Consider Your Man Card Reissued: Masculine Honor and Gun Violence in Schools

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In *Rampage*, Katherine Newman and her co-authors identify five conditions for the kind of school shootings they term “rampages”: episodes of gun violence in which the shooter intends to kill but does not target particular individuals.¹ Newman et al conclude that the following five conditions are necessary, though not sufficient.

1. The shooter perceives himself to be extremely marginal in the social world that matters to him;
2. The shooter suffers from psychological problems that magnify the impact of his perceived marginality;
3. Cultural “scripts,” which function as prescriptions for behavior, are available to lead the way toward armed attack;
4. There is a failure of surveillance systems intended to identify troubled teens before their problems become extreme;
5. Guns are available.

To date, conversation in the United States about preventing school shootings has focused primarily on points 2, 4 and 5 – mental illness, school procedures, and gun availability. At worst, the issue is framed as a counter-productive either/or – should policy-makers increase access to mental health care or decrease access to guns? At best, reformers have proposed improvements on each of these fronts, but due to a lack of political support for both gun control and social welfare provisions, these proposals have made limited headway.

This paper is concerned with the remaining two conditions. The shooter’s perception of himself as marginalized within a social world that matters to him, and that social world’s provision of cultural scripts that lead him to respond with violence to those who constitute that world, have ethical dimensions that are appropriately addressed using the tools of philosophy. How ought a person respond to peers whose words and actions, in his perceptions, fail to recognize him as the person he is committed to being? What kind of action ought an agent take to maintain his ethical identity in the face of disrespect? These are questions of honor. Honor names a crucial aspect of our thinking about how to live a flourishing life, which has been little addressed by philosophers of late but remains an important aspect of people’s ethical thinking and motivation. School shootings are typically portrayed as “senseless violence,” but the ethical demands of honor indicate their logic. Nor is the compulsion of that logic exclusive to the shooters. Masculine honor, this paper contends, also underlies US resistance to the gun control and social welfare provisions that would be required to address the more technical problems of gun legislation and mental health care.²

The title for this paper comes from an advertisement for Bushmaster rifles, one of which was used in Newtown, Connecticut to murder twenty elementary school children and six educators. In the wake of that tragedy, the advertisement’s association of manhood with assault weapons provoked outrage, but it captures something crucial about the connection between gun violence, masculinity and honor. Masculinity is never an identity a man can establish permanently; it does need to be “reissued” by those in a position to judge whether a man continues to be sufficiently masculine. This paper begins with an exploration of honor as an ethical framework that treats identity as constantly in need of “reissue.” Honor, it finds, depends upon a peer group of equals qualified to judge whether one deserves the identity-based respect one claims. Like the Bushmaster rifle ad, this ethical framework is troubling, as it may divorce the demands of
honor from other ethical standards. And yet, insofar as it attends to aspects of our identity that matter to us and to the relationships that give our lives meaning, an ethic of honor is as powerful as it is dangerous. The second section of the paper asks what honor has to offer and what relation it has to notions of the good that stand beyond social convention. Along the way, it addresses one “reissue” of the “man card,” namely Plato’s revision to Archaic notions of what it means to be a man. The third section of this paper directly addresses the relationship between masculinity and gun violence, drawing on Douglas Kellner’s correlation of gun violence, media spectacle and a crisis in masculinity. The final section turns to Adrienne Rich’s “Women and Honor” to suggest a reissue of honor itself.

On Honor

In an influential 1970 essay, Peter Berger declared honor obsolete. Honor is an “ideological leftover” from pre-modern times, he declared, surviving within modern societies only in the consciousness of “obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers”. In Berger’s analysis, the obsolescence of the concept of honor is part and parcel of modernity, with its new moralities and political arrangements. These have replaced “honor” with “dignity,” for better and for worse. Honor and dignity each supply a rationale for interpersonal respect, Berger argues, but they do so on different grounds. Honor is often considered an aristocratic value, and it remains a feature of socio-political hierarchies, though a person of any status can lay claim to honor, provided his or her behavior conforms to the requirements of honor dictated by his or her position within a particular social hierarchy. “For all,” Berger points out, “the qualities enjoined by honor provide the link, not only between self and community, but between self and the idealized norms of the community. . . . Conversely, dishonor is a fall from grace in the most comprehensive sense – loss of face in the community, but also loss of self and separation from the basic norms that govern human life.” In the rationale of honor, as Berger explains it, a person’s claim to respect depends upon his or her ability to meet the norms prescribed by his or her “institutional roles” within a social system. Modernity, whose moralities and politics free the individual from institutional roles, has replaced honor with dignity, respect owed to a person qua person. Dignity rests on an altogether different conception of the self and its relationship with society. “Institutions cease to be the ‘home’ of the [modern] self,” says Berger; “instead they become oppressive realities that distort and estrange the self.” The core self, which stands free of institutional roles that are always provisional, is the moral self owed respect. The replacement of honor with dignity has served people well, Berger notes, and there is no reason to turn the clock back. Among the moral achievements of the modern world supported by this replacement, he lists “the prescription of slavery in all its forms, of racial and ethnic oppression; the staggering discovery of the dignity and rights of the child,” and more.

Given honor’s association with oppressively hierarchical systems, it is unsurprising that in recent decades few political and moral theorists committed to progressive politics – or simply to modernity -- have wanted anything to do with it. There might seem to be little a committed egalitarian could say in its defense. All the same, Berger suggested, a rediscovery of honor by modern society was empirically plausible and, with qualifications, desirable. “It seems clear to us,” he writes, that “the
unrestrained enthusiasm for total liberation of the self from the ‘repression’ of institutions fails to take account of certain fundamental requirements of man, notably those of order.” Inevitably, Berger predicted, institutions would come back into favor. “The ethical question,” he supposed, “is what these institutions will be like.” Arguably, what has happened instead is that institutions have become even more irrelevant, as liquid as the post-modern self. Indeed, from the vantage point of several decades into post-modernity, “unrestrained enthusiasm for total liberation of the self from institutions” seems another ideological leftover, the province of college sophomores and unreconstructed hippies.

Honor may be salvageable, however, on other grounds. Kwame Anthony Appiah, drawing on a small corpus of work on honor in and outside philosophy, emphasizes features of honor that flow from its definition as an ethical code linking the self to a community and its idealized norms: its attunement to identity, motivation and interpersonal relationships. Honor, Appiah contends, is a “crucial” but “neglected” topic for contemporary moral philosophy, and crucial for the same theoretical and practical reasons as the philosophical consideration of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and other social identities. “[L]ike our social identities, it connects our lives together. Attending to honor . . . like noticing the importance of our social identities, can help us to treat others as we should and to make the best of our own lives.”

Appiah conceptualizes honor not in terms of institutional roles but of interpersonal relationships. Because having honor means being entitled to respect from others, it is relational from the ground up. Drawing on Stephen Darwall’s differentiation of two kinds of respect – appraisal and recognition respect -- Appiah delineates two types of honor. One type – which might also be called esteem – is accorded to a person based on others’ appraisal that s/he has demonstrated excellence in some field deemed worthwhile. A person can be honored, for instance, as a superior musician, warrior, or scientist. This type of honor, which rank-orders persons against a standard, is intrinsically competitive and hierarchical. The other type of honor, however, which Appiah (following Darwall) calls recognition respect, accords respect equitably on the grounds that a person meets standards of behavior that are expected of anyone so situated. All decent teachers, for instance, have a claim to honor as teachers (recognition respect), but this is different from the honor we accord a “teacher of the year” (esteem). Frank Henderson Stewart’s Honor, another source for Appiah’s analysis, distinguishes between “vertical” and “horizontal” honor. While the “vertical” honor that functions in hierarchies accords more honor/esteem to some persons than others, “horizontal” honor exists among peers. Berger’s argument that honor is obsolete treats honor exclusively in its vertical/appraisal/esteem sense and contrasts it with dignity, ignoring honor in its horizontal/recognition aspect. Insofar as “dignity” implies a self whose claim to respect exists regardless of its social relationships, it denotes a kind of respect that is different from honor. Berger is correct that we have added the notion of dignity to our conceptual repertoire, but dignity has not rendered honor in its sense of recognition respect obsolete.

Although they are dealt out differently, esteem and recognition respect have core features in common. Honor of both kinds involves an honor code: a rationale for according or denying honor, based on expected standards of behavior. Both also rely upon the notion of a group qualified to accord and receive honor. Appiah calls this group one’s “honor peers,” and they are intrinsic to the accordance of respect. My honor peers
are the people whose respect matters to me, in part because I believe they -- and only they -- are qualified to grant me respect worth having. For instance, a gentleman could never preserve his honor by accepting a challenge to a duel from a butcher. The butcher was not his honor peer; to accept the challenge would acknowledge him as a peer, and thereby undermine the gentleman’s claim to honor as a gentleman. As a contemporary example, a middle school boy can only preserve his masculine honor by appealing to standards of masculinity supported by his (actual and aspirational) honor peers. Importantly, most people have multiple, partly but not entirely overlapping, sets of honor peers, e.g. fellow professionals, local community members, fellow citizens, fellow church-goers. This is less true of people in tightly integrated communities, e.g. Achaean prince- doms and small town high schools, in which “honor groups” overlap such that a person’s status in one realm carries into all the others.

Honor, in sum, is inherently a matter of person-relevant ethical standards maintained in relationship with others. As such, honor does not necessarily support hierarchical and politically retrograde notions of value (although it can), and it has never become obsolete. Its potential to support unjustifiable social conventions makes it a volatile ethical rationale, but contemporary theorists unmoved by promises of epistemological stability can find in it plenty that merits further consideration. Like Appiah, I find honor worthy of philosophical analysis because it attends to features of human life that make it worth living: one’s relations with others, commitment to ideals that give one’s actions meaning, and obligations to others who have an equal claim to respect.

A fleshed-out notion of honor supports a richer understanding of what it means, existentially and ethically, for a person to perceive himself as marginalized by a community that matters to him. Marginalization at the hands of one’s “honor peers” cannot be taken lightly. To be dishonored is to “lose face,” which connotes the loss not only of one’s visibility but, if “face” cannot be restored, the loss of one’s claim to personhood. Dishonor is both profoundly personal (as it threatens a person’s sense of self) and profoundly relational (as the existence of that self depends on how one appears to, and has one’s appearance reflected back by, others.) If honor enables us to “make the best of our own lives,” the continual experience of dishonor makes it impossible to live well.

**Honor and Agency**

Why dishonor should be a reason for violence, however, calls for further exploration of the connections between honor and action. As Appiah understands honor, it “is, for us, what it has always been, an engine, fueled by the dialogue between our self-conceptions and the regard of others, that can drive us to take seriously our responsibilities in a world we share.” Honor, that is, is a motivational force. Appiah claims honor as the engine driving ethical and political progress, and in chapters addressing the end of dueling in Western Europe, the end of footbinding in China, and the end of the Atlantic slave trade, he shows how a shift in public conceptions of what was honorable drove progressive social change. In all three cases, Appiah contends, reasonable arguments about the injustice of the institution gained limited traction until reformers shifted the public’s understanding of what honor required, after which change
came remarkably quickly. Appiah makes a compelling case for addressing injustices that plague contemporary societies not by heaping rational argument on top of rational argument but by shifting majority opinion to align what honor demands with the aims of justice. If this is so, revision of the “cultural scripts” that support school shootings and revision of the gun culture that supports easy access to guns, could be effected by such a realignment. Before jumping to that conclusion, however, two questions need to be addressed: Why is honor the “engine” of change, and what relation does honor have with genuinely good ends?

In *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams teases out the relationship between the terms of his title and, although honor is not its explicit focus, his analysis connects honor to agency. Shame is not synonymous with dishonor, as shame is an emotion whereas dishonor is an experience, namely a rupture between the individual and his ideals that is recognized by the community that gives significance to those ideals, which is reflected back to and perceived by the individual. Shame is, however, the appropriate emotional response to dishonor. As Williams shows, through an analysis of Greek drama and epic poems, the shame that characters feel in the wake of dishonor or know they will feel if they behave dishonorably drives their decisions and actions. This is not, he argues, merely a feature of the psyche of Ancient Greeks. The need to preserve one’s honor, in Williams’s account, remains a wellspring of agency.

In Sophocles’ *Ajax*, the hero is slighted by the award of Achilles’ arms to Odysseus. To keep him from killing the Greek army in revenge, Athena makes him mad, and he slaughters a flock of sheep and cattle believing them to be the army. When he recovers from his temporary madness and realizes that he has made himself absurd, he resolves to commit suicide. He has been dishonored twice over, by the Greek decision and by his own mad actions. Williams hones in on his statement “I must go,” the last words he speaks before killing himself. Why *must* he go? Because, Williams argues, given the (Achaean, heroic) ideals to which Ajax is dedicated, it has become clear to him that there is literally no way he can go on living. “He knows that he cannot change his ethos, his character, and he knows that after what he has done, this grotesque humiliation, he cannot live the only kind of life his ethos demands. . . . Being what he is, he could not live as the man who had done these things; it would be merely impossible, in virtue of the relations between what he expects of the world and what the world expects of a man who expects that of it.”

Ajax’s actions are strikingly similar to those of rampage shooters, and Williams’s analysis of their ethical import shines light on the sense in “senseless” violence. The boys who turn guns on their classmates and then themselves are, like Ajax, motivated to act by the impossibility of continuing to live without honor. Wanton violence followed by suicide, however, is not the only possible response to a loss of face. Williams offers as a counter-example Euripides’s play *The Madness of Heracles*, but a somewhat more promising example (because Heracles does kill his children, though not himself) would be that of Achilles. In the pivotal scene in the *Iliad* where he considers killing Agamemnon after Agamemnon dishonors him by taking Briseis, his war prize and symbol of his personal worth, Achilles reconsiders. Instead of killing the king, he avenges his honor by publically showing restraint and then withdrawing from the fighting.
Achilles’s reconsideration and restraint are, importantly, brought about through an internal dialogue between different “parts” of his psyche. When angered by Agamemnon’s disrespect, Achilles is initially unsure what to do: “within his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword . . . or else to check the spleen within and keep down his anger.” Note that both alternatives are portrayed as actions; Achilles must overcome either Agamemnon or the parts of him that are divided against other parts. While Achilles “weighed in mind and spirit” these two possible actions, Athena – the goddess of orderly warfare and wise judgment – “caught him by the fair hair” and told him that, should he refrain from killing Agamemnon, “some day three times over such shining gifts shall be given you by reason of this outrage.”

Achilles checks his spleen, and Agamemnon lives. Yet although Achilles is a savvier preserver of his honor than Ajax, and presented as sane throughout this episode, he is hardly an exemplar of non-violent conflict resolution. His withdrawal from battle nearly destroys the Greek army, and by the end of the Iliad his actions have caused the deaths of the friend whose life he held most dear, countless Greeks and Trojans, and himself. Plato said as much, and in the Republic he simultaneously reconfigures the terms in which crises of honor are internally debated and opens up new ways of living.

The part of the soul associated with honor in Homer, Plato, and other Greek literature, is the thumos, usually translated as “spirit.” As Achilles’s internal debate between “mind and spirit” suggests, it was treated by the Greeks as one seat of deliberation, and in Plato it is the part of the soul that, in these internal dialogues, supports the aims of time, honor. The Republic first explicitly mentions thumos in Book II, when Socrates and Glaucon are considering warfare and whether guardians can be sufficiently courageous to defend the city yet sufficiently loyal to avoid turning on it. Although this is a brief section of the Republic, the question they raise resonates throughout the book and continues to haunt political life. It is at the heart of contemporary gun violence, of rampage shootings but also chronic violence among the dispossessed and the militarization of police forces. How can a society that thrives on competition for consumer goods, and that relies upon force to protect insiders who have these goods from outsiders exploited to produce them, simultaneously cultivate defenders of its way of life and avoid becoming prey to these armed defenders? How can it defend itself against outsiders without creating outsiders within? As Glaucon exclaims, “By Zeus, it won’t be easy.”

Plato’s resolution of this problem depends upon appropriate education of the spirit. There are exemplars of this alliance of courage and loyalty, Socrates suggests: dogs, who are gentle to familiars and fierce towards enemies. Like a dog, this analogy implies, the spirit is part of human purposes but less than completely human. Dogs, who defend private and communal property, are a necessary element in elevating a political community over the “city of pigs,” in enabling citizens to live a fully human life, but they are still animals and still dangerous unless properly trained. By analogy, the spirit usefully keeps the appetite in check but needs to be put under the control of reason. This marks a shift from Homer, in which mind and spirit negotiated as equals. For Plato, the spirit remains a source of agency, but it does not select its ends. In Phaedrus, Plato uses another animal analogy that recognizes thumos as an aspect of agency but not a guide to its direction. Socrates likens the soul to “the natural union of a team of winged horses and
their charioteer. Without the horses, who represent spirit and the appetites, the chariot cannot move; if the charioteer does not direct the horses, the chariot veers off course. This analogy better captures how thumos works as an engine, although the dog analogy better captures the prospect of violence and internal sabotage.

To direct the soul towards the aims of reason, which is the soul’s proper ruler as the person is of the domestic animal, Plato turns to the arts to stamp the spirit with an impression of the good. Among the stories the Republic’s youth will not be told is that of Achilles. Achilles, driven by honor nearly to destroy his own army, can be no model for a guardian. The education Plato describes in the Republic will create a new kind of leader, the philosopher, whose spirit is dominated by reason such that honor aligns with justice. When Plato traces the decline of the ideal republic through four lesser political arrangements, the first stage of decline is “timocracy,” a politics guided by honor, whose rulers are persons dominated by spirit. A timocracy is the best of the inferior modes of government but inferior all the same, as it represents the domination of honor over justice, spirit over reason, the dog over its master. In presenting the just Republic as a better alternative, Plato opens up new ways to be human and a new kind of socio-political order in which such a person could thrive. In doing so, he offers a way out of the shame-driven necessity that drove Ajax to suicide and Achilles to destruction. An Achaean warrior might need to kill for the sake of his honor because he could not change his character, but the philosopher would never need to do so. In envisioning an alternative rationale to convention, and alternative ways of being human, Plato counteracts the necessity of violent action.

Plato, that is to say, issues a new kind of “man card.” He does so in response to the question Glaucon and Socrates raise: how a wealthy society can be protected from attacks by both the outsiders it exploits and those inside who, seeing the opportunity to benefit, attack insiders. His resolution to the problem of honor – to respect it as a motivating force but require it to align it with justice rather than follow its own ends -- might seem a promising basis for addressing gun violence, which exists in just such a situation. Yet Plato’s answer raises new problems even as it resolves others. Above all, the “guard-dogs” within any society, i.e. those who are educated to use violence to achieve their ends but expected always to subordinate their own interests to the aims of persons higher in status, are not dogs but human beings and unlikely always to accept their subordination. In establishing a hierarchy of persons within society, and treating those moved by honor as destined to be fighters but not rulers, Plato creates the conditions for a militarized notion of honor that ties it even more firmly to violence. That hierarchy also creates the conditions for competitive, esteem-seeking honor at the expense of equitable relations among peers. And the demotion of spirit from its equal place at the table of decision making becomes grounds for dismissing certain kinds of people from equitable access to authority. Insofar as Plato’s “man cards” could only ever be issued to some men, they cannot serve as an alternative to honor to those unqualified to receive them. Honor, having been associated with conventional masculinity and violent aggression, becomes an even more dangerous dog.

In more pragmatic terms, when people feel tugged in one direction by the demands of honor and another by the demands of reason, telling them one more time to listen to reason is unlikely to have much effect. This is what Appiah’s historical case studies establish. It is no solution to gun violence at all to tell gun owners what reason
demands. The judgment of school shooters may be clouded by mental illness, but reason is also of limited use where it might be thought better to apply: gun regulation. Although reason can clarify what kind of gun regulation a society might put in place to control internal violence, it can do little to convince voters to support such regulation when honor tells them otherwise. And honor does tell them otherwise. Most US gun owners say they keep a gun to protect themselves and their families against crime, and although public health experts and pediatricians warn that keeping a gun in the household creates a risk far greater than the risk of a violent intruder, this logic has limited sway with men (or women) who stake their honor on being able to respond to potential violence with violence. What analysis of honor as an engine, perhaps but not always towards the good, suggests is that rather than provide yet more reasons to support laws and policies likely to reduce gun violence, citizens would do well to shift the notion of what honor demands of a man.

Gun violence and the Crisis in Masculinity

In *Guys and Guns Amok*, Douglas Keller argues that rampage violence in American public spaces, which he extends to include acts of domestic terrorism as well as school shootings, is fueled by a toxic brew of media spectacle, a crisis in masculinity, and the availability of guns. He adopts and adapts Guy Debord’s conception of spectacle as “the overarching concept to describe the media and consumer society, including the packaging, promotion, and display of commodities and the production and effects of all media.”31 The media is often blamed for providing violent cultural scripts; in Kellner’s account it does so but not in the market-controlled, unidirectional way some critics claim. Rather, it serves as a public stage on which masculine identities are negotiated and constructed.

Kellner notes that contemporary youth are frequently portrayed as a menace (Plato’s dogs again), other times as subject to unprecedented hazards. He emphasizes that they have unique advantages and disadvantages, which are, however, inequitably distributed. Young men, especially young white men, retain privileges, but they face diminished prospects as compared to earlier generations, and Kellner explores the refuge some have taken in ultraviolent masculine identities. Cultural, political and economic changes, Kellner notes, have “robbed white men of positive identities (as family providers, farmers, union members, and so on) and left them feeling besieged and confused.” Some men, Kellner points out, have “made the transformation smoothly, expressing solidarity with other groups and identities in an egalitarian spirit, and constructed identities that were multiple, flexible, and politically progressive.” Others, however, have created a “new strain of white male identity politics fueled by intense rage, resentment, paranoia, and apocalyptic visions, often exploding into violence.”32 According to Kellner, the crisis in masculinity drove many men to seek solace in guns and weapons. Guns and military culture in particular fetishize weapons as an important part of male virility and power, treating guns as objects of almost religious veneration and devotion. In this constellation, the expression of violence through guns and the use of weapons is perceived as an expression of manhood. In recent years, however, gun culture has mutated into a more diffuse military culture where
explosives and more lethal weapons are deployed by extremist white male groups and individuals to try to reconstruct even more exaggerated hypermale identities. Kellner’s account of white male identity politics and extremist groups provides useful social context for understanding the actions of school shooters. *Guys and Guns Amok*, however, is less useful for making sense of the wide middle ground between militant extremists and progressives committed to fluid, flexible, gender-equalitarian identities. Many men who disdain expressions of white male identity culture, such as foul-mouthed talk shows and militia movements, enjoy hypermasculinized professional sports and video games. The “amok” metaphor, which connotes battlefield madness, captures the problem of Ajax and school shooters, but not the problem of Achilles, the self-controlled and successful but ultimately more destructive man of honor. A polarized account like Kellner’s, that divides men into the two camps of good progressives and bad right-wingers, is an unsatisfactory means of understanding the logic of men like Adam Winkler, a legal scholar whose *Gunfight* chronicles recent judicial interpretation of the US constitution’s second amendment. Winkler’s analysis is even-handed and reasonable; the reader gets the sense that he is committed to an expansive notion of gun rights but is not one of the extremists he calls “gun nuts.” In the last, affectionate words of his acknowledgements, he reveals why he favors the right to bear arms: his wife and his daughter. “They embody,” he says, “the reason a law-abiding person might want to own a gun.” The American Academy of Pediatrics may have the epidemiological evidence to support their claim that “the absence of guns from children’s homes and communities is the most reliable and effective measure to prevent firearm related injuries in children and adolescents,” but as a husband and father, Winkler is unconvinced. What the lens of honor provides that Kellner’s analysis lacks is a way to understand why a rational and loving husband and father might put his family at risk for the sake of his self-respect. The masculine ideal that a good man is a protector of his family is widely shared. It can seem benign, but insofar as it upholds the argument of Winkler and other moderate proponents of expansive second amendment rights, it makes guns widely available within American communities, where they are terribly dangerous. In upholding their honor, such men sometimes find, as did Achilles, that they have inadvertently destroyed those they most love.

**Conclusion: Women and Honor and Human Beings**

Adrienne Rich titles her reflections on honor “Women and Honor: Some notes on lying,” and indeed her piece takes the form of notes rather than sustained argument. Because it formulates honor in terms very different from the masculine warrior ethos, however, her ideas are worth parsing out.

Whereas “male honor” has had “something to do with killing,” as she notes, and is “something needing to be avenged: hence the duel,” women’s honor has been “something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband.” Strictly gendered delineations of what honor requires are also evident in the realm of honest communication. A man of honor could give his word to a personal or public commitment, and “a man’s ‘word’ sufficed – to other men – without guarantee.”
Honesty has not been expected of women, however, and as Rich points out women “have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps ... We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear.” Expected to lie, women have become, Rich laments, liars. Men, meanwhile, have been expected to tell the truth – but “about facts, not about feelings. They have not been expected to talk about feelings at all.” Nor have men been expected to tell the truth to women, and Rich accuses “patriarchal lying” of manipulating women “both through falsehood and through silence.”

The question that interests Rich in this piece is whether, through a new commitment to honest communication in relationships between women, “a truly womanly idea of honor [is] in the making.” In reorienting honor from visual spectacle to (truthful) speech, Rich’s account of honor is at odds with the predominant metaphor of honor as a matter of surface appearances that runs through Plato, through the correlation of honor and “face,” and through the etymology of “respect” (to look back). Yet her correlation of honor with honest speech and willingness to listen in relationship harks back to another scene in the Iliad on which Achilles’s honor pivots: his meeting with Priam over the return of Hector’s body. When Priam comes in supplication, Achilles has for twelve days desecrated Hector’s body by dragging it behind his chariot and refusing it proper burial. He overreaches in his use of violence to avenge a friend, and Achilles thus stands to lose the honor on which he has staked everything else he values. With the help of Apollo and Hermes – both gods of good speech – Priam reaches Achilles’s tent, and the two men sit down to talk. Priam’s honest account of his feelings for his son Hector, and his appeal to Achilles’s feelings for his own father, finally moves Achilles to pity. Their conversation starts with Priam catching Achilles’s knees in a gesture of supplication, a display of esteem that recognizes Achilles as “dangerous and man-slaughtering,” but after hearing Priam’s grief Achilles “took the old man by the hand, and set him on his feet again,” thereby recognizing Priam as a respect-worthy equal. Through honest communication in and about relationships between men, Achilles reestABLishes his honor. While Achilles’s claim to esteem as the greatest of warriors is maintained through the public spectacle of his quarrel with Agamemnon, his identity as a good prince can only be maintained through this act of honest communication (which takes place, appropriately, in his private tent).

What Rich’s piece adds to the Iliad’s depiction of these two, complementary moments of honor’s issue and reissue is the declaration that the peer-to-peer kind of honor – that which Appiah calls recognition respect -- depends upon honest communication. This version of honor has been shamefully neglected by men and is rightfully taken up by women. Although she explicitly states that “[t]hese notes are concerned with relationships between and among women,” her insight is not limited by that focus. Once honor is reissued – dusted off and reconsidered in the light of gender equity, including the possibility of new kinds of relationships between and among men and women – the inclusion of honest communication alongside public spectacle opens up more promising possibilities for the reissue of a man card – perhaps this time as a human being card.

In regards to the problem of gun violence in America, fostered by notions of honor that keep guns available and marginalize some for the sake of upholding social
hierarchies, this suggests a deceptively simple response. Masculine honor needs to be reconfigured to mean not protecting friends and hurting enemies, in Plato’s formulation, but rather listening to outsiders, recognizing them as equals even when their truths are painful to hear, and speaking honestly in response, about feelings as well as facts. By Zeus, as Glaucon might say, it won’t be easy. Not to try, however, puts at risk both the honor and the relationships that all human beings hold dear.

2 Although gun violence in schools has not been limited to the United States, the problem is disproportionately severe in the US context, for reasons that call for historical and sociological analysis. In addressing school shootings through a philosophical analysis of honor, this paper aims to shine light on US gun violence in schools as well as physical violence in other school systems.


7 Berger, 179.

8 Berger, 180.

9 It has been picked up by conservative theorists like Allan Bloom and Harvey Mansfield in their lamentations for the lost virtues of manhood, but otherwise relegated to the philosophical basement. See, Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Mansfield, *Manliness* (Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2007).

10 Berger, 180.


12 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How moral revolutions happen* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). A look at the eclectic sources that contemporary theorists of honor draw on confirms Appiah’s claim that the topic has been neglected by philosophers. Berger’s essay was first printed in a sociological journal. Appiah turns to historical sources and to research by Frank Henderson Stewart, an anthropologist. Stewart’s book, *Honor*, opens with the claim by anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers that before the social sciences addressed honor in the 1960s, little was written outside literature. This is not quite true, Stewart says, although the philosophical literature has been undistinguished except for Italian theorists of the 16th century, but his counter-example is legal scholarship. Insofar as honor is a matter of social relationships and motivation, it makes sense that serious thinking about it would be spread across literature, social sciences, and law – fields in which these are central concerns – as well as philosophy. Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

13 Appiah, xv.
For Darwall’s account, see Stephen Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” Ethics 88 no.1 (October 1977), 36-49.


Appiah, 3-51.

Appiah, 179.

Bernard Williams, Shame and Necessity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Philosophical and ethnographic analyses distinguish shame from guilt, a related but distinct notion. Shame is tied to honor, guilt to having broken a rule or disobeyed a rightful authority (God, the law, etc). This distinction is worth keeping in mind as it opens a host of corollary connections of shame to honor, relationality, and socially situated/practice-based ethics and guilt to disobedience and deontological/Kantian morality. Williams considers Kant’s account of honor a distraction from Greek insights into autonomy, which are, he holds, better attuned to shame’s influence on human action.

In Rampage, Newman et al note that many shooters who survive later attempt, or confess to having meant to commit, suicide. Criminal justice experts recognize the phenomenon of “death by cop,” in which a person effectually commits suicide by committing a crime that he knows will provoke police to shoot him, and many school shootings fall into this category. Importantly, Ajax, like school shooters, is also mad; to say that such actions have an internal logic is not to say that any rational person would take them.


In English, “heart” has the same sense of a body part that is the seat of intense feeling, as in “lion-hearted” or “wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve,” and perhaps “heartbroken,” though as the last example implies, the English “heart” is also the seat of romantic love, an entirely modern notion. Thumos, unlike English “spirit,” has to do with worldly human concerns and relationships, not “spiritual”/supernatural entities, who may seize one’s hair but not one’s thumos. As I do not know Greek, this interpretation relies on others’ work.

RW Sharples, “‘But why has my thumos spoken with me thus?’ Homeric Decision-Making.” Greece and Rome (Second Series) 30, no. 01 (1983), 1-7.

Thumos is evoked, though not named, in Book I, when Thrasymachus leaps up in anger at Socrates and insists that justice is support of one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies. There, Thrasymachus is portrayed as animal-like in his anger; he is a case-study of what the thumos is capable of when unchecked by reason. His interpretation of justice, of course, correlates to the traditional notion of what honor demands. Just as he subordinates reason to spirit, Thrasymachus subordinates justice to honor. See, J.R.S. Wilson, "Thrasymachus and the Thumos: A Further Case of Prolepsis in Republic I." The Classical Quarterly (New Series) 45, no. 01 (1995), 58-67.

Plato, Republic, Page


Kellner, 3.

Kellner, 92.

Kellner, 97.


Winkler, page 302


Rich, 186

Rich, 188

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