

# Nobility (Early Modern Period)

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## 1. Introduction

Anyone who in the early modern period wished to claim a heroic reputation or portray a past figure as a hero had to go by the norms of a strongly stratified society based on a hierarchy of different estates. Not everyone could be turned into a hero in quite the same way. Certain 'heroic roles' were for example unsuitable for women, or they could only assume such roles if an additional effort was made to legitimise them, i.e. gender was an important factor when it came to heroization. But social status was also relevant considering that the classic military hero was a noble warrior in the early modern period. There were certainly exceptions to this: different rules applied to naval warfare than to land warfare, and there were also societies in which the boundaries between the estates and classes were less clearly defined than they were in England for example with its landed gentry, or perhaps even in Castile with its numerous *hidalgua*. Nevertheless, in order to qualify as a fit subject for the process of heroization at all, a potential hero generally needed to have certain social qualities, including for instance a 'noble' birth and a noble lifestyle. In the religious sphere, that was of course far less the case: martyrs or prophets of either sex could certainly come from among the common people. In most European countries, however, the military hero of bourgeois or even sub-bourgeois origins did not become widespread until after the French Revolution, and even in some cases not until the later 19th century. To be able to point to heroic ancestors or one's own heroic deeds was thus also a means of social distinction in early modern Europe. The principles that defined the social hierarchy were at least partially negotiated in the debate over heroes and heroic deeds. The figure of the hero is therefore of

fundamental importance for the nobility in this era, just as, conversely, the common notions of the heroic in this time period are to be understood only in relation to the nobility's attempts to achieve and secure some kind of cultural hegemony.

## 2. The European nobilities and the languages of social distinction

It bears keeping in mind that Europe's nobilities in the early modern period were exceedingly heterogeneous. That was true not just for the diverse regional and national elites, but also for the difference between high ranking aristocrats and simple country squires, especially since a distinction has to be made between countries with a relatively high concentration of nobility (significantly more than 5% of the population; in some cases up to 10%, such as in Poland, Castile and Hungary) and those with a relatively small noble population (like Scandinavia or Bohemia and Moravia). What did a member of the wealthy Bohemian *Herrenstand* ultimately have in common with a Castilian *hidalgo* who lived a modest life in a city? General statements about the nobility's self-understanding and self-fashioning are therefore difficult to make. The same goes for heroic models which informed noble behaviour and the image of themselves which they presented to society.[1]

However, there were nevertheless social languages in the early modern period which allowed noblemen and noble women of different origins to negotiate some widely acceptable concept of what constituted nobility as such. Certainly, starting in the late 16th century, this increasingly included the rhetoric of courtesy and politesse, which had been conceived during the Renaissance in Italy and was later refined primarily in the vicinity of the French court into the ideal of the *honnête homme*[2], but also a vocabulary of heroic virtue and masculinity. Nobles did not define themselves everywhere in Europe in the same way as members of a military elite. For instance, there was the urban nobility of Northern Italy and the *noblesse de robe* in France. However, the reference to heroic deeds of one's ancestors was still an important point of reference for the social and cultural identity of the nobility almost everywhere – at least if elites are ignored who in fact established their legitimacy primarily by occupying offices in the civil administration or by belonging to noble corporations which were part of regional or national diets and parliaments. At the heart of the matter was always a discourse of distinction: only nobles, as was emphasised, were capable of performing – primarily martial – heroic deeds. And only nobles could have invoked ancestors who had performed such deeds.

## 3. 'Heroic' as a synonym for noble

From the end of the 16th and into the 17th century, the word 'heroic' or 'heroicus' was therefore used in certain contexts almost synonymously with 'noble'. In Brussels, for instance, a treatise titled *Iurisprudentia heroica* was published in 1668. The subtitle of the book reveals its subject: *De Iure Belgarum circa nobilitatem et insignia*[3], i.e. the law concerning nobility and coats of arms. Beyond that, heraldry and genealogy were also often described as *scientiae heroicae* or *sciences héroïques* because they dealt with the nobility's origins and insignias.[4] Justification for this choice of words was found in pointing out that coats of arms "according to their provenance were signs of heroic deeds and accomplishments", as one pertinent treatise states even at the end of the 18th century.[5]

A heroic self-image was consistent with an ideal commonly held by the nobility that focused on such values as courage, honour and generosity of character (*magnanimitas*, *generosité* – corresponding to the Aristotelian ideal of *megalopsychia*). That self-image correlated to a certain tendency of noblemen to resort to force of arms in everyday life still strongly in evidence in the 16th century and also thereafter to an extent. It was a demonstration of the willingness to defend one's honour and one's claims to social superiority with a weapon in one's hand.

Later, courtly and urbane models of behaviour in the sense of the *honnête homme* ideal superimposed and sublimated that violent bearing.[6] However, the willingness to put one's own life on the line for honour, in a duel for instance, remained an integral, albeit nonexclusive characteristic of a noble self-understanding, at least among noble military officers. To act differently would have discredited the aspiration to belong to an elite for which the heroic self-affirmation was more important than the ability to defend one's own position through compromise and shrewd tactics or even just to ensure one's own survival.[7] There were certainly groups of nobility that eschewed this self-stylisation, such as the aforementioned French nobility of the robe. (Nevertheless, starting in the late 17th century, the sons of the nobility of the robe often sought a connection to the nobility of the sword through a military career.) However, in general these groups tended to be the exception to the rule, at any rate before the 18th century, when the nobility ramified more into entirely differently functional elites.

Wherever the ideal of a martial existence remained the guiding principle, it also influenced the nobility's education, which to a certain extent was aimed at a permanent *imitatio heroica*. A certain affinity to **violence** and seemingly uncontrolled or **transgressive** behaviour in certain situations formed one component of (masculine) noble conduct. Such characteristics were reinforced by actual participation in martial conflicts and commensurate experiences of violence, as the American historian Jonathan Dewald has emphasised: "Contemporaries were impressed by the special psychological impact of the experience of warfare and by the ways this experience separated nobles from other social groups. In combat as in other aspects of his life, the military nobleman was expected to regulate his passions in ways quite unlike other men. Passion was not to be entirely repressed." The heroic courage that class-conscious nobles had to display certainly had its psychological price, for "both the duelist and the warrior were men who had stepped beyond the normal limits of social behaviour." [8]

#### 4. The afterlife of knightly traditions

The authoritative notions of noble honour and heroic virtue were determined by the traditions of knighthood well into the 16th century. Those traditions in no way became obsolete as quickly as earlier scholarship has assumed.[9] The heavily armed noble horseman still retained his place on the battlefield in the late 16th century, at least in some theatres of war, as the French Wars of Religion showed.[10] However, the habitus of the knightly warrior survived the transformation of warfare anyway. Even the military entrepreneurs of the Thirty Years' War, such as the certainly controversial Ernst von Mansfeld (1580–1626)[11] or Bernhard of Weimar (1604–1639)[12], still knew to portray themselves as knightly heroes, or were portrayed as such by supporters and admirers. They needed to do this, after all, since the cultural capital that their carefully dramatised heroic charisma provided them with was important to recruiting and motivating troops. If we look for example at the Spanish army in Flanders, we notice that to the extent that members of the high nobility assumed or re-

assumed an ever higher percentage of command positions from the 1630s onwards, such a self-fashioning became more and more important in that context as well. This self-portrayal also encompassed a show of greater respect for the opponent – only in combat against an honourable enemy could heroic deeds be performed – which the professional soldiers of the late 16th century, some of whom had acted with utmost brutality against the ‘rebels’ in the Netherlands, had rather seldom shown.[13] Furthermore, the Spanish captain general Ambrogio Spinola (1569–1630) was portrayed by Velazquez in his famous *Surrender of Breda* (1635) primarily as a knightly warrior, although Spinola, who hailed from a family of noble Genoese financiers, was just as much a banker to the Spanish crown as he was a military leader.[14] But Velazquez’ painting was only one outstanding example of an entire series of artistic portrayals of the era that emphasised the heroic field commander of aristocratic origins and treated the rest of the battle only as a backdrop.[15]

On the French end, the prince de Condé (1621–1686) stood opposite those Spanish commanders. His victory at Rocroi (1643), which was due not least to the deployment of French cavalry, aroused the hope among the French nobility that the era of the heroic knightly warrior according to the example of the Chevalier Bayard had returned.[16] That hope as such would go unfulfilled; Condé himself became involved in the turmoil of the Fronde after 1648, a rebellion that failed because, among other reasons, noble actors’ heroic self-dramatisation, which was inspired by the chivalric romances of the time and unequivocally theatrical, coalesced with an exaggerated individualism. An insistence, marked by heroic pride, on one’s own prestige and the claim to one’s own rank was not a good foundation for the collaboration of a band of malcontent nobles who had no natural leader.[17]

In addition, however, the standing armies of the late 17th and 18th centuries increasingly demanded of their officers and soldiers strict discipline and the willingness to subordinate their personal endeavours for glory and honour to service for the monarch or prince without qualification. The **heroic deed** was no longer sufficient on its own, but was legitimised through its position and function within a wider cultural framework. Specifically in France after 1660, this framework was orientated entirely towards the king, whose own heroization limited and outshone every pretension of individual nobles to glory.[18] Nevertheless, this extreme focus on the king must arguably be seen as a unique French development, since in the Habsburg monarchy for instance there remained considerably more room for independently acting noble war heroes and their self-dramatisation – like Prince Eugene.[19] Regardless, military heroes were still necessary even in France as role models for the officers and to motivate the troops, this despite the changes in warfare, which at first glance allowed less room for any individual’s spectacular heroic deeds than in the past.

## 5. Crisis and transformation of heroic models in the 18th century

The enlightened 18th century, however, proved to be more sceptical than the era of Baroque hero adoration regarding the traditional ideal of the heroic warrior which had inspired so many nobles in the past. On the one hand, the transgressive qualities of this ideal of heroic, violent masculinity increasingly became the object of criticism. On the other hand, simple soldiers and non-commissioned officers were now also appearing, more than in the past, as figures fit for a potential heroization.[20] The fight of the *Régiment des Gardes françaises* at Fontenoy in 1745 for example sparked an intense debate in France about redefining heroic soldierly courage beyond the noble milieu.[21] Therefore, at

least the 18th century can be described as a time of crisis of the traditional association between martial heroism and nobility. It was precisely that crisis that galvanised the reformers who wished to restore for the nobility, as a class of warriors, a secure place in society, and wanted them to regain their old cultural hegemony. In France for instance, Philippe-Auguste de Sainte Foy argued that the nobility's "bellicose disposition" justified its monopoly over officer positions. According to the Chevalier d'Arc, the heroic ethos remained alien to the bourgeois, for the "esprit de calcul" and the "amour de la gloire" were just as incompatible as "honneur" and "intéret".[22]

The French army reforms after 1763, which reinforced and expanded the privileges of the nobility of the sword and even followed the Prussian example with its almost entirely noble officer corps, were greatly influenced by such pleas for a renewed military nobility.[23] The discussion went differently, however, beyond the Channel in England, where in and around the year 1700 the noble elite – the peerage and the gentry – actually defined themselves less than the French *noblesse d'épée* did using heroic deeds performed on the battlefield, and more via office holding, accumulating wealth and practicing a specific class culture. What was peculiar for the development in England, however, was the fact that beginning in the early 18th century the hero, to the extent he was a politically relevant figure, tended to be portrayed as a patriot and as a defender of his country and of freedom, and less as a loyal servant of the monarch. That may have been one of the reasons that there was no lasting decline in the prestige of military heroes, for they could be presented as defenders of freedom.[24]

That does not mean that there was also no criticism of the figure of the military hero in England, whether it be that it was ironised and ridiculed, as Alexander Pope did in his 1712 epic *The Rape of the Locke* (cf. mock-heroic)[25], or that the transgressive elements of the heroic were criticised from a Christian perspective. However, it was still possible to integrate the critique of the martial and of the heroic into an ethos of patriotism, which allowed contemporaries to see the fight for English greatness as a struggle for civilisation and humanity.

In England, the culture of the heroic was free of the toxic legacy that the boundless glorification of Louis XIV as the *roi de guerre* in the decades before 1715 had left behind[26], and this was one of the reasons that it flourished in the 18th century, more so than in France. In the context of this culture, the traditional land-owning ruling class, which re-militarised to a remarkable degree in the long wars against France after the early 1790s, developed new resources of legitimation. In general, the English elite displayed a remarkable talent in the 18th century of adapting to changing models of the heroic. The reinvention of the ideals of medieval knighthood, which culminated in romanticism, but had older roots, certainly made it easier to redefine the ideal of the aristocratic hero in England. An elite that focused on the ideals of "patrician valour and self sacrifice" (Linda Colley)[27], or that at least dramatised and publicly staged their lives in line with those ideals, asserted itself in the decades after 1790 as well. Meanwhile, the French nobility was increasingly struggling even before the Revolution to formulate a self-image that could be aligned with the new ideals of the Enlightenment. The influential ideal of the *grand homme* had been too much designed as an alternative script to the traditional noble hero.[28] Moreover, the calls were too loud to give the entire nation and its citizens a share in the claim to honour and glory, and thus in the heroic self-portrayal commensurate to that claim, which had been reserved for the nobility until that time.

Thus France certainly represented in the European context rather an exception than the rule, for elsewhere the nobility managed seamlessly to reinvent itself as a patriotic elite in the age of nationalism. This was perhaps also facilitated by a re-heroization of the notions of masculinity, which allowed the knighthood of long gone eras to once again become a paragon everywhere. This was also true in the colonial space, since many British officers in India invariably carried *The Life of the Chevalier Bayard* or *Les Chroniques de Froissart* in their saddlebags. At any rate, these developments were a fundamental requirement for the nobility to survive as a social power elite, though not as a corporate estate in the traditional sense, after the turn of the 18th to the 19th century. In the age of the nation state focused on military and political power, many noble elites entered into a close alliance with the forces of nationalism and imperialism, and employed their status-specific traditions of heroic-martial self-fashioning as social and cultural capital within the context of this alliance, or as the English historian Chris Bayly has described it: “As supposed embodiments of chivalry, they also reinvested their inheritance of status, becoming among the most passionate proponents of the new nationalism and imperialism.”<sup>[29]</sup>

## 6. References

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- 4 Vulson de La Colombière, Marc de: *La science héroïque, traitant de la noblesse, de l'origine des armes, de leurs blasons et symboles, [...] des reynes et enfans de France, et des officiers de la couronne et de la maison du roy [...]*. Paris 1644: Cramoisy.
- 5 [Siebenkees, Johann Christian:] *Erläuterungen der Heraldik als ein Commentar über Herrn Hofrath Gatterer's Abriß dieser Wissenschaft*. Nuremberg 1789: Schneider, 26.
- 6 Chariatte, Isabelle: “Transfigurations du héros dans la culture mondaine du siècle classique. Madeleine de Scudéry, La Rochefoucauld, le chevalier de Méré”. In: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen* 2.2 (2014), 37-47, especially 39-44, DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2014/02/04](https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2014/02/04); cf. Chariatte, Isabelle: *La Rochefoucauld et la culture mondaine. Portraits du cœur de l'homme (Lire le XVIIe siècle; 7)*. Paris 2011: Classiques Garnier, 152-158.
- 7 Among the literature regarding the duel: Ludwig, Ulrike: *Das Duell im Alten Reich. Transformation und Variationen frühneuzeitlicher Ehrkonflikte*. Berlin 2016: Duncker & Humblot. See also Brioist, Pascal / Drévilion, Hervé / Serna, Pierre: *Croiser le fer. Violence et culture de l'épée dans la France moderne (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle)*. Seyssel 2002: Champ Vallon.
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- 12 Cf. for instance Freinsheim, Johann: *Teutscher Tugentspiegel. Gesang von dem Staunen und Thaten deß Alten und Newen Teutschen Hercules. An den Durchleuchtigen Hochgebornen Fürsten und Herren, Herren Bernharden, Hertzogen zu Sachsen [...]*. Strasbourg 1639.
- 13 González de León, Fernando: "Soldados Platicos and Caballeros. The Social Dimension of Ethics in the Early Modern Spanish Army". In: Trim, David J. B. (Ed.): *The Chivalric Ethos and the Development of Military Professionalism*. Leiden/Boston 2003: Brill, 235-268. And González de León, Fernando: *The Road to Rocroi. Class, Culture and Command in the Spanish Army of Flanders, 1567–1659*. Leiden 2009: Brill, 185-213. Therein, De León describes a "penchant for self-dramatization" that also became evident in an increasing number of duels (187).
- 14 Rivero Rodríguez, Manuel: *La España de Don Quijote. Un viaje al Siglo de Oro*. Madrid 2005: Alianza, 341; "Inmortalizado por Velásquez como general victorioso en La rendición de Breda, no podía escindir su personalidad de banquero-asentista y la de general-tesorero de los ejércitos de su majestad."
- 15 González de León: *The Road to Rocroi*, 2009, 186, with the observation on Spanish and Flemish battle paintings of the second third of the 17th century: "In these canvasses the major focus is almost always on the spectacular, courtly or chivalric aspects of the command."
- 16 Drévilleon, Hervé: *Batailles. Scènes de guerre de la Table Ronde aux Tranchées*. Paris 2007: Seuil, 119–140; Bertière, Simone: *Condé. Le héros fourvoyé*. Paris 2011: Fallois.
- 17 Regarding the Fronde: Rubel, Alexander: *Eine Frage der Ehre. Die Fronde im Spannungsfeld von Adelsethos und Literatur*. In: *Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte* 32.2 (2005), 31-57; Walther, Gerrit: "Protest als schöne Pose, Gehorsam als Event. Zur Formation des ludovizianischen Absolutismus aus dem Geiste der Fronde". In: Schilling, Lothar (Ed.): *Absolutismus, ein unersetzliches Forschungskonzept? Eine deutsch-französische Bilanz / L'absolutisme, un concept irremplaçable? Une mise au point franco-allemande*. Munich 2008: Oldenbourg, 173-189. Regarding the historical context of the Fronde and the values of the involved nobles, cf. also Constant, Jean-Marie: *La folle liberté des baroques 1600–1661*. Paris 2007: Perrin.
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- 19 Regarding Prince Eugene: Großegger, Elisabeth: *Mythos Prinz Eugen. Inszenierung und Gedächtnis*. Vienna 2014: Böhlau.
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- 22 Wrede: *Ohne Furcht und Tadel*, 2012, 395; cf. Sainte-Foy, Philippe-Auguste de (Chevalier d'Arcq): *La Noblesse militaire ou le patriote français opposé à la noblesse commerçante*, 1756.
- 23 Blaufarb, Rafe: *The French Army 1750–1820. Careers, Talent, Merit*. Manchester 2002: Manchester University Press, 12-45.
- 24 Asch: *Herbst des Helden*, 2015, 110-118.
- 25 Terry, Richard: *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper. An English Genre and Discourse*. Burlington 2005: Taylor and Francis. Cf. Williams, Carolyn D.: *Pope, Homer and Manliness. Some Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Classical Learning*. London 1993: Routledge.
- 26 Cornette, Joël: *Le roi de guerre. Essai sur la souveraineté dans la France du Grand Siècle*, Paris 2000: Payot; cf. Wrede, Martin: "Des Königs Rock und der Rock des Königs. Monarch, Hof und Militär in Frankreich von Ludwig XIV. zu Ludwig XVI". In: Wrede, Martin (Ed.): *Die Inszenierung der heroischen Monarchie. Frühneuzeitliches Königtum zwischen ritterlichem Erbe und militärischer Herausforderung (Historische Zeitschrift, Beihefte N.F.; 62)*. Munich 2014: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 382-408.
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