

Chapter 3

Monks of Honour: The Knights of Malta and Criminal Behaviour in Early Modern Rome

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Violence and criminal behaviour were pervasive features of social life in early modern Rome and they featured prominently in the penal code. The analysis that follows will demonstrate the frequent occurrence of violence among knights of the Order of St John as part of everyday interchange in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Rome, and will explore the associated meanings of violence for manhood. Violence will be defined in terms of the infliction of physical harm or humiliation for a wide variety of ends, through which a spectrum of cultural meanings were derived, contested and reinforced. This should help us evaluate the functions of violence as an expression of manliness and honour. As Peter Burke has clearly shown, 'honour was a much-debated subject in early modern Italy'.¹ It is through the examination of routine outbreaks of violent behaviour that the links between criminal behaviour and masculinity can be explored.

The greatest obstacle to this approach is the nature of the surviving evidence of criminal behaviour. The cases discussed here, largely drawn from the criminal records of the Governor of Rome, are based on the testimonies of participants and victims and are thus riddled with interpretative difficulties. For example the records provide only vague indications of the perpetrators' causes or intentions. Often the nature and cause of violent disorder have to be inferred from narratives of litigants and witnesses that were, perhaps, shaped more by legal processes than by real events. The discussion, therefore, focuses on the ways in which violence was very often the counterpoint of knightly honour and prestige.

Desmond Seward describes the Knights of Malta as 'noblemen vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, living a monastic life in convents which were at the same time barracks, waging war on the enemies of the Cross'. A blend of monastic and military life was shared by the Knights Hospitaller, the Templars and the Teutonic knights over a span of almost 200 years in the Holy Lands. After being driven out of the Holy Lands, the Knights Hospitaller devoted themselves to the defence of the Mediterranean shores and the protection of Christian merchant shipping against the might of the Ottoman Empire and later the Barbary corsairs,

¹ Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 13.

first from Rhodes and then from Malta (the *corso*).² This is the traditional image portrayed by historians, basing themselves on the accounts provided by early modern chroniclers of the Order such as Giacomo Bosio, Bartolomeo dal Pozzo and the Abbé de Vertot,³ who continually stressed the heroic role played by the knights in defending the Holy Lands, Rhodes and later Malta.⁴ The discussion that follows moves away from this approach. Rather than emphasizing the military and religious ideals of the knights as an order of warrior monks, this study seeks to highlight their role as members of an elite group of men who, like other men of their age, resorted to violence when they felt the need. It is important to stress, however, that this violent pattern of behaviour clashed with their designated role as members of a religious order.

The privileges of the knights, as a monastic military order, were strenuously defended by successive popes, who relied on these warrior monks for the continued defence of Malta against the Ottoman threat. In Malta and in the Papal States the knights were exempted from secular justice; at the same time they were immune from local ecclesiastical tribunals, so that the responsibility for investigating their criminal activity and dispensing their subsequent punishment fell directly on Rome. Nonetheless the post-Tridentine popes faced a serious and ongoing problem posed by the criminal behaviour of many individual knights of St John.⁵

For their part the European nobility frequently sought initiation into the Order for their male offspring, which removed potentially resentful cadet sons from their estates, reduced the possibility of an overproduction of heirs through the acceptance of holy orders and provided an outlet for youthful ardour through the *corso*. On their establishment in Malta, these young men completed a term of residence in the convent and received religious and military training to serve on the Order's galleys. They also performed administrative services in the various congregations that administered the Order. Those who wished to obtain higher offices remained in Malta. Others who had obtained a captaincy could claim preferential rights to a commandery in Europe to which they could retire and administer on behalf of

² Desmond Seward, *The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders* (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp. 17–18.

³ Giacomo Bosio, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione et ill.ma militia di S. Gio. Gerosolimitano* (3 vols, Rome, 1594–1602); Bartolomeo Dal Pozzo, *Historia della Sacra Religione Militare di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, detta di Malta* (2 vols, Verona, 1703 and Venice, 1715); René Aubert de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta* (2 vols, London, 1728).

⁴ Whitworth Porter, *A History of the Knights of Malta* (London, 1858); Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St John in Jerusalem and Cyprus, 1050–1310* (London, 1967); Ernie Bradford, *The Shield and the Sword* (New York, 1973); H.J.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta* (New Haven, 1994).

⁵ Anthony D. Wright, *The Early Modern Papacy: From the Council of Trent to the French Revolution 1564–1789* (London, 2000), p. 93.

the Order.⁶ The Order could therefore draw upon an extensive and generationally replenished human resource (the younger disinherited sons of the European nobility) and offer them social roles and identities befitting noblemen. Knights of 'the Religion' were thus found not only in Malta – their administrative, military and religious centre – but throughout Europe, where their religious vows were often contradicted by their social upbringing as nobles and their military training as warriors. Inevitably, away from the restraining influence of the convent in Malta, such men often embroiled themselves in complex, potentially violent social situations in which they were subject to both civil and ecclesiastical powers, as well as being foreign nationals and members of a religious Order.⁷

The knights, though theoretically tied by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, consistently ignored their vows. They were clearly privileged, rich, certainly not chaste and often disobedient to their superiors. It was not uncommon for a knight, or a group of knights, to resort to excessive violence to stress their point. One such violent occurrence broke out in July 1568 when a group of young Castilian knights, condemned for writing pasquinades against the ruling Grand Master Jean de La Valette (1557–1568), entered the magisterial palace and ransacked the chancellor's desk.⁸ The chronicler of the Order, Fra Bartolomeo Dal Pozzo, asserts that during the reign of Grand Master Jean Levêque de La Cassière (1572–1582) the worst problem was not fear of an Ottoman invasion but the unruly behaviour of the knights who were in perpetual discord among themselves.⁹

Sometimes the Holy See withdrew its support of the Order. For example, when in spring of 1599 the knight Fra Carlo Valdina was disrespectful and slapped the secretary of the Roman Inquisition Tribunal of Malta, the Inquisitor was prompt to take legal action against the knight and, in a rare stance, Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605) sided with the Inquisitor.¹⁰ In a 1624 report addressed to Father Fioravanti, then the Jesuit confessor of Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644), the behaviour of most knights in Malta is described as 'scandalous'.¹¹

In 1627 Pope Urban VIII issued a decree by which knights were ordered to refrain from keeping concubines¹² – a command ignored by many members of the

⁶ Sire, *Knights*, p. 92.

⁷ Carmel Cassar, 'Justices and Injustices: the Order of St John, the Holy See, and the Appeals Tribunal in Rome', *History and Anthropology*, 19/4 (2008): 305–23, p. 308.

⁸ National Library of Malta, MS 632, pp. 60–62.

⁹ Dal Pozzo, *Historia*, vol. 1, p. 128.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 415–16. On 23 July 1599 the Cardinal Secretary of the Holy Office informed Inquisitor Hortensio of the Pope's favourable decision. But the Inquisitor was urged to proceed against the knight Valdina with great care in order to convince the knights that by his action the Inquisitor was only trying to uphold the dignity of the Holy Office. *Archivum Inquisitionis Melitensis*, Malta (henceforward AIM), *Corrispondenza*, vol. 1, fol. 29.

¹¹ *Archivio di Stato*, Rome (henceforward ASR), *Archivio Camerale*, III, busta 1274, p. 10. Report dated 25 August 1624.

¹² *Ibid.*, busta 1276, n.p.

Order. Nevertheless the Holy See deemed it fit to confirm publicly that 'the banner with the white cross on a red field (the banner of the Order of St John) has always been honoured and favoured above all the others by the Holy Apostolic See'.¹³

Why were the Knights of St John so highly privileged? The Langues of the Order always contained among their members some from the highest-ranking aristocratic elites of Catholic Europe, and the Holy See had to ensure good diplomatic relations with the states of these Langues.

Since all the cases of violence under examination here occurred in Rome, a brief outline of the city's socio-political character is essential to evaluate the ways in which the knights undermined legitimate authority. In early modern times social life in the city of Rome was tainted by excessive violence through all its echelons, making it very hard for the authorities to control. The records of the Governor's court abound with accounts of stabbings, shootings, brawls, fist fights, commotions and various other forms of disruption to public peace and order. This type of behaviour was prevalent throughout Mediterranean Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but for political and social reasons Rome became a catalyst as it had developed into a cultural centre and attracted all sorts of patron-client relationships. Furthermore, the city's administration was relatively weak, encouraging the inhabitants to take matters into their own hands. The situation was further complicated since Rome was largely a city of immigrants and visitors, and native Romans were in a minority. Hordes of foreigners went to Rome on business or to seek work. Others were on pilgrimage to the Holy City, or soliciting political and economic patronage. Moreover, each visiting nobleman, prelate or ambassador brought with him a retinue of servants, retainers and hangers-on. Karen Liebreich recently estimated that some two-thirds of Rome's population consisted of either immigrants or passers-by.¹⁴

This was a city with a large unmarried male population, and Rome could be described as a city of 'loose men' often quick to resort to violence, to which the state responded with repression.¹⁵ One area of tension concerned relationships between men and women, although, as Thomas Kuehn has shown, clear-cut dichotomies between male and female did not exist in Renaissance Italy.¹⁶ Despite this, many Italians assumed that any woman without a male protector could easily end up as a 'loose woman', reducing herself and her family to a calamitous situation. Honour was treasured more than life itself, and figured as a top priority.¹⁷ On the other

¹³ Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (henceforward BAV), Barb. Lat. 5285, fol. 289.

¹⁴ Karen Liebreich, *Fallen Order: Intrigue, Heresy and Scandal in the Rome of Galileo and Caravaggio* (London, 2004), p. 3.

¹⁵ Thomas V. Cohen and Elizabeth S. Cohen, *Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome: Trials before the Papal Magistrates* (Toronto, 1993), pp. 20–27.

¹⁶ Thomas Kuehn, 'Person and Gender in the Laws', in Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (eds), *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London, 1998), pp. 105–6.

¹⁷ See, for example, Sharon T. Strocchia, 'Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities', *ibid.*, pp. 39–60; Guido Ruggiero, "'Più che la vita caro": onore,

hand, men felt the need to prove their sexual competence. In such circumstances a relationship could either develop or come to a cataclysmic end. Of course there were instances where a woman would politely refuse a man's flirtatious invitation, and accept another suitor's hand, but the typical response to such a rejection would be a barrage of insults and foul language. In extreme cases the loser would resort to murdering his successful rival.

This is precisely how the romantic adventure of Giovanni Battista Fagnano ended. The protagonists in this love triangle were the courtesan Pasqua Padovani, the Florentine Knight of Malta Giovanni Battista Soderino and the impoverished Milanese gentleman, and lover of Pasqua, Giovanni Battista Fagnano. On 30 November 1562 the servant boy of Fagnano reported that his master had, the night before, been murdered by the knight Soderino. Fagnano, after ensuring that Signora Pasqua was on her own at home, had expressed the wish to visit her. Fagnano's wish was granted, but some 15 minutes later the two lovers were joined by the knight Soderino, accompanied by a friend (Mastro Scipione Corbinello) and two servants. When he found that Fagnano had preceded him, Soderino turned to Pasqua and said:

'You know well that I told you that I do not wish to be in a place where there is this one', referring to my master [Fagnano] because: 'His humour is incompatible with mine and we may commit an act of madness!' And on hearing these words my master replied: 'Why is this Sir knight! What annoyance have I caused you?' And the knight replied: 'You know well Fagnano what you did to me!' ... and he took out his dagger, went near my master and slashed his face on the right side and hit him with the point of his dagger under his right breast. And my master put his hand on his dagger and tried to defend himself, but he fell.¹⁸

By claiming that Fagnano's 'humour is incompatible with mine' the knight Soderino seems to imply that Fagnano's character was abhorrent to him. After all Fagnano was an impoverished gentleman whom he had offered to support financially. So when Fagnano proved better than him in capturing the attention of a woman it was much more than Soderino could bear. Soderino's attitude seems equivalent to what David Gilmore calls 'an image of manliness' that forms an integral part of male 'personal honour and reputation'.¹⁹ Soderino was in essence a 'real man' who had to prove himself in a struggle with other men and in his ability to dominate

matrimonio, e reputazione femminile nel tardo rinascimento', *Quaderni Storici*, 16 (1987): 753-75; Elizabeth S. Cohen, 'Honour and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 22 (1992): 597-625.

¹⁸ ASR, Tribunale Criminale del Governatore (henceforward TCG), sec. XVI busta 76, fol. 575v, 30 November 1562.

¹⁹ David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven, 1990), p. 31.

women.²⁰ By warning that 'an act of madness' might follow Soderino meant an act of revenge under a code which Edward Muir claims 'subjected' young men 'to discordant imperatives that forced them to act in ways that were evasive or impulsive, paranoid or self-destructive, timid or overly aggressive'.²¹

Rejection, without doubt, was popularly regarded as a humiliating experience which a man of honour like the Knight of Malta Soderino could not accept. It is evident that his behaviour was determined by a need to reassert his manhood and continue proving it to himself and others.

Male friendships at the time could be extremely competitive, with drinking in taverns and bragging of sexual exploits. The underlying insecurity that many men felt is revealed by their need to seek continually the admiration of their peers as they took the first steps towards manhood. Honour, notoriously fragile, was often a source of prickliness, thin-skinned sensitivity, boastful swagger and struggle for a prominent position in the social hierarchy. All these attitudes encouraged duelling, which became a very common practice in mid-sixteenth-century Rome. Pierre de Bourdaille, seigneur de Brantôme, who spent three months in Rome after the demise of Pope Paul IV (1555–1559), reported that duels were commonplace.²² It has often been claimed that duelling throughout Italy receded after the famous anti-duelling decree of the final session of the Council of Trent in 1564.²³ However documentary evidence proves otherwise.

In Malta documents for the period under study are packed with references to knights duelling among themselves. The documentary evidence seems to suggest that the duelling activities of a religious order of monks who had vowed poverty, chastity and obedience, like the Knights of St John, caused the Holy See great embarrassment. It was not uncommon for the Secretary of State of the Holy See to remind a ruling Grand Master to punish duellists harshly. Cardinal Aldobrandini was particularly insistent on this issue with Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt in 1610. For his part the Grand Master promised that he would do his utmost to ensure that this violent habit was kept under strict control.²⁴ But it appears that the knights themselves were reluctant to divulge any information about their

²⁰ Edward Muir, 'The Double Binds of Manly Revenge in Renaissance Italy', in Richard C. Trexler (ed.), *Gender Rhetorics: Postures of Dominance and Submission in History* (New York, 1994), pp. 67–8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²² Donald Weinstein, 'Fighting or Flyting? Verbal duelling in Mid-Sixteenth Century Italy', in Trevor Dean and Kate J.P. Lowe (eds), *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 213–14; see also 'Discours sur les duels', in Pierre de Bourdaille de Brantome, *Oeuvres* (8 vols, Paris, 1787), vol. 8, pp. 49–63.

²³ Weinstein, 'Fighting or Flyting?', p. 214; Francesco Erspamer, *La biblioteca di don Ferrante: duello e onore nella cultura del Cinquecento* (Rome, 1982), pp. 115–20; Frederick Robertson Bryson, *The Sixteenth-Century Italian Duel* (Chicago, 1938), pp. 118–19.

²⁴ Archivio Segreto Vaticano (henceforward ASV), Fondo Borghese II vol. 93, fols 163–4, 19 January 1610.

duelling activity. At the end of her deposition a Valletta woman confessed that her lover – a Knight of Malta – would beat her if she divulged to the Holy Office his involvement in duels.²⁵

It was also hard for confessors to obtain permission to absolve duellists. In 1597 Claudio Acquaviva, the General Superior of the Jesuits, informed the Provincial in Palermo that Father Guglielmo from Malta had written several letters asking for permission to absolve duellists 'that did not cause scandal'. The General added that the rector of the Jesuits' College in Malta had been making similar requests for two years and had promised the rector to discuss the issue with the Holy Father.²⁶ But the issue of duellists was still recurring in 1667. In May of that year Cardinal Barberini, Secretary of the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome, informed the Inquisitor in Malta that henceforth he could absolve duellists.²⁷

Duelling was such a major concern that it was often punished directly by the Inquisitor, the papal representative in Malta. In 1587, no less than five knights were accused of duelling by the Malta Inquisition tribunal. But the tribunal tended to be lenient with transgressors, who were usually absolved after receiving a penitentiary sentence.²⁸ Confusion seems to have emerged from the inability of the Holy See to take a clear stand. Thus Paul V's order to impose harsh penalties on duellists in 1610 was revoked by Urban VIII, who suggested to Inquisitor Visconti that for the Holy Year of 1625 he should do his utmost to pardon those knights accused of duelling.²⁹

The few criminal cases involving knights of St John appearing before the Governor's tribunal in Rome likewise indicate that young knights continued to resort to their swords, as a case in 1620 attests.

Michelangelo Caroli, who lived next to the church of San Silvestro, gave an eyewitness account of a quarrel which broke out a stone's throw away from the inn known as *Hostaria del Gambaro* in Rome. Caroli saw some Spanish gentlemen leave the tavern together. Immediately, they started insulting a young Italian man who was walking right in front of them. To make matters worse, one of the Spaniards shouted out that he wished to give the lad (*giovene*) a good beating. The young man turned round and shouted back, 'You fuckin' cuckolds [*becchi fotuti*], is it me you wish to beat?' Then he grabbed one of the Spaniards by the

²⁵ AIM, Processi criminali, vol. 28C, case 227, fols 1248–50, 25 September 1608.

²⁶ Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome, Sicula, vol. 5, 119v, 15 February 1597. Acquaviva declared his intention to consult the Pope in a letter he sent to the rector in Malta on 1 June 1596; *ibid.*, fol. 116v.

²⁷ AIM, Corrispondenza, vol. 11, fol. 222.

²⁸ The knights in question were Fra Simon Clavisana, Fra Honorato Tortona, Fra Fernando Coirus, Fra Julius Cesar Santinello and Fra Ottavio Ceuli. AIM, Processi criminali, vol. 169, case 58, 25 March–4 April 1587; cf. Carmel Cassar, '1564–1696: The Inquisition Index of Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St John', *Melita Historica*, 9/2 (1993): 157–96.

²⁹ AIM, Corrispondenza, vol. 5, fol. 9, 15 March 1625.

throat, tore his large collar in two and threw it on the ground. After that the young Italian man and two of the Spaniards came to blows. At this point a young knight of Malta, distinguished by a cross on his cloak and accompanied by another young gentleman armed with swords, intervened. The irascible knight called out to the two Spaniards that it was most shameful and cowardly to assault a single man. The witness Caroli added that he believed the assaulted man was a valet of the knight and concluded that soon after the knight's intervention the Spaniards dispersed.³⁰

Struggles for honour involved individuals and groups alike. The notion of a collectively shared honour was so strong that the glory, or the disgrace, touched all members of the group. This fact inspired proud display, manly swagger and much political jostling over what might seem, to modern sensibilities, very minor issues. The tumultuous and often bloody conflicts of life stemmed from struggles not over tangible issues, but over reputation. The Knights of Malta undoubtedly shared this kind of 'value' that the gentlemanly class treasured.

The concept of honour has traditionally played a central role in the ordering of society. As pointed out by Guido Ruggiero, honour 'placed people in a social hierarchy and prescribed behavioural patterns that kept society together and largely peaceful without recourse to a judicial system'.³¹ Thus hierarchy was closely linked to honour. High status both conferred honour and set boundaries to its contests. However since honour pervaded all social levels, everyone struggled to save face and keep their own standing. Kristen Neuschel concludes that personal loyalties in the sixteenth century were complicated and unstable, and alliances rather ephemeral. As a result the system of honour that formed the base of these alliances made each man a power unto himself, so that nobles could claim some amount of political autonomy made 'by virtue of their personal identity'.³² If a man swore loyalty to a master he was expected to demonstrate a sense of loyalty and gratitude to him.³³ At the same time the master was obliged to acknowledge his client's dignity.³⁴ For this reason it was inadmissible to filch honour from one's social betters. Thus a gentleman could afford to shrug off an insult by an inferior and would even risk derision. On the other hand he could avenge it by some scornful act that inflicted pain and shame on the inferior without affecting his own honour.

³⁰ ASR, TCG, sec. XVII, busta 163 (1620), fol. 1238r-v, 2 June 1620.

³¹ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford, 1985), p. 19.

³² Kristen Neuschel, *Word of Honour: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1989), pp. 15-17.

³³ 'As governor of the household, the master was entitled to reverence, honour, and obedience in return for duty of care', Pavla Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West 1500-1900* (Bloomington, 1998), p. 16.

³⁴ Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies on Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 357.

This is exactly how one Knight of St John wanted to deal with his servant, though it all turned foul. In September 1614 a corporal of the *sbirri* (gendarmes) reported that that morning he had seen a gentleman hit another man with a sword in the square of the St John Lateran Basilica. The corporal soon had the gentleman arrested and identified as Fra Giovanni Battista Seva, a Piedmontese Knight of Malta.

In his deposition Seva explained that he had intended to leave Rome for Naples but his servant Bernardino had refused to accompany him. Bernardino also refused to move the luggage to the carrier. Seva argued that instead of obeying him Bernardino had insolently asked for the return of his belongings and asked his master to leave him alone. About to lose patience, Seva insisted that Bernardino take the luggage to the carrier at the Chiesa Nuova and return in haste. But Bernardino still refused and instead demanded his belongings, insisting that he wished to remain behind. When Seva refused, Bernardino tried to take the goods from the knight's own hands, whereupon the knight struck him on the arm. In reaction the servant put his hand on the hilt of his sword, but his master did not give him time to draw his sword and started to punch him. Soon after the two men began to exchange blows in the presence of a crowd of people. Finally the knight managed to grab Bernardino's sword from his hand. Finding himself disarmed, Bernardino tried to escape, but he had hardly moved a few steps when the enraged knight drew his sword and ran him through the back. The knight then resheathed his sword, mounted his horse and left hurriedly to avoid the *sbirri*, though he was then caught outside the gate of San Giovanni.³⁵

The knight's physical retaliation may be seen as an attempt to restore the status which had been diminished by verbal abuse. Fist blows were acceptable as a form of conduct for settling disputes between a gentleman and his servant. When Bernardino tried spontaneously to unsheathe his sword the knight Seva felt that his servant was going too far and had to employ aggression to deter a challenge. In short, as a man of honour Seva had to seek revenge by retaliating in an appropriate way and thus retain honour – that 'most precious' and 'perishable' of social attributes.³⁶ Seva's act of retaliation was essentially what Muir describes as 'a rational response to a provocation, a response authorized by cultural imperatives'.³⁷ Bernardino was simply an 'inferior' and it would have been demeaning for the knight to duel with a man who was not a gentleman.

In a highly stratified society obsessed with rank and hierarchy, men seem to have borne the burden of continually asserting and justifying their social position. Failure to do so deprived men of their word of honour since they had no credit on which to vouch, and therefore could not be trusted. By implication men of no worth were voiceless. At the same time gentlemen prized their honour. Thus it was shameful for a gentleman to refuse a contest when challenged. Since a man's

³⁵ ASR, TCG, sec. XVII, busta 120, case 39, fols 1790–92, 27 September 1614.

³⁶ Gilmore, *Manhood*, pp. 30–55.

³⁷ Muir, 'Manly Revenge', p. 68.

honour resided in the integrity of his reputation, all sorts of slights or assaults could be read as challenges to honour. The interpretation of such moments was highly elastic. If witnesses agreed that there had been an affront, a man had to counterattack or lose standing.³⁸ This emerges clearly from a case in which the knight Fra Fulvio Alberini fell victim to his own irresponsible behaviour.

At carnival time in 1583 a barber surgeon went to visit a man of about 25 years of age who was badly wounded and lying in bed. When asked how he came to be wounded, he identified himself as Fra Fulvio Alberini, a Knight of Malta hailing from the city of Rome.³⁹ From the inquiry it transpired that Alberini had shot, or was thought to have shot, Ascanio Ruggieri, a gentleman living in the palace of Cardinal d'Este. Investigations led to the arrest of several witnesses, among them Claude Mongez, a French servant. Mongez admitted to having seen three masked men on horseback, one of whom was dressed in white. After reaching the palace of Cardinal d'Este, where the gentleman Ascanio Ruggieri lived, the masked man in white took out a harquebus (a sort of a hand gun) and shot Ruggieri. There were shouts of 'Kill! Kill the assassins!' and Ruggieri drew his sword and apparently struck the masked man. The masked horseman then fled the scene. Mongez could not add much else as he returned to his work.⁴⁰ Another dependent of Ruggieri, Andrea Novara, declared that he had heard the two shots and soon after learnt that the Knight of Malta, Fra Fulvio Alberini, had been wounded in the head and was trying to seek refuge in a courtyard leading to the kitchen. Later, Novara overheard several gentlemen, among them his master Ascanio Ruggieri, say that Alberini had shot and wounded Ruggieri and that the latter, to defend his honour, had beaten the knight. Once Ruggieri wounded his adversary, his honour had been avenged, and so he ceased his assault.⁴¹ As both Ruggieri and Fra Alberini were gentlemen, Mongez, Novara and other servants refrained from intervening in the brawl. It was another gentleman dependent of Cardinal d'Este, Ferrante Franchi of Ferrara, who went to the knight's aid. Franchi, a writer, had heard the two shots, noticed the young wounded knight and heard Ascanio Ruggieri boast that he had struck the knight. However the knight told Franchi that the harquebus had been fired outside the cardinal's palace by one of his masked friends, called Marcello [Giustini].⁴² Despite having allegedly wounded the wrong man, Ruggieri declared that justice must take its course. Franchi had found the wounded knight Alberini on the floor in a small kitchen beneath the cook's table, and lifted him up. Franchi declared that the young man was bleeding profusely. He also noticed that there was a small

³⁸ Ibid., p. 81; Weinstein, 'Fighting or Flyting?', p. 212; James R. Farr, *Hands of Honour: Artisans and their World in Dijon, 1550-1650* (Ithaca, 1988), p. 180.

³⁹ ASR, TCG, sec. XVI, busta 177 (1582), fol. 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid., fol. 4r-v.

⁴¹ Ibid., fol. 5v.

⁴² Marcello Giustini, himself a Knight of Malta, was later found guilty and executed for murder. The case is briefly mentioned by Thomas V. Cohen, *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 2004), p. 119.

harquebus under the table. Other members of the cardinal's retinue believed that Alberini himself had fired the harquebus at Signor Ascanio Ruggieri.⁴³

According to the patriarchal model of manhood, dependent males like Mongez and Novara were not 'full' men as they were 'considered to be dependents of the head of the household and hence part of the family'.⁴⁴ They were simply labourers toiling for a wage, of little or no worth and held in low esteem. Ferrante Franchi enjoyed higher status and felt duty-bound to intervene and help the wounded knight. Yet Franchi, who hailed from Ferrara and was seemingly an educated and refined man, was himself a dependant of Cardinal d'Este, a member of the once all-powerful d'Este family. The case-study clearly demonstrates tensions between normative ideas of manhood and other sets of social relations. Appropriate behaviour for men and women was context specific and linked to status. The head of a household was expected to be prudent but generous, forceful but loving. He had to be honest and obedient to those in authority.

This attitude is evinced in the approach taken in another incident by the nobleman Giacomo Benzoni. One Friday evening, in a carriage in front of the Gesù church, the Knight of Malta Fra Antonio Contreras and his friend Captain Cesare Vanucci met two knights of the Tuscan Order of Saint Stephen, called Paravicino and Nari.⁴⁵ Paravicino had allegedly fabricated lies against Contreras, who then challenged him to a duel.⁴⁶ Many gentlemen intervened to stop them.⁴⁷ Some 40 swordsmen, including many in the retinue of Paravicino, became involved in a general melee which ended only when a *sbirro* arrived, brandished his sword and shouted twice 'Stop in the name of the law!' ('*ferma alla corte!*'), at which the crowd dispersed.⁴⁸

That same evening the knight Contreras and his friend Vanucci were recognized by some members of the retinue of the knight Paravicino. Outnumbered, Contreras and his friend fled and sought refuge in the house of the Roman nobleman Giacomo

⁴³ ASR, TCG, sec. XVI, busta 177 (1582), fols 5v-6v.

⁴⁴ Linda A. Pollock, 'Parent-Child Relations', in David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli (eds), *Family Life in Early Modern Times 1500-1789* (New Haven, 2001), p. 209; Miller, *Transformations*, p. 16; Farr, *Hands of Honour*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ The knight Antonio Contreras may easily be the intrepid corsair and mercenary captain Alonso de Contreras. In his autobiography de Contreras states that soon after joining the ranks of the Order of Malta in 1611-1612 he applied for the post of captain in the service of King Philip III of Spain (1598-1621) and continued to serve the Spanish Crown for the rest of his life throughout the Mediterranean and the West Indies. There is reference to frequent visits to Italy, including Rome. He was even admitted to a private audience with Pope Urban VIII over a commandery of the Order in 1629. But there is no clear evidence that he was in Rome in 1620. Cf. Philip Dallas (ed.), *The Adventures of Captain Alonso De Contreras: A Seventeenth-Century Journey* (New York, 1989).

⁴⁶ ASR, TCG, sec. XVII, busta 163 (1620), case 24, fol. 932v.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 931.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 933.

Benzoni, who was entertaining some friends. Contreras and Vanucci entered the Benzoni house uninvited, and since they did not usually frequent it they were asked for an explanation. The fugitives explained that they were being chased by a group of five or six men, had no intention to become embroiled in the law courts and asked to leave through the back door. They were allowed to seek refuge while Giacomo Benzoni and Altieri went out to speak to Paravicino, who recalled his men. Contreras and Vanucci could thus leave the house unharmed.⁴⁹

Attempts by participants and others to limit violence were common. And even when this failed there is often evidence that bystanders sought to stop the quarrel. In the Contreras/Vannucci episode, barging into the Benzoni house could have been interpreted as an affront to Giacomo Benzoni. But in this instance the two intruders pleaded for protection, which was granted. At that point Contreras and Vannucci came under the protection of the head of the Benzoni household and the Paravicino retinue had no option but to wait for another chance.⁵⁰

The clash between the Knight of Malta Contreras and his enemy, the rich knight Paravicino, shows that being a man in this milieu involved negotiating several different forms of behaviour. There was a code which emphasized the proper behaviour for elite men. A sense of responsibility was important in manliness and independence, self-sufficiency and neighbourliness were all sources of honour. This emerges clearly in the attitude taken by Benzoni. The code associated the possession of property with autonomy. In short manhood was a cultural construct which defined a code of behaviour meant to demonstrate that gentlemen were superior to other men.⁵¹

In essence violence served two main functions in group combat. It was a form of territorial demarcation, often expressed through competitive tests of strength, and it served to regulate behaviour and even facilitate comradeship as a means of shared activity and friendship in the sense of reciprocal disclosure and mutual trust.⁵²

When on 21 June 1616 the dead body of a young man was found in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, two barber-surgeons declared that the wounds had been caused by a sword and a dagger. The victim in question, a French gentleman from Normandy named Adrien Thomas, Seigneur de Fontaine, was presumed to have been murdered by his close friend Fra Giovanni Battista Alli, a Knight

⁴⁹ Ibid., fols 939v–943, 12 May 1620.

⁵⁰ Ibid., fol. 953v, 20 May, 1620.

⁵¹ J.K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford, 1964), p. 280; Michael Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (Princeton, 1985); Gilmore, *Manhood*, esp. pp. 30–38.

⁵² Robert A. Strikwerda and Larry May, 'Male Friendship and Intimacy', in May, Strikwerda and Patrick D. Hopkins (eds), *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in the Light of Feminism* (Lanham, 1992), pp. 79–94.

of Malta hailing from Rome. Thomas was known to be a skilled swordsman.⁵³ One witness, Bartholomeo Milanese, explained that he saw two gentlemen accompanied by an attendant armed with swords walking in the direction of the Porta del Popolo. Some time later, one of the gentlemen returned, with blood streaming from his throat, and accompanied by the servant carrying his sword. The two men were then seen entering the church but the attendant came out of the church unarmed. Soon after, Milanese learnt that the wounded gentleman had died in the church.⁵⁴ The dagger used in the murder was found later that morning outside Porta del Popolo.⁵⁵

When interrogated, Thomas's French servant, Nicole, explained that he had gone to look for his master and learnt of his death. He informed Thomas's cousin Jean Lettavagli (Le Tavant?), Seigneur d'Angravisia (d'Angerville?), residing in Rome. Lettavagli and Nicole, along with the French knife merchant Jerome Pitre, went to denounce the case at the Office of the Governor's tribunal.⁵⁶

Nicole said that in Rome his master was sharing his lodging with the Knight of Malta Fra Alli 'of the white cross' and his young servant Benedetto. Alli and Thomas, carrying swords, had gone out together the previous evening and neither had returned home. However, at dawn the knight returned home alone, went directly to his room, talked to his servant in a very low voice and later left the house armed. Nicole felt reluctant to accuse Fra Alli of murdering his master. Instead, he declared that he could only suspect Alli of murder.⁵⁷

It is evident that the knight Alli and the French gentleman Thomas were firm friends who even shared lodgings. Yet in the end the knight was still accused of murder. In acts of violence comradeship was often mere ostentation meant to signify men's strength and physical prowess. Fraternal bonds like those between Alli and Thomas provided a means by which manliness could be publicly displayed, although this can be seen best in cases of collective violence taking place in nocturnal escapades.⁵⁸ Violent bravado was designed to impress both the other members of the group and their adversaries. The majority of those involved in nocturnal brawls – be they Knights of Malta, their friends or adversaries – were young men occupying subordinate social positions through their relatively young age or inferior economic status.

As a concept, honour is found in every society, and it has often been understood as the idea of a person's worth within their own community. However, the term may have different values for different sets of people in different societies. Thus

⁵³ Several witnesses confirmed that he trained at the fencing school of one Mastro Cencio. ASR, TCG, sec. XVII, busta 132, case 2, fols 99–100, 21 June 1616.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, fols 100v–101.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 101v.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 102r–v, 21 June 1616.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, fols 103–4v.

⁵⁸ Almo Paita, *La vita quotidiana a Roma ai tempi di Gian Lorenzo Bernini* (Milan, 1998), pp. 291–3.

honour varies from one region to another, from one community to another and, above all, it carries different connotations from one class of society to another. It is more than just a means of expressing approval or disapproval of a particular mode of behaviour, and it often validates itself by an appeal to the facts. This condition may help to explain why the official estimation of a person's worth may often appear ambivalent to the rest of society.⁵⁹ When it is acknowledged by the people at large, however, the concept of honour presents no problem. This might emerge in times of calamity and war. In Malta the Ottoman Siege of 1565 may be considered as one such episode.

A diary of this siege, compiled by the Spanish soldier Francisco Balbi di Correggio, provides eloquent proof of how early modern honour was intricately linked to a good reputation. One of the most impressive episodes described by Correggio is the account by Juan de La Cerda of the impossible situation faced by the garrison at Fort St Elmo, at the tip of the harbour of Malta. La Cerda explained that apart from the exhaustion of the defenders, the fortress was doomed to fall in a short time. Grand Master La Valette's response is revealing. Thanking La Cerda for his information and advice, the Grand Master promised that he would send timely aid. La Valette further promised that at a time when it appeared that the garrison of St Elmo could no longer hold out he would go in person, with other soldiers, to defend it. By his bold assertion the Grand Master had appealed to the highest ideal of honour, based on the highest moral virtue of honourable men in the sixteenth century. La Cerda realized that he had no option but to return to his post at St Elmo and fight to the end.⁶⁰ The episode shows clearly that a man of honour was not only expected to defend his honour when challenged, but was also expected to live up to his obligations and ideals, whatever the danger or cost.

One might argue that among the Knights of St John 'honour' had come to represent a wide range of social, sexual, economic and political values. The case studies discussed above suggest that competition at all levels between Knights of St John and other men was often resolved violently. Such violence was not simply an untamed overspill of latent aggression, but contained precise meanings and was governed by elaborate rules of play. Violence was a vital instrument in maintaining honour. In disputes over status it often went hand in hand with the denigration of the opponent, and possibly led to his death. But one also comes across references to rather stoic self-control, even in the face of utter humiliation or, at other times, in the face of death. Perhaps the attitude of Grand Master Jean Levêque de La Cassière may be cited as an example. In 1581 a series of riots by members of the Order followed the publication of a ban on the presence of prostitutes in Valletta by La Cassière. At a special meeting of the Council, from which he opted unwisely to absent himself, the Grand Master was deposed and replaced by the Prior of

⁵⁹ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 488–507.

⁶⁰ Francesco Balbi di Correggio, *The Siege of Malta 1565*, trans. H.A. Balbi (Copenhagen, 1961), p. 58.

Toulouse, Fra Marthurino de Lescaut Romegas, on the grounds of incompetence and senility. Although humiliated and placed under arrest at Fort St Angelo, La Cassière prudently refused offers of assistance by various dignitaries of the Order so as to avoid bloodshed. It was evidently a self-conscious choice by a man of great dignity. The Grand Master was so sure of his conduct that he felt no need to defend his honour. La Cassière was soon proved right and his honour was restored by the Pope's intervention.⁶¹

On most occasions the ruling Grand Master of the Order in Malta and the papacy in Rome joined ranks in exercising political authority in an attempt to enforce moral discipline and security. Both authorities claimed the right to bestow honours and it was accepted that those whom society honours are honourable. Such an argument suggests that honour is not purely an individual attribute and is often related to social solidarities. It is common for social groups to possess a collective honour in which their members share. This state of affairs is endemic among Mediterranean communities and implies that the dishonourable conduct of one member of the group reflects upon the honour of all, while a member shares in the honour of the group.⁶² Thus honour pertains to social groups whose honour is bound up with their fidelity to the head of the community, whether this consists of a nuclear family or the head of a nation whose collective honour is vested in his person. Finally it serves to establish the consensus of the society with regard to the order of precedence. Society demonstrates what is acceptable by reference to what is accepted.

A man is answerable for his honour only to his social equals, that is to say, to those with whom he can conceptually compete. A man who would tolerate no stain on his name and demonstrated a readiness to defend his honour with his sword was considered to be a gentleman. By upholding the chivalric ethos, a gentleman was entitled to esteem and self-respect. To fail in upholding one's honour was disgraceful and shameful.

In Rome, as elsewhere, the knight-monk members of the Order of St John were constrained to appear manly in daily social interactions and relationships with other

⁶¹ As head of a religious order, La Cassière appealed to Rome. Representations on behalf of both sides were made to the Holy See, leading to some nasty incidents in St Peter's square between rival delegations. By late September 1581, both the deposed Grand Master and Romegas had gone to plead their case in Rome. But while La Cassière was met with full honours and great pomp, Romegas was forced to beg pardon from the Grand Master, a humiliation that proved too much for the gallant Romegas, who died the following November. Soon after, the Pope reprimanded the rebellious knights, but La Cassière too passed away on 21 December 1581. Dal Pozzo, *Historia*, vol. 1, pp. 181–204.

⁶² See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society', in John G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London, 1965), pp. 191–241; Anton Blok, 'Rams and Billy-Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour', *Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16 (1981): 427–40; Campbell, *Honour*.

men and women. This ideal of virility was in essence a social construct that had to be acquired before it could be enforced on others. It was claimed through rituals of excess and disruptive displays of strength in defence of honour. The stakes in affairs of honour were high. Although violence was frequently condemned by the authorities, it nonetheless underpinned their own superior claims to dominance. Ultimately, therefore, violence was at least implicitly condoned as a necessary aspect of manhood, although there were legal differences in its appropriate uses. But the role of the knights was ambivalent. While being nobles and warriors they were also monks. As Catholic monks they were tied by the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience – vows they broke continually. As a result there existed widespread inconsistencies and contradictions in the way their violent behaviour was assessed.