

*Iain Hampsher-Monk*

## FIGHTING FOR POLITENESS

*Markku Peltonen (2003): The Duel in Early Modern England, civility, politeness and honour. 355+x pages, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.*

Over the last twenty years or so, politeness has been a major topic amongst early-modern social historians and historians of ideas. Markku Peltonen's rigorous study intelligently locates the duel in the context of debates about the nature, function and forms of 'civility' between the later 16th century and the early 18th century. The book makes exhaustive use of primary sources (23 pages of primary source bibliography) and is only slightly less generous with secondary work, synthesising a lot of recent studies. Its approach is highly systematic and the major claims are impeccably set out and meticulously documented. What are they?

Peltonen rejects the thesis originally advanced by Norbert Elias and adapted for England by several recent writers, that the emergence of courtly civility was part of a process of consolidating central state power. On this view politeness involved the internalisation of codes of restraint amongst hitherto uninhibited feudal magnates making them increasingly tractable. The consequent growth in royal authority enabled it ultimately to ban duelling as an affront to sovereignty, and relegate lordly conflict to verbal jousting.<sup>1</sup> Whilst granting that some contemporaries argued that the politeness connected with duelling codes decreased violence (although some argued they did so by the

threat posed by the introduction of the new and more deadly rapier), Peltonen's claim is that this analysis fits neither the chronology nor the aetiology of duelling in England. He convincingly shows that the private duel in England was a distinct and innovative renaissance practice, brought from Italy in a range of books, both translations and domestic productions and quite different from traditional species of formalised violence used to settle disputes, such as trial by battle. Indeed, within England, these were identified with different juridical traditions – civil and common law. Trial by battle and chivalric contests were public rituals conducted under the King's law and often witnessed by him. Duels (though ritualised) were private affairs conducted without licence and typically in defiance of the King's express wishes. Contra the Eliasian thesis therefore, the culture of the duel represents a *loss* of royal control over this area, and the culture of civil politeness, rather than supervening on, and suppressing such violence, is actually intimately associated, not only temporally, but ideologically, with it.

At a deep level Peltonen schematises honour on two axes: whether honour is horizontal or vertical and whether it is reciprocal. Vertical honour is conferred in virtue of one's position in a stable hierarchical order. Horizontal honour is conferred by subjective acknowledgement of one's peers. Honour dependent on peer recognition was reflexive – it involved a symmetry of assertion and concession. The breaking of such reflexivity by the withholding of honour by a peer, effectively dishonoured the individual from whom it was withheld. Withholding honour was signalled by some slight, imputation of non-honourific behaviour – 'giving the lie' or claiming that one's interlocutor had told a falsehood is a prime example – or merely by the failure to treat the other in terms of the prevailing codes of address or politeness. Given the elaborate character of these, occasions for taking offence were many. Once honour was impugned it could only be restored through the issue of a challenge and the fighting of a duel. That is, through a physical reassertion of the (impugned) equal status of the two participants.

A subtext in these contested accounts of the duel, relates to this question of social hierarchy. Against the view that civility and the duel consolidated a hierarchical social order with the prince at its apex, Peltonen shows that it is rather the expression of an essentially

diverse, urban and anonymous society which produced the competition and status-anxiety which firstly required formalised civil codes to be negotiated safely, but then required the duel to address occasions when the perceived failure to observe these called into question the status of the injured party. It was precisely the dislocation of the prince – or any other definitive superior — from this social field which made the authoritative resolution of status-dissonance impossible – hence the duel.

So far from civility being a weapon in the hands of consolidating absolutisms, the codes of politeness — with the duel at their heart — seem to address a social group and behaviour which, whilst not without courtly models, had escaped the confines of the court and certainly of princely oversight. Indeed there was acute tension within the duellist culture between the overt rule of the prince, and his attempts to prohibit the practise on the one hand, and the felt need on the part of the Gentleman – loyal and honourable as he claimed to be – to satisfy the demands of honour. In this sense the monarch was ‘for the most part beyond’ – i.e. in conflict with, the world of civil courtesy.

Despite this careful analysis, and his confrontation with Eliasian historical sociology the main focus of Peltonen’s work is not on historical sociology as such – there are few details of actual duels, or statistical estimates of their prevalence – so much as with the way in which justifications and attacks on the practice of duelling provide an occasion for making articulate the writers’ assumptions about social culture. Duelling thus acts more as a touchstone from which to assess the various early-modern writers’ accounts of politeness than exemplifying its structural role in modern analyses of it. Needless to say, there are overlaps here, in the sense that the latter provides some evidence about the former, but this is, inasmuch as it can be distinguished, for the most part an analysis of a discursive area.

Peltonen chronicles and analyses the introduction of duelling, the etiquette of it, the campaigns in favour of it as productive of polite civility through the discipline of the duel, and against it as occasioning civil disorder, and contempt for the magistrate. Campaigns against included both those led by monarchs – James I and Charles II (although the latter less than wholeheartedly) — and publicists such as George Silver who argued that preoccupation with the rapier – fit

to ‘murder poultry’, but useless in war – was undermining English military valour and preparedness. The review of the several phases of the arguments surrounding duelling illustrates a series of *topoi*, a conceptual repertoire, traced sometimes in minute detail, from which the cases for and against duelling could be made. These frequently involved barefaced ideological manipulations. Let me select three for mention.

One of the charges early laid at the door of duelling was that it should be shunned because it possessed that most heinous of qualities – it was *foreign*! But in the Augustan plays of Susannah Centlivre and Margaret Cavendish the argument is reversed, the true code of politeness and associated duel of honour (distinguished from its false, foppish — and foreign — counterfeit) was identified with British courage and valour and a history continuous with medieval chivalry. Another well-worn topos was the relationship of civility to the court. For some writers this association was a recommendation. Even defenders of the duellist’s right to autonomous defence of his honour commonly indicated that the Prince was the fount of all honour (and concomitantly one suggested penalty for duelling — since death evidently held no terrors — might be banishment). This association with the sycophancy and dependency of courts could lead ‘country’ ideologues and the civically minded to reject politeness altogether. Yet for others, and increasingly in England amongst writers such as Shaftesbury and Addison and Steele, a form of polite civility which was distanced from the court was articulated, and identified too, again in contrast to the courtly ethic, with liberty. Such arguments richly exemplify the kinds of rhetorical redescrptions and moves well analysed in Quentin Skinner’s methodological work.

One final topos surrounded the issue of sincerity and led into deeper territory. Not only did the emphasis on conventional containment of feelings, and the formality of new ‘polite’ modes of interaction smack to many (particularly Christian, but also to the more austere civic) moralists of insincerity, but the very structure of horizontal and reciprocal honour focussed attention on the conventional judgments made about individuals in the eyes of others, rather than on any intrinsic properties they may possess, or on their own inner convictions of their rectitude. Such civility was a world where opinion ruled, where honour simply was what it was held to

be, in the way that fashion too was no more than what it was held to be (the parallel was often drawn by its detractors). The particular challenge this notion of honour raised was to the notion of virtue conceived of as dispositional and intrinsic, independent of worldly opinion, and in particular to Christian virtue – often conceived of as in contempt of it. Duellist honour was in such obvious contrast to Christian teaching that it is intriguing to realise that this fact was rarely in itself adduced – even by clerical opponents – in arguments against it. Duellists themselves candidly acknowledged they were playing a different game as did William Wiseman, who, speaking for dualists, conceded with disarming candour that he was going to ‘leave Scriptures, and Church Lawes; because they be not altogether our profession, and the word, and the sword seem contraries.’ Christian opponents of duelling instead therefore often used indirectly religious arguments such as pointing out that duelling involved disrespect for the monarch – the Lord’s anointed. But the contrast between intrinsic virtue and reciprocal honour went wider than merely that between clerics and defenders of duelling. It involved a conflict between intrinsic notions of worth – whether religiously based or not – and a free-floating and purely conventionalist one. In this sense the final chapter – on Mandeville – represents a culmination of many of the underlying themes of the whole book.

Situating Mandeville in the context of the arguments examined in the earlier part of the book as a way of interpreting his meaning is not unproblematic – indeed situating Mandeville in the context of *any* arguments notoriously fails to disclose an unequivocal meaning. Nevertheless – not least because of Mandeville’s pivotal position in any understanding of eighteenth century ethics, social or economic thinking – this discussion does illuminate the way in which a recondite and antiquarian practice such as duelling reaches out to illuminate many of the changes in social and moral values taking place at the time. Mandeville’s radical scepticism turned the whole panoply of what had been anti-politeness arguments into arguments in favour of it. Hypocrisy, flattery and empty politeness were the features of polite intercourse, but to recognise this was to endorse, not to expose, or criticise it, for such properties made social intercourse pleasing, whereas those who would insist on ‘speaking the truth of his heart and what he feels within, is the most

contemptible Creature on Earth'. For Mandeville not only can we not find virtue in civility, we should not seek it there. Civility simply *was* conventional veneer, and it was based on the same passions – self-love – as those we criticise in uncivilised peoples. Mandeville's claim was to be refined by Hume — who both found a role for natural sympathy and recognised that the artificial virtues have a different genesis from the natural ones – yet in explaining even the most refined moral sensibilities in terms of natural passions Mandeville established a method which would last a long time. But in acknowledging reciprocal and 'theatrical' qualities of honour Mandeville was mounting a defence of it, and its concomitant duelling. Quite simply duelling maintained politeness. Moreover it was a defence which integrated well into Mandeville's other scandalous claims about how, for example, luxurious expenditure called industry into being.

In retrospect Steinmetz, an early 19th century historian of the duel explained the absence of a return to barbarity in an England from which the duel had all but disappeared, not by denying a connection between duelling and politeness, but in terms of the very success of that causal link. It was the very pervasive success of the ethic of duelling which had rendered duelling itself unnecessary.

We might in conclusion point to what is surely another legacy of the duellist's code. In the English Parliament, members are allowed privileged speech – they may make remarks about individuals which in other circumstances would be subject to legal constraint. What they must do not – on pain of being asked to withdraw from the House, and however overwhelming the evidence is to the contrary – is to 'give the lie', that is, to say about any other member that they have told the House an untruth.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Like so much German historical sociology the origins of this account are to be found in Hegel. Cf. the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (transl. Millar), Oxford, 1997; 497-520.