

Étude critique / Review Essay

The Duel in the History of Masculinity

W. SCOTT HAINE*

Peter Gay — *The Cultivation of Hatred. Vol. III, The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993). Pp. x, 685.

Kevin McAleer — *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in fin-de-siècle Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Pp. xiii, 268.

Robert A. Nye — *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France. Studies in the History of Sexuality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Pp. ix, 316.

A DECADE AGO, the *Daily Telegraph* in England proclaimed V. G. Kiernan's *The Duel in European History*¹ "a definitive study". The reviewer spoke too soon, for that year in France François Billacois published his fine social psychological study, *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*, and in 1991 in Germany Ute Frevert published a study on German duels during the nineteenth century from a Weberian perspective.² In addition, over the past two years three excellent books have appeared either dealing directly with the duel (Robert A. Nye and Kevin McAleer) or touching on it tangentially in a wider study of aggression (Peter Gay). The historical study of the duel and aggression is of vital current interest due in large part to the pervasive questioning of gender roles in general and masculinity in particular.

Of the three authors, Nye is the most attentive to the new literature on

* W. Scott Haine is the editor of *The Social History of Alcohol Review*.

1 V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honor and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2 François Billacois, *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*, translated ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Ute Frevert, *Men of Honor: A Social History of the Duel*, translated ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

masculinity (often inspired by feminist theory) and its focus on the male body, its sexualities and aggressions. Nye's use of the concept of "honour codes" as a "conceptual bridge" to explore the intersection between the private realm of sexual behaviour and the public domain of male sociability provides a fruitful path for future historians. Nye thus takes a very different approach from Gay, who, in the first volume of the *Bourgeois Experience*, felt that women were the "problematic sex". In this third volume, Gay's stance has not perceptibly changed because he devotes little time and space to recent theories about masculinity (though he does so on the question of aggression).

Nye, believing that Billacois underestimated the power and persistence of the duel after the early modern period, convincingly shows how the medieval honour code spread across the Old Regime, from the warrior aristocracy to the early modern monarchical bureaucratic nobility and then to the upper bourgeoisie. In its transition across class lines the concept of honour was transformed: from military service to strategies of inheritance, reproduction, and power. The duel as the epitome of honour survived the 1789 Revolution and was the ritual around which a new code (synthesizing noble and bourgeois elements) emerged at the start of the nineteenth century and expanded from its traditional military milieu into the fields of biology and medicine. Doctors advanced the theory of a "true" masculinity in all spheres of life and valorized the productive heterosexual procreator. One of the most suggestive conclusions to be drawn from Nye's work is that French males strove to overcome the private "dishonour" of the falling French birth rate (especially compared to Germany) with public acts of virility on the duelling grounds.

The final three (and the longest) chapters detail the workings of the culture of the honour code. A new duelling code, the first of its kind since the seventeenth century, was published in 1836 by Count Chatauvillard updating and rationalizing the duel. By restricting duels to sword play, decisions as to the drawing of "first blood", and demands that seconds be of "the best class of men" and that they be invested with "quasi-judicial powers and with safe-guarding the honor of the duelists", the new code achieved a "quasi juridical" status that nullified all governmental attempts at prohibition. Nye perceptively links the duel to bourgeois male urban sociability in clubs, newspaper offices, Masonic Lodges, and the Parliament. Indeed, the "*politesse* of good society and the *politesse* of the dueling ground were ... cut from same cloth" (p. 132).

The duel received added impetus from France's debacle in the 1870–1871 war with Prussia. In the postwar proliferation of literature on heroism, the duel seemed an indispensable way for French manhood to steel — the pun is mine — itself for future conflict. During the 1870s fencing schools multiplied; by 1890 Paris had more than 100 fencing masters. In 1882 a society was organized to encourage fencing, and in 1886 Parisian masters revived the Academy of Arms. Department stores and newspapers built their

own fencing halls. Indeed, the era saw the emergence of a fencing press. Nye believes that an average of 200 duels took place annually between 1875 and 1900. During political crises, such as the Boulanger and Dreyfus affairs, the total rose to 300 annually. The épée was by far the favoured weapon: by the 1880s only 10 per cent of the duels involved pistols and only one per cent used the sabre.

In his conclusion, entitled “Courage”, Nye connects the duel and its code of manly honour both to war and sport, showing how these “disciplines” (in Foucault’s sense) prepared the French bourgeoisie for war. He ends with a deftly chosen quotation from the World War I memoirs of the great historian Marc Bloch, who believed that courage in the trenches was the product of personal honour reinforced by group loyalties. In short, the code of honour, honed over the course of centuries and fused with modern technology, produced a fatal explosion that reverberates to the present day.

Kevin McAleer provides a splendid comparative study of honour from the other side of World War I’s trenches. McAleer, acknowledging Nye’s assistance, also provides a fruitful chapter comparing German and French duels. McAleer, however, focuses more narrowly upon the political and military history of German honour than Nye does for France. This strategy is entirely appropriate because the German duel did not evolve as its French cousin did, but remained tied to aristocratic military mores and restricted to the wealthy, better educated upper bourgeoisie. As a result, 90 per cent of the German male population was outside the “honour loop”. Although Nye provides no comparable percentage, the weight of his evidence indicates that duelling drifted farther down the French social scale.

The pistol, not the épée, was the weapon of choice for the Germans, who duelled only about half as often as the French but had a much higher fatality rate. The German concept of masculinity put a premium on stoic physical courage, demanding “a bovine impassivity” rather than physical agility. For all serious insults, the German duellist was commanded to stand still, to fire and be fired upon. After provocation, the principals had to deliver the challenge within 24 hours; the actual duel had to take place within 48 hours. Germans believed that an insult could not be tolerated and that the greater the danger in the duel the greater the honour of the participants. The French duel, by contrast, was considered “something of a joke” because so few died. McAleer estimates that one in five German duels ended in death, whereas French duels accounted for only two and twelve deaths annually.

Although the duel became assimilated into the bourgeois ethos in France, in Germany it remained entrenched in the world of the Prussian military aristocracy. Germany’s “mammoth reserve officer corps”, staffed by the bourgeoisie, ensured that, unlike in France, the model for the German duellist continued to be the military officer. After 1840 various Prussian, then German kaisers lent their prestige to the duel. The German middle class perceived duelling, McAleer asserts, as they perceived war — a means of social advancement. By the late nineteenth century even student duelling,

known as the *mensur*, was imitating the officer's code. The rapier had been replaced by the schlager, a straight-edged cutting weapon bereft of a point, which allowed fencers to engage in an "increasingly aggressive, reckless, and lacklustre style of sword play that like pistol duels tested high on careless disregard for self and on the art of unflinchingly taking it" (pp. 123–124).

In an ambitious conclusion McAleer connects duelling to some of the major themes of modern German history. He argues, for example, that duelling provides new evidence that Germany indeed trod a "separate path" (*Sonderweg*) from other modern nations until after Hitler. Duelling stunted the development of equal citizen rights and was thus part of a "retrograde and negative nihilistic world view" of a lawless and aristocratic elite. In addition, he sees a connection between the neo-feudalism of the duel and that of Nazi ideology. While not always convincing, his hypotheses are certainly stimulating and should generate subsequent research linking the personal and the political in the history of masculinity.

Unlike Nye and McAleer, Peter Gay does not emphasize the links between duelling, aggression in general, and twentieth-century warfare. He starts with a consideration of the *mensur*, which despite its adolescent antics he views as "civilizing naked pugnacity", providing "an adolescent rite of passage", and remaining "an aristocratic survival taken over into a bourgeois society". Aside from some comments on the duels of Bismark and Lassalle, duelling unfortunately winds up being largely peripheral to Gay's study. He does, however, furnish a useful analysis of the long list of nineteenth-century thinkers (Hegel, Darwin, and Nietzsche, among others) and novelists (Zola to Jack London) who analyzed aggression. He also examines how aggression functioned in the lives and thoughts of such captains of industry as Carnegie and Rockefeller. He concludes, much like Nye but using completely different evidence, that the Victorians "democratized the courtly ideal of prowess" by linking manliness and energy.

Gay's analysis is at its best and most penetrating when he explores the critics of aggression. He demonstrates that English writers such as Thomas Hughes, Anthony Trollope, and William M. Thackeray undermined notions of prowess and castigated adolescent posturing. Gay offers many more examples of critics of traditional masculinity in England than in France and Germany. More study will be needed on this point, but if England did have more critics of masculine prowess, then perhaps it might help explain why duelling declined in England by the 1850s, more than half a century earlier than it did on the Continent. Gay next shows, in an analysis of the bourgeois conscience at work, some of the pacific ways — alleviation of corporal punishment in prisons and schools, for instance — in which masculine energy was channelled. He does not discuss the anti-duelling leagues that arose on the Continent, but does provide a telling example of women's reaction to duelling. In chapter 4, in a discussion of women and aggression, Gay details a female revenge fantasy in an 1899 poem by the minor German

poet Maria Janitschek. In this poem a woman challenges a man to a duel; when he refuses to fight, saying that men do not duel with women, she kills him. Gay concludes that this poem “naturally met with widespread disapproval” (pp. 346–347). It is a forceful and fascinating portrayal, and one wonders if it might reflect a widespread sentiment among women. In any case, the example highlights the potential for further study of women’s reaction to duelling.

A common theme running through all three books, as through much recent writing on the sociology and history of masculinity, is the problematic status of masculinity: man’s constant need to prove himself. Although men of honour have supposedly always had to maintain an icy sangfroid, as Nye compellingly shows, they have also possessed — in the words of the contemporary duelling theorist Bruneau de Laborie — a “painfully nervous noble susceptibility”. McAleer shows that honour in Germany was a sort of anxiety-producing “aesthetic sense” devoid of a clearly conceived ethical content. In the title of his last chapter, “Uncertain Mastery”, Gay, too, captures the ambivalence of nineteenth-century males as they attempted to subject passion to reason.

These three superb studies provide historians with a diverse set of problems for future exploration. One concerns the relationship between the duel, aggression in general, and sports. Is it a coincidence that England, after eliminating duelling during the first half of the nineteenth century, became the leading European nation in developing modern sports in the second half of the century? It appears, from Nye and McAleer, that duelling was less often lethal in France than in Germany because it was tied more closely to physical fitness and sport, although more research is needed here. Another point involves the relationship between reason, science, and aggression. Feminist and postmodern writers assert that violence is an intimate part of the reason and science produced by European males. Implicitly both Nye and McAleer are mindful of this connection because they link the nineteenth-century duelling field to the twentieth-century battlefield. Gay, on the contrary, retains the Enlightenment faith that reason can channel aggression into constructive ends. Indeed, he believes that, on the whole, the nineteenth century succeeded in harnessing aggression to positive ends. He thus concludes that “sheer stupidity drove the world toward August 4, 1914 as surely as the greed of the imperialists or the swagger of emperors.” Given the current debate on the interrelation between rationality, masculinity, and aggression, Gay’s thesis should provoke much reflection. In summary, these three books provide vital material and methodology for the history of masculinity.