



Frank Dierkes. *Streitbar und ehrenfest: Zur Konfliktführung im münsterländischen Adel des 16. und 17. Jahrhundert.* Westfalen in der Vormoderne: Studien zur mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Landesgeschichte. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2007. 223 pp. EUR 37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-402-15040-5.



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A Necklace for Lambert: Or, Symbols and Noble Honor in Early Modern Westphalia

Nobles in early modern Europe were famously quick to defend their honor against one another. Any perceived challenge to noble status demanded a commensurate re-tort, lest the offended party be perceived, by his or her inaction, to validate the insult. Depending on the circumstances, a riposte might be delivered with counter-defamation, litigation, physical violence, or some combination of all three. Whatever form it took, as Frank Dierkes shows in this richly detailed and carefully argued monograph, the imperative to remain “battle-ready and steadfast in honor” framed all disputes among nobles.

The objects of Dierkes’s study are conflicts among the territorial nobility in the prince-bishopric of Münster roughly between 1500 and 1640—a period, there as elsewhere, of profound transformations in the structure and balance of power between princes and the privileged orders. But Dierkes is concerned less with the substance of these conflicts than with reconstructing the normative and communicative milieu in which they unfolded. In face-to-face societies, he argues, honor was conveyed primarily by symbolic means. Honor was never static, so

upholding it required constant reassertion through signs and ritual; hence, also, the vulnerability of noble status to defamatory, symbolic assaults. When one noble impugned another’s honor, moreover, he necessarily called into question that person’s claim to the entitlements of noble status. To think of disputes over honor as epiphenomenal to conflicts of material interest—as Hillyar Zmora and others have argued—is to erect an anachronistic distinction between the substance and trappings of nobility.

To show how nobles used symbolic action to prosecute their disputes, Dierkes organizes his study into three main case studies, each involving one or more interrelated conflicts. The first concerns a dispute over an estate in Mechelen that began in 1499 and was not resolved until 1528. This case shows how deliberately the protagonists choreographed their symbolic assaults: in 1520, for example, one party to the dispute, Goddert Harmen, arrested his opponent, Lambert von Oer, seized his horse and armor, and placed him in a heavy neck iron—a symbolic pillory. These actions were crafted to assert Harmen’s noble right to self-defense, to tar Oer as a common

criminal, and to place him symbolically beyond the circle of persons whose rank immunized against such indignities. Left unanswered, these actions nullified Oer's claim to the property. The dispute is also noteworthy for what it tells us about the relationship between noble self-help and the "institutional path" of conflict resolution. On the one hand, Harmen's extravagant intervention aborted efforts to mediate the dispute peaceably. But it also provoked a strong reaction: the territory's governing bodies liberated Oer from the dishonor he had suffered and eventually compelled Harmen to cede all claims against the Mechelen estate.

In that instance, symbolic action escalated an already long-running conflict. The second case study involves a dispute between the Galen and Kerckerinck families over the very symbols of noble status. At issue was the Kerckerincks's claim to a pew near the altar of the parish church in Rinkerode. The Galens claimed that their opponents, as members of a semi-noble stratum called *Erbmännner*, had no right to worship in such close proximity to *bona fide* bluebloods such as themselves. At one point, the Galens occupied the Kerckerincks' pew, an act that, like Goddert Harmen's neck iron, repudiated their noble status by symbolic means. The entire affair, in other words, concerned the demarcation of social boundaries and the symbolic trappings of nobility. In this instance, litigation set the terms of symbolic action. The Kerckerincks were already party to a lawsuit over the social rank of *Erbmännner*, which obligated them to assert noble status by appropriating its symbolic appurtenances. Likewise the Galens had little choice but to deny their foes the markers of true nobility.

The third and most spectacular conflict resulted in the fatal stabbing of Gerhard von Morrien, the titular head of the territorial nobility, by Dietrich von Galen in July 1617. It suggests that if anything, disputes over noble honor had the capacity to escalate far beyond the clashes of material interest that had prompted them in the first place. Here, the originating tension pitted Morrien against Galen over hunting rights; it escalated into a conflict over honor when Morrien's servants seized Galen's huntsmen, dogs, and horns. Symbolically, this act simultaneously challenged the Galens's property

rights, stole their means of asserting those rights, and assaulted an important mark of noble status. The stabbing of Morrien propelled the conflict into a spiral of insults, reciprocal lawsuits, and defamations that ended only with Galen's exile in 1621. To be sure, material interests lay at the source of all this feuding. But honor was the cultural template (*Sinnfolie*) that gave them meaning. The defense of honor, moreover, manifested itself in ways that defied any narrowly materialist logic.

Dierkes's symbolic analyses are his book's compelling strength. But he is more cautious about relating his findings to broader transformations, such as the domestication of European nobility. Yet its traces are legible throughout. In contrast to late medieval noble feuding, for example, it is striking how rarely noble violence was directed against the seignorial dependents of rivals. Domestication, it seems, had already come a long way. These processes might also have been illuminated by more comparative work. If conflicts over honor were "existential," it is in part because the territorial nobility still monopolized access to the prince-bishopric's lucrative offices and prebends. Did such conflicts escalate as easily in territories where princes were more firmly in control? A final question concerns religion. Dierkes notes in passing that several of his protagonists were Protestant. Indeed, by the 1560s or so, most noble houses in the prince-bishopric had converted. One wonders whether confessional differences had any exacerbating impact. Did they have no bearing on conflicts over church pews?

That said, Dierkes is correct to note that judicialization did not extinguish the nobles' right to autonomous action in self-defense. To be sure, most conflicts among nobles were carried out before regular tribunals of justice. To the extent that they acknowledged the superiority of a judicial overlord, these lawsuits registered the nobles' gradual acceptance of their own subordination. But, as Dierkes's case studies demonstrate, nobles still had plenty of options. Long into the seventeenth century, the availability of judicial tribunals merely added to the arsenal of weapons that nobles might use to advance their interests and to defend their honor.

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