



Steven C. Hughes. *Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor, and Masculinity in Modern Italy.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. xv + 360 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1072-7.

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Published on H-Law (June, 2008)

Nothing More Manly Than a Sword

In this highly entertaining and scholarly book, Steven C. Hughes examines the complex interaction between dueling and the rise of both the liberal Italian state of the late nineteenth century and the Fascist state of the twentieth century. Hughes makes a compelling case for the paradoxical conclusion that an increase in dueling is a frequent corollary to times of political transition. Rather than the last vestige of the old aristocratic order, Hughes demonstrates that the chivalric code was a means by which “up-and-coming elites ... set limits on behavior and legitimized their own status in society” (p. 329).

One of the most valuable things about the book is the fact that Hughes not only has read all the historical literature on such highly contentious topics as gender, violence, and honor, but also has managed to synthesize and incorporate this huge body of scholarship with an admirable mix of sophistication and clarity. Hughes has a fascinating mix of primary sources, including a nineteenth-century journalist’s careful statistical account of duels in Italy, dueling manuals, countless pamphlets, and speeches as well as novels, plays, and artists’ renderings. Though his chief topic is the paradoxical ways in which dueling and progress were linked in modern Italian history, he also puts the Italian experience in a much wider context, explicitly comparing Italy not only to the usual suspects—England, France, and Germany—but also to Belgium, Ireland, and Portugal.

Though the duel in Italy dates back to the Renaissance, its modern reemergence stems from the

Napoleonic period. As Hughes puts it, the French revolutionary armies provided both the “example and provocation” for a revival of the duel in Italy (p. 19). That liberation and unification both called for renewed displays of courage and honor is not surprising. Indeed, the early chapters of the book are considerably less gripping than those in the second half. That nineteenth-century nationalism was epitomized by calls to masculine vigor is well established, but what is much less obvious is the way that the duel was implicated in the rise of liberalism and the middle class after reunification. Given the regional and cultural diversity that made unification so much easier in theory than practice, the duel provided a tool for political development. Hughes argues that “the duel reflected in its stylized violence the heat of Italy’s early political discord. Indeed, the pugnacity of debate and the bellicose response of punctilious honor were part and parcel of a society coming to grips with the daunting task of building a nation based on liberal principles” (p. 128). Not only did the duel present a way station on the road from violent free-for-all to reasoned debate, but it also helped to create a unified ruling class. According to Hughes, “the code offered an almost ready-made nationwide notion of masculinity and respectability that could transcend the differing regional and professional backgrounds of the recently empowered ‘bourgeois’ elites” (p. 136). Hughes clearly demonstrates with both quantitative and qualitative sources that the duel was most essential for the upwardly mobile. Journalists, politicians, and military officers all perceived the chivalric code as proof of manli-

ness and, more important, of gentlemanliness. The ambivalence of the judicial system when dealing with duels further served to “socially and symbolically broaden the gulf between the people and the ruling elites” (p. 323).

On a more practical note, the duels also had the advantage of being rarely dangerous and almost never fatal. “In short, the prestige, position, and publicity to be gained from a duel greatly outweighed its risks, whereas to refuse a challenge could ruin a man’s social and even professional life” (p. 164). Ironically, the social power of the duel was so strong that even those who argued vigorously against dueling in theory sometimes felt compelled to engage in duels to defend their honor. Even though the duel was limited to gentlemen, dueling became a staple of popular entertainment. Hughes points out that the most popular edition of the dueling code was published as part of a series that included books on “palm reading, tattooing, cycling, guitar and cinematography” (p. 191). This list demonstrates the popular appeal of the duel; the rather jarring inclusion of books on cinematography also reminds us that the chivalric code was being invoked in an age when mechanization had already made profound changes in modes of both life and death.

Italy was not alone in seeing a resurgence of dueling in the nineteenth century; however, while dueling had little appeal in Germany and France after the horrors of World War I, the Italian Fascists encouraged another resurgence of dueling in the immediate postwar period. Though the individual aspect of the duel as well as its

aristocratic overtones lessened its appeal by the 1930s, the ritualized violence of the duel meshed well with Fascist calls for courage, vigor, and manliness. As Hughes puts it, “for the fascists, chivalry was on a continuum of violence that could be invoked to justify, to intimidate, to retaliate or to warn” (p. 281). Though Hughes does not belabor the metaphor too far, he cites a nineteenth-century aphorism suggesting that to break the sword of a gentleman was to produce four shards; “these will be collected, sharpened, and instead of a noble sword you will have four assassin’s daggers” (p. 223). For late nineteenth-century liberals, the carefully regulated ritual of the duel provided a necessary step in the path toward parliamentary government. Later, the Fascists adapted the dagger as their iconic symbol. “By taking the dagger rather than the sword as fascism’s iconic weapon of honor, the party reached out not only to the trenches of WWI but also to the honor traditions of the popular classes, which the liberal regime had so often ignored or disparaged” (p. 312).

This carefully researched and well-written book is essential for anyone studying the interplay of masculinity, honor, and violence in modern European politics. As an added bonus, it ends on a hopeful note. Hughes points out that the rapidity with which dueling fell out of favor suggests that “with a little luck and a lot of reason we might be able to head things in the right direction” (p. 334). Let us all hope that his predictions are as apt as his scholarship.

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Citation: Carolyn Conley. Review of Hughes, Steven C., *Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor, and Masculinity in Modern Italy*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

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