, as the reaction of the Kurfiirst to the duel in Werl proved: he forbade the Erbätzler guild to carry rapiers. The guild protested against this prohibition by arguing that frequently “among people both of the higher and lower ranks two have a clash with their rapiers”—and in those cases the other members of their class were not ordered afterwards to “lay down the rapier.”⁴ Without a doubt, the availability of deadly weapons increased the potential for violence at the time. In this regard, the efforts by the authorities to prohibit the use of such weapons are understandable. The nobility itself remained unaffected by this. Sabre, rapier, and sword were the insignia of its class, and it could not do without them. This not only counted for active military officers but also for that part of the nobility that served at court or pursued other forms of civil life. Even the new nobility did not exclude itself. On the contrary, to prove their equality and to compensate for differences in position, new nobles were even more prepared to adopt aristocratic practices.

Thus, for example, in 1709, the thirty-year-old Johann Hektor von Klettenberg, whose father had been ennobled by the emperor as a Frank-
furt burgomaster and who did not feel accepted by the other patrician families of the city, deliberately provoked a duel with a member of the rich and renowned von Stallburg family. During a reception he bragged about his heroic deeds so much that one of the von Stallburgs felt compelled to remark that he too stood his ground. Klettenberg demanded proof and announced that the following morning he would bring a set of pistols. Even though Stallburg did not take the matter seriously and some common acquaintances sought to mediate, Klettenberg insisted on his challenge, and the duel took place. After the pistols had failed several times, Stallburg wanted to end the duel, but Klettenberg insisted on a continuation. Consequently, they drew their rapiers, and in the course of the fight Stallburg was so badly wounded that he died on the field. Before expiring he exclaimed: "Brother, I am hit." His opponent had then approached him and responded: "Brother, forgive me." A handshake cemented their reconciliation—and the fraternal bond that had been created through the fight. Such encounters thus traversed the social tensions between the not very wealthy social climbers of recent nobility and the rich patricians of long-standing pedigree.5

What is striking here is the readiness with which Stallburg accepted Klettenberg's challenge even though he did not see cause for conflict or a duel. Had he refused, it would have been regarded as cowardice, and Frankfurt society would have blamed him for not accepting the challenge and thus breaking the nobility's unwritten code of honor. To be regarded as a coward for avoiding a duel equaled expulsion from society, a social death sentence, to which possible death in a duel was obviously preferable. This social compulsion to duel was highlighted by the Prussian edict on dueling of 1713, according to which "officers and soldiers who had been insulted or provoked were held despicable and almost unworthy of commerce or company of other people of honor and reputation, if they avoided confrontation with their offenders out of mere fear or out of consideration of the severe punishment required by the edict." The same law also mentioned that among students there were many who consciously provoked a comrade, who was insulted but not prepared to challenge the offender to a duel, to do so after all. They would not only take to task the offended party verbally, by repeating the insult to him "in a very rude way," but also "exclude him from their company, at the table and in conversation, by turning the plates upside down, not offering him a drink, or other humiliating acts and gestures."6
It was common knowledge in the early modern era that students were particularly apt to act aggressively and use extreme force. A victim of a typical student "scrap" was Heinrich Platen, a student of noble extraction, killed in 1620. In his funeral address, the Wittenberg superintendent Balduin sharply castigated the extreme violence in the student milieu. Instead of mediating irrelevant arguments with a "joy of peace," they preferred to "fight them out with ferocity." Revenge was a constant motif, and there was a fine line between gaining honor and preserving it. According to the superintendent, "many seek to find great honor in scrapping," while others argued that "one cannot maintain an honorable name in any other way." 7

Concern over the growth of student dueling was exemplified in a 1686 critique by A. Fritschius, a civil servant from Rudolstadt. He noted that some duels, especially among students from the nobility, arose from a "false opinion of the Point of Honor," according to which an insult demanded "satisfaction." But as a rule most duels were fought "for completely low and irrelevant causes." They arose, he continued, from conflicts rooted in "nightly walks in the streets, so common nowadays, accompanied by barbaric screams, and in feasts and drinking bouts at tavern tables and in private rooms and the consequent excessive drunkenness." Such behavior, common in the student youth culture, apparently led increasingly to conflicts that became more violent because of the growing dissemination of the rapier. Fritschius quoted an old professor as saying, "In my day there were students that carried coats, but nowadays they all look like soldiers." The "coat," the monks' dress that was reminiscent of the ecclesiastical tradition of university life, was replaced in the seventeenth century by aristocratic dress that included the rapier, as universities came more under the influence of the nobility. Each university that wished to attract a noble clientele had to supply a fencing runway and employ a competent fencing master who could instruct the students in the art of crossing swords. According to Fritschius, if the universities had not complied with the needs of their students or had forbidden them to carry rapiers, "such strictness would be followed by the universities' ruin, and the students would be caused to desert the academies entirely."

Nevertheless, there was increasing concern toward the end of the seventeenth century on how "duels and scraps of the students in the academies could be controlled with more vigour." Fritschius, who had sent his work to princes and town magistrates before publication, received positive reactions without exception. Some universities forbade dueling but to
little effect. In 1701, the duke of Saxonia, Friedrich, wrote to his noble colleagues that in his opinion "the harmful ill of dueling has caught on both at the courts and among other nobles, as well as in particular at the universities of the Holy Roman Empire in such a way that measures applied against it and repeated sharp orders generally have been to no effect." Like the Saxonian, the duke of Württemberg thought that united action of all princes was necessary to "emphatically oppose this ill that has caught on too much." He remarked that the University of Tübingen turned away "malicious and quasi-habitual duelers." However, gathering from the extensive correspondence between the university and the government, this evidently had not solved the problem.

Despite isolated attempts, there was no success in bringing together all German or even all European rulers, as Friedrich II proposed, for a united initiative against student and nonstudent duels. Many princes did issue edicts "against self-revenge, injuries, disturbances of the peace, and duels" (Prussian mandate of 1713), which were written "with blood" and prescribed the death penalty for duelists who had killed their opponents. But it was exactly such draconian punishments that kept the edicts from ever being applied. Even if a case legitimately came to court, the duelist seldom received his sentence, and he was as a rule reprieved by the prince.

Contemporaries were well aware of this contradiction. Even legal scholars were unable to clear it up. They pleaded for a ban on dueling and strict criminal prosecution, yet they often awarded the duel positive functions. The main reason why it was seen as reprehensible was that it constituted "an intrusion on the sovereignty of the state." The absolutist state was offended by the obvious usurpation of authoritarian power, which undermined the orderly conduct of its jurisdiction. It could not tolerate the fact that its subjects wanted to "administer justice themselves" and that they fell back on violent means of conflict. Such behavior, as the influential jurist Carl Gottlieb Svarez explained to the Prussian crown prince in the early 1790s, violated "the first basic law of civil society according to which its members are obliged not to decide their disputes through private violence, but rather to reach a decision in accordance with the laws of the state through its appointed judges." Karl Reinhold, a professor from Kiel, argued in 1796 that such private adjudication "breaks the treaty that makes the citizen a citizen and makes the state a state."
It was not so much the violence itself of dueling that bothered the princes, but rather the fact that duelists took the law into their own hands. Thus, the mandates against dueling of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were aimed not so much at the so-called rencontres, or spontaneous clashes in which disputes were immediately settled by force and without further preparation. Rulers tended to judge such clashes mildly because they derived from "first and sudden agitation, against which there is no resistance." In contrast, formal duels that were planned without "sudden agitation" were regarded as violating the "high-courtly office" entrusted to the sovereign. Thus, the edict issued by the electoral prince of Jülich, Kleve, and Berg in 1692 instructed the inquiring authorities to investigate meticulously whether alleged rencontres were not in fact "real duels" that had been arranged "verbally, or by correspondence, secret messengers, servants or others." Only such an arrangement made private single combat between two subjects a serious problem, a usurpation of "the preserved rights of the sovereign," and hence a crime against the state.

At the same time, though, it was obvious that the state opposed this crime far less strictly in practice than in theory. Immanuel Kant complained in 1798 that the duel "receives leniency from the government, and it is made a matter of so-called honor in the army to take action against insults into one's own hands. In such cases the head of the army does not get involved; without, however, making them publicly legal." Svarez, too, pointed out these political inconsistencies to the future Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia when he was still crown prince. On the one hand, the monarch forbade his subjects any initiative toward self-help; on the other, he tolerated it with the nobility and even agreed to dismiss officers who had obeyed the ban on dueling and rejected a challenge: "The officer who fights is taken in. Who doesn't fight is also taken in."

Svarez's colleague Ernst Ferdinand Klein, who worked on a new codification of the dueling laws, came to the conclusion that governments were not really interested in emphasizing the legal ban on dueling. This lack of interest stemmed from the fact that dueling was "too deeply woven into our constitution and our customs." In addition, dueling was practiced almost exclusively by the higher strata of society, which were especially important to the state. There even seemed to be "something solemn and respectable in duels," which as such made them valuable and dear to the authorities. Society was not served "if the total eradication of duels was
linked to the extinction of the longing for honor," and Klein further worried that "the violent suffocation even of a false and misguided longing for honor could at the same time easily suffocate the longing for real honor." A state that cared for the moral integrity of its elites must not take such a risk "because with the evil, if it could ever be destroyed, at the same time something very good would be eradicated." 21

What was this "very solemn and respectable good"? Klein found it in the longing for honor and in the readiness to defend one's honor with life and limb. A similar argument was brought forward by Goethe's brother-in-law, Johann Georg Schlosser. In his opinion it was easier and more forgivable that someone "would let his life be taken without resistance, than his honor, however imagined it may be. As long as we must live with people, we must maintain a position among them. Who lets himself be pushed down, who is kicked in contempt, is worse off than the dead." 22 Bavarian law professor Martin Aschenbrenner conceded that there was "a certain honor of life without which the most upright and talented man could not assert himself; for honor consists in the public opinion of a man who is held to know ways of maintaining his independence." 23

According to "public opinion," this self-assertion, as a proof of honor, had to be carried out in a courageous, energetic, and decisive manner, so that the duel presented itself as a "vehicle of courage and determination." 24 It was preferable to other ways of securing respect because it mastered violence and passion and only allowed them an ordered, controlled form. In the same sense, Osnabrück civil servant Justus Möser praised the duel in 1786 because it prevented wild outbreaks of self-revenge and "restricted it to a solemn and formal encounter." Thus "nature kept its right," but took on a civilized guise. 25 Six years later the popular philosopher Christian Garve from Breslau honored the duel as cultural progress: "What has been caused by the inadequacy of social institutions, and has had its roots in the independence of passions, has in its consequences helped to give society true advantages and to master these same passions." 26 And in 1827, Goethe saw in the "principle of the point of honor a certain guarantee against raw violence." For that reason he wished it could be "kept alive" by all means. 27

But a duel did not only seem more civilized and cultivated than a normal scrap; it was also more communicative and entailed a distinctive element of reconciliation and consensus. By agreeing to a fight with the same weapons, chances, and risks, the challenger abstained from any form of
revenge or retaliation. Instead, he conveyed the message to his opponent that he accepted him as an equal with whom he would struggle for self-assertion on equal terms. Thus, although an enemy, he could also be a potential friend with the transformation taking place through the fight. In the proximity of death, both combatants underwent a sort of ritual cleansing in which all feelings of hatred were cast away. In the moment of greatest danger each recognized the opponent as his alter ego, who subjected himself to this danger in the same loneliness and freedom. A new connection was thereby established; brotherhood and lifelong friendship could follow such an encounter.²³

A duel thus separated men less strongly and less permanently than alternative strategies of solving conflicts such as, for example, suing for libel. This was also the opinion of Ernst Ferdinand Klein. For him, the duel was a generally accepted form “under which the divided could approach each other again.” This made it extremely useful for social peace.²⁹ However, like many of his contemporaries, Klein wanted to reserve the duel for serious and grave conflicts. For this reason he wanted duels to be punished by the authorities (even though they were useful). The aim of punishment was not to take revenge or to generally deter duelists. Instead, the measures were to prevent duels from being misused for anything other than solemn and respectable causes. If the duel went unpunished on principle it would quickly degenerate into “dangerous foolishness,” and this would seriously damage the philosophy of the duel and its supposedly noble character.⁵⁰

From the perspective of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such foolishness, mischief, and passion had already been toned down and had virtually disappeared from the practice of dueling. The demilitarization of the nobility had contributed to this development as well as its growing accommodation to the concentration and representation of power at court.³¹ Whereas the duel of the sixteenth century could hardly be told apart from a “scrap” or a “tussle,” the duel of the eighteenth century had consistently developed into a highly ritualized single combat of honor, whose formal restrictions reflected the stiff ceremony of the noble courts.

The duelist of the eighteenth century still had to show physical bravery if he did not want to lose the respect of the other members of his class. At the same time, however, he did not use the duel to increase his honor or to win new honor by overcoming his opponent. It was not the victory it-
The Taming of the Noble Ruffian

self but the willingness to risk his own life that constituted the honorableness of a duelist. Courage and bravery served not to punish the opponent but to protect oneself from disrespect. The forms of the duel also became more civilized and detached. This was supported by the increasing use of firearms, which prevented physical close fighting and allowed the duelists a more measured and disciplined conduct. The seconds acted more and more exclusively as public supervisors who made sure that the duel did not degenerate into an emotional act of revenge.

According to observers, even the willingness to get into a duel had diminished significantly in comparison with earlier times. "It is true," an anonymous author wrote in 1757, "one isn’t as anxious any more to put one’s honor into provoked quarrels." Likewise, according to Christoph Meiners, a professor from Göttingen, professional ruffians were no longer tolerated in the enlightened society of his time. Only serious insults that were irredeemable by "either the judgment of a court or the revocation and declaration of honor by the offender" could spark a duel that was "if not publicly allowed, at least quietly tolerated or excused."

Whether duels really took place less frequently in the eighteenth century than in the seventeenth or sixteenth is beyond our knowledge. There was no official record of duels. Furthermore, publicity was avoided if possible in an effort not to draw the attention of the courts even if they did not look too closely into these matters. Most duels took place secretly or became known only to a chosen few whose discretion could be trusted. Contemporary opinions and assumptions thus have to be dealt with carefully. Too often they formed part of politically biased strategies of argumentation. Thus authors who felt committed to a middle-class, "enlightened" creed in progress generally tended to note a diminishing tendency to duel, whereas contemporaries who were more skeptical or pessimistic about progress (or who demanded political intervention) were more likely to announce an increase in fights of honor. Thus baron Adolph von Knigge noted in 1785 that duels were becoming "more and more rare." On the other hand, in 1819 Bavarian parliamentarians, asking the king for a stricter law on dueling, complained that the "prejudice" was anything but abating. On the contrary, it was constantly taking in wider circles and had, "so to speak, become a fashion." In the same year, the author of a philosophical treatise on dueling estimated "at least two thousand duels taking place in Germany every year"—a number that can be neither verified nor falsified.
We do have reliable information, though, for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The German Reich began keeping criminal statistics in 1882 and between that year and 1912 they reveal 2,111 criminal cases against dueling. Altogether, 3,466 men were convicted between 1882 and 1914 for offenses related to dueling. This, however, was only the tip of the iceberg, and jurists agreed that the criminal statistics did not give "a true picture of the actual frequency of the duel in Germany." Only a fraction of all duels ever came before a court. As a rule, all those involved remained silent. Because a duel was based on the agreement of both sides, there was generally no legal plaintiff. In this it differed from other crimes such as physical injury or theft. But even if information leaked and rumors spread, it was never certain that there would be a police inquiry or that the public prosecutor would raise charges.

In view of this situation it is hardly possible to say that dueling no longer had a place in the age of bourgeois society. On the contrary, the single combat of honor was able to maintain its position in the nineteenth century in most European states including France, Russia, Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. Only England and the northern European countries provided an exception. Evidently, the duel and its underlying principles were able to survive in bourgeois societies and did not lose their appeal. At first sight, this may seem surprising. After all, bourgeois society, as it began to develop from the ancien régime at the end of the eighteenth century, saw itself as a firmly civic community. At least in theory, violence was a highly suspicious way of solving conflicts. That citizens sought to settle their disputes or conflicts of interests by use of force did not seem to fit into the concept of bourgeois society acting in a rational and disciplined manner. Political theorists accepted that war was often unavoidable for protection against outside threats, but within society they wanted to avoid when possible the "small-format war." For example, in 1843 the representatives of the Rhenish provincial parliament argued, "Our time of spiritual maturity can no longer accept intrusions of violence and self-help and can only embrace legality."

This message was only partly received by the citizens, though. Neither men from the provincial and urban lower classes nor those belonging to the better-off circles of society could bring themselves to completely renounce physical force. Whereas journeymen, day laborers, and factory
workers sought to decide their quarrels with fistfights or knives, military officers and those with a university background held onto the practice of dueling. However, unlike men of the lower classes, potential and actual duelists tried to justify their actions politically and morally by bringing them into accord with the principles of civil society.

Thus the famous law professor Rudolf von Ihering left no doubt in 1872 that he considered the "courageous fight" to be a "duty of moral and physical self-preservation." He saw duels, like wars and revolutions, as "scenes of the same drama: the fight for justice." That the use of direct force played an indispensable role was evidently a matter of course for Ihering and did not need to be questioned any further. Just as he, like most of his contemporaries, accepted war as a legitimate form of international conflict management, Ihering also recognized the violence in a duel as justified and necessary.

As long as one could not do without war, so the argument ran again and again, the duel also had to be tolerated because it was based on the same "law of nature." It was no coincidence that in the midst of World War I, when "raw violence alone now rules the earthly existence of men," the writer Hermann Bahr gave this "law of nature" some thought. As "an old duelist, though retired now for many years," he understood the duel as an expression of "the last earthly truth," according to which "justice, conscience, spirit, mind, or whatever else we might call the presumed powers of the human community, are only a pretext, shiny façades, mild illusions, but hidden inside is the lord of life himself: raw violence."

In the case of the duel, however, this violence did not break into civilized "civil life" in a "raw" or "blunt" manner but slipped on a "dignified and aesthetic" garment. According to Jena professor of philosophy Jakob Friedrich Fries, this was thanks to "fighting regulations," which "granted each man the right to the same advantages in the fight." Thus the duel of honor strictly speaking was "something in between war, in which all violence and trickery are allowed, and peace, in which only the law prevails." In the duel, to take up a phrase of 1805, violence was forced to "be just." This was supported by binding rules that steered, controlled, and limited the use of force. Without these rules a duel was no longer a duel, a fact which state legislation also took into account by only regarding those fights carried out in accordance with the regulations as legally privileged duels. Fights without strict rules fell under the regular laws for physical injury, manslaughter, or murder.
With this limited definition of a “legal” duel, legislators were making a clear social distinction. It was assumed that the duel’s elaborate code of rules could only be learned and applied by members of the upper classes. Only among such people, a high civil servant of the Prussian ministry of justice argued in 1833, “was found the respect for custom, as well as the cast of mind and moderation, which contain the only guarantee against the most dangerous consequences of the duel.” The scuffles of the “lower popular classes,” on the other hand, were “disorderly scraps,” in contrast to which the duel stood out positively as a demonstration of “honor and morals.”

Thus, the reformed legal system of the nineteenth century also assigned the duel a special elevated position. Whereas French law (and under its influence Rhenish and Bavarian law) had erased dueling as a criminal matter of its own, Prussian law, which became binding for the whole German Reich in 1871, maintained special legislation for duelists. They should not, as was designated by the French model, be sentenced according to the laws of physical injury and manslaughter, but rather according to those regulations designed specifically regarding the practice. After all, duelists were not “raw, criminal, or foolish and unreasonable people,” but “common members of classes in which honor and obedience of the law are held highest, who stand closest to the monarch.” Even though their action was illegal, it was done for the most respectable motives and fulfilled “what public opinion honored and demanded.” The Prussian minister of justice Friedrich von Savigny also agreed with this concept. In 1844 he justified the duel’s special status by saying that the legislator “must not stand in direct opposition to public sentiment, and so must not pronounce himself in favour of a dishonorable punishment for an action which, as a rule, stems from love of honor and courage.”

Love of honor and courage—these politically desirable virtues distinguished not only the nobility in the nineteenth century but also large parts of the middle class. When the Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preußischen Staaten came into force in 1794, it had still excluded them from the dueling society. At the time, the law had not accepted fights among nonnobles as duels; instead, it had classified them as attempted murder. The Prussian criminal law enacted in 1851, however, repealed the privileges of the exclusive “dueling classes.” Thus it took into account a social and economic development by which the middle or “educated” classes had risen into the circle of society capable of giving satisfaction. In the nineteenth century,
in fact, duels were no longer confined to the nobility but increasingly occurred among members of the middle classes. Of the 232 Prussian duelists whose encounters took place between 1800 and 1869 and could be reconstructed from the records, at least 101, or some 44 percent, were of noble birth. In contrast, of the 303 duelists who found their way into Prussian judiciary, ministry, and cabinet documents between 1870 and 1914, nobles accounted for no more than 19 percent.

Thus, within a century, a model of behavior, which had its roots in early modern noble culture and had until then been jealously guarded by the aristocracy, had been passed down to the middle classes. But what exactly persuaded middle-class men to take up the duel and the code of honor connected to it? Did they merely "copy the aristocracy's manners," as Social Democratic Party leader August Bebel suspected in 1896 and as some historians keep on arguing? Or were there other more "bourgeois" motives? In answer, a distinction needs to be made between internal and external motives, that is, between individual tendencies and social pressures. On the one hand, middle-class men were influenced increasingly by institutions that obeyed the point d'honneur strictly and kept it alive. The most important of these institutions was the military, in which up to World War I (and after) the compulsion to duel was semiofficially in force and was approved by the king and kaiser. In 1858, the Bavarian minister of war Wilhelm von Manz saw the duel "closely connected to the honor of noblemen which was the main support of the warrior-class." In 1912 his successor still characterized dueling as a "basic pillar of the army." Its main function was to prevent "the dangers of the loss of habit of belligerent virtues" that arose during long periods of peace. For this reason both the officer corps and the state were interested in preserving the duel as a demonstration of "belligerent courage and self-sacrifice." Thus, the commander-in-chief must maintain "the undisputed right to dispel weak elements that cannot meet these requirements."

To the same extent that middle-class men became military officers—in 1860, 35 percent of the Prussian officer corps had middle-class backgrounds, increasing to 70 percent by 1913—they also became accustomed to the social pressure that demanded dueling for honor. This was true even of those men who did not want to become professional officers. During their year of obligatory service, middle-class recruits became familiar with honor as defined by the military; if they strove for the rank of an officer in the reserve, they had to arrange their civil lives in strict accordance
with it. Again and again it was impressed upon them from the highest places that they "had to remember their position as an officer while working in a business." Even as civilians, they were always under the obligation to care for "the preservation of their honor as members of the officer corps." Evidently these admonitions proved successful. According to the Ministry of War, officers of the reserve were more frequently involved in duels at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century than active officers. A representative to the Imperial Diet critically commented on these figures, saying that officers of the reserve apparently tended "to be even more eager than the active officers to show a certain vigour and to put an exaggerated amount of emphasis on the point of honor." 56

Such exaggeration could be related to the fact that reserve officers were under a double social obligation to duel. After all, the army was not the only institution in which the point d'honneur was at home. It was also practiced at the universities. By the end of the nineteenth century, half of all German students belonged to special societies, and two-thirds of these gave—as the jargon of the time called it—"satisfaction." Even the newly founded gymnastics, choral, scientific, and regional societies, which were often critical rivals of the established student corps and fraternities, very quickly adopted the code of honor of the traditional associations.

This code, which increasingly began to appear in print after the late eighteenth century, obligated students to react to insults with a challenge to a duel. Among themselves, as well as in their dealings with officers, nobles, and men with university degrees, conflicts of honor had to be settled by an armed encounter. Thus, the student body, which had been predominantly middle class as early as the eighteenth century, claimed a concept of honor equal to that of the nobility and officers. It understood itself as "a separate class, isolated from the other citizens," which competed with nobles and officers for high social standing. 57

Among students, equality was to prevail; the "advantage of birth" lost its validity. 58 Noble and middle-class students were united, as the physician Adolf Kußmaul wrote remembering his Heidelberg student days, in "a student knighthood, in which princes and barons, sons of civil servants and farmers honored each other as free and equal society members." 59 The code of honor and the practice of dueling were considered positive influences on "suppressing a stupid pride of ancestry and [creating] an equality of nobles and the bourgeoisie." Whereas at the end of the eigh-
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In the sixteenth century no nobleman outside the university would have degraded himself to duel with a commoner, it evidently became no longer “advisable among students to turn down a duel under the pretext of aristocracy and inequality of class.”

Such a refusal would have been read as a sign of cowardice and would have lastingly excluded the person concerned from the social respect of his fellow students.

That students in particular cultivated a concept of honor connected to the demonstration of courage and violence had much to do with their age structure and the specific demands of adolescence. Just like the journeymen, with whom they frequently quarreled — especially in the eighteenth century — and who cultivated a raw and aggressive disposition, students also sought to overcome their insecurities of age and status by a deliberately vigorous and dashing “comment.” They wanted to “show themselves manly in all circumstances”; they wanted to be seen as adults.

For this purpose they invented a model of behavior that stressed discipline, comradeship, bravery, and unconditional loyalty, as well as the ability to hold one’s drink. Within this ethos, the duel played an essential role. As proof of courage, determination, aggression, and the acceptance of violence, it gave youthful students a manly dignity that masked the actual dependence of their position. The duel, according to Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1808, embodied the students’ interest in “gaining the highest dignity,” and he recommended it as an “indispensable instrument of male character formation.”

The students’ longing for self-assertion and initiation was indeed very strong. This was especially obvious in a new form of ritualized single combat, which was adopted at the universities in the course of the nineteenth century and which originally had little in common with the classic duel of honor. In these so-called fencing bouts, the particular clothing, weapons, and methods generally ruled out serious injuries. Reasons for such bouts also differed significantly from those of the duel, because they were based on “stylized insults,” which had been invented by the student societies and which were exchanged between their members.

From the middle of the nineteenth century even these imitated insults were completely given up, and fencing bouts were arranged by “assignment.” Any personal motive had disappeared from such encounters; the only point was to try one’s strength, show courage, demonstrate steadfastness, and make one’s mark as a worthy society member. More than three-fourths of the annual eight thousand sabre duels that took place at German universities in the 1890s
were fencing bouts arranged by assignment and constituted little more than fighting games. Just under a quarter were light duels of honor that were contracted independently of the regular rituals of fencing bouts. Thus, the duel had not disappeared from the student environment but was restrained in everyday university life.

For this reason, fencing bouts had a double function. On the one hand, they helped to maintain a certain aggressiveness and a preparedness to use force in the way that students behaved, but without posing a serious threat to life and limb. On the other hand, they kept up the memory of the classic duel of honor and even habituated students to its precepts. When, in the 1850s, the young fraternity member Heinrich von Treitschke was insulted by a corps student “in the most vulgar way,” he challenged him to a pistol duel. To his father he justified himself by saying, “I did not want to fight out a matter of honor with such a silly thing as a sabre bout.”

The societies themselves took scrupulous care that their members acted in accordance with the comment (the societies’ rules of correct behavior) and reacted to serious insults in an appropriate fashion, that is, by a challenge to a duel. Refusals to act accordingly were punished with exclusion. In this way the student societies maintained a strong compulsion to duel among their members, similar to that of the officer corps. More important and more successful than the threat of severe sanctions, however, was the habitus that the societies inculcated in their members. It remained influential long after the student had left the university and had become a graduate member of a fraternity. Civil servants, lawyers, doctors, philologists, technicians, and engineers who had belonged to student societies were likely to take the laws of honor seriously in their later lives and act according to them.

The lawyer Ernst Meyer, for instance, had long passed thirty when he fought a duel with a Prussian officer named von Donop in 1839. Even though his student days were a decade behind him, in his encounter with von Donop he instinctively fell back upon the forms and habits practiced at the university. When the officer called him a “silly boy,” the old pattern of escalation kicked in: “Blushing, I must admit it,” Meyer wrote in his defense statement, “that at the moment the long-forgotten student-comment intruded into my mind.” It induced him to respond that von Donop was “a most miserable cur,” an insult that had to be followed by an immediate challenge to a duel. If his memory had failed him, he might have been
reminded of his duties by his former student society. This happened in 1885 to the Berlin architect Bornemann, who, having been slapped by a colleague named Krause, at first “took no further action.” Thereupon, Krause reported the case to Bornemann’s old student dueling society, which instructed its former member to issue a challenge. Bornemann subsequently agreed to do so. A married man in his late twenties, Krause had evidently internalized the rules of the academic comment better than Bornemann and did not need any official admonition.

The social institutions that embraced the dueling code—student societies as well as the army—surely did not exercise complete control over the actions of their members. There were repeated cases of men who successfully sought to evade the compulsion to duel. But there was no massive opposition to the duel in imperial Germany; rather, the practice was generally accepted. This loyalty to the code cannot simply be explained as the result of the institutional support that dueling found in the army and universities. Without being convinced of the individual “meaning” of a single combat, thousands of men would not have put their lives at stake, written farewell letters to their closest relatives, and suffered both the fear and reality of death. Social pressure alone could not have promoted such sacrifice. It had to be augmented by what dueling supporters had internalized and what they called its “idealistic side.”

Masculinity and Violence in the Duel

This idealistic side was closely connected to the proof of manliness shown in the duel. A highly acclaimed masculine nature could be expressed and validated through dueling, which simultaneously provided the opportunity to distinguish certain male gender characteristics purely and clearly from the female and to relate them to each other. It was taken for granted in nineteenth-century gender discourse that a man should embody a certain wildness and roughness. According to an encyclopedia of 1806, the term male carried “the connotation of strength and bravery,” whereas for another of 1824, being a man was associated with courage, power, and “bursting passion.” It continued that “from man loud desire rages” compared with woman, in whom “quiet longing is at home.” And further on: “The male must gain, the female seeks to preserve; the male by use of force, the female with kindness—or cunning.”

Another encyclopedia, this time from 1835, affirmed that the basis of
force and violence was located in the male body: "Physically the male is indicated by larger size, stronger bones, coarser muscles; mentally, however, by more courage based on a greater feeling of strength and thus a greater ability to perform the strenuous deeds of life; at the same time [he has] a strong compulsion to assert himself in life with his powers and his will as the more able sex in general; for this reason, war, hunting, taming of animals, and the larger part of those deeds demanding physical strength are for the most part done by men, just as in creating and destroying it is the male character that mainly proves itself." Violence and destruction belonged to the "male character" as much as the impulse to build and the traits of fatherly protection. One set could not come without the other.

Such ideas endured deep into the twentieth century. A Catholic reference book noted as late as 1933: "To real manliness belong strength, bravery, ... readiness for life's emergencies and commitment in case of danger. Participation in public affairs, to fight for the community's goals, lies within the nature of the male. Belligerence and the task of safeguarding his community, authority, discipline, leadership and power, the male regards as his natural prerogative. Man moulds the state, its hardness corresponding to his nature; he carries out the historical clashes, and fights the wars." However, to this positive characterization the dictionary added a warning not to overemphasize "wildness, rawness, and violence." Instead, the object was to work toward a "limitation and check on the concepts of honor and war" and to tone down the destructive and aggressive potential of masculinity. Without a doubt, this appeal referred to the extreme aggressive militant cult of masculinity brought about by the end of the Weimar Republic and the National Socialists' marching hordes. In the brawls and streetfights of the early 1930s, the destructive element of "manhood" surfaced unvarnished and without restraint. In the end, violence became a frenzy, a medium in which virility and power could be experienced.

Compared with this, the nineteenth century gave male violence a significantly more disciplined form. Except for the army and the police, which were authorized by the state to exercise force, there were no associations whose principles of organization included instrumental violence. The vigorous, expressive use of force was also strictly regulated. Only in the "society of those capable of giving satisfaction" and in student fencing bouts were men allowed to let off steam, and then only in a well-ordered, predictable, and controlled form. It was exactly this form which made such violence acceptable to the civil society of the bourgeois age. Under
the condition that violence was bounded and restricted, it could be inte-
grated into the character of the male gender and even perform important 
educational functions. These achievements were expressed clearly in the 
self-descriptions of duelist.

The duels by assignment, for example, were supposed to “toughen up 
and increase the student's personal courage and to train him to become 
aware of his strength and manliness.” The duelist had to prove this manli-
ness by entering the fencing ground without a sign of fear and also giving 
no indication that might be read as weakness or cowardice. For instance, 
the "comments" of the early nineteenth century labeled those who retreated 
during a duel beyond the boundary of the fencing runway as cowards. In 
the second half of the nineteenth century such strictures increased. “The 
first requirement" of a good fencing bout, the fraternity member Georg 
Pusch reported, “is now to 'stand.' We are no longer satisfied if a student 
merely steps up to fence wearing the colours of his society, but we de-
mand that he takes the blows he cannot parry without even flinching.”

The style of fencing also changed: instead of priding themselves on the 
aesthetics of fencing, with equal emphasis on offense and defense, the du-
elists of the 1880s struck at each other simultaneously and without re-
straint. The Prussian minister of justice remarked disapprovingly that 
they “regarded the observance of skillful rules of defense as stemming 
from cowardice.” What must have seemed to fencing masters as a mock-
er-y of their art, the students took as an expression of the highest vigor and 
of a dashing character. They were not bothered by the serious injuries it 
caused; they did not care that many a society member reminded contem-
poraries “vividly of a beefsteak.” On the contrary, dueling scars on the 
face were proof of special courage and bravery.

Even the new rules were lopsided in their emphasis. Evidently, more 
important than the ability to strike out bravely was the ability to take the 
opponent's blows without a flicker of fear or pain. This was thought to be 
an essential “aid for the education of character,” which was at least 
equally important for later life as demonstrating courageous aggressiv-
ness. Thus one tract of the 1880s preached: “Once you have looked the 
opponent in the eye a couple of times when the swords cross, and do not 
flinch when one blow after the other hits home and warm blood runs 
down the body, then it will also be easier in difficult situations in life to 
maintain one’s composure, and not only to bear physical, but also emo-
tional pain more easily.”

In 1912 the dueling societies proclaimed in unison that the idea of the
fencing bout was by no means "to injure the opponent as gravely as possible. Of course, any duelist can be joyous of a victory. But this question is never central in the evaluation of a fencing bout. Here the only matter is whether the duelist has 'stood well,' that he has shown no fear of the blow, the gashing wound, and that the pain has not brought about any sound. Truly, the fencing bout is merely an aid for the education of manly courage, self-control, the decent treatment of a fellow student even if he is the opponent, and the responsibility of everything one does." In imperial Germany this argument found the highest validation. Kaiser Wilhelm II emphasized in 1891 that fencing bouts "toughen up the courage and strength of a man, and that basis of steadfastness is won that becomes important later in life." In parliament both liberal and conservative representatives praised the positive educational effect of such armed encounters. "The German man," the Württemberg parliamentarian and university chancellor Carl Heinrich von Weizsäcker said in 1897, "should be able to defend himself in every sense and be educated in this way." Likewise, according to the Hamburger Nachrichten on April 25, 1896: "No other physical exercise has such a positive effect on the development of personality, strength of character and courage as exercise with the sword." After all, "when evaluating the student fencing bout, one has to assume that at the university the young student is not only to be educated in his subject but also should receive the basis for his whole future destiny. It can only help his manner as a man to become accustomed to arranging his behavior according to his duties and personal responsibilities."

The student duel thus conveyed an education toward manliness—a manliness combining strength, power, self-control, and aggressiveness. This manliness was in turn expressed perfectly in the duel. Here too, "the central element was to face the opponent," whereas the actual outcome of the combat became secondary or even "completely irrelevant." This sharply distinguished the duel of the nineteenth century from its predecessors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which had emphasized the result, that is, who won and who lost, as being of primary importance. This shows how much the image of manliness had changed over time. In the first half of the eighteenth century a man could play out passion and "intense emotions," whereas a century and half later, one had to keep a cool head and exhibit absolute "calm and sangfroid." For the "educated," the duel thus became a means to "protect themselves against an excessive amount of their own passion."
The duel served therefore to enable a man to act out his strength, power, and violence in a disciplined and controlled form. To forbid him this behavior was, according to von Ihering, an expression of “unmanliness” and “moral castration.” Conversely, people of the “better society” regarded a man who evaded a duel as a coward and a weakling. Even the German Anti-Dueling League, founded in 1902, expressly refused to impose a formal promise on its members not to fight duels under any circumstances. Even they had to maintain the liberty to “show that we are not what we are thought to be—namely cowards.”

That they were neither cowardly nor treacherous, duelist demonstrated by facing each other as equals. They acted under the same conditions and with the same weapons, just as they shared the same chances and risks. The violence they practiced was mutual and hence “just.” Nobody was cheated. Each used force actively and suffered it at the same time. Consequently, the duel was an act of violence based on reciprocal consent: a treaty that allowed the mutual acceptance of physical aggression within a set frame of rules.

It was a matter of course that such a treaty could only be concluded by men within the better circles of society. Men of the lower social classes were not seen as having the necessary rationality, control of emotions, and self-discipline. Equally unthinkable was a duel between a man and a woman. Women, so it was believed, were just as incapable as men of the lower classes of behaving in a disciplined, calm, and cool-headed manner during a conflict. Besides, it was considered contrary to their womanly character—the main traits of which were thought to be gentleness, love, weakness, and fearfulness—to get involved in a violent fight. Contemporaries of the nineteenth century were convinced with few exceptions that nature had arranged it that way: “The whole moral existence of the female was based on demureness and chastity, while that of the male rested on courage and strength.” That is why, as the liberal Carl Welcker noted, “for the female, an offence against womanly modesty and chasteness, and for the male, unmanly cowardice, lead to the loss of honor and respect.”

In conclusion, men of the middle class and nobility used the duel during the nineteenth century to prove that they were neither unmanly nor cowardly. Thus they also earned the reputation with women of being “quite piquant and interesting.” At the same time, the male code of honor put enormous pressure on women. Not all but many duels were fought
over the issue of adultery. As the Prussian minister of justice Beseler explained with sympathy in 1907, a husband whose virility was under attack sought to “restore his questioned manliness through a duel.” Challenging his rival with sword or pistol, he saved his male honor, and if he suffered injury or death, it was his wife’s fault. A married woman of a noble or a middle-class family thus did well to scrupulously control her sexuality and to avoid unfaithfulness, if possible. But a young, unmarried woman was also obliged to guard her honor, which meant her chastity. If she did not, it could happen that her father or brother would challenge her “seducer” to a duel. By doing this, he did not save the honor of his daughter or sister, which was lost once and for all, but rather his own. Of course, the dueling code put pressure not only on women but also on men. As the Prussian minister of war von Falkenhayn stated in 1914, it forced a distinctly belligerent behavior upon men that was supposed to suppress any doubt about their “manliness and their ability to defend themselves.” It demanded actions from them, the violence of which endangered their own and other men’s existence. Nevertheless, they held on to the duel up until World War I—despite the criticism of Social Democrats, leftist liberals, Catholics, and feminists. It was only due to the experience of unrestricted violence in an industrialized mass war and a series of social changes that the duel lost its ground as a reserved area of controlled violence after 1918.

Notes

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9. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, A 202 Bu 2534 (reply dating from 30 March 1702); A 274 Bu 64.
10. See Prokowsky 1965.
11. Schlözer 1786, 3.
12. Bavarian dueling mandate (1779), in Meyr 1784, 137–45.
15. Scotti 1821, 218 (quotation from a 1692 edict).
16. Bavarian dueling mandate (1773), in Meyr 1784, 81–86.
23. Aschenbrenner 1804, 29.
27. Müller 1982, 162.
28. Loen 1751, 447; Von den in Deutschland gewöhnlichen Gebräuchen bei Duellen und über die Mittel die Duelle abzustellen (Leipzig, 1804), 109–10. See also the Klettenberg case, discussed above.
29. Klein 1806, 144.
30. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Berlin-Dahlem, Rep. 84 a, no. 8054 (17 August 1809).
33. Meiners 1788, 678.
35. Verhandlungen der Zweiten Kammer der Standesversammlung des Königreichs Baiern (Munich, 1819), 3:60.
36. Penzenkuffer 1819, 4.
38. Billacois calls nineteenth-century duels a mere "echo," and Kiernan suggests a rebirth of dueling in this period, which rests on the (false) assertion that dueling had died out before.
40. Verhandlungen des 7. Rheinischen Provinziallandtags 1843 (Koblenz 1843), 77-78.
42. Bartunek 1912, 8.
43. Bahr 1918, 228-29.
44. Das Duell in seiner moralischen und gesellschaftlichen Bewertung (Leipzig, 1871), 5.
45. Fries 1818, 337.
47. Motive zum revierten Entwurf des Strafgesetzbuchs für die Preußischen Staaten (Berlin, 1833), 1:162, 156, 154.
48. Ibid., 1:103, 115.
49. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Berlin-Dahlem, Rep. 84 a, no. 8056 (18 September 1844).
50. Allgemeines Landrecht 1870, 694.
52. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Abt. IV, A XIII 3, Fasz. 4a (9 August 1858).
53. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Abt. IV, M Kr no. 11097 (29 December 1912).
55. Quote ibid., 288; Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, RM 3/v.10118 (18 January 1913).
57. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Abt. II, Mln no. 72423 (19 September 1821).
63. Ernsthausen 1894, 40-41, 49ff.
64. Salvisberg 1896, 25.
65. Treitschke 1912, 264.
66. Staatsarchiv Detmold, L 86, no. 1739.
68. Krüütz 1806, 723 (first quote); Allgemeine deutsche Real-Encyclopädie für die gebildeten Stände, 6th ed. (Leipzig 1824), 4:182 (other quotes).
69. Pierer 1835, 162.
71. On vitalistic vs. instrumental forms of male violence, see the contributions by Eve Rosenhaft and Peter H. Merkl to Mommsen and Hirschfeld 1982.
72. Pusch 1887, 11.23.
73. Deutsches Zentralarchiv Merseburg, Hist. Abt. II, 2.2.1. no. 17834 (6 October 1880).
74. Plach 1887, 17.
76. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Berlin-Dahlem, Rep. 84a, no. 8037.
77. Quoted in Fabricius 1898, 355–56.
79. Düsterlohe 1896; Graeser 1902, 39.
80. First quote: Zedler 1750, 1350–51, 1337. Second quote: Medem 1890, 40; Czeipek 1899, 12.
82. Ihering 1872, 95–96.
85. Greveniz 1808, 66.
86. Welcker 1838, 641.
89. See Frevert 1995b, 194ff.
90. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Berlin-Dahlem, Rep. 84a, no. 8037 (22 April 1914).
91. See Frevert 1995a, chap. 6.