The Double Guilt of Dueling

The Stain of Suicide in Anti-Dueling Rhetoric in the Early Republic

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By most accounts, Alexander Hamilton never intended to kill Aaron Burr—indeed, Hamilton never intended to pull the trigger. In the days and weeks after accepting Burr's challenge to duel, Hamilton repeatedly told friends and family of his intent to hold his fire while his opponent took aim. "Then, sir, you will go like a lamb to be slaughtered," warned Rufus King. Hamilton refused to reconsider and on July 10, 1804, just hours before the encounter at Weehawken, he wrote a letter he hoped would be published should he be slain, confirming his intentions: "I have resolved . . . to reserve and throw away my first fire, and I have thoughts even of reserving my second fire," Hamilton declared. He was mortally wounded the next morning, and, according to his friends, had remained true to his word. In the aftermath, many New Yorkers seized on those last words and the published testimony of his second, Nathaniel Pendleton, as compelling evidence that the most famous duel in American history was not murder, but suicide. "He exposed his own life," the Presbyterian firebrand Eliphalet Nott told an Albany audience before the month was out. "This was his crime."[1]

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1. Letter from Robert Troup to Timothy Pickering, Mar. 31, 1828, Alexander Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress; Harold G. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 vols. (New York, 1961–87), 27: 280; Eliphalet Nott, *A Discourse Delivered in the North Dutch Church, in the City of Albany* (Albany, NY,

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Rather than probe Hamilton's psychological state in his final days or examine whether he was enacting a death wish, this essay considers how the ambiguities of Hamilton's perceived intentions allowed a generation of anti-dueling reformers to build a moral majority against a practice that had held America's first generation of politicians and soldiers in its deadly grip. Although unambiguously illegal in most states, dueling had become an accepted ritual of honor and even a mark of status among officers and gentlemen seeking to emulate the European military elites they had encountered during the Revolutionary War. To such men, the lure of the field of honor was vastly more compelling than the threat of legal sanction.[2]

Frustrated by duelists' indifference to the rule of law, anti-dueling activists who were inspired to action by Hamilton's slaying mounted one of the first moral suasion campaigns of the new republic. This loose constellation of reformers has been almost completely neglected both by scholars interested in the ritual practices of "men of honor" in the early republic and by students of larger and better coordinated reform movements like abolition or temperance. Yet the audacity of these reformers is remarkable: Using Hamilton's death as their touchstone, this uncoordinated collection of ministers, university presidents and professors, newspaper editors, and assorted other minor public figures inverted the moral associations between dueling and honor. Obliterating longstanding notions of the duel as honorable self-sacrifice, reformers working in the aftermath of Hamilton's ambiguous death recast dueling not as an honor ritual but a unique form of homicide, a fatal compact of suicide and murder. In a full-throated denunciation of the events at Weehawken, the Newburyport Congregationalist Samuel Spring summed up the emerging moral calculus of the anti-dueling movement: "In fine, Duellists

1804), 5. For a revisionist account see Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York, 2007).

2. Hamilton's psychological state has been examined by many scholars, including Douglas Adair, Fawn Brodie, and Henry Adams. This literature is surveyed in J. Lee Shneidman and Conalee Levine-Shneidman, "Suicide or Murder? The Burr–Hamilton Duel," *Journal of Psychohistory* 8, no. 2 (1980), 159–82. Evarts B. Greene, "The Code of Honor in Colonial and Revolutionary Times, with Special Reference to New England," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 26 (1926), 367–88.

are always self-murderers, if not willful murderers of their adversaries. And who with honor can plead their cause?"[3]

In this compelling revision of the persistent association of honor with self-sacrifice, these reformers played upon growing contemporary anxiety about the specter of suicide, anxiety that revealed a set of deeper concerns about the ability of the young republic to elicit appropriate moral behavior and political participation from its unruly body of constituents. This master-stroke sustained anti-dueling activists for three decades as they attempted to persuade individual citizens of the moral abhorrence of taking the field. Only in 1838, in the wake of the unambiguous slaying of Congressman Jonathan Cilley by a fellow member of the House of Representatives, did events spur opponents of the practice to abandon the once potent connection between dueling and suicide and to instead embrace new tactics designed to use political tools to bring an end to ritual violence in America. By illuminating the turning points in this complicated campaign, this essay offers both a case study of the tactics of early nineteenth-century moral reformers and a singular demonstration of the cultural significance of suicide in the early republic.

Reframing this well-established honor ritual as an abhorrent, premeditated species of suicide allowed anti-dueling reformers to leverage the cultural significance of suicide in early America to their advantage. Anxiety about both personal and political self-destruction drove public discourse within the newly United States. Persons from all walks of life were engaged in the larger debate about suicide—everyone from ministers and parents concerned that their charges might succumb to suicide cults and sensational novels to abolitionists who exposed slave suicides to jailors

3. Samuel Spring, *The Sixth Commandment Friendly to Virtue, Honor and Politeness: A Discourse, in Consequence of the Late Duel* (Newburyport, MA, 1804), 15. The only substantive work on the American anti-dueling movement is Thomas J. Carmody, "'Arise and Stand Forth': A Fantasy Theme Analysis of American Clergy and Their Calls for Social Action in the Nineteenth Century Anti-Dueling Movement, 1804–1856" (PhD dissertation, Regent University, 2004). On an earlier anti-dueling movement in England, see Donna T. Andrew, "The Code of Honour and Its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England, 1700–1850," *Social History* 5 (Oct. 1980), 409–34.

watchful of inmates whom they feared might take their own lives in order to escape lawful punishment. Across the new nation, students at colleges like Harvard and Yale were debating the strength of injunctions against suicide and offering dramatic valedictory addresses on the subject. In literary and intellectual circles, clubs and societies held special meetings to ask "Is Suicide Justifiable?" Furthermore, Americans not only viewed suicide as a matter for esoteric debate but also considered the act itself as an index of the moral health of their compatriots. Thus, when in 1800 the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences sent out a questionnaire to the state's 107 townships to gauge the new nation's progress in agriculture, industry, culture, and character, it inquired as to "the number of persons convicted of capital crimes, and instances of suicide, within twenty years, or since the town was settled, and whether committed by natives or foreigners."[4]

Such concerted interest in the prevalence and potency of suicide was a phenomenon fueled by a matrix of legal and literary developments. After the Revolution, lawmakers in several states had overturned British common-law precedents that had sought to deter suicides by punishing survivors and mutilating corpses. While many observers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush, cheered the decriminalization of suicide in states such as Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Vermont, and New Jersey, many others worried that such developments amounted to an official endorsement of suicide and feared that a wave of self-destruction would soon crash down upon young America. For instance, the anti-dueling reformer Samuel Spring remarked upon how "common" self-murder was "at the present day" as he addressed his congregation in 1805: "It is to be lamented," Spring continued, "that public authority

4. Lorna Ruth Wiedman, "Suicide in American Fiction, 1798–1909" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995), 24; Howard R. Lamar and Carolyn C. Cooper, eds., *Voices of the New Republic: Connecticut Towns 1800–1832* (New Haven, CT, 2003), 302. Thomas Day, *The Suicide. A Dialogue Exhibited on the Stage at the Public Commencement of Yale-College* (Litchfield, CT, 1797). Likewise in 1790, 1791, and 1802 Benjamin Rush sent out a succession of explorers, including Meriwether Lewis, armed with questionnaires about the natives. "Is suicide common among them?" he asked each time. See, for instance, George W. Corner, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush, His "Travels through Life" Together with His Commonplace Book for 1789–1813* (Princeton, NJ, 1948), 188–89.

does not carefully and uniformly mark the crime with those tokens of disgrace which men generally dread more than death itself."[5]

Moralists like Spring could be forgiven for believing that an epidemic of suicide was already sweeping the newly United States; anyone who opened a newspaper in early America would have gained the same impression. The expansion of the newspaper exchange system after the Postal Service Act of 1792 had caused newspaper coverage of suicides that occurred within the United States to surge, creating the misleading impression that the occurrence of suicides was rising fast. Novels too were enjoying incredible popularity in part because of their reliance on romantic suicide as a dramatic plot device; almost half of all American novels published between 1789 and 1800—including four works by Charles Brockden Brown and two by Susannah Rowson—centered their plots around a completed suicide. This literary fetishization of self-destruction worried a generation of parents that their adolescent children would draw from these tales the notion that suicide was a reasonable recourse if their young affections ever went unrequited or their troubles became insurmountable.[6]

In short, during these first formative decades of independence many different groups found they had a vested interest in defining and enforcing the boundaries of individual behavior, the taking of one's own life foremost among them. Indeed, because it embodied the growing tensions between collective organization and the individual in the new republic, suicide stood at the center of debates about the proper reach of public and parental authority and the limits of personal autonomy.

For these reasons, all kinds of early national reformers seized upon the specter of suicide to propel their agendas. In fact, the degree to

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5. Spring, *Sixth Commandment*, 14. Keith Burgess-Jackson, "The Legal Status of Suicide in Early America: A Comparison with the English Experience," *Wayne Law Review* 29, no. 1 (1982), 57–87; Thomas Jefferson, "The Memoir," in *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies, from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Thomas Jefferson Randolph (New York, 1830), 1: 125; Benjamin Rush, *An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals, and Upon Society* (Philadelphia, 1787), 3–4.

6. For a thorough analysis of these developments, see Richard J. Bell, "Do Not Despair: The Cultural Significance of Suicide in America, 1780–1840" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2006); Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780–1850* (Philadelphia, 2005).

which moral reformers in the early American republic deployed anti-suicide rhetoric is both dramatic and significant. Whether they were united against the demon drink, unregulated lotteries and backroom gambling dens, the fashionable tight-lacing of ladies' corsets, or the cult of dueling, no rhetorical device was used more frequently and consistently in early national and antebellum moral movements than the likening of the particular vice to suicide. For instance, the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush built his crusade against distilled spirits around the central idea that inebriates were "guilty of a species of suicide." Were those who drank themselves to death, Rush often asked, any different from those who might willfully jump "from the mast of a ship full sail into the sea?" (see Figure 1). Rush was hardly alone in articulating this connection; after his death in 1813 his many disciples copied such rhetoric into their own persuasive pamphlets, keeping the language of suicide at the forefront of American temperance literature until the 1830s.[7]

Temperance campaigners were hardly alone. The anti-lottery reformer Job Tyson spent much of the 1820s and 1830s informing readers and audiences in Pennsylvania and elsewhere that dozens of men from the clerking classes had been driven to suicide by the addictive temptations of this popular form of gambling. Ruined and made wretched by the lottery, his religious faith and conscience long dissipated, Tyson asked "where can the infatuated and unhappy victim find refuge but in the embraces of death?"[8]

It was perhaps inevitable that campaigners against such vices would catalog their most extreme consequences to deter their fellow citizens; it took no great mind to connect lottery gambling to despairing suicide when contemporary newspapers were filled with such tragic examples of cause and effect. But in contrast, campaigners who argued that drinking and other vices were in and of themselves peculiar species of suicide exerted considerable rhetorical effort to do so. Offering important testimony to the cultural significance of suicide in contemporary discourse, various reform-minded interest groups attempted to demonize their target vices by recourse to the rhetoric of self-destruction. The anti-dueling

7. "Messieurs Hall and Sellers," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Dec. 26, 1771. Bell, "Do Not Despair."

8. Job R. Tyson, *Brief Survey of the Great Extent and Evil Tendencies of the Lottery System as Existing in the United States* (2nd ed., Philadelphia, 1833), 59–60.

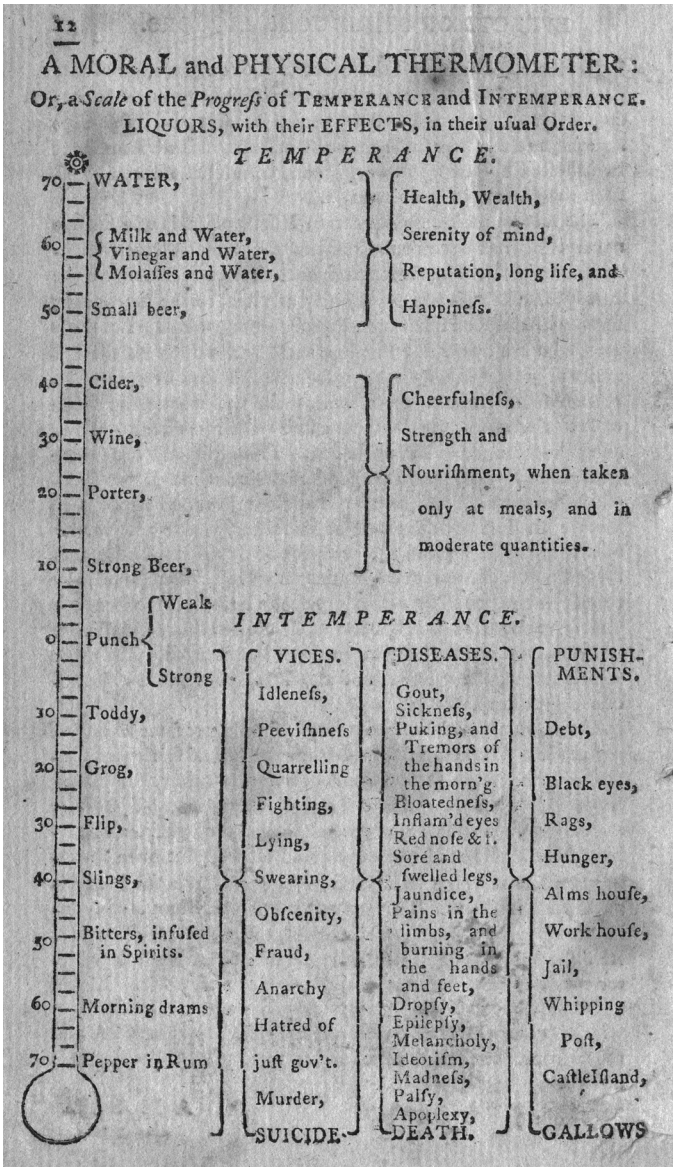

Figure 1: Detail from Benjamin Rush, *An Enquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors on the Human Body. To Which Is Added a Moral and Physical Thermometer* (Boston, 1790). In addition to repeatedly invoking the comparison between drinking and gradual suicide in his textual productions, Rush also popularized the literally fatal consequences of continued consumption of distilled liquor in a series of illustrations of "moral thermometers."

crusade makes a useful case study of the extent and significance of the analogy of suicide in reformist debates because its loose coalition of moralists and modernizers could not rely, as those in other movements could, on legislative sanctions to eradicate mortal combat. Duels were already illegal. Existing statutes threatening fines, imprisonment, and various public humiliations seemed no match for the code of honor. Thus, unlike anti-lottery campaigners who could try to ban all ticket sales or temperance reformers who could press for the legal suppression of alcohol, opponents of dueling had no reliable way to prevent aggrieved Americans from meeting at dawn for pistols at ten paces. As such, the moral arguments they could muster to persuade the public to regulate themselves became all important.

To make their case to an ambivalent American public, nineteenth-century anti-dueling activists assembled an arsenal of arguments that envisioned the duel not as an honor ritual but a unique form of homicide, a deadly hybrid of suicide and murder. While lottery reformers, for example, had largely limited themselves to reminding readers and followers that playing the lottery often *led* to suicide, a generation of anti-dueling activists argued for a deeper connection between suicide and the object of their own reform agenda. Suicide, here, was not simply the tragic consequence of the vice in question, but its literal meaning and instantaneous product. Dueling *was* suicide.

The American anti-dueling movement first emerged in the wake of Alexander Hamilton's duel with Aaron Burr. While a handful of combatants had taken the field before the Revolution, only in the war years and thereafter did dueling emerge as a status marker among American elites. The arrival of hundreds of European officers on the continent during the war years had forged a link between dueling and civility among an American officer corps who, in the words of Charles Royster, were "newly self-conscious about their uniqueness and their proper public inviolability." Continental Army soldiers and many more militiamen began to imitate men like the Marquis de Lafayette, who brandished the credentials of his class when he challenged a British nobleman to a duel during his sojourn in America in 1778. Emulating their European counterparts, a generation of generals, declaration-signers, and other American notables took to the field to repair their reputations or secure their status during

the revolutionary war and its immediate aftermath. "The rage for dueling here," a French visitor wrote in a letter home during the conflict, "has reached an incredible and scandalous point." Returning to civilian life after the war, many officers helped to inculcate the practice of dueling into peacetime American society. The growth of the honor-driven republican politics recently illuminated by Joanne Freeman, along with a sensationalist press, and a revival of both republican rhetoric and romantic idealism conspired with the desire to imitate the standards and practices of the nation's newly minted war heroes to produce an upsurge in dueling.[9]

Most duels were fought among southerners who effortlessly added pistols at ten paces to a vast array of status- and honor-affirming ritualized public behaviors that also included extravagant hospitality, horsemanship, and the hunt. New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, however, were hardly immune to the dueling frenzy that seized a segment of the new nation's population after the Revolution. "You may judge," Janet Montgomery of New York wrote to a cousin in September 1780, "how fashionable duelling has grown, when we have had five in one week." Historical inquiries have so far failed to uncover evidence that precisely confirms the frequency of duels—many encounters went unrecorded by newspapers, and few duelists were ever prosecuted for wrongdoing—but the trend was undeniable. Without naming its sources, *Claypoole's Daily Advertiser* of June 12, 1800, listed twenty-one duels fought in the United States within the previous six weeks.[10]

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9. Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977), 210. Gérard de Rayvenal quoted in W. J. Rorabaugh, "The Political Duel in the Early Republic: Burr v. Hamilton," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Spring 1995), 1–23, quote 14. On scattered colonial duels and the emulation of dueling European officers during the Revolution, see Bruce C. Baird, "The Social Origins of Dueling in Virginia," in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, ed. Michael A. Bellesiles (New York, 1999); Robert Baldick, *The Duel: A History of Duelling* (New York 1965). On dueling as politics, see Joanne B. Freeman, "Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr–Hamilton Duel," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996), 289–318. Among the post-Revolutionary generation of notable duelists were DeWitt Clinton, Horatio Gates, Button Gwinnet, Philip Schuyler Hamilton, James Jackson, Lachlan McIntosh, and David B. Mitchell.

10. Janet Montgomery quoted in Jeannette M. Hussey, *The Code Duello in America* (Washington, DC, 1980), 5. "Dueling!" *Claypoole's Daily Advertiser*, June 12, 1800. The best work on early American honor rituals includes Bertram Wyatt-

Four years later, the death of Alexander Hamilton seemed to bring some civilian duelists in the North to their senses, but it did little to stem the increasing recourse to armed combat amongst military men and among southern and western elites. Thanks largely to the vulnerable egos of these honor-driven gentlemen, the two decades following the death of Hamilton likely witnessed the most duels in any period in American history.[11]

Even though most duels were not fatal, dueling was so prevalent in the decades after Hamilton's death that scores of men fell by pistol and sword on fields of honor across America. Despite an 1806 law barring challenges between officers, dueling had become so rampant in the Army and Navy that the historian William Stevens once calculated that "two thirds as many officers were killed by dueling as were slain in all the naval battles between 1798 and the Civil War." Beyond the military, elected officials in the South and West and in the nation's capital seemed particularly willing to make and accept challenges. Socialized from birth to base their own evaluations of themselves on their reputation among their peers, southern gentlemen embraced a code of honor that demanded redress whenever their bearing or manliness was challenged.[12]

Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); Dickson D. Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, TX, 1979); Nicholas Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville, VA, 2002); Steven M. Stowe, "The Touchiness of the Gentleman Planter: The Sense of Esteem and Continuity in the Antebellum South," *Psychohistory Review* 8 (Winter 1979), 6–15. For a discussion of dueling's fatality rate in England, see Anthony E. Simpson, "Dandelions on the Field of Honor: Dueling, the Middle Classes, and the Law in 19th Century England," *Criminal Justice History* 9 (1988), 105–10.

11. On the upsurge of recorded duels after 1804, see A. W. Patterson, *The Code Duello: With Special Reference to the State of Virginia* (Richmond, VA, 1927). Wayne C. Minnick, "A Case Study in Persuasive Effect: Lyman Beecher on Duelling," *Speech Monographs* 38, no. 4 (1971), 262–76.

12. William Oliver Stevens, *Pistols at Ten Paces: The Story of the Code of Honor in America* (Boston, 1940), 71. C. A. Hartwell Wells, "The End of the Affair? Anti-Dueling Laws and Social Norms in Antebellum America," *Vanderbilt Law Review* 54, no. 4 (2001), 1805–47. Bradley A. Johnson, "'A Succinct and Formal Violence': The Function of the Duel in Southern Fiction, 1825–1950" (PhD dis-

Dozens of state officeholders were killed or injured in these personal and professional disputes. Yet despite the rising death toll, Joanne Freeman argues that mortal violence was rarely the intention of duels among politicians. Rather, for this generation of lawmakers—the same men who passed legislation against dueling but then refused to enforce it—"duels were demonstrations of manner, not marksmanship; they were intricate games of dare and counter-dare, ritualized displays of bravery, military prowess, and, above all, willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's honor." It was this fragile moral conceit that led to the death of Jonathan Cilley, the Maine congressman in the U.S. House of Representatives who was shot dead by another of its members, William J. Graves of Kentucky, in a duel in February 1838. While most other political fatalities since Hamilton had been local and state officials, the fact that this tragedy was performed on the national stage drew unprecedented attention from newspapers and their readership. Not since the events at Weehawken had public interest and outrage been so keenly focused on the mortal consequences of dueling.[13]

The deaths of Hamilton and Cilley are not only tragic landmarks in the history of American dueling but also the most significant flashpoints in an understudied movement to eradicate dueling in America. Spurred to their pulpits and platforms by the Burr–Hamilton duel, a loose coalition of ministers, editors and university administrators throughout the country began speaking out against dueling. These anti-duelists never created any national institutional apparatus; nevertheless they quickly began to imitate the tactics of larger reform movements like temperance and anti-slavery by forming local organizations to promote moral self-regulation and lead by example. In southern and western towns like Charleston (1826), Savannah (1826), Pittsburgh (1827), Natchez (1828), and New Orleans (1834), members of fledging anti-dueling organizations pledged

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sertation, University of Connecticut, 2001), 29–30. Stowe, "Touchiness of the Gentleman Planter," 7. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 118–29. Andrew Jackson, Sam Houston, Henry Clay, and Thomas Hart Benton were all among this bellicose cohort of southern duelists.

13. Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT, 2002), xxiii. Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Rituals in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987), 45.

to refuse any challenges made to them and to persuade friends and family to do likewise. Indeed, while anti-duelists working in the aftermath of Hamilton's death always enthusiastically endorsed every proposal and petition to increase legal penalties for dueling, they recognized the practical limits of such tools and instead devoted most of their efforts to persuading young men to voluntarily renounce the code duello.[14]

Like many other early nineteenth-century reformers, anti-duelists embraced the tools of mass communication to carry their message beyond personal encounters and local networks to a national readership. Pamphlet after pamphlet poured from the presses, each one intended to convert the passive ambivalence of individual readers into an active abhorrence of dueling. Thus, in the surge of anti-dueling activism that followed the death of Alexander Hamilton in 1804, opponents of dueling launched a series of sustained attempts to skewer the idea that dueling was reputable, proportional and just. In the several dozen sermons and addresses that circulated in pamphlet form throughout the early republic writers mocked its rituals, exposed its absurdity, and condemned it as a vice of a Frenchified aristocracy. Notably, when addressing the consequences of dueling, these reformers paid little attention to the generally low mortality rates among American duelists, painting instead a picture of the practice as routinely fatal (see Figure 2).[15]

Most fundamentally, anti-duelists sought to redefine the code of honor that drew gentlemen to take their lives in their hands at the smallest

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14. Carmody, "Arise and Stand Forth," 6. Charles H. Hoover, "The Criminality, Cowardice, and Cure of Dueling," *American National Preacher* 12, no. 5 (1838), 65–80. Dick Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri* (Columbia, MO, 2000), 79–99. For some typical anti-dueling editorials in this period, see "From the Patron of Industry," *Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot*, Sept. 12, 1821; "Editor," *Middlesex Gazette*, July 16, 1826. On the rise of anti-dueling societies, see Jack K. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station, TX, 1980), 60. Thomas Gamble, *Annals of Savannah: Savannah Duels and Duellists 1733–1877* (Savannah, GA, 1923), 185.

15. *To the Honorable Speaker, and the Other Members of the House of Representatives of the State of South-Carolina* (Charleston, SC, 1804), 1; Frederick Beasley, *A Sermon Upon Duelling: Delivered to the Senior Class in the University of Pennsylvania, on the Sunday before Their Commencement* (Philadelphia, 1822), 8. Mason L. Weems, *God's Revenge against Duelling, or, the Duellists Looking Glass.* (2nd ed., Philadelphia, 1821), 15–16, 25. Carmody, "Arise and Stand Forth," 149.

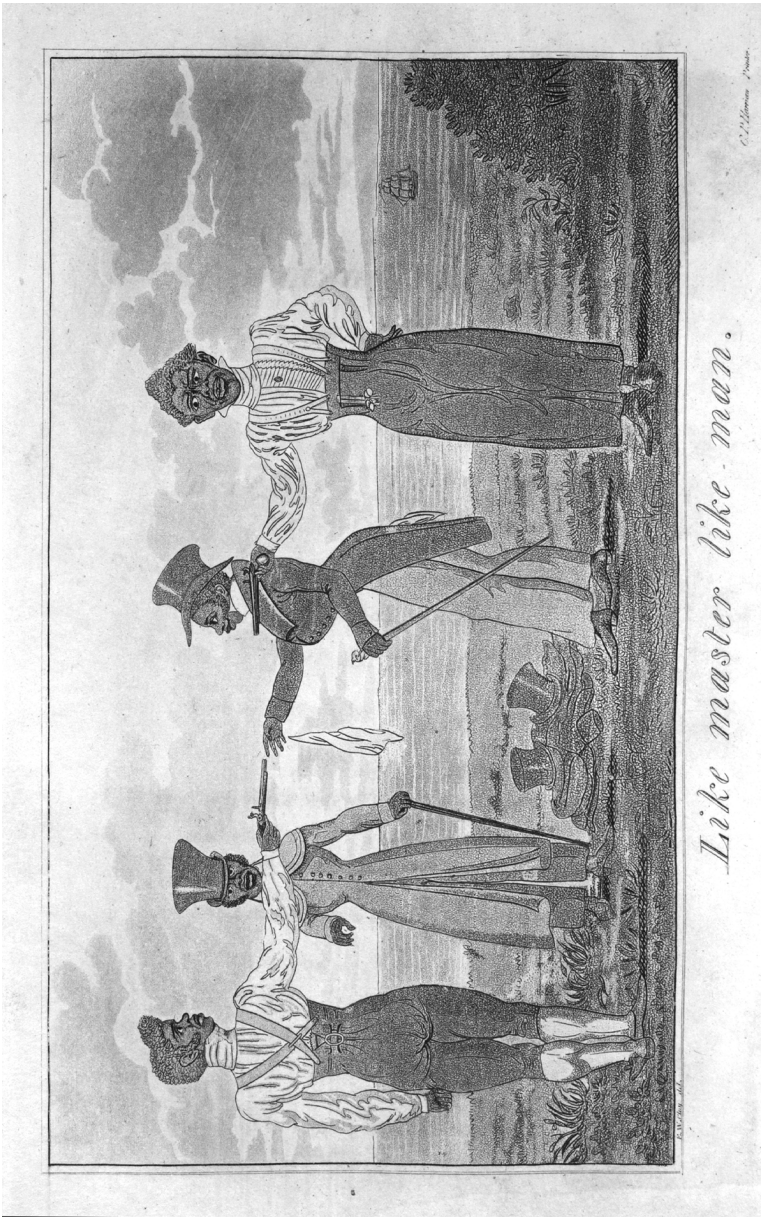

Figure 2: Detail from Mason Locke Weems, *God's Revenge against Duelling, or, The Duellists Looking Glass* (Philadelphia, 1821). In a popular pamphlet "calculated to entertain and instruct the American youth," Parson Weems uses racial ridicule to satirize the democratization of this elite ritual.

provocation. As the mocking tone of Massachusetts Unitarian Abiel Abbot suggests, ridicule was usually the first order of business:

> The beeriest trifles have been thought serious enough, to put life in contest; and offences the most incidental stains upon honor deep enough, to be washed away with blood.—Honor! What is that honor, which must be supported by dueling? Which demands, like Molock, its human victims? Is it a thing estimable? What virtues does it assemble and exercise?—What benefits does it achieve? If these questions must have their answer, may it not be said that it implies cowardice oftener, than true courage, and meanness of spirit more than magnanimity? It certainly implies a heart, inexorable to the calls of friendship and the cries of humanity.

Many others joined the chorus of voices suggesting that dueling was not honorable but cowardly—a refuge for the thin-skinned, or what Yale President Timothy Dwight dismissed as "the anguish of wounded pride." Others took a different tack, suggesting that true gentlemen did not stoop to dueling to fortify their reputation. The New Jersey preacher Charles Hoover didn't mince words:

> The absurdity of the duelist is obvious in another view. By engaging in a duel, he virtually concedes that his character is questionable, and an appeal to arms is necessary to establish it. It would not be thought necessary for Franklin, or Madison, or Washington, or Marshall, were they living to engage in a duel. They were acknowledged as honorable men, without a certificate that they had shot down their traducers. But the duelist, by his own showing, is of so dubious a character, even among his personal friends and constituents, that he must fight to convince them he is a man and not a poltroon. The evidences of his courage and honor have been so few and doubtful that he must go to the field of blood to sustain them.[16]

True honor, reformers argued, was the antithesis of dueling. Mourning the unbidden emotional, financial, and legal burdens placed upon the families and friends who lost loved ones in duels, these anti-duelists redefined honor as self-respect, self-preservation, and humane consider-

16. Abiel Abbot, *Self Preservation. A Sermon Preached before the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, in Boston, June 7, 1802* (Boston, 1802), 9–10; Timothy Dwight, *The Folly, Guilt, and Mischiefs of Duelling: A Sermon, Preached in the College Chapel at New Haven* (Hartford, CT, 1805), 17; Hoover, "Criminality, Cowardice, and Cure," 73.

ation for family and society. "If you receive an affront from another," the Baltimore Episcopalian Frederic Beasley counseled, "withdraw yourself from his society, treat him as a heathen man and a publican, until he ingenuously confesses his fault and offers an atonement, or until you have learnt to conquer your own resentment." Turning the other cheek, most anti-dueling campaigners agreed, was a truer act of honor and courage than the fruitless slaughter of rivals and enemies over the smallest trifles.[17]

At the heart of this rhetorical attempt to decouple dueling and honor, anti-duelists enshrined the simple yet potent idea that dueling was a suicidal act, a unique species of homicide. Alongside a parallel but initially less powerful rhetoric that sited dueling as a particularly cold and premeditated species of murder, the analogy to suicide became the motif of choice for reformers who worked to instill proper fear and disdain for a cultural practice that persisted on the margins of respectable society.[18]

Most nineteenth-century Americans instinctively understood dueling as an extreme (yet honorable) form of risk-taking. By contrast, the assertion that dueling should be classified as a form of suicide was hardly intuitive. Indeed, the vigor with which opponents of the custom attempted to make the case that the duel was a peculiar form of self-destruction suggests the distance that their arguments had to travel. The language with which early nineteenth-century reformers tried to establish the notion that dueling was suicide reveals the slow process by which they forged this link. In 1802, Abiel Abbot, Pastor of the First Church in Haverill, Massachusetts, and one of the first nineteenth-century figures to emphasize this connection, described dueling as "suicide in heart," a phrase that perhaps betrays some uncertainty about whether readers

17. Frederick Beasley, *A Sermon on Duelling: Delivered in Christ-Church, Baltimore, April 28, 1811* (Baltimore, 1811), 25. See also Samuel Barrett, *Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Sermon Preached in the Twelfth Congregational Church, Boston, March 4, 1838* (Boston, 1838), 15.

18. Beasley, *Sermon Upon Duelling*, 10. Walter C. Colton, *Remarks on Duelling* (New York, 1828), 47. Scattered earlier attempts to link dueling to suicide include Joseph Sewall, *He That Would Keep God's Commandments Must Renounce the Society of Evil Doers* (Boston, 1728); Benjamin Colman, *Death and the Grave without Any Order. A Sermon Preached July 7, 1728. Being the Lord's-Day after a Tragical Duel* (Boston, 1728); "For the Western Star," *Western Star* (Stockbridge, MA), July 30, 1793. Anti-dueling activists in Britain also occasionally made the same connection.

would agree with his assessment. By contrast, in 1811, after almost a decade of similar attempts to build the moral case against dueling—many of which had been published in the wake of the Burr–Hamilton duel—the connection between suicide and the duel was far better established; Virginia minister Samuel Low unabashedly pronounced modern dueling to be "suicide of the highest grade, and in the first degree."[19]

It was newspaper coverage of Hamilton's death that first gave the notion that dueling was a species of suicide a national profile. When the General's second, Nathaniel Pendleton, submitted his highly partisan account of the duel to the *New York Evening Post* on July 19, it informed readers that "on the evening preceding the time of the appointed interview, [Hamilton] informed Mr. P. he had made up his mind not to fire at Col. Burr the first time, but to receive his fire, and fire in the air." Newspapers also eagerly published Hamilton's last public letter, in which the General articulated his decision not to fire and purposefully cloaked himself in the garb of a self-sacrificing martyr. Local commentators quickly picked up on this self-destructive reading of Hamilton's actions, some using it to divide the blame for his death evenly between the two combatants. On August 14, one Hudson Valley newspaper columnist wondered "was he not, is not every duelist, accessory to his own death, a murderer or suicide?" A week later, in Northampton, Massachusetts, another newspaper editorial told readers that Hamilton "entered deliberately . . . upon a scene of murder and suicide" and noted that had the duel taken place in the Bay State "his body would have been subjected to the most ignominious treatment," just like that of a suicide. Ministers across New York and New England offered similar readings: "Thou hast not done whatsoever thou couldest to preserve thine own life," Presbyterian Hezekiah Woodruff lamented from his pulpit in Albany. So widespread was the suggestion that Hamilton's death by duel was a species of suicide that the rocky stretch of Weehawken shore where the General fell became a site for many far less ambiguous suicides in the years that followed.[20]

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19. Abbot, *Self Preservation*, 12; Samuel Low, *A Discourse on Duelling: Preached on Sunday, March 4, 1810, at the Capitol in the City of Washington* (Richmond, VA, 1811), 18.

20. Harold G. Syrett and Jean G. Cooke, eds., *Interview in Weehawken: The Burr–Hamilton Duel as Told in the Original Documents* (Middletown, CT, 1960); 151, "Remarks," *The Bee* (Hudson, NY), Aug. 14, 1804; "Northampton; Tuesday, August 21, 1804," *Republican Spy* (Hudson, NY), Aug. 21, 1804; Hezekiah

So consistently was the dueling-as-suicide argument made in the three decades after Hamilton's death that the notion began to strengthen beyond the tracts produced by the reformers themselves. In 1831, for instance, the Baltimore Life Insurance Company gave notice that it would refuse to pay out in two particular circumstances when the policyholder might have effected his own death: suicide or dueling. Newspapers of all stripes repeated the refrain: "What perversity of sentiment that public opinion must be," the Boston *Liberator* told its antislavery readers in 1834, "which tolerates and supports the crime of Duelling, for instance, as a reputable and honorable system: which stamps the name of noble courage, independence and honor, upon the crime which unites in itself the guilt of deliberate suicide and wilful murder!"[21]

A glance at a quantitative survey of the anti-dueling literature reinforces the notion of dueling as suicide as a growing concern. In a sample of thirty-five pamphlets published between 1801 and 1850 to persuade readers of the dangers of dueling, arguments that dueling should be understood as a species of suicide appeared in eighteen, or more than half. The distribution of pamphlets over time was extremely uneven, but in the disaggregated data two large clusters are readily apparent, one in 1804 in the wake of the Burr–Hamilton duel and another in 1838 following the encounter between William Graves and Jonathan Cilley. Table 1 on the following page shows the frequency with which the rhetoric of suicide appeared in the sample over time.

This survey takes no account of differences in print runs and distribution or the likelihood of titles being reprinted, yet its findings are suggestive. While it is clear that the currency of the rhetoric of suicide had declined by the 1840s, the ascendancy of suicide rhetoric in anti-dueling literature during the 1810s and 1820s is equally apparent. John Black's

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Woodruff, *The Danger of Ambition . . . Death of General Alexander Hamilton* (Albany, NY, 1804), 20–21. For sensible commentary on how Hamilton attempted to manage the interpretation of his death through these last letters, see Isenberg, *Fallen Founder*, 263. On subsequent suicides at Weehawken, see, for instance, "New-York, July 31, 1807," *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser*, July 31, 1807.

21. "On the Duty of Refusing to Par Take the Production of Slave-Labor," *The Liberator*, Jan. 25, 1834, "No Headline," *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, July 14, 1831, 4. See also "Mr. Ansel; Glover; Postmaster; Paper; Mill; Village; Alstead; Attempts," *New-Hampshire Sentinel*, Feb. 11, 1836.

Table 1: Suicide Rhetoric in Anti-dueling Pamphlet Literature, 1801–1850

Decade	*Number of pamphlets in sample*	*Number featuring suicide*	*Percentage with suicide*
1801–1810	10	5	50%
1811–1820	3	2	67%
1821–1830	6	6	100%
1831–1840	12	4	33%
1841–1850	4	1	25%

remarks to "a large and attentive" audience in western Pennsylvania in 1827 were thus entirely representative: "duelling is worse than folly and absurdity, it is self-murder, and possesses all the attributes of deliberate suicide. Whether a man takes away his own life, by his own hand, or presents his bosom to another, whom he authorizes to take his life, in the nature of the case, there is no difference."[22]

To these reformers' way of thinking, the characterization of dueling as a kind of suicide was particularly persuasive because it brought home the idea that a duel stained two people with guilt for a single killing. As the simultaneous perpetration of both murder and suicide, death by dueling was the killing of someone who consented to be killed. What New Jersey preacher Charles Hoover called "the double guilt of murder and suicide" made dueling a unique and terrible hybrid of two of the most appalling crimes in the American imagination. While defenders of dueling, some of whom occasionally published their own polemics on the subject, believed that the reciprocity of risk nullified the sin of the practice, opponents of dueling argued persuasively that this only intensified its immorality. Their repeated invocations of the sixth Commandment—Thou Shalt Not Kill—took on even greater meaning in this context as it encompassed a prohibition against both types of homicide.[23]

22. John Black, *A Sermon on National Righteousness and Sin Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, April 3, 1827* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1827), 1, 9. This pamphlet sample is based in part on a bibliography compiled in Carmody, "Arise and Stand Forth," Appendix.

23. Hoover, "Criminality, Cowardice, and Cure," 69. "Remarks on Duelling," *Weekly Recorder* (Chillicothe, OH), Sept. 25, 1817. On the pro-dueling pamphleteers, see Posthumus, *Observations on the South Carolina Memorial Upon the*

In fact, for many reformers, particularly those writing before 1838, the notion that dueling was murder was secondary to the argument that it was suicide. Claims that dueling was murder had lesser impact than claims that dueling was suicide because the Revolution had forged an association between honor and the slaughter of political enemies that was difficult to untangle. Thus, they focused instead on the more potent assertion that the duel was an act of voluntary self-destruction, a freely given consent to be killed that opponents of dueling lay before their readers and audiences as the ultimate proof of the dangerous, blasphemous, selfish, and immoral nature of the practice. In the duelists' ritual of challenge and acceptance, death could only occur by consent: No one could be killed without his own say-so, a fact that made the murderer simply the accessory to the suicide. It was this determination, that dueling was by definition a form of suicide—and thus by definition dishonorable—by which opponents of dueling made their case in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Timothy Dwight, the President of Yale College and an embarrassed cousin of Aaron Burr, made the argument succinctly in 1805 in an address that became a touchstone for future writers on the topic. In every duel, Dwight wrote, "each party puts his soul, and his eternity, into extreme hazard, voluntarily; and rushes before the bar of God, stained with the guilt of suicide."[24]

In the years that followed, reformers returned again and again to the connection between dueling and suicide. As they did so, they reminded their readers that this species of suicide, like any other form of self-destruction, mounted twin challenges to divine law and the social com-

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Subject of Duelling: In a Letter to a Friend (1805). Stevens, *Pistols at Ten Paces*, 164. For invocations of the Sixth Commandment, see, for instance, Spring, *Sixth Commandment*.

24. Dwight, *Folly, Guilt, and Mischiefs*, 19. See also Abbot, *Self Preservation*, 7–12; William Ladd, *A Letter to Aaron Burr on the Barbarous Origin: The Criminal Nature and the Baneful Effects of Duels* (New York, 1804), 14; Spring, *Sixth Commandment*, 15; Low, *Discourse on Duelling*, 18–19; *An Essay on Duelling* (New York, 1830), 13; Henry Ware, *The Law of Honor: A Discourse, Occasioned by the Recent Duel in Washington; Delivered March 4, 1838* (Cambridge, MA, 1838), 15–16; Colton, *Remarks on Duelling*, 23; M. A. H. Niles, *The Sin of Duelling; A Sermon Preached at Marblehead, April 5, 1838* (Newburyport, MA, 1838), 16; Black, *Sermon on National Righteousness*, 9; Isaac Worcester, *A Discourse Occasioned by the Recent Duel at Washington, Delivered at Littleton, N.H., April 12, 1838* (Concord, NH, 1838), 8.

pact. First, by violating the principle of self-preservation instilled by the Creator, the suicidal duelist trampled upon God's laws, teachings, and authority. Anti-dueling activists, many of whom were ministers or were otherwise associated with the denominational outreach movements that characterized the Second Great Awakening, stressed that the gift of life was a gift from God; to voluntarily risk or lose life over a quarrel involving personal honor was thus an unnatural and blasphemous thing. Doesn't the summons to duel "imply your right to surrender your own life, and demand his, at pleasure?" the pacifist essayist William Ladd asked in an open letter to Aaron Burr that circulated in Georgia in the months after Hamilton's death. The surrender of life in such frivolous disputes was not man's right to exercise: "power to give life, and to take it away, the most high God has reserved to himself. He alone is entitled to say, I kill, and I make alive." What arrogance, Ladd continued, to "arrogate the distinguishing privilege of the Lord of heaven and earth." Only public justice, necessary self-defense, or lawful war could excuse such action. Willful suicide could not.[25]

Second, death by dueling constituted a dangerous attack on the social compact. As a species of suicide, dueling allowed men to exercise the power of life and death over their own bodies. This was an unacceptable usurpation of the privileges that each individual had surrendered as the terms of membership in a community—"treason against the majesty of the nation," as Rev. John Black put it in front of a large crowd in Pittsburgh in 1827. Having invested society with the right to arbitrate justice and protect citizens from themselves and each other, individuals had no business breaking this contract and seeking redress on their own fatal terms. "The utility of society is too great to be sacrificed, on private principles or for the sake of personal gratification," Samuel Spring argued in a speech before his Massachusetts congregation. And many activists agreed that dueling set a dangerous precedent. Dueling's improprieties "taught the people entirely to disregard human laws" and "to weaken the authority of all laws." In the tense decades immediately following the ratification of the Constitution, duelists' inherent challenge to

25. Ladd, *Letter to Aaron Burr*, 14. See also Spring, *Sixth Commandment*, 10; Low, *Discourse on Duelling*, 17; Black, *Sermon on National Righteousness*, 9; Beasley, *Sermon Upon Duelling*, 9; Colton, *Remarks on Duelling*, 23; Lyman Beecher, *Remedy for Duelling; A Sermon Delivered before the Presbytery of Long Island, at Aquebogue, April 16, 1806* (Boston, 1806), 14.

the sovereignty of the new and fragile republican experiment seemed especially threatening. Likewise, at a time when reports of death-row inmates who killed themselves to escape the hangman were routinely front-page news, the fact that these dueling suicides went largely unpunished also appeared to many as an affront to the supremacy of the criminal justice system.[26]

Several writers went further still, suggesting that many duelists were not simply unwitting suicides, but consciously sought out dueling as a means to fulfill a death wish. Such arguments both reinforced the widely held notion (visually illustrated in Rush's moral thermometer) that self-destruction was the most despicable form of homicide and served to underline the volitional aspect of early nineteenth-century definitions of suicide. In 1811, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* published the story of a depressed Irishman that exemplified the argument. Decided upon suicide and "embarrassed in his circumstance," the man persuaded his servant to engage in an orchestrated duel in which the servant was supposed to kill the master, to execute his wishes. Seeking to avoid the harsh postmortem punishments for suicide in Ireland, the unhappy man chose to stage a duel "for fear of having his body buried as a felo de se [felon of himself] in the highway, with a stake drove through it." Fortunately his servant dissuaded him from the whole endeavor, and the protagonist fled to the Isle of Man. A few years later, the itinerant Pennsylvanian book-peddler and moralist Parson Weems imagined a similar link between dueling and intentional suicide. Describing young men overtaken by "gambling, goatish lust, or satanic pride," Weems speculated that the desperate urge to escape their mounting troubles through death was probably very great. "And if they can't muster patience, to wait long enough to kill themselves with whiskey and tobacco," he remarked, "they will give way to their brutish passions and provoke some other madman to blow out their brains."[27]

Only a few anti-duelists took their rhetoric to those extremes. Yet many more made the case that as a form of suicide, dueling was particu-

26. Black, *Sermon on National Righteousness*, 9; Spring, *Sixth Commandment*, 7–8; Worcester, *Discourse*, 9; *To the Honorable Speaker*, 1.

27. "Irish Suicide," *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), May 4, 1811; Weems, *God's Revenge*, 13. For a parallel example from anti-dueling fiction, see J. R. McDowell, *Henry Wallace; or the Victim of Lottery Gambling. A Moral Tale. By a Friend to American Youth* (New York, 1832), 62.

larly pernicious because it exhibited a cold, calculating preparation for death. In 1811 Samuel Low tried to persuade politicians assembled at the Capitols in Richmond and Washington, DC, that while many suicides were being excused as the product of dizzying derangement or momentary madness, duelists could make no such case for their actions:

> Modern Duelling is . . . the most irrational and flagitious species of suicide. So great is our abhorrence of this crime, that, we are inclined to consider common suicide, under some circumstances, a far less heinous crime. . . . A principal reason for this opinion is, that he who is guilty of the desperate, unnatural and revolting act of lifting his hand against his own life, must either be influenced by some sudden and violent emotion of passion, which, while it lasts, is a sort of insanity; or he is truly insane, in the usual sense of the word. It appears to us that some kind of degree of mental derangement is necessary to the commission of his unhallowed deed. Suicide implies great previous tumult and disorder of the mind; it presupposes irresistibly strong passions, intense feeling, and intolerable suffering. Whereas Duels, though they may be undertaken in passion; though they may commence in a spirit of frantic rage, are afterwards almost always conducted with coolness and deliberation; and proceed with caution, temper, and system to their iniquitous consummation.

Clearly conversant with the legal trend toward insanity verdicts following other types of suicide and suspicious of the growing legal consensus in early national America that no rational person could be held responsible for murdering themselves, Low used the evidence drawn from dueling rituals to implicitly critique the treatment of suicide under the law.[28]

The ubiquity of the rhetoric of suicide in the anti-dueling campaigns of the early nineteenth century was the direct result of broader concerns about the specter of self-destruction in the young republic. And the rhetoric itself was so effective in these campaigns because it so adroitly inverted contemporary assumptions that duelists were honor-bound combatants and exposed the practice as a species of volitional self-destruction. This language put the case for individual self-regulation in its most pointed terms. For as long as the anti-dueling movement was preoccupied with reforming individual behavior—persuading one reader

28. Low, *Discourse on Duelling*, 18–19.

at a time to renounce mortal combat—and for as long as so many other discussions in the broader polity expressed concern about the specter of suicide, it made good tactical and rhetorical sense to drive home the fatal dangers that duelists brought upon themselves.

For these reasons, the rhetoric of dueling as suicide flourished in persuasive pamphlet literature between 1804 and the late 1830s. Originally preached at baccalaureates, graduations, cadet assemblies, and meetings of state and federal politicians so as to target would-be duelists and their families, more than two-thirds of polemics in print by 1830 made the case that duels were stained by suicide. Indeed, while we lack reliable information about how these rhetorical salvos were received by individuals, it should be noted that opponents of dueling often delivered their remarks in multiple venues before setting them down for publication. Furthermore, when pamphlet versions appeared, they were usually sold cheaply, sometimes simultaneously published in multiple states, and often reprinted.[29]

As the data from Table 1 illustrate, however, after sustaining arguments for moral self-regulation for almost four decades, this language was rapidly abandoned beginning in the 1830s. Two developments account for this transformation. First, by the late 1830s the anxiety about the prevalence and meaning of suicide that had consumed many moral leaders since the nation first rose unsteadily to its feet in the 1780s had finally begun to subside. The peculiarities of the newspaper-exchange system that had created the chimerical impression that suicides were on the rise had been resolved, while the fad for sentimental novels featuring the desperate suicides of seduced girls and unrequited young men had slowly passed. Furthermore, the decriminalization of suicide in several states during the 1780s had not in fact led to any measurable increase in the number of verifiable suicides tallied by local authorities, even despite the financial uncertainties generated by the unraveling economy. In short, fears that the specter of suicide would bring the new nation to its knees had come to naught. Consequently reformers of all sorts found

29. Dwight, for instance, preached his address at Yale and in New York City before it was published, while Weems's pamphlet was advertised as "admirably calculated to entertain and instruct the American youth" and was read as far afield as Missouri. Weems, *God's Revenge*, 1. Steward, *Violence in Missouri*, 91. For a case study that unwittingly illustrates the limits of reception studies, see Minnick, "Lyman Beecher on Duelling."

that invoking suicide in their print campaigns was a less effective tactic in the antebellum period than it had been in the early republic.[30]

Yet anti-dueling activists had a further reason to abandon the comparison to suicide after 1838. The highest profile duel in the first third of the nineteenth century, the Burr–Hamilton encounter of 1804, had seemed to many contemporaries like an elaborate suicide. Burr had taken deadly aim; Hamilton had famously fired his shot into the air and left a dying confession that partisans had offered up as a suicide note. That the rhetoric of dueling as self-destruction had flourished in the ensuing reform campaign was not surprising. By contrast, the most famous duel of the 1830s, the violent affray that brought about Congressman Cilley's death in 1838, seemed harder to construe as self-intentioned; Graves had shot his fellow House member over a point of honor, and Cilley had left no ambiguous dying confession. The analogy to suicide seemed inappropriate.

With public outrage against dueling freshly invigorated by this high-profile slaying, anti-duelists changed their goals, tactics, and rhetoric to capitalize on the widespread appetite for action. Opponents of the practice now made eradicating the spectre of dueling from the halls of Congress and the State Capitols their primary goal, overturning the four-decade focus on individual self-regulation that had first coalesced in the aftermath of Hamilton's death. Vocal spokesmen like Long Island preacher Lyman Beecher had long warned of the dangers that dueling posed to the political elite that governed the republic, but it took the slaying of Cilley to force this problem to the top of the national agenda. Reverend M. A. H. Niles was one of almost a dozen anti-duelists to publish pamphlets following the congressman's death in 1838 to argue that if elected officials were constantly in fear of their lives, bullying colleagues or lobbyists could use the threat that they might challenge their opponents to duels in order to corrupt congressional voting. "To tolerate a duellist in our national councils," he told the nation, "is to place ourselves under the government of the barbarian and the savage." Activists like Niles thus began to pressure voters to use the ballot to remove duelists from political office. Addressing a Charleston audience in 1844, Rev. John Bachman spoke plainly: "Electors, show by your

30. Bell, "Do Not Despair," 122–24; Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820–1870* (Ithaca, NY, 1979), 26.

votes that you will leave the duelist at home to study out his higher law,—and resolve that he shall not be your lawgiver."[31]

This subtle shift in focus from individual self-regulation to electoral intervention and tougher new legal sanctions meant that the connections between dueling and suicide in activist writings now began to unravel. In fact, it made increasing sense to see any deaths from political duels not as suicide but as murder. Because it engendered feelings of guilt and individual responsibility for one's own actions, suicide was only a useful rhetoric when asking people to regulate themselves. By targeting their outrage against political duels, anti-duelists writing after 1838 were no longer asking private citizens to regulate their own conduct and save themselves—anti-dueling societies quickly folded as this agenda was abandoned. Now activists were asking for public help in preventing one legislator from killing another. The language of murder thus gained the ascendancy in campaign rhetoric as reformers pleaded with the public to intervene to stop congressmen from slaughtering each other. Thus, while Samuel Low had in 1811 confidently proclaimed dueling as suicide in the first degree, in 1838 writers were now more timid in this evaluation. Dueling is "virtually killing one's self," Reverend Niles told his audience in Marblehead two months after Cilley's death. Isaac Worcester echoed this diluted language in New Hampshire weeks later in an evaluation of dueling that clearly demonstrated the supremacy of the murder charge over the once dominant accusation that dueling was suicide: "Will it be said that the duelist is not a murderer, because he exposes his own life while he attempts to take that of his antagonist? Does then the addition of the guilt of virtual suicide take away the guilt of attempting, or designing, to take another's life?"[32]

More commonly, comparisons to suicide were dropped altogether—appearing in only a third of anti-dueling pamphlets published between 1838 and 1850. The equation of dueling to murder was now the most useful rhetorical gambit. For example, in an address preached and published "in consequence of the late duel in Washington," the Boston

31. Niles, *Sin of Duelling*, 13; John Bachman, *Sermon on Duelling* (1842), 12; Beecher, *Remedy for Duelling*, 10. The presidential campaign of Henry Clay was the first casualty of this new reform tactic. Minnick, "Lyman Beecher on Duelling," 267. *The Murder of Jonathan Cilley* (Washington, DC, 1844).

32. Bachman, *Sermon on Duelling*, 16; Worcester, *Discourse*, 8. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South*, 64–65.

Congregationalist Samuel Barrett demanded that because "public opinion denies a place of refuge to the murderer" the duelist be confronted in the same way. "Why should the duelist be exempt from the charge of murder, who leisurely prepares his weapon beforehand, and, at the fixed time, deliberately destroys it with it the life of a fellow-man?"[33]

While the Graves–Cilley duel provided the occasion for this remarkable shift in anti-dueling rhetoric, the substitution of murder for suicide was also becoming evident in the rhetoric of other reform movements that were abandoning moral suasion in favor of more direct means of intervention. In the same way that anti-duelists had championed the charge that dueling was a species of self-destruction, anti-lottery and temperance advocates organizing in the five decades after 1780 had likewise forged their own moral suasion campaigns by associating those vices with suicide. But by the 1830s, these campaigns too had discovered the inadequacies of relying solely on individual conscience to regulate behavior and concluded the public might now finally support prohibition. Thus in the same decade that anti-duelists embraced the charge that dueling was murder to mobilize the power of the ballot box to suppress the practice, leaders in other reform movements made similarly dramatic adjustments to their tactics and rhetoric in order to embrace institutional possibilities for reform. For instance, during the 1830s temperance promoters abandoned moral suasion in favor of seeking legal restrictions on the sale of distilled spirits and thus began to couch a death from drinking as a murder conceived and executed by the agents of the liquor industry. "The office of the executioner, though less respectable, is not more criminal, than that of . . . he who sells poison by the hogshead," the novelist and militant opponent of intemperance Robert Breckinridge remarked to his middle-class readers in 1833.[34]

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33. Barrett, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, 1.

34. Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Immorality of the Traffic, Manufacture, and Use of Ardent Spirits as a Drink; and the Duty of Christians* (Baltimore, 1834), 16. In a study of 109 persuasive temperance pamphlets published in America between 1810 and 1849, none published before 1830 made the assertion that drinking was gradual murder, though after 1830 this argument appeared in more than a quarter of all such pamphlets published against alcohol. Bell, "Do Not Despair," 444. For a visual illustration of this newly popular conceit, see the Skeleton as Tavern-keeper depicted in Thomas Posage Hunt, *Death by Measure; or, Poisons, and Their Effects, Found in Intoxicating Liquors* (Philadelphia, 1846). For advocacy of the use of the ballot in multiple reform movements, see W. W.

The 1848 election of Zachary Taylor, who campaigned as an anti-dueling candidate for the presidency, capped a decade in which the number of recorded duels in America plummeted. Dueling persisted in the Deep South and in frontier states like Louisiana, Missouri, and California through the Civil War and beyond, in part because of the weakness of local justice systems. But in the North and as far south as South Carolina, dueling seemed to be disappearing fast, especially in the corridors of power. In 1844 one anti-duelist happily noted that "dueling has become less common and fatal of late," before renewing his call to exterminate it altogether. Five years later, in 1849, one Pennsylvanian observer concluded that dueling was "no longer countenanced by the tastes, habits, and the views of society at large." After three decades of moral suasion, reformers had succeeded in building enough public support for the campaign to carry through a new ban on dueling in Washington, DC, and to raise accountability for lawmakers and officeholders. As New Haven Congregationalist James MacDonald noted in one of the many sermons mourning Jonathan Cilley's death, this change occurred only because of the expansion of the campaign against dueling beyond the exclusive appeal to individuals to regulate themselves: "Let the press, the bar, the pulpit, unite their solemn and earnest testimony that correct opinions may exist, and a proper indignation may be excited throughout the community, against the men, who, setting all law, human and divine at defiance, do aught, either directly or indirectly, to sustain this abhorrent and homicidal custom."[35]

Patton, *Duty of Christians to Suppress Duelling: A Sermon Preached on the Annual Fast, April 4, 1844, at South Boston* (Boston, 1844), 8.

35. William H. Barnwell, *The Impiety and Absurdity of Duelling: A Sermon Preached in St. Peters' Church, Charleston, on the 9th Day of June, 1844* (Charleston, SC, 1844), 6; Alexander MacKay, *The Western World* (Philadelphia, 1849), 142–43; James M. MacDonald, *A Mourning Land. A Sermon Occasioned by the Late Duel at Washington between Jonathan Cilley, and William J. Graves* (New London, CT, 1838), 11. Among many notable duels in the West, the encounter between California Senator Broderick and the State's Chief Justice Terry caused widespread outcry. For anti-dueling activism in this region, see J. D. Strong, *A Plea against Dueling: A Discourse Delivered in the Presbyterian Church, at Oakland, California, Sunday, September 25th, 1859* (San Francisco, CA,1859). On the decline of frontier dueling after the Civil War, see Baldick, *History of Duelling*,

Anti-duelists writing after the death of Congressman Cilley in 1838 largely abandoned the assertion that dueling was suicide, an association that had formed the linchpin of the moral argument built against dueling since the death of Hamilton in 1804. Of course, what credit this reformist alliance deserves for the widely noted decline in honor killings in the antebellum years is difficult to determine. Certainly, anti-duelists were assisted by broader changes in the structure of society in northern and eastern states that made this form of violence both redundant and repellent. Nevertheless, in their print campaigns, reformers made careful and cunning decisions about how to describe dueling that played on heightened sensitivity about suicide. Only as the republic matured did activists abandon their charge that dueling was suicide and shift their rhetorical emphasis to the argument that dueling was murder. In doing so reformers not only capitalized on the distress and indignation that followed the slaying of Jonathan Cilley by a fellow member of the House but also demonstrated a newfound confidence in the moral strength of the American electorate.[36]

136. Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York, 1984), 270–71. Hartwell Wells, "Anti-Dueling Laws," 1838.

36. On relevant religious and social changes in northern society see Rorabaugh, "Burr V. Hamilton," 20–21.