Words and Swords: The Maître d'Escrime and the Creation of Bourgeois Masculinity

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That Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier's commemoration of Napoleonic glories, *Friedland 1807*, executed between 1861 and 1875 and now hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was well received in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war should be no surprise. However, in appreciating this work, one should consider also the almost-invisible seam of repaired canvas in the upper-right corner. It was here that Meissonier's son tore the canvas in some ill-advised and overly-enthusiastic fencing practice in his father's studio—an accident that was every bit a part of the work's publicity as the painter's painstaking studies and preparations. Both the painter's brush and the fencer's sword were taken to proclaim the bellicose truth: That the men of the Gallic nation, despite their recent embarrassment, were indeed martial. (And since we are indeed here discussing men, masculinity, and the public sphere, I pray you will excuse my lack of gender-inclusive language.)

A few historians have attempted to address the history of fencing—notably for *belle époque* France, Robert Nye of Oregon State. However, though Nye makes some good points about fencing, dueling, and gender systems, his *Masculinities and Male Codes of*

Honor in Modern France is riddled with factual errors, omissions, and misapprehensions. To begin with, even if I am going to presently focus on the all-male coterie of fencing masters, we must remember, as Nye does not, that women fenced, too, even if they did not do so on equal footing with men. Furthermore, Nye's conclusion that "the fencing and gymnastics societies of the 1880s sought to train the young to manifest the mental and physical courage needed for revenge" and were "means by which the moral and psychological conditions of the battlefield could be socially produced" is flawed.[1] This is partially because history-writing is, as Isidore of Seville observed in the sixth century, a form of rhetoric, and Nye is exhibiting the anti-positivist tendency that has become fashionable in the academy since the 1960s, and partially because he is, as far as I can ascertain, not a fencer, and so however much he might research the phenomena from the outside, he has not been brought up in the rituals, courtesies, and norms of the noumenon itself.

What must first be understood is that fencing in the *belle époque* was more than mere sport, gymnastics, or military training. As Alexandre Coudurier, founder of the salle where I studied during my Fulbright to Paris, wrote in his 1904 essay "On the Foil and the Épée," which won first prize from the Academy of Arms:

> . . .the purpose of fencing is not only to prepare for combat [that is, the duel], but also to aid the student's physical and moral development. Taking into account this double perspective, what an admirable exercise is that of the foil, *perhaps the only sport out of all of them that can be called an intellectual sport!* It participates at the same time in the attributes of art and science, and cultivates in its devotees, besides the necessary physical aptitude, equally indispensable mental qualities. The practice of this art first of all creates judgment, elegance, and precision, and it is not only a marvelous school of endurance, an excellent means of physical

[1] Robert A. Nye, *Masculinities and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 219

> development for young men, and a guarantor of youthfulness and vigor in the years of maturity; but it is also a school of justice, of loyalty, of a firm and weighty courage that makes men strong and even daring when necessary, but also enemies of futile and poorly-considered quarrels.[2]

The task of imparting this "art and science" fell to a unique class of individuals—the fencing masters. Yet, the fencing master in *fin de siècle* France presents us with a paradox. He was at once worker and aristocrat, educator and tradesman, a fixture in a domestic space and a champion of the French nation who sallied forth to do battle against his foreign counterparts. He was by necessity a swordsman of great skill, yet his job was to receive upon his breast the clumsy first thrusts of students by way of nursemaiding them into the art. I would argue that he was, in short, a liminal figure, standing paradoxically between some of his society's binary opposites, and also as a gatekeeper and champion against those outside. His workplace, the *salle d'armes*, was likewise a liminal space in which rituals were enacted, class distinctions were elided, and the reality of death by sharp steel was sublimated into the courteous *touche*. And, like all such heroic liminal figures, the *maître des armes* was vital to cultural production—in this case, the production of *l'escrime*, and in so doing, the formation of the unique idea of Republican nationalistic masculinity that existed between the Franco-Prussian war and the First World War. This ethic must likewise be understood as a duality or paradox: On the one hand it is indeed, as Nye observed, nationalistic, competitive, aggressive, and outward-directed, while on the other, it was also inward-directed, geared towards the development of the individual and the non-violent resolution or even avoidance of quarrels.

[2] Alexandre Coudurier "Du Fleuret et de l'Épée" (Caen, 1904).

First, a bit of history, so as to better understand some of the ironies involved. Professional fencing teachers appear as far back as thirteenth-century Parisian tax rolls, but they were considered disreputable sorts who contributed to delinquency and student riots. The *métier* of the *maîtres en fait des armes* was not recognized until 1569, in the reign of Charles IX.[3] The *métier*, like all such guilds, functioned in several capacities: It regulated competition, ensured the quality of services, and served as a mutual-aid society. As Kate Van Orden makes clear in her sublime *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France,*[4] fencing, like dancing, was an integral part of the education of the aristocratic gentleman; also like dancing, it was a deeply symbolic and "courteous" act in which real conflict was elided, statements of social hierarchy were made, and the *ordo saeclorum* was perpetuated. No wonder, then, that it was reorganized by Louis XIV as part of his scheme of aesthetic totalitarianism, and that six of the guild of fencing masters were ennobled by him in 1656. The remarkable thing about this is that fencing masters were not even members of the sort of rich bourgeois who might have bought their way into the nobility of the robe—they were professionals, albeit, like dancing-masters, lawyers, and Latin tutors, professionals who offered a service to the nobility by which they differentiated themselves from those of lower rank. Moreover, they came, and have historically most frequently come, from plebian origins. This is the first irony, paradox, contradiction, or what have you: That the fencing master was at once common and elevated.

Following the Revolution, the National Assembly was quick to do away with many of the outward signs of the aristocracy, including disbanding the various guilds in 1790.

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[3] Renée de Lespinasse, *Les Métiers et Corporations de la Ville de Paris* Vol. 3 (Paris, 1897), pp. 597–604.
[4] Kate Van Orden, *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago, 2005).

This innovation was exported to the lands conquered by Napoleon, where guilds still in part employed the weapons used by the French before the reign of Louis XIV, notably the rapier and the two-handed longsword. This is our second paradox or irony: That the form of fencing throughout Europe would, thanks to egalitarian reforms, universally followed the mode of employ that the Sun King had patronized—with the light foil, first developed in its modern sense as a fencing-room substitute for the court-sword of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (We likewise see a change of fencing literature; the *Manuel d'Escrime* that Captain de Bast published in Brussels in 1836 is didactic in nature, whereas the works of the Enlightenment tended to present themselves more as treatises on the art. But this is outside our purpose.)

The profession as a whole suffered by the dispersal of the guild; by 1840, there were only about ten civilian *salles d'armes* in all of France, and fencing instruction was for the most part kept alive by the army. By the end of the Second Empire, there were about 35 teachers. After the Franco-Prussian war, however, we see a sea-change: the national military fencing school at Joineville-le-Pont was begun in 1872, the *Société de l'encouragement de l'escrime* was founded in 1882, and the civilian Academy of Arms—that is, the old masters' guild—was re-founded in 1886. There were 100 masters in Paris alone by 1890.[5] Newspapers kept masters on-staff to keep their journalists in trim for the inevitable duels that would arise from differences of editorial (that is, political) opinion, and the annual benefit grand assault—the only time the masters faced one another in public—was a society event of the first water, filled with deeply symbolic rituals such as the "grand salute" and giving rise to similar spectacles as far away as New York. This is our third irony: That the republican institution of the *salle d'armes*, a comfortable

[5] My statistics are taken from Nye, pp. 159–160

bourgeois space with showers, dressing-rooms, and comfortable chairs and couches, was built on the imitation of two hated symbols of the *ancien régime*—the *métier* and aristocratic privilege.

Regarding the latter, the sumptuous *salle* of the Third Republic was a conscious evocation of chivalric past in more than just the antique weapons and mottos involving honoring, in various combinations, arms, the masters, the fatherland, and women that adorned the walls. René de Lespinasse, in his great compilation of the documents concerning the *métiers* of Paris published from 1886–97, gave a chivalrous, romantic, and completely spurious tale of the *métier* of the fencing masters as having originated with the heralds of medieval courts. Yet, much as the medieval idea that any armed man-at-arms was worthy to face the king himself on the field of battle, the *salle d'armes*, unlike the snobby British club, was the great homosocial equalizer where a laborer was the equal—or the master—of any man. This isn't to say that the salles themselves were classless, since they came in many flavors from the humble and affordable to the sumptuous and expensive, but within the space itself, there was no distinction; a man distinguished by the brilliance of his foil-play if not by his birth, brought in to the most aristocratic salle as a guest of one of the members, would be treated with the same courtesy as a baron. Thus, our fourth seeming paradox: fencing was by its nature both aristocratic and republican. (Needless to say, women have historically *not* been equal; in fact, women's individual saber was only added to the Olympics in 2004.)

We must also examine the role of the master in the classical method of teaching. For military-style group drilling was not used—thus, the inaptness of Nye's comparison between fencing and gymnastics or other such exercise. Rather, instruction was always

individual, combined with conventional exercises such as *tirer au mur*. Once the basic postures were learned, the master (ideally wearing black, though photographic evidence shows us this was not always so) would, by verbal instruction and physical cue, draw the desired actions and reactions from the student. His plastron—the padded over-vest—provided the student's target. After a year or so of such efforts, the student was ready for the assault, that is, free-fencing. This is a labor-intensive form of teaching that requires an instructor of superlative skill, but it produces excellent results.

The realities of this form of teaching are our sixth paradox. The job of the master, that man who must, at a bare minimum, be a highly proficient, technically correct, and dangerous fencer—is to be a human target, to receive the first wobbling thrusts of the infant *debutant*. This model of masculine vigor and gentility, who symbolizes the power of the laborer to be the equal of any aristocrat, is in the receptive role, even as he is the absolute master of the situation. He is a servant who commands. His workplace is furthermore indoors, a private, domestic space invisible from and shielded from the world of the street—albeit an irregular one. The *salle d'armes* is more than a mere "fencing room"—it is a dojo, a temple, a transformative space.

Similarly, a rigid code of *politesse* governed (and still governs) behavior in the salle. One was expected to acknowledge when one had been hit; one does not discuss politics or religion; one does not criticize the performance or skills of another *tireur* (fencer); one does not shake hands after the bout with a gloved hand; nor does one *tutoyer* one's fencing partner, even if he is a good friend—one says "vous" on the piste and "tu" off it. The duel between the French master Pons and the Neapolitan aristocrat and Italian nationalist Turillo de San Malato (who was neither a master nor his son Athos, as Nye

incorrectly states) was held because of the latter's particularly Italian habit of uncouthly shouting on the attack.[6] This was part of a larger rivalry between French and Italian fencers, which went back well before San Malato's arrival on the Parisian scene in 1881. For instance, the Haitian-born French fencing master Jean-Louis dispatched thirteen Italian prêvots and masters in successive single combats on a Spanish hillock as part of duel between regiments in 1814.

In some respects, this was an inevitable conflict: In the late nineteenth century, there were only two schools of fencing, the Italian and the French, each with their own peculiarities of weapon and tactics, with all other European countries following the one or the other. Ultimately, the French can be said to have won, since the Fédération Internationale d'Escrime, formed in 1913 to regulate international competitions such as the Olympics, forced the Italians to abandon such native customs as extra-long and heavy weapons and allowing the upper arm as target in foil competition, while the Italians likewise put aside their rapier-like *spada da terreno* for a dueling sword adapted from French models. Thanks to this rivalry, there were no shortage of Franco-Italian duels in the Third Republic: San Malato's 1909 *New York Times* obituary states that he fought forty altogether in his life (albeit of a nature less lethal than those of Jean-Louis' day). However, the primary venue for such rivalries was the fencing piste—and the newspaper columns devoted to fencing. As one such critic, the French fencing master Rupiere, remarked on the French tour of the masters of the new Italian national academy of fencing teachers, the *Scuola Magistrale*, in 1889:

[6] Jacabo Gelli, *Bibliografia generale della scherma con note critiche* (Milan, 1881), p. 177.

> The Roman masters have not yet abandoned theatrical postures, useless movements and contortions, and the continuous beating of the adversary's blade, which they search for in a monotonous fashion. . . but the attack executed from immobility [*i.e.*, in the French manner] is always superior to the attack performed with an advance [a typically Italian maneuver]. . .[7]

In other words, the Italian school of fencing was not only ineffective: It was vulgar, as well. The French masters, however, were valiant, elegant, and scientific. It was opinions expressed in print such as this such as these that made men such as Louis Merignac, Camille Prevost, and Alphonse Kirchoffer into national heroes. This is the seventh irony: The French masters, who, save for their trade, might see as almost belonging more to the female sphere of labor than the male, sallied forth from their salles to engage with a series of what William Gaugler called "epic encounters" with Italian masters such as Greco, Pini, and Pessina. In fact, no matter what the lionization of the amateur sportsman in the late nineteenth century, Olympic fencing rules specifically allowed masters—professionals—to compete from the first games in 1896 until the 1980s. These encounters went a long way towards the birth of modern sport, including the institution of judging committees, which replaced fencers acknowledging their own touches and were a first step towards the positivist, technological solution of electrical apparatus that utterly changed the sport in the twentieth century. We can clearly see, the higher the stakes, the less orthodox and genteel the fencing became and the more the reliance on outside judging. As another French master, Victor Maurel, disagreed with Rupiere's "sour grapes" approach and wrote on the difficulty the French fencers had with the Italians:

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[7] William Gaugler, "Epic Encounters Between Italian and French Fencing Masters 1881–1911" in *Fencer's Quarterly* (March, 2000), p. 13.

> Above all, the purpose of fencing to the Italian fencers is combat; their aim is to hit and not be hit. We, instead, admire, above all, aesthetic bouts. Here is the habitual expression, and we hear this heresy daily: "One beautiful hit equals ten bad ones." With this attitude, one can obtain only a conventional art that is no longer combat, and that places one in a position of inferiority when faced with men who fence seriously.[8]

We must draw a distinction, as Maurel did, between fencing and "combat." (This is another matter on which Nye is mistaken.) The implement of fencing had, since at least the sixteenth century, been the quadrangular-bladed foil, or *fleuret*, so called because the button, or *mouche,* was held to resemble a flower-bud. It was in the 1880s that a rebated version of the triangular-bladed dueling sword, or *épée du combat,* began to be employed in the fencing halls. However, épée fencing—that which one would think as being praised as closer to the "truth" of "combat"—was often considered but a degraded version of foil-play. To quote Maître Courdurier again:

> Out of all of these marvelous qualities that make this sport incomparable, what pertains to the exclusive practice of the dueling sword? One thing only: combat, *the fight to land a touch well- or poorly-given,* a fight in which *the god of chance* often plays the principle role, and in which can make a lucky novice into a presumptuous creature who, believing himself the equal of the greatest masters, neglects his studies and may one day pay dearly for the immoderate confidence he has in his strength. . . . *The foil is the exercise, the musical scale, the voice exercise that the greatest artists must never abandon under pain of seeing their powers diminish. The foil, in a word, is the means. The dueling sword is nothing but the very simplified result: It is the ends.*[9]

[8] Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, 13
[9] Coudurier, "Du Fleuret."

Note that Maître Courdurier does not condemn the duel itself. To do so would be unthinkable. I wrote, in my initial outline for this paper, that one of the ironies of the fencing master was that he was both model of gentlemanly behavior and villain who led the *jeunesse* to kill or be killed in duels. I was convinced that somewhere, I had seen some reference. I was wrong: Fencing masters were universally lauded, and their service of preparing men for dueling was seen as a vital service. In fact, few French were brave enough to publicly voice opposition to the duel itself, even if duels over trivial matters were mocked. I cannot stress this highly enough: The duel, even if formally illegal, was seen as crucial to the functioning of society and for a man to refuse a legitimate challenge was to effectively commit social suicide. For him to be actually convicted was unheard of; rather, the court was frequently used as a theater to get the juicy details into the press. Even members of the various European anti-dueling societies, the first of which was founded in 1904, never condemned the practice of fencing even if they were willing to risk ostracism from society for refusing to accept challenges to the duel.

This brings us to our eighth and final paradox: Though fencing masters did indeed prepare men for dueling, fencing in the classical sense is not really about teaching a man to kill another man in any sort of utilitarian way. This isn't to say that it isn't a martial art, or about learning to use the sword. Rather, in the words of my own master, Ramon Martinez, techniques of personal combat are "only one aspect of what the practice of classical fencing encompasses. It also teaches discipline, self control, physical, mental, and spiritual awareness. Perfect form and perfect execution of technique are of paramount importance, for form was created to ensure the most efficient execution of

specific functions, with economy of motion as the ultimate goal." Or, as the nineteenth-century master Louis Rondelle said:

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> A classical fencer is supposed to be one who observes a fine position, whose attacks are fully developed, whose hits are marvelously accurate, his parries firm and his ripostes executed with precision. One must not forget that this regularity is not possible unless the adversary is a party to it. It is a conventional bout, which consists of parries, attacks, and returns, all rhyming together.[10]

Fencing, in the classical sense, is a pedagogical experience, inculcating the core values of civilization in the student—the ability to harmlessly destroy, to politely murder, to shrug off being both victor and vanquished in a struggle for dominance where both parties come out ahead. The more proficient one becomes, contemporaries held, the less likely one is to seek out another man's blood. This is an entirely different mentality from that which governed the high-stakes international competitions, which we can see as leading down the long path to modern trash-talking NBA players. Peter Gay, in *The Cultivation of Hatred*, the third volume of his great psycho-historical study of the nineteenth century European bourgeois mind, does not specifically handle fencing, though he does discuss the German student ritual of the *mensur.* Still, Gay may give us a pointer that can help us arrive at why the fencing-dueling complex was so elevated: By the formalization of violence, it is, in a way, controlled. The world is thus ordered, and the raw id, while acknowledged and given vent to, is removed one step from reality and thereby both diffused and taken out of sight. The violent instinct, in other words, is both socialized and hidden, acknowledged and denied. Gay says of the *mensur*, for instance,

[10] Louis Rondelle, *Foil and Sabre: A Grammar of Fencing in Detailed Lessons for Professor and Pupil* (Boston, 1892).

that it "is a superb instance of the clash between the two meanings of cultivation, an exercise in aggression checked by accepted rules"—but this may be said, to an extent, of similar ritual, or indeed, of any sport.[11]

Further, in agonistic fencing, at least, the reality of conflict and death is given a veneer of sociability. In civilized society, which is to say *progressed* society, one is not in daily peril of one's life. Saber-toothed tigers do not haunt the Rive Gauche, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting students, and Genghis Khan almost never leads his Mongol hordes down the Rue de Rivoli, stopping to loot the Louvre on the way to the Palais de Justice. Likewise, we do not die in polite society; we "pass on," and we are not fired, but rather "let go." Fencing, as a phenomenon distinct from but related to the duel, channeled the bourgeois id into acceptable forms. The well-publicized late nineteenth-century competitions between French and Italian fencing masters, the lionization of the fencing master as national hero and model of French manhood, and the fatal duels attending the Dreyfus affair were only the exterior signs of a national self-image that manifested itself through devotion to a cult of idealized Hectors and Achilles straining together under the watchful eye of their masters. The French *maître des armes,* a creature deliberately created in the *ancien régime,* and then, in the era between the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War, re-domesticated to become integral to cultural production. He thus became simultaneously the repository of, solution to, and reproducer of, his culture's hopes, aspirations, and insecurities. It is in the failure of the model that he represented with the introduction of the high-stakes international competition that we see the progressive brutalization of society in the years leading up to the First World War.

[If there is time, I will talk on some slides of Salle Coudurier]

[11] Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred* (New York, 1984), p. 9