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Rituals of Violent Masculinity: A Feminist Comparative Historical Analysis of Male-Male Fighting, Shame and Misogyny

Christina Vogels ¹

1) *Auckland University of Technology*, New Zealand

Abstract

This article uses a combination of two feminist research methods to further understanding of the enduring nature of men's use of ritualised forms of violence. In particular, this article examines men fighting other men to mitigate the effects of feminized shame and to stabilise masculine honour. Using a feminist comparative historical analysis alongside a feminist systematic review, two manifestations of ritualised honour-based fighting will be explored: men's duelling of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and today's (hetero)romantic and homosocial practice of territory marking: men claiming ownership over their (hetero)romantic partner by threatening to fight other men who appear to be romantically interested in her. By looking at the relationship between two types of ritualised fighting from different time-periods, the enduring nature of why men fight other men to mitigate feminized shame can be discussed in new ways. This type of analysis helps shed light on inherent fragilities within these violent practices, signalling how men's ritualised fighting could be destabilised in the future.

Keywords

Territory marking, (hetero)romantic relationships, gender hegemony, shame, ritualized violence

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Corresponding author: Christina Vogels

Contact address: cvogels@aut.ac.nz

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Rituales de Masculinidad Violenta: Un Análisis Histórico Comparativo Feminista de las Peleas entre Hombres, la Vergüenza y la Misoginia

Christina Vogels¹

1) *Universidad Tecnológica de Auckland*, Nueva Zelanda

Resumen

Este artículo utiliza una combinación de dos métodos de investigación feministas para comprender mejor la naturaleza perdurable del uso de formas ritualizadas de violencia por parte de los hombres. En concreto, este artículo examina las peleas entre hombres para mitigar los efectos de la vergüenza feminizada y estabilizar el honor masculino. Mediante un análisis histórico comparativo feminista y una revisión sistemática feminista, se explorarán dos manifestaciones de la lucha ritualizada basada en el honor: los duelos entre hombres de los siglos XVIII y XIX y la práctica (hetero)romántica y homosocial actual de marcar el territorio: los hombres reclaman la propiedad de su pareja (hetero)romántica amenazando con luchar contra otros hombres que parecen estar románticamente interesados en ella. Al examinar la relación entre dos tipos de peleas ritualizadas de diferentes épocas, se puede discutir de nuevas maneras la naturaleza perdurable de por qué los hombres pelean con otros hombres para mitigar la vergüenza feminizada. Este tipo de análisis ayuda a arrojar luz sobre las fragilidades inherentes a estas prácticas violentas, señalando cómo las peleas ritualizadas de los hombres podrían desestabilizarse en el futuro.

Palabras clave

Marcado territorial, relaciones (hetero)románticas, hegemonía de género, vergüenza, violencia ritualizada.

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Correspondencia Autores(s): Christina Vogels

Dirección de contacto: cvogels@aut.ac.nz

Men's ritualised fighting has long been a stable part of society. Overwhelmingly, expressions and embodiments of masculine honour have been deeply embedded within these violent rituals, along with tendencies for men to use fighting – or the threat of a fight – as a way to mitigate the shame of being feminized. Today's homosocial and (hetero)romantic practice of territory making is one such example of men's ritualised fighting that can have significant social impacts. Territory marking involves men claiming ownership over their (hetero)romantic partner by threatening to fight other men who appear to be “making moves on her” (Vogels, 2022, p. 206). Not only does it enable men to fight their peers as a way to mitigate feelings of feminized shame and, in turn, protect their masculine status in society, it is also highly misogynistic as it “enables men to oppress women by both controlling who they can interact with and objectifying them as objects to be fought over” (Vogels, 2022, p. 206). While this form of fighting clearly impacts men's lives, to a greater degree it effects women by keeping them objectified and infantilised by their (hetero)romantic partners (Vogels, 2022). Even though it is a recognised gendered practice (Vogels, 2020; 2022), it remains woefully under-researched.

Using a feminist comparative historical analysis alongside a feminist systematic review, this article will explore today's practice of territory marking in comparison to an outdated form of men's ritualised fighting - duelling of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This article has three key aims. By looking at the relationship between an antiquated and a current-day form of ritualised fighting that are both based on securing masculine honour and shame-mitigation, the enduring nature of why violence is used by men, in this way, can be discussed in new ways. In addition to this, by exploring the historical similarities of men's honour-based ritualised fighting, the inherent fragilities of men's use of gendered violence to mitigate feminized shame can be explored. This, then, provides space to shed light on how a contemporary misogynistic practice like territory marking could be destabilised in the future.

This analysis is important: from a violence against women prevention standpoint, territory marking is a concern. Not only does it promote violent forms of masculinity, it also breeds an essentialist and misogynistic ideology that women should be subjugated in their romantic relationships with men. Feminist research that explores territory marking is important for strengthening understanding of violence against women and how to prevent it in the future. In addition to this, as far-right ultra-traditional versions of masculinity gain more widespread promotion through media and popular culture (Brown, Mondon & Winter, 2023; Brown & Mondon, 2021), a growing number of men may feel compelled to mitigate the effects of feminized shame through entrenched practices like territory marking. This article, therefore, aims to contribute new feminist solutions to growing concerns about the state of hegemonic masculinity in society.

Defining Feminized Shame

For decades, scholars have explored men's gendered responses to being shamed for not being masculine enough (for example, Åslund et al., 2009; Brown, 2004; Canaan, 1991; Consalvo, 2003; Fast, 2015; Gebhard et al., 2019; Gilligan, 2003; Vogels, 2020; Vogels, 2022; Gruber et al., 2014; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2005; Kimmel & Mahler, 2012; Klein, 2006; Lansky, 2013;

Messerschmidt, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2000; Sommer et al., 2020; Stoudt, 2006; Sundaram, 2013; Velotti et al., 2014; Websdale 2010). This type of work was pioneered by critical masculinity theorists – and most popularly by Raewyn Connell (1987, 1992, 1995, 2005) and her conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity. One of Connell’s most notable contributions in this space has been her theorizing of plural masculinities (Connell 2005, p. 44; see also Connell, 1992; 1995), which she defines as “configurations of practice structured by gender relations” (Connell, 2005, p. 44). These different configurations of masculinity are ordered within a hierarchical system where the exalted configuration of practice – hegemonic masculinity – “embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Connell argues that this system is paradoxical: even though hegemonic practices are the most sought after by men, they are almost impossible to embody. Instead, most men achieve the characteristics of what Connell calls complicit masculinities: masculine practices that are seen to support the hegemonic version of masculinity yet are more achievable for boys and men to embody. As Connell (2005, p. 79-80) maintains, by enacting practices that are complicit with hegemonic masculinity, men are rewarded with a patriarchal dividend that enables them to secure their masculine status.

Many men, however, are unable to achieve this complicit status. Another of Connell’s (2005, p. 80-81) configurations is termed marginalized masculinities – categorized by masculine practices that intersect with marginalized class and ethnic identities. These practices are promoted when they benefit the stabilization of hegemonic masculinity and disparaged when they threaten the primacy of hegemonic masculinity. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika rugby players have long been revered by sports media and rugby fans for their embodied athleticism on the rugby field, enabling them to play the game successfully. However, Māori and Pasifika men are also persecuted as deviant through the media’s over-representation of Māori and Pasifika within crime news stories (for example, see Hokowhitu, 2013). And for men and boys whose gendered performances fail to be promoted in any way, a subordinate masculine status is assigned. This configuration is the least sought-after of all the masculine practices within this gendered system, as they are permeated with feminine and homosexual attributes. These attributes are disparaged by this system in order to contain their threat to the stability of hegemonic masculinity. It is within these qualities that men are shamed as feminine within the social order of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 78-79).

Over the years, Connell’s framework has been taken up by a significant number of scholars (in relation to research around young men see: Allen, 2005, Allen, 2007; Barnes, 2011; Campbell, 2000; Campbell & Mayerfield Bell, 2000; Gilmartin, 2007; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2005; Light, 2007; Messerschmidt, 2000; Park, 2006; Pringle & Hickey, 2010; Redman, 2001; Stoudt, 2006; Swain, 2003; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013). Critics (Francis, 2010; Halberstam, 1998; Paechter, 2006a; Paechter, 2006b; Paechter, 2012; Schippers, 2007), however, argue that Connell’s framework is premised on a form of gender essentialism that conflates masculinity with male bodies and femininity with female bodies. With regard to feminized shame, Connell’s framework can only account for the effects of feminizing men within a broader discussion of subordinate masculinity. For many scholars, this is not sufficient due to the lack of focus on *femininities* and the male body. These scholars, therefore, argue that a more

nuanced account of gendered identities is needed, introducing terminology like male/masculine femininities and female/feminine masculinities to academic discourse.

Of the recent critiques surrounding Connell's gender essentialism, Mimi Schippers' (2007) conceptual work is arguably the most innovative "because it more rigorously questions the taking up of femininities by male bodies and the taking up of masculinities by female bodies [by addressing] the conditions placed on what is privileged as masculinity and what is denigrated as femininity" (Vogels, 2020, p. 195). Other scholars have also addressed Connell's essentialism; for example, Paechter has worked with terms like "masculine girls" (2012, p. 232) and "masculine women" (2006a, p. 261), while Halberstam (1998, p. 1) theorised "female masculinity". However, Schippers' (2007) approach tackles the "system of privilege and denigration" in a more robust manner (Vogels, 2020, p. 195). Herein lies her sophisticated account of what she terms *gender hegemony*, which interrogates the "embodiment of masculine and feminine characteristics by individuals," providing new ways to explore how men's fear of being feminized can lead to violent consequences in society (Schippers, 2007, p. 92).

For Schippers (2007), an understanding of gender hegemony shifts scholarship away from a fixation with hegemonic masculinity to a "more nuanced focus on the hegemonic scaffolding" (Vogels, 2020, p. 194) through which masculinities and femininities are organized. This scaffolding represents the structural conditions for "relationships between men and woman as 'naturally' and inevitably a relationship of dominance and submission" (Schippers, 2007, p. 91). For example, this scaffolding is predicated on women being physically vulnerable and men being physically strong, which naturalizes male domination as part of gendered relations in society. By emphasizing these operations of gender hegemony that "place men's dominance over women at the center" (Schippers, 2007, p. 86), not only is the privileging of masculinity in society exposed but a focus on femininity is brought back into critical discussions about gender.

At the core of gender hegemony is the "relationship of difference" (Schippers, 2007, p. 90). While Connell's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity discusses difference, Schippers suggests that a Butlerian approach to difference sits "more centrally" (Schippers, 2007, p. 90) in how gender hegemony is defined. Within the workings of gender hegemony, difference – and its relational complementarity – is principally marked by "heterosexual desire":

For Butler, heterosexual desire, as a defining feature for both women and men, is what binds the masculine and feminine in a binary, hierarchical relationship. In contemporary Western societies, heterosexual desire is defined as an erotic attachment to difference, and as such, it does the hegemonic work of fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites (Schippers, 2007, p. 90).

Therefore, while the content of both masculinity and femininity is more complex than just hetero-desire, hetero-desire provides the "ontological essence" (Schippers, 2007, p. 90) of a complementary relationship based on difference. This alone, however, does not "constitute hegemony" (Schippers, 2007, p. 90); instead, hegemonic operations require a relationship of "ascendancy and dominance" and that the naturalization in Western societies of the "physically dominant"/penetrator masculine sexuality "in relation to femininity" underpins this relationship (Schippers, 2007, p. 90).

Men's privilege, therefore, sits at the core of how gender hegemony orders gendered identities, illustrated in how Schippers works with the terms "man"/"woman" and "masculinity"/"femininity" (Schippers, 2007, p. 89-90). In order to build her analysis, she (2007, p. 90) argues that it is the "quality content" of what is symbolically referred to as "man" and "woman" that needs examination. As she (2007, p. 94) asserts, it is the "relationship articulated through the quality content of femininity and masculinity that is the central feature of gender hegemony". For example, qualities like physical strength and assertiveness are associated with masculinity, which in turn associates femininity with qualities like being vulnerable and passive.

This emphasis on relational quality content forms one of Schippers (2007, p. 90) main departures from Connell (Schippers 2007, 90). Connell's (2005, p. 44 and p. 76-81; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) view that one can speak of masculinity and femininity as social practices infers that masculine practices are only performed by male bodies and feminine practices by female bodies. Masculinity and femininity need instead to be conceptualized as the "contextually and culturally specific set of meanings for what women and men are and should be" (Schippers, 2007, p. 92), which in turn makes social practice "the mechanism by which those meanings come to shape, influence and transforms social structure." Therefore, qualities for what women and men should be become the core of the "hegemonic significance of masculinity and femininity" (Schippers, 2007, p. 90).

With this line of thought, men and women can embody masculine or feminine characteristics where "regardless of one's sex category, the possession of erotic desire for the feminine object is constructed as masculine and being the object of masculine desire is feminine" (Schippers, 2007, p. 90). However, the key to the workings of gender hegemony is that certain bodies will embody legitimate gendered identities, whilst others will not. Here, the theory of gender hegemony reconsiders what hegemonic masculinity is through the lens of "recovering the feminine Other" (Schippers, 2007, p. 85). In doing so, a collection of relational configurations – hegemonic femininity, pariah femininities and male femininities – emerge.

By incorporating an attention to difference, complementarity, ascendancy and dominance, hegemonic masculinity can now be considered "the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). Within this consideration, hegemonic masculinity includes various qualities like men "embodying physical strength, being authoritative, and able to be violent in conflict-based situations" (Vogels, 2022, p. 207 – see also Schippers, 2007, p. 91). With this attention to difference, complementarity, and ascendancy, hegemonic femininity emerges as the qualities "defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). These qualities include physical weakness, defenselessness, passivity, and being unable to use violence effectively in conflict-based situations (Schippers, 2007, p. 91).

The term hegemonic femininity is controversial. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 848), femininity cannot take on any hegemonic status as it is subordinate within the system of hegemonic masculinity. Schippers (2007, p. 94), however, provides a convincing rationale:

Although the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity is one of ascendancy for the masculine and for men, there is, I argue, an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over other femininities to serve the interests of the gender order and male domination.

Femininity is, therefore, hegemonic when it serves the ascendant order of hegemonic masculinity. In turn, the hegemonic function of this version of femininity regulates other femininities that threaten this ascendant order, for example, gendered performances by female bodies that appear masculine and feminine practices that are enacted by male bodies (Schippers, 2007, p. 94-95).

While gender hegemony does not conflate masculine practices with men and feminine practices with women, core to its workings is that the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity is restricted to certain bodies:

If hegemonic gender relations depend on the symbolic construction of desire for the feminine object, physical strength, and authority as the characteristics that differentiate men from women and define and legitimate their superiority and social dominance over women, then these characteristics must remain unavailable to women (Schippers, 2007, p. 94).

Hegemonic masculinity is therefore assigned “the exclusive rights to qualities when embodied by men that establish and legitimate men’s dominance over women” (Vogels, 2017, p. 6). This definition replaces the need for a theory of complicit masculinities (Connell, 2005, p. 79-80). Instead of an emphasis on an aspirational hegemonic masculinity that is unattainable, hegemonic masculinity reads more as an everyday achievement. In turn, hegemonic femininity is given exclusive rights to the qualities that, when embodied by women, “establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity” (Schippers, 2007, p. 94).

With specific reference to legitimacy, femininity is defined as “always and already inferior and undesirable when compared to masculinity”, which therefore positions masculinity as “always superior” and never to be “conflated with something undesirable” (Schippers, 2007, p. 96). With this understanding, legitimate – and therefore hegemonic – ways for men to act can also be succinctly labelled “masculine”, which in turn “means that there are no masculine characteristics that are stigmatized as contaminating or as subordinate” (Schippers, 2007, p. 96).

Unlike men, women who display masculine qualities are heavily stigmatized within this system. Such qualities threaten and contaminate gender hegemony and are assigned the status of what Schippers (2007, p. 95-96) terms pariah femininities. When men are idealized for possessing qualities like being sexually assertive, desiring the “feminine Other” (Schippers, 2007, p. 86), and being authoritative, women possessing these qualities are not afforded the same accolades; instead, they are often labelled “slut”, “lesbian”/“dyke” and “bitch” (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). These derogatory labels are used to restrict access to these masculine qualities because of the threat their display by females poses to the hegemonic ordering of gendered identities.

And when men fail to achieve hegemonically masculine qualities, they too are seen as inferior, illegitimate and contaminants and, therefore, stigmatized and shamed for performing versions of male femininities (Schippers, 2007, p. 96-97). Yet, Schippers (2007, p. 96) is careful to move away from an overly simplistic view of male femininities, as simply men doing femininity, to a more focused account of male femininities as “the characteristics and practices that are culturally ascribed to women, do the cultural work of situating the feminine in a complementary, hierarchical relationship with the masculine and are embodied by men”. Male femininities are thus performances of hegemonic femininity but enacted by males, for example, being “compliant, defenseless and physically weak” (Vogels, 2017, p. 8-9). These qualities of hegemonic femininities when performed by male bodies are “culturally defined as contaminating” (Schippers, 2007, p. 96). This is because, these performances “threaten the scaffolding that places hegemonic masculinity as dominant” (Vogels, 2017, p. 8-9). Like pariah femininities, then, male femininities do not adhere to the principles of difference, complementarity, ascendancy and dominance that work to privilege hegemonic masculinity within the hegemonic ordering of gendered identities (Schippers, 2007, p. 96-97).

This conceptual work around pariah femininities and male femininities also speaks directly to the constitution of hegemonic femininity. Unlike pariah femininities and male femininities, hegemonic femininity, although a feminized arrangement, is not cast as undesirable when embodied by women. This is because it is complementary to hegemonic masculinity and contributes to the “cultural insurance for male dominance” (Schippers, 2007, p. 96). Pariah femininities and male femininities, on the other hand, are subordinate to hegemonic femininity and cast as undesirable and contaminating to gender hegemony because they threaten the ascendant position of hegemonic masculinity. For example, when men show a sexual desire for other men, the “assumed naturalized, complementary desire between men and women” is unsettled (Schippers, 2007, p. 96). Therefore, for men, being shamed as feminine is the ultimate derision.

This article focuses on how the relationships between men’s ritualised fighting is connected, over time, to men’s attempts to mitigate the effects of feminized shame. Securing masculine honour is woven throughout these complex performances of hegemonic masculinity, whereby men use the threat of and/or fighting other men as a way to prove their masculine worth. This enduring quality of hegemonic masculinity needs feminist attention, with specific regard to how these violent forms of masculinity can be destabilised in the future.

Method

Men’s use of violence as a way to secure honour and mitigate the effects of feminized shame is a phenomenon that has been seen repeatedly throughout history and into current day. As such, there are a wide variety of manifestations of this form of gendered violence that scholars have explored. For example, the Balinese cockfights of Indonesia (Geertz, 1972; Johnsen, 2008), Sereer wrestling of Senegal (Llaurens, 2009), inter-gang violence (Horowitz & Schwartz, 2017; Hunt, 2003) and school shootings (Klein, 2006) in the United States and the recent phenomenon of two car garage fighting (Melzer, 2013). This article does not attempt to canvas all or many forms of men’s ritualised fighting over time. Instead, the primary intention

of this analysis comes from a violence against women prevention focus and is specifically tasked at learning more about why territory marking, a form of ritualised fighting embedded within the context of (hetero)romantic relationships, exists today. By comparing this form of men's violence to a similar yet antiquated form of fighting – the duel – novel ways of making sense of this modern-day practice can take place.

This article uses a feminist comparative historical analysis alongside a feminist systematic review to better understand why men's ritualised fighting endures over time, specifically when related to the men trying to stabilise their masculine honour and mitigate feminized shame. Historiography and historical analysis have been widely used in the social sciences. As Lange explains, historiographies (also known as historical methods) “are the most common analytic techniques used in the discipline of history...generally used to explore either what happened at a particular time and place or what the characteristics of a phenomenon were like at a particular time and place”. Historical analyses go further by “analyzing the different cause-and-effect relationships present in each scenario, considering the ways individuals, influential ideas, and different mindsets interact and affect one another” (Cole et al., 2022, p. 12). Comparative historical analyses are different still: while historical analyses tend to explore one historical event, a comparative historical analysis explores different historical events to explore patterns of social phenomena over time (Lange, 2013, Bernhard & O'Neill, 2021; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). As Lange (2013, p. 4) explains, comparative historical analyses are often centred around a “within-case method”. This case study approach is therefore one of the hallmarks of comparative historical analysis which enables such work to “pursue insight into the determinants of a particular phenomenon...that is, they are temporal and analyze processes over time” (Lange, 2013, p. 4).

This article adopts this comparative approach specifically within a feminist historical methodology. Feminist historians (see Burton, 1992; McDonagh, 2018; Rotramel, 2020, Scott, 2004; Shapiro, 1992) have a well-established tradition of exploring historical periods and events through a feminist lens. Feminist comparative historical analyses (Offen, 1988; Lal et al., 2010), therefore, are tasked to explore how a gendered case study of a phenomena is shaped over time. This article uses the case study of men's ritualised shame-based fighting, in particular, two types of ritualised shame-based fighting from different time periods: duelling of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a contemporary form of ritualised fighting – territory marking, first documented in academic scholarship in the early 1990s (see Canaan, 1991).

The dataset for this feminist comparative historical analysis was generated through a feminist systematic review strategy (Denscombe, 2014). Systematic reviews are another popular approach used in social science research. Primarily they involve a “review of the research literature whose aim is to arrive at a conclusion about the state of knowledge on a topic based on a rigorous and unbiased overview of all the research that has been undertaken on that topic” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 135). As such, systematic reviews complement comparative historical analyses by “rethink[ing] existing literature in ways that generate new and better ways of thinking about specific phenomenon” (Alvesson & Sundberg, 2020, p. 1290). Feminist scholars, therefore, have used systematic reviews to rethink a range of existing topics via a feminist lens (Lewkowitz & Gilliland, 2025; Kauzlarich & Greenwood, 2025; Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2024; Viana et al., 2024).

For this article, academic accounts of duelling were sourced from Google Scholar and other online databases; then, fourteen academic texts (comprising of journal articles and book chapters) were chosen as the corpus for this study. This corpus was chosen based on their detail of duelling practice alongside commentary about the connection between duelling and masculine honour and/or shame. This duelling corpus was then analysed in relation to all existing scholarship on territory marking to explore comparatively how duelling – and its manifestations of ritualised honour-based fighting – compares and contrasts to territory marking today. Comparatively analysing these historically distinct corpora captured a range of insights about the relationship between shame, honour and masculine performances of male-male violence over time as well as the inherent fragility of men’s ritualised fighting.

The Duel

Many scholars have provided accounts of men’s duelling and the conditions that ritualized this form of violence (eg. [Boschi, 1998](#); [Breashears, 2004](#); [Ellett, 1997](#); [Frevert, 1998](#); [Gallant, 2000](#); [Haine, 1996](#); [Harvey, 2005](#); [Hughes, 1998](#); [LaVaque-Manty, 2006](#); [Low, 1999](#); [Masterton, 2017](#); [Nye, 1993](#); [Shoemaker, 2002](#); [Spierenburg, 1998](#)). Broadly speaking, the duel evolved from pre-modern practices such as primitive “hand-to-hand combat” used to settle disputes ([Ellett, 1997](#), p. 59) and chivalric duels carried out to defend or mark geographical territory ([LaVaque-Manty, 2006](#), p. 718). As societies introduced more “regularized procedures to dispense justice” ([Ellett, 1997](#), p. 59) throughout the sixteenth century, the duel became a way to “resolve questions of honour” ([Shoemaker, 2002](#), p. 525). Duels, therefore, evolved into a form of male-to-male violence that was far more organized, “stylized” and rule-bound than other types of men’s fighting, such as “barroom brawls” or “fisticuffs” ([Ellett, 1997](#), p. 59). For example, duels had to be organized by seconds: seconds were affiliates of the duelists who had to negotiate key features of what the duel would look like; this included what weapon would be used, the time the duel would take place, and its location ([Frevert, 1998](#), p. 39; see also [Ellett, 1997](#), p. 63-64; [Nye, 1993](#)).

Duelling took place first in Europe – and in particular Italy and France – from the sixteenth century, and then moved into the UK and North America; the practice continued throughout the nineteenth century and even into the early twentieth century in some places ([Boschi, 1998](#); [Breashears, 2004](#); [Ellett, 1997](#); [Frevert, 1998](#); [Haine, 1996](#); [Hughes, 1998](#); [LaVaque-Manty, 2006](#); [Low, 1999](#); [Masterton, 2017](#); [Nye, 1993](#); [Shoemaker, 2002](#); [Spierenburg, 1998](#)). As the duel progressed into the latter part of the nineteenth century, historians note that pistols replaced sword use ([Ellett, 1997](#), p. 63-64). The fact that the duel spanned a number of centuries and even adapted when weaponry preferences changed indicates how enduring it was. Arguably, this is because of what was at stake for men at this time: this brutal and violent practice not only provided a way for men to gain honour (by winning) but also laid the foundation for men to be shamed if they lost. As [Connell](#) notes, the duel was a “symbolic definition of masculinity through violence” ([Connell, 2005](#), p.192). Therefore, the ability of a man to not only fight but to fight better than his opponent became a clear marker of hegemonic masculinity ([Schippers, 2007](#), p. 91). As [Nye \(1993, p. 13\)](#) laments, “A man was in the greatest danger of dishonouring himself at the very moment he most expressly affirmed his honour.”

Duels were primarily fought between men of similar classes, and historical accounts tend to focus on duelling between men of the “upper echelons” (Ellett, 1997, p. 59) – or what can be labeled as “elite” duels. However, duels were carried out amongst the lower classes (see Boschi, 1998; Gallant, 2000; Spierenburg, 1998). These “popular duels” were also fought over honour and highly ritualized but tended to be less “official” than elite duels (Spierenburg, 1998, p. 99): for example, there was usually little negotiation beforehand. Instead, popular duels were far more direct and “attuned to an instantaneous settlement once a conflict has arisen” (Spierenburg, 1998, p. 101). The knife tended to be used as the weapon of choice in these popular duels (see also Gallant, 2000). Knife fighting did not require the same level of training as sword fighting, making it a more accessible weapon for use amongst men from lower-class groups.

The elite duel tended to follow a series of common characteristics and was primarily practiced in Europe and the United Kingdom (Ellett, 1997; Fervert, 1998; Hughes, 1998; Nye, 1993; Shoemaker, 2002; Spierenburg, 1998). This type of duel was a solely aristocratic practice, used by this class to “settle...disputes extra-legally” (LaVaque-Manty, 2006, p. 719). Therefore, regardless of whether the state condemned or condoned duelling, men continued to duel. Even though the elite duel was performed outside of the law, it enjoyed formal, ritualized features: as mentioned, only certain weapons were used – the sword then later the pistol – negotiated by each of the duellists’ seconds (a party affiliated to any given duellist) before the duel took place, along with the time and place of the event (Fervert, 1998, p. 39; see also Ellett, 1997, p. 63-64; Nye, 1993). Young men from the “elite” class were trained in the art of sword-fighting, becoming professional duel “masters” and being inducted into the code of honour of this new form of masculine ritual (Connell, 2005, p. 192).

Men duelled for several reasons, and these reasons showcase what men saw as a threat to masculinity at the time. According to Nye (1993) there were four broad reasons for a duel to take place. The “political duel” (Nye, 1993, p. 191-200) and “journalistic duel” (Nye, 1993, p. 187-190) were both contextual to men’s professional integrity and reputation. For example, if a reporter was called out for being dishonest, they may negotiate a duel to bring honour back to their name. Similarly, if someone brought disrepute to a politician, the politician could call for a duel to settle the matter. As LaVaque-Manty explains, duels were ostensibly fights for “proof” or “vindication” (LaVaque-Manty, 2006, p. 718) and, therefore, were commonly used within these professional bodies as a way to mitigate being professionally shamed, often in the form of slander.

The other two types of duels – the “futile” (Nye, 1993, p. 210-215) and the “serious” (Nye, 1993, p. 200-210) duel – speak more to men mitigating the effects of being shamed in their private rather than professional lives. Futile duels were, as they sound – duels that “were nearly always trivial or spontaneous in nature” (Nye, 1993, p. 210). As Nye (1993, p. 211) explains, a typical futile duel would have been initiated over some “altercation in a public setting”: for example, at “the races, a men’s club, the theater, or even a crowded sidewalk, when one man thought it beneath his dignity to make way for another man in his path.” While these duels were fought quite spontaneously, there was still usually a degree of planning involved (for example, often, a second would organize the time and place for the duel to be carried out).

A “serious duel was initiated when a man’s “personal honour” had been “wounded” (Nye, 1993, p. 200). These types of duels were more significant than futile duels as they “combined

deeper feelings of outrage with more dangerous duelling conditions” (Nye, 1993, p. 200). Overwhelmingly, these types of duels were fought in private due to their intimate nature (Nye, 1993). From historical narratives, there were a number of ways a man could be dishonoured resulting in a “serious” duel. One of the most common reasons was “gallant” in nature; these duels were initiated principally to “defend the honour” of one’s wife and, in some cases, to defend the honour of “a mistress, a mother, even a sister” (Nye, 1993, p. 200). It is important to note that these duels were rarely fought *over* a woman: “Few of the serious duels we know about were the results of an open competition for the favours of a woman, as in popular melodramas or travesties of the wild west”. Therefore, the gallant duel mainly was initiated and carried out by “an able-bodied male who was the legal guardian, husband, or closest relation of an offended woman was obliged to challenge her offender” (Nye, 1993, p. 200-201).

A man’s honour could also be wounded if there were questions about his embodiment of the time’s “normative sexual characteristics and desires” (Nye, 1993, p. 9). Here, we find a version of the duel that was fought not only to secure masculine honour but also to mitigate the effects of feminized shame. Primarily, men during this period were required to be married, and heterosexuality was the only normative sexual identity. Therefore, a man who was either unmarried or seen to desire other men “dishonoured himself and brought shame to his family” (Nye, 1993, p. 9). This process of shaming, which evoked derision of the feminine Other, provided a way to regulate “the relations between the sexes, families, and clans; to distribute prestige (and therefore status) among them; and finally, to promote cohesion in the whole society through the ‘shaming’ of individuals who have forfeited their honour” (Nye, 1993, p. 9).

Fear of the feminine Other was pivotal in this process. As Nye (1993, p. 125) explains:

The fear of effeminacy, sexual perversions, and homosexuality was common throughout western Europe in the decades prior to 1914. This widespread public concern was certainly stimulated by growing military tensions, a number of prominent homosexual scandals, and the multiple strains put on sex roles by the social and political emancipation of women. These influences produced in Germany and England the same kind of antihomosexual animus that existed in France, blunting the impetus of fledgling homosexual rights movements, and encouraging defensive denials by homosexuals and their defenders that homosexuality was incompatible with manliness or constituted a threat to national security.

Therefore, duelling provided men with an opportunity to show courage, an enduring quality of hegemonic masculinity that helped men mitigate being feminized as weak and cowardly – both of which were qualities of male femininity that were largely associated with both homosexuality and sexual dysfunction at the time.

This opportunity to show courage was made accessible to more men as class-based parameters that distinguished the elite and popular duel relaxed throughout the mid to latter parts of the 1800s. This was due to many countries in the Western World adopting less rigid class structures. The growing middle class, in particular, created an environment where duels could now happen between men who were not strictly from Aristocratic groups (Nye, 1993, p. 172):

Honour was no longer the fetish of a tiny elite, but a quality of any Frenchman who was conscious of his civil dignity, jealous of his personal rights, who loved his fatherland and dreamed of revenge against its enemies. The hegemony of honour was such that a larger number of men than ever before felt themselves obliged to lay claim to these goals, whether or not they shared the more narrow political ideals of the republican program.

This, in turn, changed the conditions of duelling: “The ethos of the modern duel was more egalitarian than its ancestor because it depended on a conception of masculinity that all men possessed as males, a birthright, as it were, conferred on them by the modern discovery of the difference between the sexes” (Nye, 1993, p. 215).

By the latter half of the 1800s, most countries saw the practice outlawed, which matched the growing public opinion shift of the day: the duel was now primarily seen as “vulgar” (Masterton, 2017, p. 606). This shift in public opinion correlated with a new sensibility of manhood sweeping the Western world from the latter parts of the nineteenth century. This new version of masculinity privileged men to act in gentlemanly ways, with a dominant quality being an ability to show “physical self-restraint” (Masterton, 2017, p. 606). This meant that being the “violent brute” (cite) was now less of a marker of idealized masculinity. As Masterton (2017, p. 627) notes, however, there was still a requirement for men to be able and willing to fight:

The ability to commit and counter interpersonal violence remained an important component of Victorian masculinity in all classes. The social, and to a lesser extent legal, restraints placed upon interpersonal violence influenced the degree to which this ability might be acted upon, but it did not negate the original prerequisite. A gentleman had recourse to the courts and to the newspapers to arbitrate a disagreement, but not because he was afraid to meet the scoundrel in the street. A gentleman could delegate the protection of his person and family to the authorities, yet he must be able to defend himself and his home if attacked. And, of course, a gentleman should not fight a duel—provided he was unafraid to do so.

This showcases the paradoxical and theatrical nature of the duel. While the duel was centered around the physical act of violence, it was also as important to show a masculine disposition to fight regardless of whether the duel took place or not. Initiations of a duel did not necessarily mean that a violent exchange would occur (Ellett, 1997, p. 64; Shoemaker, 2002). Historians also note that often, the seconds would endeavor to reach a resolution to a problem before weapons were even used (Ellett, 1997, p. 64; Shoemaker, 2002). But, regardless of whether a physical fight took place or not, the masculine quality of being willing to use violence to settle disputes remained the most crucial disposition for men to embody (see Schippers, 2007, p. 91).

Territory Marking

While the duel ceased to be a common practice by the early nineteenth century, “the ‘problem’ of honour” (Nye, 1993, p. 13) in men’s lives endured, along with the use of ritualized violence as a way to address it. A well-established body of research has documented a range of modern-

day violent practices used by adult (Vogels, 2022; Brown, 2004; Gebhard et al., 2019; Gilligan, 1993; Gruber et al., 2014; Lansky, 2013; Velotti et al., 2014; Websdale, 2010) and young men (Åslund et al., 2009; Vogels, 2020; Canaan, 1991; Consalvo, 2003; Fast, 2015; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2005; Kimmel & Mahler, 2012; Klein, 2006; Messerschmidt, 2000; Sommer et al., 2020; Stoudt, 2006; Sundaram, 2013) to resolve these “problems of honour” (Nye, 1993, p. 13).

Territory marking is one such contemporary ritualized masculine practice designed to help men mitigate feelings of feminized shame. As previously defined, territory marking involves men claiming ownership over their (hetero)romantic partner by threatening to fight other men who appear to be ‘making moves on’ her. Its primary purpose is twofold: it helps men mitigate the effects of feminized shame as well as enabling the subjugation and objectification of women (Vogels, 2020; Vogels, 2022, Canaan, 1991; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2005; Sundaram, 2013). As Sundaram (2013, p. 123) summarizes, violence is used when young men’s “status and identity are uncertain.” While it is recognizable as a practice in society, it is woefully under-researched. This article, therefore, aims not only to add to the extant literature on territory marking but also endeavours to articulate new insights into the enduring nature of why men fight other men when their masculine honour is at stake.

Canaan’s (1991) ethnographic research of young men (aged 16-24) from the United Kingdom was the first study to discuss this practice. From conducting group interviews with young men, Canaan (1991, p. 119) found that young women were talked about as objects to be fought over “by males and for males only.” In these cases, violence was a resource to be used by young men to guard their reputation if their masculine status as boyfriends was being jeopardized by someone else encroaching on their “territory” (Canaan, 1991, p. 119-120). Canaan (1991, p. 119-121) concluded that this marking of territory was both figurative (treating girlfriends like objects of ownership – see also Sundaram, 2013) as well as literal. For instance, such fights also occurred when young men started to date young women from outside their own geographical territories (Canaan, 1991, p. 120). According to another earlier study, it is also presumed that secondary schools are likely places where territory marking occurs due to the propensity for “intense male to male competition for dominance” to occur, particularly within the more informal setting of the schoolgrounds (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2005, p. 122; see also Vogels, 2020, p. 203).

In more recent years, a handful of scholars have explored this practice in further depth (Vogels, 2020; Vogels, 2022; Sundaram, 2013). Primarily, territory marking appears to be a fist-fighting practice, with a suggestion that the severity of violence depends on the type of indiscretion: for example, one might be justified in punching a peer a couple of times for kissing his girlfriend, while a “full on bash” would be justified if the peer had had sex with his girlfriend (Vogels, 2020, p. 203). The ability and willingness of the body to perform violently is integral to one’s masculine status in these peer-based situations (see Messerschmidt 1999).

While territory marking is clearly a practice based on men’s ability to control their female romantic partners (Vogels, 2020; Vogels, 2022; Canaan, 1991; Sundaram, 2013), research also indicates that men justify territory marking practices as heroic and paternalistic – that is, as a means to protect women from other men (Vogels, 2022, p. 210-213). Heroic paternalism is often regarded in society as quite benign; however, it is a cornerstone of gender hegemony as it justifies men’s ability to control women while also subjugating women as submissive, weak,

and vulnerable. Appearing to act out of heroic paternalism is, therefore, an effective way for men to mitigate being feminized by peers when their masculine status as boyfriends is threatened. Territory marking, in one study (Vogels, 2022, p. 210-212), also went hand-in-hand with a more extreme paternalistic treatment of women: one woman was infantilized as both childlike and in need of protection from the advances of other men. This highly misogynistic treatment of women stabilizes hegemonic masculinity's claim that men are able to be authoritative over women.

Research also suggests that *a willingness to engage* in territory marking practices may be as important, if not more important, than actually carrying out a territory marking fight, much like expectations embedded in the duel (Masterton, 2017, p. 627). Therefore, an understanding of territory marking may only need to be theoretical for men to comply with gender hegemony. For example, in a recent study (Vogels, 2020, p. 201-203) carried out with high school-aged young men, they talked of a code by which a fight would take place *if* a peer had kissed or had sex with one's girlfriend; this talk did not indicate that any of these young men had actually seen or carried out such a fight. Young men from this study also talked about the likely consequences for those who chose not to mark their territory, for example, being called derisive and feminizing slurs by one's male peers, like "pussy" (Vogels, 2020, p. 203). This indicates that part of the ritual of territory marking is an expectation that one must be willing and able to fight in order to protect one's masculine status as a boyfriend from being feminized. Expectations are also placed on male bystanders to support the practice, meaning that it is largely undesirable for men to disagree with or attempt to stop a male peer initiating a fight (Vogels, 2022, p. 213). This suggests that bystander complicity likely plays an overarching role in stabilizing the rules of territory marking and, therefore, its place in the wider workings of gender hegemony.

By historically comparing duelling and territory marking, one can start to see distinct similarities between the two practices. As outlined, both practices are highly ritualistic, adhering to codes of conduct and rules of fighting, with the actual fight itself *as important as* a man's willingness to fight regardless of whether the fight occurs. Both practices also rely on complicit peers to endorse and legitimize violence to secure masculine honour. And, perhaps the most important and overarching similarity between the duel and territory marking is that both practices have highly feminizing impacts on men who choose not to fight or who cannot fight adequately. Mapping these similarities exposes an enduring formula that enables men to use fighting to secure their masculine honour.

Paradoxically, this historical analysis also shows that men's fighting for honour has always been and continues to be in flux. With reference to duelling, Nye (1993, p. 13) explains that "the 'problem' of honour...is that it was never secure, required constant reaffirmation, and was always open to challenge". In other words, duelling itself did not endure; in fact, it was largely viewed as "vulgar" once gender hegemony started to promote "the gentleman" version of masculinity (Masterton, 2017, p. 606). Men, therefore, had to find new ways to use violence as a resource for maintaining their masculine status in society.

Ambivalence and Social Change

As scholarship on territory marking is scarce, it is difficult to know when this contemporary practice began. However, what can be deduced is that territory marking is ritualistic and a male-to-male violent practice that shares many similarities to duelling. While this suggests that men fighting men for honour has enjoyed stability over the centuries, a frailty also sits at the core of both of these practices. If hegemonic masculinity were truly stable, then social practices designed to protect hegemonic masculinity would not need to be reinvented over time. Instead, “cracks and fissures” (Jackson & Salisbury, 1996, p. 107) continue to surface across history, marking moments of ambivalence within the workings of gender hegemony. Therefore, what is more enduring and stable is the constant threat the feminine Other poses to hegemonic masculinity.

These moments of ambivalence mark exciting possibilities for change. Lisa Adkins (2004) provides a useful account of how change can be brought about in these very moments of ambivalence. Adkins argues that gendered norms are always a “product of temporal performances, always adapting and accommodating to the moment” (Vogels, 2023, p. 2792). These norms are also never fully incorporated, and by in large are susceptible to unattainable ideals. This, therefore, creates space for ambivalence to surface, which according to Adkins, is where possibilities for “gender detraditionalisation” (Adkins, 2004, p. 191) arise. Therefore, possibilities for change sit at core of mimesis - as “internal to the operation of norms themselves” (Adkins, 2004, p. 206) and not from external forces. As this historical analysis has shown, the gendered norm of men fighting one another in order to maintain honour has been in flux over the last few centuries, meaning that ambivalence has been present a number of times at the very core of normative performances of masculinity.

Conclusion

Moving forward, there is an exciting opportunity for researchers in this space to pay particular attention to societal shifts in how men manage their masculine status. Ambivalence in territory marking has already been documented (Vogels, 2020; Vogels, 2022). For example, while men currently tend to appear supportive of practices like territory marking, some men are able to vocalize resistance as well. For example, one young man in Vogels’s (2020, p. 205) school-based study spoke candidly, in front of his peers, of his resistance to the practice, arguing that disciplinary action from the school would make fighting not worthwhile. Another study found that some men were able to still display agency to pursue a romantic connection even when threatened by a peer (Vogels, 2022, p. 214). In these moments, the threat of the feminine Other seems not so great; it is at these very crossroads in men’s dispositions where work could be done to further break open these “cracks and fissures” (Jackson & Salisbury, 1996, p. 107) to action more profound change.

History also tells us that current versions of men’s honour-based violence – like today’s territory marking – will likely fall out of favour with society altogether. While territory marking is still largely seen as acceptable, watching for when this practice tips into being seen as

predominantly socially unacceptable is arguably where the most change can occur, as this will be when gender hegemony and its campaign to ensure hegemonic masculinity's domination is at its most vulnerable. This work is valuable. Not only will destabilizing such practices potentially help men to manage masculinity without violence, but it would also destabilize the control men have over women when they objectify them in this way. Destabilizing these honour-based practices also has the potential to disrupt misogynistic narratives that femininity and its connection to being female is a shameful trait when exhibited by men.

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