Knife Fighting and Popular Codes of Honor
in Early Modern Amsterdam

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Abram Janse Smit died of his wounds late in the night of 19 December 1690. Earlier that night, he had been fatally stabbed by a man he had never met before. It was all because of his sister-in-law, a woman known as Molenaar Jetse (Miller's Jets). She must have been notorious, but for what we don't know. Once in a tavern, a group of sailors who had just come ashore asked whether anyone knew where Miller's Jets lived, and a man promptly showed them the way. That night in the winter of 1690, Jets was in a cellar-bar on the Verwers Canal (cheap drinking places were often located in the basements of houses). For unstated reasons, she got into a quarrel with a certain Claas Abrams, who threw three pieces of a tobacco pipe at her face on purpose. She called him a gauwdief (sneaky petty thief) and then left with another woman. When Claas rose to pursue her, a man stopped him at the door. That man and other male customers held him in the cellar for a quarter of an hour and finally let him go when he promised to do Jets no harm. Quickly forgetting his promise, Claas spotted Jets at Rusland Street and followed her, without further harassing her yet. At the Lommers bridge
Jets was lucky to meet her brother-in-law, Abram. He was in the company of Freek Spanjaart, a famous knife fighter. Despite his fame, during the incident about to follow in which his friend lost his life, Freek was to be an inactive spectator.

As we would expect, Jets complained to her brother-in-law about Claas’s earlier harassment and the fact that he continued to pursue her. Turning to him, Abram drew his knife. But then he announced that he had no inclination to fight, and he walked on. Claas did not trust his words. Moreover, Claas found it unacceptable that someone should draw a knife on him without any reaction on his part. So he went after Abram with his own knife in his hand. Then Abram asked Claas twice whether he intended to harm Jets. When he received no reply, a knife fight ensued. During the combat Freek Spanjaart and Jets just watched. In the middle of it Abram’s knife broke. He requested the knife of his friend Freek and got it. Apparently, his adversary granted him a timeout for the exchange. It did not help Abram. He was dangerously stabbed and taken to the “bandage house.” Claas left the scene. Later that night, upon his request, it was Jets who went to the bandage house to see the victim. At that moment Claas was hiding in a cellar where his child was nursed. Jets returned after midnight, reporting that Abram had died. Thereupon, Claas fled the town. However, he returned and was caught a few weeks later, which resulted in his decapitation in January of the next year.

In certain respects this case is illustrative not only of “honorific” violence but of all homicides tried by the Amsterdam court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, the encounter took place in a lower-class milieu, which is equally true for the great majority of homicidal incidents. Like Claas Abrams, most killers were men. In cases of lethal knife fights, not only the killer but the victim, too, was male without exception. In such incidents, just the outcome determined who became a corpse and who a potential fugitive. Knife fights in particular have great potential for a study of the social context and cultural meaning of violence. Such fights, and the tavern quarrels often preceding them, can be analyzed in terms of ritual, honor, and male culture just as much as the official duel. Earlier historians usually passed over tavern brawls, considering them as indicative of the hot passions of previous centuries. They merely saw a heap of senseless violence. Although passions certainly were involved, there is more to say about these incidents. Again, what matters is the sociocultural context. The historical anthropologist Anton Blok
states that as we go into greater detail with our analysis, what seems senseless violence at first sight becomes meaningful violence instead (which implies that we understand it better, not that we should approve of it).\textsuperscript{3} Often, a man acted violently because he felt there was no other possibility; he just had to do it.

This is precisely what Claas Abrams himself said: he had to react in some way when Abram Janse Smit drew a knife on him. Necessity also obliged Freek Spanjaart, the famous fighter, to refrain from helping his friend. Had he intervened, it would have become a vulgar brawl or at least an unequal and therefore infamous fight of two men against one. Intervention was thought honorable only if the purpose was to separate the combatants. With two against one, Abram's reputation as well as Freek's would have suffered. For the latter to lend his knife to his friend was all right, because it made the contest equal again. It was an inherent risk, far from inevitable, though, that a combat like this would result in the death of one of the protagonists. Freek judged Abrams and his honor more valuable than his friend's life. The killer, too, in the end lost his life due to the dictates of honor. He might have been spared the death penalty; after all, his adversary had been the first to draw a knife. It did not matter, the Amsterdam schepenen (judges) argued, because Claas had his chance to run away at the point when his adversary's knife broke.

\textit{Homicide in Amsterdam}

Annual homicide rates are routinely used by historians as an indicator for the level of violence in a town, region, or country at a particular time. There is general agreement that these rates underwent a secular decline in Europe from the late Middle Ages until about 1970. This long-term trend has been established first for England, where homicide rates averaged about 20 per 100,000 inhabitants in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{4} On the Continent, on the other hand, medieval rates might be as high as 50 or more. The figures for Amsterdam are based on body inspection reports (the best source for this). Homicide rates underwent a steep decline from about 47 per 100,000 in the fifteenth century, an average of 25 in the sixteenth century, to a low point of 3.25 (partly due to underreporting) in the 1660s and 1670s. There was a temporary rise to about 9 per 100,000 between 1693 and 1726. Thereafter the rates declined: they stood between 2 and 3 in the second half of the eighteenth century. They were lower still during the
nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. Knife fights were endemic in Amsterdam during the low-homicide decades after the middle of the seventeenth century as well as during the temporary peak in the last decade of that century and the first quarter of the eighteenth. They appear to have been particularly frequent, however, in the latter period.

Body inspection reports tell us little about the pattern of knife fighting or the sociocultural context of violence in early modern Amsterdam. For this, court records are a much better source. The evidence on knife fighters, their codes of honor, and their notions of masculinity is derived from a series of 143 homicide trials conducted between 1650 and 1810. It is supplemented by a preliminary analysis of trials for nonhomicidal violence in Amsterdam. In both series, the interrogation protocols are rich in documentation. A crucial question is whether any change occurred in the pattern of violence during the 160 years studied and, if so, how to explain it.

Before the presentation of the evidence, the quality of the sources must be assessed. On the whole, the Amsterdam court records are very informative. The court left witnesses and defendants ample room to speak for themselves. These depositions are rich in details and, more than once, the magistrates were obliged to inquire into the meaning of certain expressions, places, or events. It is a fashion among modern researchers to analyze protocols like these purely as "texts" or "language." Alternatively, defendants' stories are considered as just strategies to get away with it as best they could. Did defendants, and maybe witnesses as well, embellish their stories after the event? If they did, we might see more order in the culture of violence, a greater adherence to codes, than there actually was. Of course, researchers should always be on their guard, and strategies certainly played a part. However, evasive responses are easily recognizable for what they are, and as a rule they do not impose more cultural order or sense on the events. Many defendants started by denying the major allegations or turning threatening words into neutral ones. I am reassured by the magistrates' careful inquiries in serious cases. Almost always the court confronted the accused with several witnesses. The interrogation protocols regularly contain different versions of the defendant's confessions, from which it is possible to reconstruct the likely course of events. When it came to torture, the accused usually admitted what the principal witnesses had said. In most cases I am confident that I have the "real story," but with respect to certain contested events it was impossible to
choose between two versions. Surely, not all the details are always right, but we do have an image of actual fights. There is no fiction in the archives here.

Although "honorific" knife fighting forms the principal concern of this article, to understand it better it must be contrasted with less honorable violence. One-on-one combats with equal weapons can be termed popular duels. They were a prominent feature of Amsterdam street life up until about 1720. The knife fight's fall from prominence marked a major shift in the character of violence in the city. By the second half of the eighteenth century, violence emanating from conflicts in intimate relationships comprised a much greater share of Amsterdam homicide, although this category remained fairly steady in absolute terms. Violence among partners or family members will be discussed only insofar as it sheds light on the central issues of ritual and honor and their interconnections with gender.

Two contemporary terms, appearing frequently in the court records, are closely associated with these central issues. The word *voorvechter* denoted a man who had great skill in knife fighting and respected its rituals. Voorvechters used the term *eerlijk man* as a compliment to a fair fighter. Literally meaning "honorable man," the concept combined the issues of honor and gender.

*The Knife-Fighting Culture: Ritual, Honor, Gender, and Social Boundaries*

Who participated in the knife-fighting culture? It was not only a male preserve. It was also situated in a lower-class milieu. To be more precise, most fighters occupied a social position along the border of the "respectable" and the "disreputable" segment of the urban lower classes. This is true for the protagonists in popular duels as well as most other killers in the homicide series. The definition of respectability, of course, lay with those who claimed to possess it.

About half of the fighters also were petty thieves or they committed property crimes on an occasional basis. A group of five young men who walked the streets on a Wednesday night in July 1681 apparently lived off petty crime. When a quarrel arose, two of them tested their skill with knives and one died. The survivor, a boy of about fifteen, fled the town. Later he confessed to committing petty thefts in Leiden and Utrecht.
between the incident and his eventual arrest. Lambert Bouman and Fredrick Lodewijckse probably counted as disreputable as well. The conflict in January 1696, in the course of which they challenged each other to a knife fight, had arisen over a prostitute. Other fighters were ex-soldiers or sailors temporarily ashore. They might be on the “right” side of respectability. Still others had recently come to town in the hope of finding employment. The homes of these people, when mentioned, often were in the dark alleys running between the main streets. Several homes consisted of just a room in a house. Many fighters were “sleepers”: people who stayed in someone’s house for a while and paid for bed and board. The occupational and housing categories overlap. Between two voyages, sailors usually stayed in a “sleeping-house.” Some of them were foreign sailors. A homicide case in 1729 resulted from a conflict between two Englishmen who ran boarding houses. In the end, a “sleeper” from one house, James Jackson, stabbed a “sleeper” from the other, William Bellet Young.

Sailors received their final payment upon discharge. During their first few weeks ashore, they certainly had money to spend. Others might have obtained it by illegal means, but it is also possible that they saved it from their wages. Bordering on the disreputable did not necessarily mean being very poor. There were hardly any vagrants among the group of fighters. We know that most of them must have had some money available, because they liked so much to go out. They preferred to spend their pennies in public places.

The world of the tavern, suspect for the respectable segment of the city’s population, was central to the knife-fighting culture. Fighters felt at home in various kinds of public places, from cheap cellar-bars to fancier establishments where music was played. Some particular bars were mentioned in more than one homicide protocol. A few notorious inns lay just outside the Haarlem gate. Taverns with music belonged to the culture of semirespectability just as much, which is illustrated by the name of the violin player in “the court of mice nests,” Karel Scheetneus (Charlie Fart­nose). The court clerk denoted one place bluntly as “Eva’s whores and thieves’ bar.” When a man had been stabbed to death on her doorstep, Eva and a few male customers were arrested, primarily to be heard as witnesses. Although there is talk of brothels and prostitutes in several homicide cases, most of the public places frequented by the fighters seem to have been just for drinking. Of course, drinking was often accompanied
by gambling and chance games such as tik tak (a kind of backgammon). The killing of Arent Schinkel by Cornelis Timmerman, for example, resulted from a disagreement in a tavern in the late summer of 1706. Cornelis, a sheepskin seller, had lost two jars of wine to Arent, a tinsmith. Later he suggested to people who knew him that Arent was a swindler; in the same tavern he called Arent a rascal several times. On the night of 30 December Cornelis was looking for Arent along in Nes Street. He learned that his enemy sat in a neighboring bar, so Cornelis went outside to wait for him. When Arent finally left for the street, too, a fatal combat ensued. Many more cases of violence punished by the Amsterdam court originated from disagreements over gambling debts or pretended false play. It is a tribute to the centrality of the world of the tavern that one homicide resulted from a "dispute" among four drunken companions over which bar they should visit next.

Not every incident arising in a tavern was a fair fight. The homicide series contains a few cases in which the defendant had stabbed an un­armed innkeeper who refused to serve him. Those killers had simply lost control in a state of utter drunkenness. They were a minority; most drink­related acts of violence were combats of one against one. When they were particularly skilled, fighters enjoyed local fame in the world of the tavern. In fact, we know that Freek Spanjaart was a famous fighter, not from the trial of Claas Abrams, discussed earlier, but from a passage in the protocols of a trial a few months later. The defendant, Hermanus de Brujin, was at least as famous. A female friend of his recalled a conversation, in his absence, at a place they often frequented. According to the innkeeper, nicknamed "the Baboon," Hermanus was a voorvechter no one could beat; the Baboon considered him even better than Harmen Hoedemaker or Freek Spanjaart. Most likely, Freek's name did not ring a bell with the interrogators or the clerk who wrote it down. The court took note of this conversation as an additional incrimination. We learn from it that knife fights and their protagonists were discussed in taverns and that skilled fighters were probably admired.

One more type of unequal fight, that of stick vs. knife, reflects the social cleavages separating the culture of violence from the respectable segment of the urban population. Respectable people refused to become involved in knife fights. When they were threatened or challenged, they would try to ward off the danger by other means. A stick was the typical weapon of defense. With it, they would try to knock the knife from their
attacker's hands or to hit him, or both. A quarrel over two fighting dogs between two neighbors, Willem van Busscherveld and Hendrik Westerman, in 1731 is an example. When Hendrik drew a knife and threatened to kill Willem's dog with it, Willem first withdrew into his house at his wife's insistence. But he returned, was challenged by Hendrik, and walked up to him with a broomstick in order to wrestle the knife from his hands. Some people routinely carried sticks with them in the street, probably for use as walking sticks in more peaceful situations. In July 1706 Servaas van der Tas, having visited several bars, made a remark to three men he met in the street. They refused his company: "We don't speak to you, little friend." Thereupon Servaas drew his knife and attacked one of them, who warded him off with his stick. In many respectable homes a stick stood behind the door, just as some shopkeepers today might have a baseball bat ready. It did not help Pieter Fontijn in 1711. He was a victim by accident. His attacker, Ambrosius Coertsz, first had been in the bar beneath Pieter's house. When he demanded another drink at 10:30 P.M., the landlord said he did not serve that late. A quarrel ensued, but the landlord managed to kick Ambrosius out. When the latter returned between 2 and 3 A.M., he knocked on the wrong door. Pieter opened and asked him whom he wanted to speak to. Ambrosius replied, "It is you I want," and immediately seized him. Escaping from the other man's grip, Pieter ran inside, came back with a stick, and swung in Ambrosius's direction. Then Ambrosius drew his knife. A struggle followed, and Pieter was stabbed twice in the chest.

There are more cases like this. They exemplify the extent to which Amsterdam's inhabitants had to rely on their own resources to protect themselves and their property. Since a defense with a stick is referred to in the records on such a routine basis, we may suppose that it was an ordinary custom and often successful. When a man warded off his attacker in this way and there were no serious injuries, it was unlikely to be recorded. Cases of stick vs. knife in the homicide series are cases of unsuccessful defense; no stick-user was tried for homicide himself.

Stick vs. knife: for the historian it is an easy tool for distinguishing two groups and their cultures. The members of these groups were socially distinct, even though they might be neighbors. The people with knives belonged to the semirespectable segment of the lower classes. Characteristically, it was noted that Ambrosius Coertsz kept a concubine and had two children by her. The people with sticks belonged to the respectable segment or were lower middle class. Of course, the latter possessed
knives, too. They might even carry one in their pocket, expecting to eat an apple somewhere, for example. But they were not ready to use it in a violent confrontation. It is unlikely that Pieter Fontijn had no knives at all, not even a sharp kitchen knife, in his house. He just did not want to become involved in a knife fight. Alternatively, it is possible that the people with sticks were such poor fighters that a knife simply would be useless to them. However, the sources convey the impression that the main reason for the way they acted was that they found it beneath their dignity to allow the other party to challenge them. They wished to keep aloof from the people with knives. In this urban community, the level of public security was such that most people had to be ready to defend themselves, but sociocultural differences played a major role in the choice of weapon.

Semirespectable though they were, the people with knives cherished the rules of their game. Combats of one man against another were not just indiscriminate clashes. Rituals and cultural codes partly dictated the course of knife fights. As I said before, they were popular duels. Respect for the rules was compatible with impulsive behavior and the unleashing of passions. The quarrels preceding a combat certainly were real, and the anger must have been deeply felt. The combination of ritual and sincerity is intriguing to our modern western minds. Fair fighters adhered to a few basic rules.

The first rule, already alluded to, was to ensure an equal combat. Everybody might be involved in the preliminaries, but when two men had actually started to fight, others normally stepped aside. This would seem wise when the bystanders were companions of both contestants: when the original quarrel had arisen within a group. In such cases, intervention only took the form of a third group member trying to convince the combatants to stop. However, there were also inactive bystanders who were companions of only one of the combatants. When Claes Hendriks Kraemer, called Smidje, met his old enemy, Jonker Bexe, at the Den Bosch fair in 1665, the latter was in the company of his cousin and two women. The enemies agreed to withdraw to a quiet place, but they became separated while trying to avoid the guard. A little later, Claes heard a voice say, "Smidje, where are you?" He answered and noticed that Bexe still was with his cousin. "There are two of you," protested Claes, whereupon Bexe’s cousin said, "Go ahead. I won’t interfere." It earned him a compliment from Claas: "You speak as an honorable fellow." The combat began. Bexe was to die from his wounds the next day, but by then Claes had already fled the town. He arrived in Amsterdam and found a job...
there, but two years later he was arrested and tried for Bexe's murder. Upon a few other occasions, too, the Amsterdam schepenen dealt with far-away homicides. These cases suggest that the knife-fighting culture also flourished elsewhere in the Netherlands. An example of a noninterfering friend in Amsterdam was given at the beginning of the article. Another example concerns a tavern brawl in 1704. The course of events is not entirely clear from the records, but the defendant, named Jan, confessed this much: At a certain moment he, Jan, went outside followed by "Steentje" and "black Martin," who both drew their knives. Then Jan got a knife from a stranger. Steentje said to Jan, "Sta vast," and the combat began. Black Martin did not interfere.

Another basic rule was to avoid embarrassing a landlord or landlady. When a conflict arose in a tavern and the participants sensed it was to be resolved through violence, they left for the street. The actual fight took place outside. Even to draw a knife indoors was not quite honorable. This course of events is so obvious from the records that it is unnecessary to document it with individual examples. Let me give a counterexample instead when, for once, a customer was stabbed inside a tavern. Cornelis Oudendijk and Willem van der Helm, sitting in Adam Beumer's cellar-bar on the afternoon of 29 November 1719, had words over an inheritance. Cornelis called Willem a scoundrel, and Willem replied that he should slap Cornelis's face for this insult. Then they were reconciled and had a drink together. A little later, however, when Willem sat on a bench near the fire, Cornelis stabbed him in the back without warning: treacherously, so the records say. Beumer immediately exclaimed, "How do you dare to perform such a schelmstuk [an act of roguery] in my cellar?" Cornelis just reacted by pulling the bloody knife out of Willem's back and putting it in his pocket. Beumer's words speak for themselves; we can feel this landlord's astonishment and indignation. That Cornelis did not throw away his knife, a common device for hiding the evidence, suggests he was either simple or extremely drunk.

Knife fights resembled official duels in several respects. One party, at least, had to perceive an encroachment upon his honor. A disagreement accompanied by strong language or just a sudden insult often sparked the incident. For a combat to ensue, one party had to challenge the other. In line with the rule not to fight indoors, the challenge often consisted of an invitation to leave for the street together. During a tavern brawl, the words "Come, follow me outside" would not be misunderstood. In the
street the fight did not necessarily start immediately. The quarrel might be continued verbally at first. The combatants might also agree to retire to some quiet area, a back street or a courtyard. Whatever they did, the yell "Sta vast" was the point of no return. When one party said this, both would draw their knives. From then on, the two were obliged, if not to attack, at least to defend themselves. If third parties were present, they served as witnesses. Their role was comparable to the seconds in the official duel, but their presence had not been arranged in advance.

The combat as such was a test of skill. In the cases of the homicide series it ended in death by definition, but it could also be over when one man had cut the other or obtained a clear advantage. Indeed, during their trial many killers confessed to having injured people on earlier occasions. A number of convicts themselves had scars. When the court inquired, they would routinely say something like: "I received this cut from a man at the Rose’s Canal last Fall." The word received suggests a kind of acceptance, but it may actually be the court clerk’s bureaucratic parlance rather than the fighters’ own words.

This description of the ritual course of knife fights is a reconstruction from a number of cases. It is an ideal type. Individual duels might deviate in one way or another from the ideal course of events. Occasional details shed further light on the inherent codes. One December night two men, coming out of a cellar-bar arguing and drawing their knives, realized it was dark outside. "Come here, under the lantern," said one to the other, who followed him. This small detail confirms that a duel started only upon mutual agreement. Lambert, a skilled fighter, had already cut his adversary on his left cheek when the latter inadvertently dropped his knife. Lambert allowed the other to pick it up again, then continued the fight and stabbed his adversary in the belly. In another case the eventual victim, a sailor, had invited his adversary to leave the tavern with him. In the street the sailor made it clear that he only wanted a fistfight, but his adversary said, "I am not able to fight you with my fists." What exactly he meant by this is unclear. In any case, both men drew their knives, cut toward each other, were separated without injuries, looked for each other again a little later, and fought anew with fatal result for the sailor, who had been the original challenger. In a homicide case in 1712 the killer, nicknamed Black Lou or Lou the German, did not care much for the victim, called Daniel Krijt, but both men respected the basic ritual. It began with a quarrel, for an undisclosed reason, in Daniel’s room. Lou first went
home to change clothes, putting on something more convenient. Back in Daniel's room, he drew his knife twice and then put it back into his pocket. Then he slapped Daniel's wife. The angered husband exclaimed, "Whoever hits my wife hits me." Lou immediately responded, "Sta vast," and he drew his knife again. Daniel said, "Vast it will be," and drew his knife, too. But soon he had been stabbed no less than eight times. As he lay on the floor motionless, his wife yelled, "Oy, my husband, he dies." Then Lou seized her and threw her on Daniel's body, exclaiming, "There, lie on your dead husband now; lie, so that the Devil may take you." This case forms a clear example of the combination of deep anger and a respect for the basic ritual of the challenge.

A final example of a one-on-one combat shows that the ritual obligation to remain fair was not always fully respected. The four actors were Jan, Johannes, Dirk, and Frans. Incidentally, Jan had been to a funeral that day, presumably of someone who had died a natural death. In the evening the four men sat in a tavern at the Haarlemmerdijk, where Johannes and Frans started to quarrel with Dirk. All three went outside and drew their knives, but Jan followed them to hush them up. In particular, he tried to calm down Johannes, who was furious with Dirk. Then Dirk left the group. At Frans's insistence, the three of them went to a tavern at the Lindengracht to order another pot of beer. Along the way, Johannes, still angry because Jan had separated him and Dirk, twice drew his knife on Jan, who said he should wait until they had reached a place where he could remove his black coat, apparently meaning that he was unable to fight while wearing it. Jan got rid of it in the tavern at the Lindengracht, but a fight did not ensue immediately. A little later Johannes kicked Jan's dog, which caused the pot of beer, just ordered, to topple. Then Johannes issued the challenge, "Come, let's go," and went outside, followed by Jan. It was 4 A.M. Frans was no longer referred to in the story; he may or may not have been present during the combat. Jan soon got the upper hand. He stabbed Johannes in the belly. Johannes fell down, but managed to cut his attacker's thumb and to lodge his knife in Jan's right arm. Jan pulled it out, threw it away, and then stabbed Johannes in his right shoulder. Jan's knife stuck, too; he pulled it out of his adversary's shoulder just as a watchman apprehended him. To stab an adversary after throwing away his knife certainly was a breach of the code of fair fighting. In this case, passions seem to have overtaken respect for ritual in the end.

Rituals of violence were supplemented by rituals of reconciliation. Be-
cause the interrogation protocols usually work toward a climax, the re-
conciliation they refer to was temporary, reached in the middle of a chain
of events. One ritual in particular stands out here. It is called afdrinken: the
men "drink the conflict away." Usually it goes like this: Two men have
an argument. They rise from their chairs, utter threatening words, and
maybe one slaps the other in the face. There is talk about settling the mat-
ter through a fight, but other men in the company hush it up and tempers
cool. At that point a bottle of wine or beer is ordered, and the whole com-
pany sits together and tries to forget the incident. But it is never entirely
forgotten. Passions may become hot again, and violence may or may not
flare up anew. In homicide cases, necessarily, reconciliation was unsuc-
cessful in the end. It may be supposed, however, that hundreds of quarrels
and minor fights have really been "drunk away," without leaving a trace in
the court records. References to afdrinken are as numerous as they are
poor in details. The skilled Lambert, who allowed his adversary to pick up
his knife, had been reconciled to him earlier. It happened after the even-
tual victim, acting suddenly, had stabbed Lambert in his left arm. Accom-
panied by the tavern's landlord, Lambert visited a surgeon and returned to
drink the conflict away with his attacker.

The rituals discussed so far may be termed positive. Their basic aim
was to stylize violence, making it less naked and unrestrained, or to re-
duce its incidence. Negative rituals, on the other hand, were associated
with the repertoire of humiliation. Several historians have observed that
attackers followed cultural codes in deciding which part of their adver-
sary's body to hit. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Artois, Muchembled
found that in many cases the victim's head had been hit, even though, in
order to kill him, it would have been more efficient to thrust a knife into
his belly. He concluded that the ritual disfiguration of an adversary's face
was meant to humiliate him. Cohen and Cohen came to a similar conclu-
sion for sixteenth-century Rome. Yet, in the Amsterdam homicide series,
almost no victim died of head injuries. Victims were stabbed in the chest
or belly or elsewhere. A possible explanation is that popular duelists
around 1700 were not normally bent on killing each other. A knife fight
was a test of strength. Upon starting it, some combatants explicitly said
that the other "needed a cut" or "should have something." If a fight ended
in death, it was an "accident." In that case, for whatever reason, one com-
batant had become so furious that he disregarded the original purpose. At
that point, he did not intend to humiliate, just to attack.

The preliminary analysis of nonhomicidal violence, on the other hand,
discloses several negative rituals. To manage to cut someone's face, for example, meant to show one's superiority over him. Some stabbings were clearly meant to humiliate. A peculiar act of degradation was to stab someone's buttock. In 1696, for example, two sailors saw their former helmsman, who had punished them while on ship, walking the streets with his wife. They decided to take revenge. They followed him to a narrow alley, where one of the sailors thrust his knife into the helmsman's right buttock. A certain Co, nicknamed "Bale of Wool," who was tried for several acts of violence in 1711 when he was twenty, denied the charges. In his youth he had belonged to a group of boys hanging around at the Botermarkt, who habitually fought the boys from the orphanage. Two former orphanage boys accused Co of having stabbed one of their group in his buttock. Upon another occasion, also at the Botermarkt, Co was alleged to have thrown his knife into a girl's buttock. His mother had given the girl money to get bandaged. In the nonhomicidal series, most victims of buttock stabbing were women. Negative rituals were practiced also by people who eventually became killers. Minor cuts and nondeadly stabbings turn up in the homicide series as additional charges against a number of defendants. Some had cut another on the cheek; others had stabbed a man in his arm. Several killers were accused of having stabbed a woman, their sweetheart or some other woman, in her buttock. Some denied this; others confessed.

Humiliation, shame, and honor: these themes played a role in most of the cases discussed. As knife fights were often begun in order to defend one's honor, insults often were the immediate cause. They included such common insults as schelmen (rogue, scoundrel), thief, or whore. An incident in 1682 began when a passer-by thought that the killer was a Jew and called him <miou<i.28 A few young fighters felt insulted at being called a boy or "little brother." Not every insult was as blunt as the one Dirk Teunisse made to Gijsbert Jacobse. The two men met in a tavern. As if he wanted to frustrate later historians' attempts to determine killer-victim relationships, Gijsbert said to Dirk: "I know you, even though I haven't seen you for a long time." Dirk's reply must have been meant to indicate that he did not remember and didn't care, either: "Then you won't blow into my ass unacquainted." Gijsbert's interrogators recognized this as heavy language, for their next question was whether Dirk had also insulted him in other ways.29

Intriguingly, the "real" duel, arranged in advance and fought with
swords or pistols, is almost absent from the Amsterdam court records. Duels with pistols, uncommon throughout Europe in this period, are not referred to at all. A few one-on-one combats were fought with swords, usually by (ex-)soldiers. Even then, an arrangement in advance was uncommon. In 1712 a group of night watchmen interrupted a rapier combat and pursued one of the protagonists, a naval officer. The officer pierced one of the watchmen with his rapier, was overpowered by the others, and was tried for homicide. The court showed no interest in the original fight. Just one incident, in 1682, was unmistakably an official duel. The contestants were two French ex-soldiers, but in the eyes of their Third Republic compatriots the issue could hardly have appeared lofty. Our Frenchmen had a disagreement over the division of the spoils after they had snatched a farmer's purse at the city fair. They decided to settle the matter with swords. Two other soldiers promised to lend them their weapons for the occasion, which cost them twenty guilders. They agreed to meet in a tavern the next day. All four eventually came. From the tavern they went to a wood-storage yard in the Jewish area. The duel was fought there, with the sword owners serving as witnesses. One combatant died and the other walked away, pursued by the victim's concubine until he reached the Muiden gate. He was arrested a few months later, after having killed a female friend.

Gender was a factor in the knife culture in various ways. Evidently, the particular ritual repertoire and code of honor of these people belonged to a male world. The connection between masculinity and the code regulating the official duel has been noted already. In making this code their own, the participants built up a self-image of a tough, noneffeminate man. This is equally true for the popular duel. No doubt, its participants felt that testing each other's fighting skill was testing each other's manhood, even though the sources contain few explicit references to this. We have to be content with indirect evidence. Chivalry may be taken as one piece of indirect evidence. A number of knife fights originated in the defense of a woman against a man by another man. Although it was common for men in this social milieu to beat women when they were angry at them, this did not always go unchallenged. Examples have been given already. Especially when a man harassed a woman in public, a regular feature of the tavern milieu, another man might interfere verbally: "You wouldn't dare to do that to a fellow," or "If she were my wife, I would beat you up." Sometimes such interventions led to a fight. Upon other occasions a man,
crossing the streets in a bad mood and looking for trouble, said upon meeting a woman that she need not be afraid because he would never fight a woman. The implication, sometimes added, was that the next man passing by had better watch out.

In spite of such protestations, some women definitely were victims of male violence. The homicide series does contain female victims, and some of them had no intimate relationship to the killer. A homicide of a wife or concubine was usually committed at home. In taverns, it could happen that a man was so angry at a female acquaintance or a recent sweetheart that he stabbed her. Presumably, such an act fell outside the code of honor. Passions had taken the upper hand then. This observation can be formulated in a different manner: since women were not expected to participate in popular duels, they could not be formally challenged. There were no customary rules for combating women, and therefore they stood a greater risk of sudden attack.

These observations can be supplemented with cases from the non-homicidal series. An ex-soldier from Zutphen, for example, was convicted in 1651 for injuring a woman’s face with a broken glass. Having a wife in Zutphen, he had left that town in the company of a woman named Griet, and he had left her, too, for a woman with whom he lived in Amsterdam. The victim was yet another woman, whose relationship to him remained unrecorded. The relationship between Claas Dorison and Annetie Bor duur remained unrecorded as well. Claas went to get beer for her, had a quarrel with another man on his way, and came back without beer. When Annetie reproached him for this, he cut her in the neck and hand. Extramarital relationships figured again in a trial in 1713. The defendant, Pieter Knoet, was married, but he had no idea whether his wife was still alive. Asked by schepenen if it was true that he lived with a woman with whom he had five or six children, he replied that he was only considered the father of the child of a certain Kee but that he did not believe it was his. In any case, Pieter was now living with Trijn Pieters, with whom he had quarreled in her home on a Saturday night. A woman living next door had interfered and said, “This is enough.” Thereupon Pieter had beaten this woman and cut her face. He claimed she fell into his knife by accident.

Cutting a woman’s face could be an act of revenge by a jilted lover; such a custom is still reported in some countries nowadays. Thus, Jan Helt cut Margrietje Duijff’s face from the eye to the mouth on Epiphany night 1698: without any reason, the court clerk wrote. He must have
meant without an immediately preceding quarrel. Jan admitted that Margrietje was his former girlfriend. An incident in 1711, we may suppose, arose because Magdalena Visser had rejected Adolf Gerrits. Adolf was sitting in a tavern with three women when Magdalena, who stayed with one of them, entered. This made “his blood change in his body.” A little later, Adolf left the tavern, now in the company of four women. In the street, he started scolding Magdalena: “You thunder-whore! You beast! What do you do here? You have no business here.” Then he stabbed her in her side. In court he admitted everything except calling Magdalena a whore. The conflict behind Marten Elskamp’s revenge, finally, remains unclear. He had been denied access to a family’s home, in particular by the woman of the house. Earlier, he had often been welcome there, having returned from Indonesia with her son. On a September night in 1744 he knocked on the family’s door. When the woman opened the door, Marten tried to cut her face, but she stepped back and received a cut in her arm instead. Under torture, Marten explained that this woman had “made him go astray” and “laughed at his sister.”

The relationships between violence and gender were multifaceted. Popular duels, as tests of manhood, were exclusively male affairs, but in various roles, women occupied a part of the stage.

Violence Changing: The Church and the State

Having analyzed the knife culture in a static fashion, I must now pose the question of change. And, following Elias, I must inquire into the interdependence of cultural change and other social developments. The knife culture may have had a long history; there is no reason to assume that the beginning of my series in 1650 was its starting point. Some information on earlier years comes from Roodenburg’s work on the church discipline exercised by the Amsterdam Reformed consistory, 1578–1700. Disciplinary cases included acts of violence by church members. The consistory dealt with a number of serious injuries, some with knives, even a few homicides. Roodenburg gives no details about these cases, but he does present the total numbers of church members summoned for violence per decade. These numbers dropped to an insignificant level after 1630. He concludes that toward the middle of the seventeenth century the consistory’s disciplinary drive had achieved success, as far as it concerned taming violence. This finding is particularly significant, because the Reformed
community may be considered representative for the "respectable" segment of the city's lower and middle classes. Around 1600, apparently, being respectable did not preclude being involved in the culture of violence. This leads to an intriguing conclusion: by the time when my series begins, the division of the urban population into the people with knives and the people with sticks had just come about.

The disappearance of the knife-fighting culture is revealed in the series itself. From its inception until about 1720, one-on-one combats were conspicuously present. Homicide trials, to be sure, represent just a fraction of the total number of killings. As noted above, the actual homicide rates peaked between 1690 and 1725, and this was mainly due to a heightened propensity for knife fights. It remains unknown what caused this temporary upsurge. Did the knife culture gain strength just before it died out? Whatever the interpretation, things had changed by the middle of the eighteenth century. As revealed by the body inspection reports, the absolute number of killings had substantially decreased then, and stabblings accounted for a smaller proportion of this diminished volume. In the series of homicide trials, there were hardly any "honorable" knife fights after 1720. Stabbings still were reported, but they were mostly unequal struggles. They began as fistfights, for example, in which the eventual victim, taken by surprise, had not drawn a knife at all. Significantly, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the only trial referring to a popular duel—a knife fight complete with the yell "Sta vast" and all that—took place in the relative marginality of the Jewish community. The combined observations from the homicide series and the body inspection reports lead me to conclude that the incidence of popular duels must have declined sharply in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

My evidence and Roodenburg's data together point to the existence of a medium-term cultural development: the process of marginalization of the knife culture. The beginnings of this process date back to the late sixteenth century, when the Reformed consistory initiated its disciplinary drive. Effective marginalization had been accomplished more or less in the second half of the eighteenth century. This chronology concerns Amsterdam. Evidence suggests that the knife culture lived on longer in some rural parts of the Netherlands. In a recent study of crime in the Groningen countryside, Sleebe notes that even in the early nineteenth century many village fights started with a semiformal challenge. The challenger invited his adversary outside, and the latter indicated his acceptance by
taking off his coat. Sleebe quotes a contemporary observer who remembered what dueling was like in the eighteenth century: Skilled fighters attempted to make long cuts in their opponent’s faces, while they prided themselves on their own scars. A comparable attitude prevailed in Drente and Brabant around 1800. In the Groningen countryside, as far as can be ascertained from Sleebe’s account, knives still dominated violent crime by the middle of the nineteenth century, but toward the end they became less common as a weapon. Thus, the marginalization of the knife culture probably was a broader development, and its chronology varied with the region.

The evidence about this development supports my theory about long-term qualitative changes in the character of violence. Notably, it points to change on the ritual-instrumental axis. The process of marginalization of the knife culture in Amsterdam meant, among other things, that ritual elements in violence lost importance during the eighteenth century. Admittedly, even modern violence may involve ritual of some kind, but a specific form of highly ritualized fighting disappeared. So what about the opposite pole, that of instrumental violence? The decline of knife fights did not mean that cases of homicide with a conspicuously instrumental character became more frequent in absolute terms. There was no positive breakthrough of instrumental violence. The share of homicides committed in relation to a property crime, for example, remained fairly steady between 1650 and 1810. This still means that, on balance, Amsterdam violence moved a little closer to the instrumental pole of the axis.

Scholars influenced by Elias’s historical sociology cannot be content with the sole description of a process, however long. Changes in the cultural meaning of violence must be linked to broader changes in Dutch society. Was the marginalization of the knife culture related to a process of state formation or, for that matter, economic developments? The present state of the evidence allows only a preliminary answer. This begins with an inquiry into the activities of the Church and the magistrates. The disciplinary drive by the Reformed consistory has been mentioned already. Although other Protestant churches have not been investigated in detail in this respect, we know that they, too, exercised moral discipline. Clearly, the godly thought all private violence sinful. We learn this from the tracts of several ministers, when they dealt with the sixth commandment. According to them, it referred not only to killing but to violence in general and the slightest quarrel that might lead to it. They routinely condemned
all sorts of violence, except such activities as executing criminals or waging war against Catholic Spaniards. Showing a vague knowledge of the popular concept of honor, the ministers uncompromisingly disapproved of it: true honor, they argued, originates from God alone. Additional evidence is provided by the resolutions taken at provincial synods of the Reformed Church. Although such subjects as the regulation of marriage and the suppression of practices considered superstitious received the greater share of the synods’ attention, there was a steady flow of resolutions concerning homicide and knife fighting. The Utrecht assembly of 1606, for example, heard complaints from the minister at Veenendaal: no less than thirty people had been killed in the village since his arrival there; unfortunately, we do not hear how long he was in office. In the eastern provinces, between 1590 and 1610, a few preachers themselves were suspected of homicide. In the 1630s the synod of South Holland spoke out against knife fighting several times. From the 1650s onward, the efforts of the synods concentrated on dueling. They attributed this custom specifically to soldiers; apparently, they considered their flock to be sufficiently pacified.

This “civilization offensive” by the leaders of religious communities was probably the main factor in the first phase of marginalization of the knife culture: its fall from respectability. In the early Republic, the competition between several Protestant denominations extended from the doctrinal arena to the issue of the community’s virtue in the eyes of outsiders. Abstention from violence was one means of exhibiting virtue. The competition between denominations stimulated the drive to reform the behavior of church members. From them, knife fights were not tolerated and, consequently, these fights became the habit of less respectable people. From the end of the seventeenth century onward the consistories were less active with regard to discipline. Moreover, the disrespectful “people with knives” hardly cared about the consistories’ concerns in the first place. The disappearance of knife fighting after 1720, then, must be due not so much to religious indoctrination as to repression by the state.

To some extent, church and state were intertwined. Apart from correcting its members, the Church exerted pressure on the magistrates. In most of the synods’ resolutions concerning violence, the courts were called upon to take a firm stand. In the late sixteenth century it was still common for the judicial authorities to allow private reconciliations in cases of homicide. They did not interfere when a killer had reached a
settlement with the victim's family; they might just impose a financial compensation on the former. Fugitive killers were convicted by default to a banishment from the jurisdiction, often consisting of a handful of villages. With a big smile the condemned paraded along the borderline, the synods complained. Clearly, the Church wanted the state to exercise its monopoly of violence through punishment. The churchmen admonished the secular authorities never to pardon those guilty of manslaughter and forbade their flock to hinder any criminal prosecution. Significantly, the ministers' definition of a duel stressed the fact that it involved two persons subject to the same authority. The duel was wrong because it meant an encroachment on the state's monopoly of violence. The influence of these ecclesiastical admonitions is difficult to ascertain. It is unlikely that it was just pressure by the churchmen that caused the magistrates to stop recognizing private settlements in homicide cases.

The timing of the shift toward an ex officio prosecution of homicide probably varied with the jurisdiction. Undoubtedly, the Amsterdam magistrates were bent on repressing the knife culture from at least 1650 onward. In my series there is no trace of a positive view nor even a neutral view of the popular duel by the court. The "honorable" combat was unlawful without any question. The only lawful excuse for stabbing someone was self-defense. This claim was bound to strict rules, such as an unmistakable duty to retreat. The duty to retreat is plain in Claas Abrams's case, cited at the beginning of this article: even though the eventual victim had been the first to draw a knife, the Amsterdam schepenen found that the killer deserved the death penalty. When his adversary's knife broke, they argued, Claas should have taken the opportunity to flee. The court told other defendants who claimed self-defense that they could easily have retreated into someone's house. Needless to say, such acts of withdrawal would be a shame on an honorable fighter.

Changes in the knife culture's infrastructure were crucial, too. The court struck at it from time to time, but the magistrates do not seem to have been engaged in a systematic policy of suppression. The infrastructure's existence is revealed in trials against individual killers around 1700. The larger community to which knife fighters belonged, maybe even some respectable people, thought lightly about the popular duel. If a fight resulted in the death of one combatant, many people considered this an accident. They found capital punishment too severe a sanction. Consequently, they refused to turn in an "honest" killer, and some were prepared to help
him escape. Of course, help came from family and friends in the first place, but even strangers might be indirectly involved. A few private persons caught a shoplifter in the act, then let him go when he confessed to having once committed manslaughter. They would have turned him in for theft, but they found it unreasonable that the poor wretch might get the death penalty for his earlier "accident." Some landlords, upon noticing a reputed killer in their bar, would ask, "Why are you still in town?" Once, we hear that money was collected in several bars in the street in which a knife fight had taken place, to support a killer in his flight from the city.49 After 1720 the court records no longer contain references to this infrastructure. It may have faded away with the knife culture itself.

A case in 1795 suggests a changed attitude on the part of the tavern public: two men quarreled in a winehouse over a loan of money; they went outside; one of them returned to the winehouse a little later, carrying a bloodstained knife that he had used to peel a lemon when the quarrel started; he exclaimed, "Where shall I go to?" No one reacted.50 Further research is needed to discover whether cooperation with the law became increasingly acceptable during the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

The knife culture that flourished in Amsterdam until about 1720 was rooted in "traditional" notions of masculinity and honor. The theme of honor has been studied by anthropologists as well as by some historians, but hardly so with reference to tavern violence in the towns of early modern Europe.51 Therefore, the ritual character of one-on-one combats in Amsterdam forms a crucial finding. This evidence broadens our knowledge of duels, which up until now was based almost solely on the official aristocratic and military duel. The popular duel was first discovered by Beattie, studying eighteenth-century England. In England it was even more formal, often being arranged in advance. The preceding quarrel, for example, might be in a tavern in the afternoon and the combat would take place in the tavern's courtyard that night with the landlord acting as a witness.52 In a similar vein, lower-class Parisians in the eighteenth century sometimes participated in prearranged fights.53 Further research is needed to determine whether such customs existed in other countries and to discover the chronology of their rise and fall throughout Europe.

In Amsterdam the disappearance of the knife culture had conse-
quences for the incidence and character of violence. After the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the homicide rate sharply declined. Ritual elements came to occupy a less prominent place in Amsterdam violence. The proportion of killings of strangers decreased, and the proportion of homicides of intimate persons rose.

Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented as lectures for the Program for British Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the history departments at Georgetown University and the University of Stony Brook, and as a paper at the 1994 meeting of the Social Science History Association in Atlanta. I am grateful to the audiences for their comments, especially to the discussant in Atlanta, Daniel Cohen. I also have to thank Martin Wiener for pointing out an inconsistency in an earlier version.

1. This had happened on 29 July 1685, also eventually leading to a homicide because of Jets. See Gemeente-Archief (Municipal Archive), Amsterdam: Archive no. 5061, Oud-Rechterlijk Archief (henceforth R.A.), no. 329, fols. 197–99.
2. R.A. 336, fols. 129vs, 132vs, 138, 140vs; R.A. 596, fol. 177vs.
5. For more details, see Spierenburg 1994 and 1996.
6. R.A. 326, fols. 162, 166, 195, 201, 219, 221vs.
8. R.A. 387, fols. 143vs, 146, 147, 161vs, 158, 159vs, 164, 174vs, 177vs.
9. R.A. 368, fols. 241vs e.v.; R.A. 369, fols. 54vs, 75vs, 77, 107, 107vs.
10. R.A. 356, fols. 82vs, 102vs, 104vs, 129.
11. R.A. 378, fols. 29vs, 32, 54, 50.
14. R.A. 356, fols. 100, 102, 129vs.
15. R.A. 364, fols. 161vs, 187, 236vs.
17. R.A. 353, fols. 161vs, 163, 164, 165vs, 166vs, 170vs, 184, 189, 194, 195vs, 197vs, 220.
18. R.A. 378, fols. 44, 47, 86.
21. R.A. 378, fols. 91vs, 94, 96, 100.
22. R.A. 365, fols. 53, 61vs, 64, 78.
23. R.A. 549, fols. 246, 250, 262vs, 264vs, 265vs, 273, 277vs, 278.
26. R.A. 545, fols. 183vs, 204, 208, 210vs, 257.
27. R.A. 563, fols. 92vs, 98, 131, 139vs, 151, 166, 171.
30. R.A. 366, fols. 23vs, 36vs, 38, 95.
31. R.A. 327, fols. 6, 10, 20, 22vs, 28vs, 43vs, 51, 54vs.
33. R.A. 309, fol. 1vs.
34. R.A. 355, fols. 2, 6vs.
35. R.A. 368, fols. 88, 93vs.
36. R.A. 345, fol. 118vs.
37. R.A. 562, fols. 207vs, 219vs.
38. R.A. 406, fols. 149vs, 164, 159vs.
42. Cf. Spierenburg 1994 and 1996. A few statements made there, based on the quantification of contextual aspects, should be qualified in view of the present analysis:

a. The distinction between strangers and acquaintances among homicide victims appears less relevant. Violence flared up among mixed groups in taverns and streets. The composition of these groups fluctuated; often they included a few friends of the eventual killer as well as a few others with whom he was previously unacquainted.

b. The proportion of strangers killed partly depends on the share of robbery-related cases. Trials against members of organized bands, however, were excluded from my series, and nonorganized robberies in which the victim was killed formed a fairly constant minority in it. (For violence by robber bands in the Dutch Republic, see Egmond 1993.)

c. My earlier distinction between killers who were professional criminals and those who were not seems less pertinent. The interrogation protocols reveal a much closer association with the world of petty crime than the listings of previous convictions or additional offenses in the sentences.

d. Whether or not one was born in Amsterdam hardly appeared to make a difference in the half-respectable community to which the knife fighters belonged.

These four corrections, however, do not diminish the reliability of the principal trend posited in the above-mentioned publications toward an increasing proportion of intimate victims of homicide.
44. See, for example, Teellinck 1622; Udemans 1658; Koelman 1690.
48. Cf., for example, Udemans 1658, 245.
49. R.A. 368, fols. 61vs, 69, 218vs, 220vs.
51. See my introduction to this book. There and earlier in this article I have referred to several studies based on court records, in which honor is a major theme. Others are Carrasco 1990; Dinges 1991; Egmond 1994; Gauvard 1991; Kuehn 1991; Keunen and Roodenburg 1992.