

Tribune which suggested that American men were becoming feminized and which laid the blame for the feminization on Valentino and his sheik movies.

Valentino did not take kindly to this affront to his masculine honor. In Mencken's words, he reverted "to the mores of his fatherland" and challenged the editorial writer to a duel. I quote Mencken again: "Unluckily, all this took place in the United States, where the word honor, save when it is applied to the structural integrity of women, has only comic significance. When one hears of the honor of politicians, of bankers, of lawyers, of the United States itself, everyone naturally laughs. So New York laughed at Valentino."

I remind you that this was written in 1926. Now, as the century draws to a close, any application of the word honor to the structural integrity of women, whatever that may be, would bring not so much laughter as bewilderment. In post-sexual revolution, post-feminist America, the concept of a link between honor and the structural integrity of women seems terminally archaic.

So undoubtedly does the notion that a man should be offended when accused of feminizing the male population of the country. After all, we live in a time of unisex clothing and blow-driers, co-ed college dorms and gay pride. In many quarters nowadays the feminization of the male population is probably regarded as a goal that, if not already accomplished, is at least deserving of additional ardent pursuit. As to the comparative state of the honor of politicians, bankers and lawyers now as compared to 1926, I shall touch upon that again later.

Honor on Stage

But it was the hapless actor's challenging the editorial writer to a duel that brought the subject of honor to my mind. I was reminded of it when seeing

Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* in a San Francisco opera performance last season. Here, too, there is a challenge to a duel. In this quite typical 19th century tale, the Russian landowner Lenski has brought his friend Onegin along on a visit to the estate of his fiance, Olga. There is a party and, of course, there is dancing. Some of the locals are not taken by the arrogant Onegin and he overhears them making disagreeable remarks. Angered, he spends more time than is considered appropriate in dancing with his friend Lenski's fiance. Now it is Lenski who becomes unhappy. A quarrel breaks out and Lenski tosses his glove on the ground in front of Onegin, which naturally means that he challenges him to a duel. Olga does what any well bred 19th century fiance would do under the circumstances: she faints. Unfortunately, the fainting doesn't accomplish much. In the duel early the following morning Onegin shoots Lenski dead.

Now, as I have indicated, there is nothing particularly exceptional in all this. Duels occur often in operas, in Shakespeare, and in countless other dramas. Furthermore, since duels were fought in defense of honor, and since the subject of honor was at the heart of so many plots, it is not surprising that dueling would often be central to the action.

As I was sitting through the four and a half hours of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* this season I began to realize that the word "honor" kept appearing in the libretto shown in the supertitles above the stage. (*Ehre* the German word for honor, though repeatedly bellowed, is usually lost amid the thunderous orchestral accompaniment). I tried keeping score for a while but such was the *sturm und drang* onstage that I soon lost count. Nonetheless, I honestly think it no exaggeration to suggest that "honor" appeared thirty or more times in the admittedly tortuous and repetitious text.

Tristan and Isolde was not the only four and a half hour extravaganza at

the San Francisco opera this season, incidentally. Verdi's *Don Carlo* lasted as long and it goes without saying that honor entered into the action there, too. Don Carlo is in love with Elizabeth of Valois. But there is a complication: for political reasons, she has been married off to Carlo's father, King Philip of Spain. In the last act, before heading off to assist the Flemish in casting off the Spanish yoke, Carlo visits his beloved for a last tumultuous farewell. "Honor prevails over love" he roars, above deafening orchestral crescendos.

A Concept Widely Accepted

Does all this seem curious? Should it? Not when one considers that for the past three thousand or so years the culture of honor held a pivotal role in the social architecture of Western society. Honor was a concept widely accepted, widely understood, and widely acted upon. In fact, it was more than just a core element in Western mores. It often became a preoccupation, even an obsession.

Let me toss a few quotes at you, some of them probably familiar, to make the point :

Here is the Roman poet Juvenal, in the *Satires*, written at the end of the first century A.D.: "Count it the greatest of infamies to prefer life to honor, and to lose, for the sake of living, all that makes life worth having."

Here is Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*: "Mine honour is my life... Take honour from me, and my life is done."

Here is Jeffrey Hudson, courtier to Henrietta Maria, wife of England's Charles I, as he entered upon a duel: "Honour is the very breath in our nostrils."

Finally, here are the famous lines of the 17th century Cavalier poet Richard Lovelace from his *To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars*: "I could not love thee, dear, so much/ Loved I not honor more."

Definitions

I could go on. Many equivalent quotes are available. I suspect that a dozen or more could be mined from Shakespeare alone. However, the point is abundantly made: honor was at the axis of the code of conduct governing men's behavior over a period of many centuries. The ethic encompassing this code was not necessarily simple and discussions of what precisely constituted honor occasionally became quite baroque. While definitions vary wildly, honor over the centuries can essentially be divided into two separate components: The first, and historically older, of the two consists of virtue and the pursuit of virtue. In modern terms virtue can simply be defined as "moral excellence" and encompasses honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, faithfulness, veracity, comity, probity and equivalent good things of the same sort.

The second and historically newer aspect of honor is broader in scope and depends not just on the individual's own activities but that of others as well. The manner in which one is perceived by one's peers, sensitivity to insult, and the need to defend one's status and reputation are all central. Also included are the protection of family, clan, or nation, which is to say, patriotism. It is this component of honor that can lead to duels and violence.

The Classical Period

The earlier aspect of honor - the belief that is dependent on virtuous acts - dates to classical times. In early Greece, dominated as it was by a courtly and aristocratic society, the pursuit of honor was considered a primary duty. The deeds that garnered the greatest admiration were those that entailed not just great labor but courage and a disdain of death. The *Odyssey* and other Greek epic poems are built around the stories and legends of such quests. The tradition

continued under the Romans. Cicero stressed (in *De Officiis*) that “no material reward, however great, can compare with the splendor of virtue, and the glory and reputation that result from it.”

The Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages the quest for earthly honors came into conflict with Christian values. Christian doctrine stressed the spiritual and sought to de-emphasize the pursuit of worldly fame and glory, even in the name of virtue. St. Augustine, for example, preached that goodness is bestowed only by God’s grace. He urged men to “avoid this desire of human honor, the glory of the righteous being wholly in God.”

Honor and its pursuit nonetheless remained an essential part of medieval chivalry and feudal custom and managed to co-exist fairly happily with the church throughout the Middle Ages. And with the reemergence of classical values during the Renaissance, the concern for honor once again came to the fore.

As it evolved the stress fell more and more on the second component of honor. The concept moved from the pursuit of virtue to the defense of one’s own status and that of one’s family, clan, leader, or nation. Honor thus required fighting duels or going to war. There was also increasingly a close link to hierarchy, entitlement, and assumptions of aristocratic superiority. By embodying such traits as obedience, loyalty and self-sacrifice, honor worked to preserve and defend class distinctions. In fact, the entire structure of royal and aristocratic rule rested on the belief that the honor of the entire group is focused in its leadership. In this view, the leader’s honor was inherent in his position and above challenge. In as much as any honor a subordinate had was derived from his leader, he held a strong vested interest in its defense.

When honor was impugned it had to be vindicated, but only if it was impugned by a social equal. An affront by a social inferior could be - and often was - punished for its impudence, but his lower status meant that he could not threaten the honor of his better. Honorable combat could only be between social equals.

Blood lines

Given the strength of the European patrilinear system, it soon came to be thought that honor was capable of being inherited from distinguished ancestors. Honor, in other words, came to travel along blood lines. Like so many other things, this concept was carried to extremes in fifteenth century Spain, the time of the Inquisition. There honor was associated not just with aristocratic blood lines but with the purity of the blood. Families with with even minor blots in their lineage were denied a large variety of privileges and honors. As much as *one* grandparent with impure blood - which in practice usually meant a Moorish or Jewish convert to Christianity - could damage an individual's professional ambitions and bring shame to his entire family.

The Herding Culture

The more violent aspects of honor took strongest hold in the Mediterranean region and among the Celts in the northern fringes of Europe. There is, I think, an interesting reason behind this fact. In the poorer, hard-scrabble regions of the Mediterranean basin the primary means of livelihood was herding. The Celts, too, were primarily a herding people. Herders are far more vulnerable than crop growers to having their assets carried off.

Land stays put, but animals can be stolen, so herders had to develop means of protecting themselves. They did this through threats of retaliation or, when

necessary, through violence. Herding areas were thus commonly marked by continual inter-tribal feuding and chronic warfare. The constant threat of violence also made for tight family bonds.

J.K. Campbell, an anthropologist who studied the social patterns of a rural Greek community, sums it up this way: "The key regulations of life are simple. Kinsmen are loved and trusted. Unrelated [individuals] are considered almost as enemies." In defending the family, Campbell writes, the kinsman is defending both its worldly interests and its honor.

Dueling

Dueling as a means of settling disputes actually originated quite early on among the Germanic tribes and was already recorded by Roman writers such as Julius Caesar. During the Middle Ages duels began to be used in judicial procedures. The taking of evidence at trial had not yet been invented and the swearing of oaths was considered to be unreliable. Then, as now, there were too many perjurers about. Therefore, if a man charged another with a crime before a judge and the accused claimed the accuser was a liar, the judge ordered them to meet in a duel. The underlying theory was that since the struggle was an appeal to the judgement of God, the individual who was in the right would emerge as the winner and survivor.

Because God was considered to be the ultimate judge, duels were also used to decide matters of doctrine. For example, a duel was fought in 11th century Toledo to decide whether the Latin or Mozarabic rite should be used in the liturgy. The contestant representing the Mozarabic side won. These affairs could be quite bloody. When a contestant was thrown or wounded, the winner would place his knee on the chest of the loser and shove his sword through a joint in his

armor.

In contrast to judicial duels, duels of honor were fought to settle strictly private disputes, usually about slights or insults, and often on the flimsiest of pretexts. In the early days the combatants battled without witnesses. Later, to avoid ambushes or other such abuses, it became customary to bring along friends as seconds. Sometimes the seconds also dueled, to demonstrate their loyalty.

Duels of honor became so common after the 15th century that various rulers issued edicts of one sort or another to limit the practice, usually with little success. In the 19th century, particularly in France, duelling also became a common feature of political disputes. In Germany, duels of honor were authorized by the military code up until the first World War and again during the Nazi period.

America

Honor and its defense were at least as significant in the New World as in the old. You can see it right there in the ringing finale of the Declaration of Independence. The signers pledged to support their Declaration with "Our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred Honor". The word "honor" was even capitalized, endowing it with a kind of transcendental quality.

Because the northern states were settled largely by farmers - Puritans, Quakers, Dutch and Germans - the culture that developed in the North was more tranquil and cooperative than that which grew in the South. The settlers of the Southern states were primarily Scots-Irish, and although they too became farmers, they imported the more violent cultural patterns adhered to by their herding Celtic forebears. As a result, although the culture of honor took hold in all parts of the country, it was considerably more pronounced and central to the

mores of the Southern states.

The South

Southern codes of honor were also complemented and reinforced by the institution of slavery. Slavery divided Southern society into two distinct strata: those having honor and those deprived of it. Since the slave lived totally outside of the world of honor, the honor of the slaveholder stood out by comparison. The words of the master who had honor had to be accorded respect; the slave, having no honor, was assumed to be a liar and his testimony held no validity in a court of law.

Dueling, too, took place in all parts of the United States but was particularly prevalent in the South and many a politician rose to prominence by way of the duel. To refuse to duel was to become a social outcast, and there were hardly any successful prosecutions of individuals who killed others in duels.

The most famous duels are probably those in which Vice-President Aaron Burr killed his political adversary, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton; and the one between Senator John Randolph of Virginia and Secretary of State Henry Clay, both of whom survived. Clay's shot tore a hole into Randolph's jacket, causing Randolph to remark, "You owe me a coat, Mr. Clay". "I am glad the debt is no greater", Clay answered.

Andrew Jackson also won two duels and tried to provoke others, and also fell victim to a curious assault. As president, Jackson could not be challenged to a duel. So a former Navy lieutenant named Robert Randolph, who felt he had been unjustly dismissed from the service, approached Jackson and did the next best thing: he pulled Jackson's nose. At the time this was considered as profound an insult as it was possible to make and Jackson knew it. He chased Randolph with

his cane but turned down the proposals of aides who offered to have him killed. Revenge for a personal slight could not be delegated. A personal attack could only be answered by an equivalent attack on the perpetrator by the victim himself.

The South maintained a tenacious attachment to dueling long after it had succumbed to opposition in the North. But it was the subject of controversy in both areas. Benjamin Franklin was an opponent and often used an anecdote to make his point. The tale involved a famous French duelist named St. Froix who one day turned to a stranger in a cafe and asked him to move away because he stank. Affronted, the stranger insisted on a duel. "I will fight if you insist", St. Froix replied, "but it will not solve anything, since if you kill me I will stink, too, and if I kill you, you will stink , if possible, even worse than you do now."

A similar point was made by another Northern opponent of dueling, Lorenzo Sabine. He wrote that a duel could be of no use in a dispute over a debt since there was no way in which the combat could retrieve the money. Supporters of dueling argued that this totally missed the point. William Gilmore Simms, a Southern novelist wrote that the duelist fights "to maintain his position in society ... and in obedience to fierce passions that will not let him sleep under the sense of injury and annoyance". For the duelist, in other words, money was not the principal concern; it was honor.

Among Thieves

Dueling as a means of settling disputes among gentlemen is now extinct, but violence as a means of settling grievances has not entirely faded away. It continues to flourish at the nether reaches of society. The familiar cliché concerning "honor among thieves" still holds some meaning. A rather fascinating parallel exists between the dangers that caused herding peoples to develop strong

codes of honor and those that affect drug-pushers, muggers, and other minor-league street-corner criminals. The assets of both groups, cattle in the case of the former, cash or drugs in the case of the latter, are easily stolen. So petty criminals, like the herders before them, needed a credible threat of violence and workable operating code to protect their mutual interest.

Another similar phenomenon exists in the inner city, particularly among African-American youth. Here is an illustration: In May, 1994 a 65 year old plumber named James Todd accidentally bumped into a teenager in a store in Brooklyn. Todd apparently didn't apologize adequately, because the boy felt he had been "dissed". "Dissed" is, of course, a contraction of disrespected. An argument ensued, and after Todd left the store the teenager followed him on his bicycle and killed him with a direct shot to the head. Incidents such as this, where young people fight and even kill over seemingly petty affronts occur often.

According to the sociologist Elijah Anderson: "In the street culture ... respect is viewed as almost an external entity that is hard won but easily lost, and so must constantly be guarded." Some observers of inner city codes of honor suggest that they are traceable to the Southern culture of honor of an earlier era, which in turn is traceable to the cultural patterns brought to the New World from Scotland and Northern Ireland. So, paradoxically, patterns of conduct that have faded away among white Southerners survive among the descendents of slaves who under the old codes held no honor at all.

National Honor

In 1923, when Mencken wrote that if anyone talks of the honor of the United States everyone just laughs, his statement could itself be laughed off as less than serious. Mencken was simply being Mencken; which is to say, he was being

characteristically nettlesome. Seventy five years later his assertion has taken on greater meaning. For better or worse, the concept of national honor as it existed for centuries is close to extinction.

Power among nations is now so dispersed, and the interests of nations are so intertwined, that little room is left for unilateral action. Insults or provocations must be ignored or deflected rather than acted upon. Defending the national interest in a contemporary setting allows little room for excessive sensitivity. The Iranian hostage crisis during the Carter Administration provides the classic example.

Here we had an upstart regime led by Muslim fanatics whose followers took over the American embassy and imprisoned its staff. If ever there was an instance of a blatant affront to the national honor this was it. In an earlier era the Congress would have done something that never happens anymore: it would have declared war. The navy would have been dispatched forthwith and Marines landed. But in the hostage crisis there were considerations more palpable than honor, namely danger to other significant American interests. If Iranian military sites or cities were bombed or otherwise threatened not only might the hostages lose their lives but U.S. embassies and installations elsewhere might be subject to terrorist attack. The interests of nervous allies also had to be taken into account.

A similar situation exists now with Iraq. Saddam Hussein's unending insults, provocations and brinkmanship are not easily countered. Any U.S. action has to be taken with the public backing of our allies - or, at minimum, with their tacit consent - and in conjunction with the United Nations. In a certain sense, American honor has now been submerged in collective Western interests as modified by NATO or ratified by votes in the Security Council.

A Changing Society

Is Mencken equally right about American life itself? Does the concept of honor as such have any remaining validity? Is it now reduced only to comic significance? The culture of honor was always, as I have tried to suggest, dependent on the existence of a stable, structured, and stratified society. It depended heavily on clearly identifiable classes or castes. Contemporary American society, with its unprecedented mobility, both social and geographic, does not fit that profile. This fact alone has made it inhospitable to honor in its traditional form.

There is too great a romance with egalitarianism on the one hand and meritocracy on the other. Our institutions are large and growing larger; they are complex, dynamic and highly competitive; they have to be to compete, not just nationally, but internationally. Whether it is in the law, in the academy, in business, in science or government, moving up the ladder no longer depends on the old school tie or family connections but on aggressiveness, toughness and competence. This makes for efficiency but is hard on old fashioned civility, collegiality, gentility and considerations of honor.

Subjective Values

Then there is the crucial matter of virtue, or “moral excellence”. Controversies existed at various times in the past about its precise boundaries. But there was never any question of what it meant, or what resided at its core. Virtue rested on objective and commonly understood principles, independent of individual points of view or cultural differences.

I think that we are all aware that this is no longer true. Post-modernism and de-constructionism, today’s dominant academic fashions, are relativist and subjectivist. They view morality as a strictly social artifice, dependent on local or

cultural prejudices. And, as we all realize as well, this point of view has dribbled downwards and is now broadly accepted at the everyday, ordinary-folks level. An entire generation has been taught - and come to believe - that, as my daughter in law likes to say, we are not supposed to be judgmental. Everyone's attitudes - in fact everyone's *actions* - must be regarded as good as everyone else's.

The cultural revolution that began in the 1960's has settled in permanently. It has brought about extraordinarily rapid changes in American mores and attitudes. These changes underly the fluidity and uncertainty which now surround the question of what is meant by virtue. As traditionally conceived, honor depended on a fair degree of moral certitude, on reasonably firm and understood barometers of what is right and what is wrong. Is it really any wonder that in these new circumstances honor has become asphyxiated?

I happened recently to come across a review of a book called *Bitch* by a feminist writer called Elizabeth Wurtzel. The review quoted Ms. Wurtzel's philosophy. She proudly trumpeted this as: "I intend to do what I want to do and be whom I want to be and answer only to myself". The phrase "answer only to myself" was what struck me. It seems to express in marvelously compact form the cultural nihilism that has elbowed honor aside.

Leadership

I earlier mentioned that by tradition the honor of the entire group is focused in its leadership. In some ways this is particularly true of the American presidency because the office embodies in one person the leadership of the state, the government, and his own political party. The position is as powerful as it is in part because it is symbolic of the entire nation. That is why commentators endlessly spout banalities about the President being a "role model". But given the

new cultural reality of which I have been speaking it hardly seems surprising that even the more outlandish escapades of American leaders of all types are met with indifference rather than consternation.

When John Meriwether, the chairman of the hedge fund Long-Term Capital, lost billions in investor's money in risky, high stakes gambles was he forced to quit in disgrace? Hardly. The Federal Reserve engineered a \$3.6 billion bailout. Meriwether fired a bunch of the fund's employees, but stayed on himself.

When the outgoing Speaker of the House of Representatives was caught in an ethically dubious publishing deal worth \$3 million was he shamed into resigning? Hardly. He got slapped on the wrist with a pro-forma reprimand.(That's lower on the scale of such things than censure.) Only when he got blamed for unrelated Republican electoral losses did his colleagues give him the boot.

And when the President of the United States was finally pushed into admitting a rather squalid episode of adultery right in the White House and then publicly lying about it, did he appear mortified? Did so much as a single cabinet member or senior aide to whom he had lied directly resign as a signal of disapproval? Did a committee of elder statesmen materialize to urge the President to resign for the good of the office and the nation? The answer is no to all of the above.

As an intense student of public opinion, the President was well aware that the American public is by now immune to scandal; he knew that citizens have grown cynical; he understood that they expect little from a politician and the little they do expect does not include honor. And, of course, the President was absolutely right: his high poll ratings prove as much. Indeed, aside from being

worthy of a few jokes. the public seems to have found the entire matter of the President's dishonoring himself only tiresome and irrelevant. The additional unfortunate fact that the subject has been dredged in partisan warfare has reinforced the public's disdain.

As a result, at once the most often repeated and most effective argument against impeachment now being heard in the House of Representatives' debate on the subject is not even directed at the legal or substantive issues. The argument is that nobody really cares; that the public does not support impeachment and wants the matter to go away. A supporting contention is that the matter should not be brought to trial in the Senate because this would draw attention away from other, more crucial, issues, tie up the government, and damage the economy. Honor, in other words, must not interfere with expediency. Only now, in the eleventh hour, with impeachment appearing to loom as a real possibility, is the country - ever so reluctantly - forced to confront the problem of what to do about a leader so bereft of honor that he refuses to leave an office he has disgraced.

In sum, the answer to the question of whatever happened to honor is fairly simple. It went out of fashion. It faded away because it was unable to moor itself on moral ground that has become so squishy that people no longer believe themselves capable of rendering judgement on anyone else's behavior. Honor faded, as well, because the culture that nurtured it for centuries has ceased to exist. The exigencies of the huge, dynamic, competitive, and populist nation that we live in crushed the life out of it. But even as we accept the reality of its demise, the more Blimpish among us cannot help but mourn a little. Many of the practices associated with it in the past were less than admirable. But it is hard not to nourish a touch of nostalgia for its more noble attributes, and for the days when it was subject to respect rather than laughter.

