

Book review

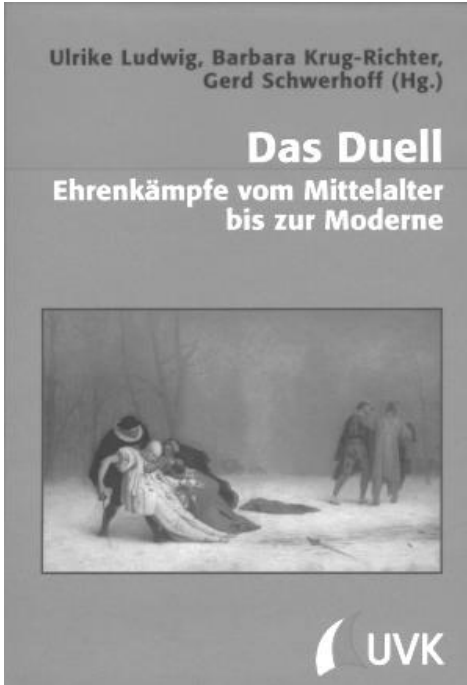
Ludwig, Ulrike; Krug-Richter, Barbara and Schwerhoff, Gerd (eds.):

Das Duell. Ehrenkämpfe vom Mittelalter bis zur Moderne.

Konstanz, UVK. 2012. 369p. ISBN : 978-3-86764-319-1.

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This volume contains 25 contributions from German scholars offering a broad and interdisciplinary approach to the “duel phenomenon” from late Middle Ages to 19th century (with some incursions into the 20th c.). It aims to offer new considerations regarding the various conceptions left by historiography of the subject, by approaching it as a cultural practice defined by moving systems of values (p.13-14). Central to the question and to the phenomenological approach are concepts of honour, manhood and violence, each of these being weighed down by diverse historiographical (p.29-38) and ideological meanings. If comparative studies of the practices (praxeology) are relevant to embrace the paradigm from its apparition to its passing on broad cultural spaces, so is

the consideration of their representation, especially “the impact of the discourse on the practices” within its interaction between laws, regulations and discourses (p.22 and 192).

The first part of the volume is devoted to disciplinary approaches (ethnology, sociology, history) and includes a paper on the art of fencing that will retain a special attention in this book review. It is followed by a “pre- or first history of the duel”, re-examining single combats (judicial and chivalric games) at the turn of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and a part considering “discourse fields” – that could be understood as “mediality” –, including studies of narrative literature, funeral sermons, legislation and normative treatises. A praxeological approach divided in two parts is then attempted: on the one hand around “princes and aristocracy”, on the other hand around “soldiers, craftsmen and students”. The volume ends with two papers on “representation’s conventions” analysing duel as model for young men’s culture and its representation in images and movies.

The duel considered as a form of ritualized single combat allows the scholars to delineate its practices and its representations into distinctive cultural and sub-cultural forms, however the subtleties from the semantics cannot be easily categorized, especially in the 18th – 19th centuries when the word became a reflection of fascination, obsession or social imagination. This issue can be drawn back into the late Middle Ages and reveals a new perspective on the subject, especially about the shift from public displays of fighting skills and virtues to the clandestine forms of the duel of honour (p. 125-128).

The contribution of Sixt Wetzler (“Thoughts on European art of Fencing”, p.61-75) is worth mentioning, since, as the author and Sidney Anglo (2000) highlighted: most of the historiography about duelling spent very few pages on the fighting itself and even less pages on the Fight Books. This situation is slowly changing since fifteen years, while studies on European martial arts (rather than “art of fencing”, the term being improper to the object of study, p. 63) and their technical literature are growing. The author sweeps away old but still widespread stereotypes about the history of fencing, replacing the proven wrong dichotomy about the use of cut and thrust in its technical context (p.68-70). He (re-)establishes facts and considerations on a very large time frame and adds a few comparisons with contemporary issues still similar to medieval and modern ones regarding the use of the written media for learning fighting skills (p.65) or the need for fighters to compare and put their style of fighting to the test (p.74-75). Central to the volume are his considerations about the social stratigraphy of the fighters from the top to the bottom of societies defined by a weapon carrying culture, underlining that the martial arts never “belonged” to any social class (p. 68), even if the discourse is filled with claims of social aspirations or ownership (about the latter, see: Forgeng 2012, 164-175).

He also emphasize that the technical literature is to be studied as a complex mirror image of actual martial arts, influenced by fashion and intellectual background (p.70-74) and need to be considered as mnemonic crutches intended for trained fighters (p. 65). This position does not gather all specialists’ opinions, but it is hard to contest since no broader investigation has been made on authorial intents or readership and material course within a large and representative corpus of Fight Books. The author also asks the question of fighting for a need or for desire pointing out that the ludic dimension of single combat to prepare for serious affairs – central to the discourse of Fight Books – can be easily traced back to the Central Middle Ages, quoting town’s authorities prohibition in London 1189 and didactic literature in Norwegian kingdoms 1250 (p.64-65), even if both cases could be further discussed.

This collection of essays comes from a symposium in Biefeld (2010) organised by the editors who led a research project on Duel (DFG, Dresden, 2008-2010: “Das Duell als kulturelle Praktik in der Frühen Neuzeit. Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu Kursachsen, Mecklenburg und Schweden”). The form of the collective book is dense and may leave the reader unsatisfied, when it comes to improve interesting concepts

introduced, such as the “ritualized duel” versus other praxis or the balance between praxeology and studies of representations. A monograph would have allowed a more constructed approach of these notions, as well as a more balanced consideration of the trilogy violence, manhood and honour, underlying behind the “duel-phenomenon”. However, the form of collective book allows the gathering of various disciplinary approaches on the matter, as well as acute case studies anthologies, epistemological considerations or comparative analysis, brought to various geographical spaces and timespans. This collection, well organized and duly introduced by the editors, but left without conclusion, is definitely mind opening and deserves its place on the shelf as a new crossroads on the history of duelling.