

"people"—a respect and admiration centered on their personal characteristics as virtuous masters.⁴⁸ One can see this wish in the way masters tried to deal with the issue of punishment. The use of the whip, it might at first seem, was an aspect of plantation life in which no master could possibly detect honor. Certainly, some masters did find themselves uncomfortable with the whip. Those who could afford it placed the burden of punishment on the shoulders of overseers—and then hated them for their brutality.⁴⁹ But often, when a master personally had to use the whip, he tried to turn it into an instrument that supported his position of honor.

Although I may carry the analogy between statesmen and masters a bit far, there is a fundamental similarity between the punishment of the slave and the delivery of the oration. In both cases, they thought that the superior virtue and intelligence—in short the character and honor of a man in authority—were on display. A master might whip a slave for many different reasons, but a slave was always informed about the character of the master by his style of delivery. "Never inflict punishment when in a passion, nor threaten it; but wait until perfectly cool and until it can be done rather with sorrow than in anger," explained a Louisiana planter. A South Carolinian advised that, when punishing, "all abusive language or violence of demeanor should be avoided, they reduce the man who uses them to a level with the negro, and are hardly ever forgotten by those to whom they are addressed." Perhaps a Virginia planter most clearly (but unwittingly) expressed the relationship between oratory and the correction of slaves. "Anger begets anger," he wrote. "A low tone of voice is recommended in speaking to negroes. This is a wise suggestion, as it must necessarily be attended by a low tone of temper. All conversation with a negro is forbidden, except about his work. This is important; he should be kept as far from his master as possible, but with no accompanying harshness; he ought to be made to feel that you are his superior, but that you respect his feelings and wants."⁵⁰ Just as the oration, regardless of its subject, established the superiority of the orator, so the words of admonition to a slave established the superiority of the master. And, of course, both the orator and the master rejected conversation as a way of establishing authority. Conversation was the style of discourse to be used only between social equals. It was not the way to achieve a position of honor.

To understand the basic similarity between the style of the statesman and the style of the master is to begin to understand the political culture of slavery. In the staterhouse and on the plantation statesmen and masters sought power and simultaneously denied they sought power. They were both aggressive and passive. They were republicans and men of honor.

CHAPTER 2

The Duel as Social Drama

VIRTUALLY ALL ANTEBELLUM Southern political leaders participated in duels during some portion of their careers. Even if public figures could avoid an actual exchange of shots, they found it almost impossible to escape the verbal interactions and formal notes characteristic of the culture of dueling and the gentlemen's code of honor. The central contention of this chapter is that the duel was a theatrical display that attempted to resolve conflict and reaffirm the political values of the dominant group in the society.¹ All societies use social dramas as an essential component to resolve disputes. In contemporary America, for example, the courtroom and the legislative chamber sometimes provide the settings for such displays. These are the theaters in which antagonists publicly meet and antagonisms are resolved or contained within a structured, formal context. Social dramas are important techniques for handling conflicts that seriously threaten a society. The participants in a social drama recognize that there has been a significant breach in their relations, but their participation in the performance allows them publicly to reaffirm their unity by engaging in ritual forms of behavior that embody common ideals. Hence, just as both plaintiff and defendant accept the procedures of the courtroom and the values embodied in those procedures, both participants in a duel abide by the code of honor and the values embodied in that code. In other words, if we can understand the duel as a social drama, we can both see the kinds of disputes that threatened to disrupt Southern political life and come to a deeper understanding of the central values that united that life. The duel seen in this way embodies in ritual form key elements of the political culture of slavery. Passivity and power, republicanism and honor are all displayed in the duel.

I

DUELING WAS A VITALLY important institution in the antebellum South. The practice first appeared in common use in America among revolutionary war officers during the 1770s and quickly spread to the rest of the nation, but it retreated into the South by the early nineteenth century. It flourished in the slave states even though it was both against the law and widely condemned in public. Even in states without antidueling statutes common law prosecution was possible. But Southern prosecutors, unlike their Northern counterparts, rarely enforced laws against dueling. When a possibility of enforcement existed, duelists crossed borders or even duelled on borders in order to create just enough ambiguity in legal jurisdiction to discourage indictment. Even when duelists did come to trial, Southern juries almost never found them guilty. If dueling laws provided that public officers swear they had never fought duels, Southern legislatures routinely passed special exception laws.²

To understand the importance of duels in Southern political life we must recognize that they were a public activity that involved large numbers of people. Perhaps only a few thousand Southerners ever exchanged shots on dueling grounds, but it is misleading to judge the importance of duels simply by the number of bullets fired. Duels directly and indirectly involved many more people. Even if one defines a dueling encounter narrowly—as the first exchange of formal notes—it is clear that the number of encounters far exceeded the number of shots. Such notorious duelists as Andrew Jackson and John Randolph engaged in dozens of dueling encounters that they peacefully resolved for each one that ended with a bullet.

Many factors could help forestall hostilities. Since most duels began with a formal letter from the offended person requesting confirmation, clarification, or explanation for words spoken, a gentleman could avoid shooting if he apologized or satisfactorily explained the insult. Seconds generally assumed the responsibility for negotiating agreements and they often succeeded. John Lyde Wilson, governor of South Carolina and author of a widely circulated code of proper dueling practices, assumed that seconds could almost always prevent an exchange of shots. This role was their prime purpose. "Use every effort to soothe and tranquilize your principal," Wilson suggested. "Endeavor to persuade him that there must have been some misunderstanding in the matter." Seconds followed this advice. Rear Admiral Daniel Ammen, for example, recalled that, during his antebellum naval career, "in the twenty-one years I have passed on board of vessels, although challenges have frequently occurred, no-duel has resulted, from a reasonable consideration of the difficulty by the seconds."³ Sometimes gen-

tlemen could avoid an exchange of shots even without an apology or explanation. Sheriffs might temporarily arrest them or a judge might require them to post bond not to duel. Moreover, parties had to agree on the mechanics of the confrontation, and trouble often developed on this issue. In 1856, for example, Preston Brooks of South Carolina, after his vicious caning of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, never fought because his opponent wanted the duel held in Canada. Brooks feared traveling through the North. On another occasion, Congressman Thomas Metcalfe of Kentucky refused to duel with Congressman Thomas Metcalfe of Kentucky because Metcalfe chose rifles rather than the more conventional pistols.⁴ An 1855 duel between B. Gratz Brown and Thomas C. Reynolds was avoided (although they later did duel) because Brown chose rifles and Reynolds rejected them since he was "so near-sighted that he could not, even with his glasses, in ordinary weather recognize any person at a greater distance than 30 paces."⁵

Even an understanding of the duel as involving more than just an exchange of bullets does not allow us fully to appreciate the large number of people involved in Southern dueling activity. Each encounter directly involved more than the two principals and their seconds. Friends gave advice or lent weapons; physicians came to the dueling grounds; public officials sometimes tried to stop the duel; worried or angry family and kin sought to interfere in various ways. For example, even if we exclude family and later investigators, thirty-four people directly participated in the Jonathan Cilley-William J. Graves duel of 1838.

The extent of public involvement in duels went well beyond the direct participants. Those who duelled often represented groups.⁶ The Haley-Delaney duel in 1771 in Charleston, for example, symbolized group conflict. Delaney represented the Royalists and, when he died after the duel, "the Whigs . . . defended Dr. Haley, and concealed him until his trial came on." In the same spirit, soldiers frequently fought for the "honor of the regiment." When Preston Brooks caned Charles Sumner in 1856, he wrote to his brother, "I have lost my individuality in my representative capacity. I am regarded to a great extent as the exponent of the South against which Black Republicanism is waring [*sic*] in my person." William L. Yancey, describing his position in the 1845 duel with Clingman, noted: "I was a Southern representative who in defending Southern rights and the honor of the whole Southern delegation was called to account."⁷

S. S. Prentiss, recent Northern immigrant to Mississippi, fought a duel with General Henry S. Foote because "he had persuaded himself too, that not only his own reputation but that of New England was at stake; he fancied he was challenged because he was a Yankee, and would not fight."⁸ Duels by legislators often originated in heated debates between

parties or factions. In 1840, for example, Whig leader Henry Clay led a bitter battle to fire the Democratic printers of Senate documents. Democratic Senator King replied in harsh words, Clay responded with harsher words, and for a time a duel seemed unavoidable. The Thomas L. Clingman-William L. Yancey duel of 1845 developed because of words spoken in debate over the annexation of Texas.⁹ In 1831, Democratic congressional candidate Spencer Pertis so brutally attacked the Bank of the United States that he received a challenge from Thomas Biddle, brother of bank president Nicholas Biddle.¹⁰

Sometimes elections themselves generated duels—duels in which the participants symbolically fought for their supporters as well as for themselves. Harsh words spoken during campaigns often provoked a challenge. In Mississippi during the 1811 congressional election, the most enthusiastic Federalist campaigner, Abijah Hunt, challenged the victorious Democratic-Republican George Poindexter after Poindexter's election victory. In 1819 General Armistead Thomson Mason and his brother-in-law, John Mason McCarty, stood at ten paces and fired muskets at each other after a bitter Virginia congressional campaign.¹¹

Young duelists sometimes fought for the honor of older leaders. During the revolutionary war, John Laurens could not bear to have George Washington maligned by General Lee, so he challenged Lee to a duel. When, in 1856, Preston Brooks of South Carolina caned the startled senator from Massachusetts, he explained, as he raised his hand to strike the first blow, that he was vindicating the honor of his cousin, Senator Andrew Pickens Butler, as well as his state. As late as 1880, Tom Smith, son of the governor of Virginia, fought against a man who had maligned both his father and Confederate President Jefferson Davis. "Just before the order was given to fire," explained a contemporary in a letter to Davis, "Col. Smith took his cane, which you [Davis] had given him . . . and suspended it to an overhanging limb. . . . When his adversary fell, he took down the cane, upon which your name was engraved, and putting it to his lips bowed to his adversary—The scene to those who understood it was very touching."¹² Clearly, Tom Smith's duel was more than his own private battle.

Newspaper editors, who were also public figures, often resorted to the duel in the antebellum South. Since newspapers were nearly always affiliated with a political party and since the duelists were almost never from the same party, editor's duels were also sometimes party battles. In 1843, for example, a Democratic candidate for Congress challenged the editor of a New Orleans Whig newspaper for articles written against his election and uncomplimentary to his character. In 1846 John Hampden Pleasants, editor of the *Richmond Whig*, fought with Thomas Ritchie, Jr., son of the editor of the Democratic *Richmond Enquirer*, because of an

Enquirer article accusing Pleasants of abolitionist leanings. Here was another Democratic-Whig battle fought with bullets rather than at the polls.¹³

As some of these examples indicate, sometimes duelists represented their families. Thomas Biddle fought for his brother, Nicholas Biddle; Preston Brooks fought for his cousin, Andrew Pickens Butler. There are many other examples. When Judge A. G. Magrath ran for Congress from Charleston, the editor William R. Taber insulted him. In his absence, Magrath's brother, Edward Magrath, challenged and killed Taber for the insult. In 1823 an article in the *Missouri Republican* accused the surveyor general, William Rector, of corruption. Rector was away in Washington; his brother assumed the quarrel and shot and killed the author of the article.¹⁴

Several other features of the duel indicate that it was less a private contest between two individuals than a clash that intimately involved large publics. Knowledge that the duel would ultimately undergo careful public scrutiny shaped the behavior of all participants. For example, throughout the period of preliminary negotiations each party maintained the threat of publicly "posting" his opponent as a coward. In posting, one could print a notice in a newspaper, as did a Missouri duelist who, assuming a large audience, addressed himself "TO THE WORLD!" about J. Quinn Thornton: "Having resorted to low, cowardly and dishonorable means, for the purpose of injuring my character and standing, and having refused honorable satisfaction, which I have demanded; I avail myself of this opportunity of publishing him to the world as a reclaimerless liar, an infamous scoundrel, a black hearted villain, an arrant coward, a worthless vagabond and an imported miscreant, a disgrace to the profession and a dishonor to his country." James Wilkinson used a slightly different technique, printing handbills and posting them all over the District of Columbia. "Hector unmasked," he announced. "In justice to my character, I denounce John Randolph, M.C., to the world as a prevaricating, base, calumniating scoundrel, poltroon and coward." Sometimes all one had to do to post a "scoundrel" was to tack the sign up in a public place and stand under it with a gun for a few hours.¹⁵

Another indication that participants regarded their duels as subject to public scrutiny is that duelists generally kept copies of notes leading to the duel. These letters were extremely important because after the duel it was not unusual for each side to publish the entire correspondence or full accounts of the episode. In 1806, for example, Thomas Swann published his account of his conflict with Andrew Jackson, submitting it "to a candid and impartial public" to judge. Jackson published his own account as well. Sometimes duelists or their seconds published joint accounts, as did the

seconds after the Cilley-Graves duel of 1838. Henry Wise of Virginia called on Cilley's second, George Wallace Jones of Wisconsin, to suggest the possibility of a joint statement. Jones consulted Thomas Hart Benton who advised: "That's just right, General, for when I had my duel with Lucas, Judge Lawless, my second, . . . and Mr. Lucas' second, Barton, made a joint statement to the public at St. Louis, as to all the facts and circumstances attending that duel." Sometimes duelist publicly acknowledged agreements reached before the exchange of shots, as was the case with Henry Clay's apology to Senator William R. King or with the settlement between John Rodgers of the navy and Captain James Barron who printed circulars of the adjustment which they sent to friends.¹⁶ Since most duels involved injuries to reputation, duelists needed to make their audience—either their friends or the general public—aware of their honorable behavior in the encounter. Duels, in other words, could never really be private battles; they had to be public.

II

WHAT SOCIAL FUNCTIONS did the duel perform in the antebellum South? The best way to begin a consideration of this issue is with a careful look at one encounter—the Jonathan Cilley-William J. Graves duel of 1838. This duel, in some ways, was rather unusual. It was the only American duel that led to the death of a sitting congressman; it involved Northerners as well as Southerners; and it broke several of the conventions of proper dueling behavior. But it is a good duel to examine in detail, in part because we have so much information about it. All the major participants (short of Cilley, who died) wrote accounts of the affair, and the death of a congressman led to a full-scale investigation and report. No other nineteenth-century duel, with the exception, perhaps, of the Alexander Hamilton-Aaron Burr encounter, generated quite so much documentary material. Moreover, despite the unusual elements of the Cilley-Graves affair, the confrontation did embody the central features common to most antebellum Southern duels.

The story of the Cilley-Graves duel begins neither with Cilley nor with Graves, but with Virginia Whig Congressman Henry A. Wise.¹⁷ On February 12, 1838, Wise spoke to the House of Representatives in favor of a resolution to establish a new committee to investigate charges of corruption in Congress. As evidence to support these charges, he referred to an anonymous article written in the Whig newspaper the *New York Courier and Enquirer*. In passing, Wise noted that the editor of the newspaper, James Watson Webb, vouched for the reliability of the accusations. Jonathan Cilley, Democratic congressman from Maine, spoke against the reso-

lution to establish an investigating committee, referring specifically to the untrustworthiness of any report derived from the editor of the *Courier and Enquirer*. Offhandedly, he accused Webb of corruption—of being opposed to the continuation of the Bank of the United States until it loaned him \$52,000.

Nine days later the irate and insulted James Watson Webb arrived in Washington. But, despite his anger, he did not immediately confront his adversary. He asked his friend, Congressman William J. Graves of Kentucky, to carry a note to Cilley requesting him to "explain" his remarks. This note was the first formal communication required by the code of honor or preparatory to a challenge. When confronted by Graves in the House of Representatives, Cilley declined to receive the note. It was this action and the accompanying explanation that shifted the immediate issue of the confrontation away from a Cilley-Webb dispute toward a Cilley-Graves dispute. There are two versions of what happened at this point. The official congressional investigation concluded that Cilley did not want to be held "personally" accountable for what he said on the floor of Congress and that he "chose to be drawn into no controversy" with Webb. Moreover, since the refusal to receive a note might be an indication that the challenged party denied that the challenger was a gentleman worthy of recognition in an affair of honor, Cilley declared that he "neither affirmed nor denied anything in regard to his [Webb's] character." This wording, of course, left open the possibility that Cilley did not regard Webb as a gentleman. It was this message that offended Graves. Since Graves had agreed to carry Webb's note, according to the code of dueling he had acknowledged that Webb was a gentleman. Cilley's refusal to do the same might be understood as an indirect insult to Graves. That Cilley wrote Graves he intended "no disrespect to you" did not soothe the furious Graves. Graves himself, a year after the duel, gave a slightly different version of this incident in a speech to his constituents. Graves maintained that Cilley had verbally assured him that he did not object to Webb as a gentleman. But Cilley later refused to commit this acknowledgment to writing. This refusal implicitly denied Graves's version of Cilley's verbal remarks and implied that Graves had lied.

At any rate, Graves then called upon Congressman Richard H. Men-
 "disclaim any exception to him [Webb] personally as a gentleman." Cilley,
 still not wanting to be drawn into a personal dispute over his public re-
 marks, answered by refusing to "admit the right on your part to propound
 the question to which you ask a categorical answer." Graves then issued a
 challenge.

Cilley, through his second, Congressman George Wallace Jones of

Wisconsin, accepted the challenge and submitted a copy of suggestions for the conduct of the duel to Graves's second, Henry A. Wise (the man whose original remarks began the dispute). The proposal was highly unusual—rifles at eighty yards. The note specified such details as how the rifles should be held before firing, how the word to fire should be given, that the dress should be "ordinary winter clothing," that each should have on the grounds a second, a surgeon, and two other friends. The seconds could have pistols, for if a principal fired out of turn, it was the obligation of the opposing second to shoot him down. Wise, after consulting with Graves and noting that it was unusual to use rifles in a duel, accepted the terms. Graves, as a matter of fact, had some trouble finding a rifle. At one point, Cilley's second actually brought him one, but finally he found his own.

On the dueling grounds in Maryland, selection by lot gave Wise (Graves's second) the choice of position. Jones (Cilley's second) would give the word to fire. The two seconds measured the distance together but, probably in their eagerness to avoid a death, they measured ninety-two yards rather than the agreed-upon eighty. Congressmen John Calhoun and Richard Hawes of Kentucky stood at a distance; the audience included two others (unidentified and uninvited) along with the hack drivers. Cilley came with Jones, his second, Congressman Jesse Bynum of North Carolina and Colonel James W. Schaumburg as his friends, and a Dr. Duncan as his surgeon. Graves came with Wise as his second, Senator John J. Crittendon and Congressman Menafee, both of Kentucky, as his friends, and a Dr. Foltz of Washington as his surgeon.

Shortly after 3 P.M. Cilley and Graves fired at each other and missed. The seconds and friends began to negotiate a resolution while they occasionally consulted the principals who stood their ground. Throughout the negotiations everyone conceded that the matter could be resolved if Cilley would remove any doubt that he did not recognize Webb as a gentleman. They all agreed that this duel involved only "a mere point of honor," that no animosity existed between the duelists, and that there was no need to continue fighting until someone had been shot. But Cilley would not change his position and Graves would not change his, so they fired again and missed. Once again, the seconds and friends conducted frantic negotiations and once again they failed. On the third exchange of shots a bullet hit Cilley, who died within three minutes.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this duel concerns what happened away from the dueling grounds while Cilley and Graves exchanged shots. James Watson Webb, the man who had received Cilley's original insult, leaped around in frenzy. Earlier, he had tried to prevent the duel because he did not want Graves to fight his battle for him. The day of the duel Webb joined with two friends and planned to confront Cilley at his

boardinghouse, force him to fight with pistols on the spot or agree to fight a formal duel before he met Graves. If Cilley refused to do either Webb planned to break his right arm in order to prevent the duel with Graves. But Webb and his friends discovered that Cilley already had left his room, so they raced to the Maryland dueling ground. They agreed that if they came upon the duel in progress Webb would ask Cilley to fight. If Cilley refused and raised his rifle at Graves, Webb would shoot him. Webb and his friends considered the possibility that someone might first try to kill Webb—perhaps even his good friend Graves! Webb agreed that under these circumstances he would first shoot Cilley and then they would all defend themselves as well as possible. None of this, of course, actually happened because Webb missed the duel entirely.

What motivated the men involved in the Cilley-Graves duel? At its core the struggle involved injuries to reputation. It began with Cilley's public statement that Webb's word could not be trusted because he had accepted a bribe. It continued because Cilley refused to recognize Webb's status as a gentleman. It did not, it should carefully be noted, originate in a desire to kill a hated enemy. It is easy to misunderstand the duel as a substitute for murder. The men who fired at each other had no special desire to cause injury or death. Cilley had said he intended "no disrespect to Graves." During the negotiations after the first exchange of shots Wise had told Jones that "these gentlemen have come here without animosity towards each other." Jones answered that Cilley "meant no disrespect to Mr. Graves, because he entertained for him then, as he now does, the highest respect and the most kind feelings." When the eighty-yard distance originally had been proposed, Wise smilingly told Jones: "The distance is so great that they will not be apt to hit each other." Still, when they measured the distance they made it even longer. Notice that Graves, the "killer" in the duel, did not even own a rifle.

The Cilley-Graves duel, as a matter of fact, was unusual in that it involved a death at all. Most duels, like the ritualized combat of medieval warfare, operated as substitutes for deadly encounters. Just as Cilley and Graves did not come to the dueling ground with a strong desire to kill each other, few duelists were motivated by a lust for blood. There were, of course, exceptions. Given its nature, the duel could be easily perverted into a legitimization of murder.¹⁸

But most dueling encounters never involved the exchange of shots and most "participants" were not principals. Even those who exchanged shots did not view death as a primary goal. Many of the most famous duelists so clearly understood this attitude that they often intentionally fired their pistols ineffectually into the air. Christopher Gadsden did so in a 1778 duel with William Henry Drayton. In Andrew Jackson's 1788 duel

with Colonel Waightsill Avery, both parties fired into the air and shook hands. When John Randolph and Henry Clay fought a duel in 1824 Randolph aimed at Clay's knees on the first shot and fired into the air on the second. He later told Thomas Hart Benton: "I would not have seen him fall mortally, or even doubtfully, wounded for all the land that is watered by the King of Floods and all his tributary streams." In an 1833 duel between S. S. Prentiss and Governor Henry S. Foote of Mississippi, Prentiss later wrote: "I threw up my pistol as I fired, not intending to hit him at all, but so near had I been to killing him that my ball, even as I threw up my pistol, hit him on the shoulder, slightly wounding him in the flesh." In 1846 John Hampden Pleasants "went upon the field with no desire to take his adversary's life; that in his last moments, he declared that previously to the combat he had extracted the ball from his pistol to lessen the chances of a fatal result."¹⁹

Of course, some of these magnanimous duelists ended up being killed by their less magnanimous adversaries. But death in a duel was not so common as one might suspect, given that the encounter involved two men shooting at each other. One historian of dueling in the old navy discovered a 22 percent mortality for those who exchanged shots. But naval duels, fought by military men anxious to prove their manhood, were probably more murderous than civilian duels. A June 12, 1800, newspaper article noted that in twenty-one duels in recent weeks only six people had died. This is a 14 percent death rate. Even this figure may exaggerate the casualties because duels involving deaths had a greater chance of being reported in the newspaper. These figures demonstrate that, while death was a distinct possibility, it was not the usual experience of duelists—even duelists who aimed at each other. The duel certainly involved the risk of death, but not usually death itself.²⁰

That death was not the usual intention even of those who killed someone in a duel is evidenced in the behavior of the "successful" duelist. "Gentlemen," explained one 1830 duelist, "I assure you that I had no enmity against that man." In an 1835 encounter, the duelist fell down by the side of his fallen opponent and "implored his forgiveness." "My despair," he later wrote, "at his fate knew no bounds."²¹ Such feelings as these gave rise to the common stories of the duelist who went insane with remorse or whose career was destroyed because he had killed a man in a duel. Andrew Jackson may be the exception here, but even he had to explain away his killing of a man in a duel. Aaron Burr is probably the most famous example of the failed duelist—the duelist who destroyed his own career by killing his opponent.

Unbearable remorse rather than career advancement seems to have been the fate of most duelists who killed. William Henry Harrison wrote after the Cilley Graves duel that "in the grave of the fallen duelist was

frequently buried the peace and happiness of the survivor." One Virginian reported a Washington duel in which the man who fired the fatal shot "became a fugitive, his life and happiness ruined." In the Trotter-Wickliffe duel in 1829 in Kentucky, the killer was reported to have "become insane and died in the lunatic asylum." Even if we assume that these tales of insanity resulting from duels were much exaggerated, they tell us a great deal about the attitudes of people in the society. The duelist who killed was not regarded as the victor.²² Graves became quite aware of this fact as a storm of public criticism—criticism from both North and South—descended on him during the months after his duel.

But if duelists fought more to preserve their reputation than to kill an enemy, exactly how did a duel perform that function? Why should an exchange of shots wash away an insult? What could an insulted man hope to gain by risking his own life in a dueling encounter? James Watson Webb clearly understood the answer to these questions. Duelists were in a common club—a club of self-professed gentlemen. To duel was to join the club, publicly to affirm that one had the qualifications for membership, to restore a tainted reputation. To be excluded from a duel by a recognized member of the club was to be denied status as a gentleman. Webb, having acknowledged Jonathan Cilley's status as a gentleman by sending him a note of inquiry about an insult, refused to allow himself to be excluded by Cilley's refusal to receive the note. William J. Graves, having recognized both Cilley's and Webb's membership by agreeing to carry a note between them, had to get Cilley to recognize Webb as a gentleman or it would cast suspicion on his own status. A duel, in other words, whatever else it may have involved, publicly and dramatically defined the members of a gentleman's club, bound them together, and distinguished them from others in the society.

It is easy to see how duels bound together principals and their own seconds. These major participants publicly reaffirmed close personal connections through their common involvement in the encounter. In the duel itself the principal and second became almost interchangeable. When Cilley and Graves stood on the dueling ground their seconds stood by ready to assume their places should it become necessary. In fact, this shift is precisely what happened when Graves moved from his position as Webb's second to his position as Cilley's primary antagonist. Graves had bound himself to Webb by agreeing to carry his note, and an insult to Webb had become an insult to Graves. Not surprisingly, duelists almost always referred to seconds as "friends." Andrew Jackson in 1798 actually used brother Masons as his seconds and kept referring to them as brothers. Seconds recognized the binding role of their position. Nathaniel Pennington, for example, explained in a letter that, when Alexander Hamilton

asked him to become his second in the fatal duel with Burr, he felt he could not hesitate a moment before accepting. "You know," he wrote, "that besides the love, the admiration and respect I always had for the amiable qualities, the sublime talents the generous spirit of that man [Hamilton], I was under particular obligations to him for particular acts of kindness, and of late much more in the habits of confidence with him than any other man in New York."²³

Principals likewise recognized the special bond. Andrew Jackson, after an 1804 duel in Knoxville, wrote his second John Coffey a note of thanks. "I have treasured the act in my bosom," he explained, "that neither length of time nor change of circumstances can eradicate or efface, and as long as my bosom beats with life, it will beat high with gratitude on viewing the event." After his duel with Henry Clay in 1824, John Randolph gathered with his friends and produced an envelope—an envelope he had earlier left with instructions to be opened in the event of his death. It contained a note that directed that the gold coins Randolph carried in his pocket be made into seals and given to the seconds. "But Clay's bad shooting shan't rob you of your seals," Randolph announced, "I am going to London and have them made for you."²⁴

That the duel reaffirmed the bond between principals and seconds should come as no surprise, but that it also bound opponents seems less obvious. When tensions grew to a point that implied fundamental, irreconcilable conflict—conflict that was highly disruptive to society—the duel served to end the conflict and reestablish harmony. Consider the form of the dueling encounter. As in the Cilley-Graves duel, the notes were always couched in terms of polite requests. Even the euphemisms implied the purpose of the duel. The encounter was a "meeting" or "interview"; the challenge an "invitation." Once the parties planned to meet they had to plot together in secret in order to avoid intrusion from authorities. Duelists shared the secret of their encounter with each other even while they kept the information from their wives. Hamilton's wife, even as Hamilton lay wounded in bed, remained ignorant that he acquired his bullet wound in a duel. On the dueling grounds each faced the other, hemmed in by the same set of formal rules. Each, often not wishing to kill, watched to guess the intentions of his opponent and adjusted his behavior accordingly. Each faced an identical danger.

The proper duel involved the extension of a host of courtesies. John Lyde Wilson's code of dueling advised that, once on the dueling ground, "each second informs the other when he is about to load, and invites his presence, but the seconds rarely attend on such invitation, as gentlemen may be safely trusted in the matter." If one party is hit, Wilson advised the second of the other party to "forthwith render any assistance he can com-

mand to the disabled principal."²⁵ It was in this same spirit of extending courtesies that B. Gratz Brown in an 1856 Missouri encounter spent the night before the duel as a guest at the house of his adversary's second. In an 1817 duel one duelist fired before the other could pull the trigger. The one who shot demanded that he be shot at in turn, but the other refused. Finally he discharged his pistol into the air and they were reconciled.²⁶

The very act of sending a note to someone, even in confrontation, meant that you regarded your opponent as a social equal. Cilley's rejection was the cause of James Watson Webb's fury. He had acknowledged Cilley as a social equal by sending him a note, but Cilley had refused to reciprocate. Wilson's code of dueling clearly stated that dueling encounters could occur only between social equals. It was in this spirit that S. S. Prentiss of Mississippi refused to duel with the editor of the Vicksburg *Sentinel* when he received a challenge. The editor was not his social equal. But Governor Tilghman Tucker's attendance at a dinner to honor the editor indicated an alliance to Prentiss, so he challenged the governor—his social equal. Similarly, Benjamin F. Perry, a frequently insulted South Carolina Unionist, decided not to challenge men who were beneath him in status. He wrote in his 1832 *Journal*: "I am not going to challenge any blackguard of an editor. The next man I fight or challenge shall be a man of distinction."²⁷ This assumption of equality between opposing duelists extended to the form of the duel. Both parties on the field, according to Wilson's code, were "entitled to a perfect equality." Consequently it was dangerous to fight a duel with a poor shot. In order to eliminate the difference in shooting ability, the distance had to be decreased and therefore the likelihood of death became quite great.²⁸

This view of the relationship between duelists made "strangers" a special problem in the culture of dueling. Strangers were people with an undetermined position in the social structure. Wilson's dueling code offered special instructions for dueling confrontations with strangers. First of all, he warned seconds: "If a stranger wish you to bear a note for him, be well satisfied before you do so, that he is on an equality with you; and in presenting the note, state to the party the relationship you stand towards him, and what you know and believe about him." As for the person challenged by a stranger, Wilson advised, "you have a right to a reasonable time to ascertain his standing in society, unless he be fully vouched for, by his friend." In 1806, when Andrew Jackson decided to refuse a challenge to a duel, he explained, "I will not degrade myself by the acceptance of a challenge from a stranger whose acts and conduct had been inconsistent with that of a gentleman."²⁹

The understanding of the duel as a ritual of admission to a gentleman's club may have caused some Southerners to see the duel as a vehicle of

social mobility. To be shot at by a man was to assume his social status. It was probably no coincidence that shortly after revolutionary general Robert Howe wrote Henry Laurens, "I have been long upon the Brigadier's list and pant to get higher," he was involved in a duel with Christopher Gadsden. One enterprising British soldier even faked a duel in order to gain acceptance among American revolutionary officers. In 1778 John Laurens wrote about a British soldier, Cope, who came to the American side seeking protection because he had just killed a man in a duel and feared the consequences. He was treated with "generosity" by the Americans until they discovered he was an "imposter." "A duel has lately been fought," wrote Laurens, "in which an officer was killed, but Cope was not concerned in it." Laurens warned others of the lie. In 1829 Edward Bates, member of Congress from Missouri, challenged George McDuffie of South Carolina. According to one historian of the encounter, "He afterwards gave as his reason for the challenge that, being a representative from a frontier state, McDuffie seemed to consider him inferior to the representatives of the older commonwealths."³⁰

To be excluded from a duel was a terrible insult, for it denied one's membership in the group of "gentlemen." Those excluded struggled mightily to gain admission. James Jackson, for example, refused a challenge from Jacob Waldburger in 1798 because Waldburger had once been whipped by a gentleman. Waldburger tried to explain the whipping in the newspaper, noting that it happened "when I was really but a boy." James Wilkinson, disgraced by involvement in Aaron Burr's schemes to detach the Western states, practically begged John Randolph for a duel in 1807. "I have no hesitation," he wrote, "to appeal to your justice, your magnanimity and your gallantry, to prescribe the manner of redress." Randolph denied his request. "I cannot descend to your level," he wrote.³¹

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a man begging for a duel occurred in an Andrew Jackson encounter in 1806. Jackson decided that Thomas Swann was not a gentleman, so he caned him. Swann was distraught, as he later confessed in a newspaper article. Jackson, he said, "was told I had letters of introduction, and could procure certain certificates to prove I was entitled to that character." Swann even subsequently published his letters of reference to clear his tarnished name.³²

The same intense social pressures operated on the other side of the dueling encounter. To refuse a duel once offered by a recognized gentleman, or to refuse to challenge once insulted by a gentleman, was to resign your membership in the club. James Thatcher, surgeon in the revolutionary army, described an officer who was forced to duel because "his brother officers treated him with contempt, and threatened to hoot him out of camp." When, in 1804, the volatile John Ramsdolph splashed wine and

broke a glass in the face of a young congressman, and then threw a bottle of wine at him, a contemporary observer reported that "the men of the Pistol say that so gross and deliberate an abuse cannot be pocketed or compromised—that A. [Congressman Alston] must fight—or leave the place in disgrace."³³ Similarly, S. S. Prentiss explained in a letter to his brother after his first duel that if he did not fight "life will be rendered valueless to him, both in his own eyes and those of the community." Willie Mangum, commenting on the Clingman-Yancey duel of 1845, noted that Clingman had to fight: "It was unavoidable, & to have declined would have disgraced him here & destroyed his just Weight & influence." Mississippian Henry S. Foote noted that short of being closely associated with a religious group no one could turn down a challenge "without being considered to permanent discredit and coldly shut out from all intercourse with gentlemen."³⁴

Since the duel always occurred between social equals it should come as no surprise that duelists frequently admired their opponents. The greater the status of your foe, the higher your own status. When Thomas Tudor Tucker was shot by Ralph Izard in revolutionary South Carolina he expressed his respect for a man who "did not scruple to acknowledge what he had said, to insist on the right of saying it, and to wish every man in the parish had been present to hear it." In a 1783 duel, after the first exchange of shots, James Jackson shouted across to the man aiming at him: "Damn it, Gibbons, you're a brave man and a good marksman, for I believe your ball hit my pistol." Gibbons replied: "You are a brave man, General Jackson." In the John Laurens-Charles Lee duel, when Laurens was late for the dueling ground, Lee's second remarked that he might not come at all. Lee was quick to answer that that was impossible for Laurens was a man of "unquestionable bravery." Even after Lee was shot and lay on the ground bleeding he remarked: "How handsomely the young fellow behaved. I could have hugged him!"³⁵

As one would expect from an institution that upheld and reinforced the equality of participants, reconciliation rather than death was more often the result of duels. The number of duels that produced good friendships or, at least cordial relations, was extraordinary. John Lyde Wilson's code mandated that, when both parties in a duel were satisfied after an uneventful exchange of shots, the second of the challenger should announce: "We have agreed that the present duel shall cease, the honor of each of you is preserved, and you will meet on middle ground, shake hands and be reconciled."³⁶ The formal language of Wilson's code captured the spirit of the real experience of many duelists. Several years after the Laurens-Crimke duel in revolutionary South Carolina, Laurens casually referred to Crimke in a letter as "my good friend John Paul Crimke." After

the Clay-Randolph duel of 1824 the two men shook hands. Clay had put a bullet through Randolph's coat. Randolph noted: "You owe me a coat, Mr. Clay." Clay answered: "I am glad the debt is no greater." According to Randolph's biographer, a few days after the duel "the parties exchanged cards, and social relations were formally and courteously restored." After Henry S. Foote shot at S. S. Prentiss in two Mississippi duels he noted: "We were good friends, and lived in the greatest amity and harmony up to the period of his death." One Louisiana duel, rather than ending in a death, ended in a jolly breakfast for all at a nearby restaurant.³⁷

Even when a duel ended in blood, the wounded duelist more often spoke words of love than of hate. As James Barron and Stephen Decatur lay on the ground both thinking themselves mortally wounded, "Barron proposed that they should make friends before they met in Heaven. . . . Decatur said he had never been his enemy, that he freely forgave him his death." As two duelists lay dying together on the ground in New Orleans, the last to die noted of his old "schoolmate" who lay dead beside him that "they had been on terms of great intimacy and friendship for fifteen years; and he bore honorable testimony to his character as a man of science and a gentleman." It was clearly another good reference letter to take to heaven.³⁸

The duel not only permitted men to display their membership in the dominant social group in the society, it also allowed them to define publicly the proper behavior of the members of that group. After all, an "insult" involved words spoken or written that damaged a reputation. These words indicated improper behavior and by negative implication suggested proper comportment.

What words so damaged the reputation of a Southern political leader as to make him want to risk his life in order to erase their effect? Only a very few kinds of insults generated duels in the South. Although many duels had their ultimate origins in longstanding rivalries and political disagreements, the movement from a dispute to a duel could only be accomplished by a handful of magical words. James Watson Webb, for example, although he disliked Cilley's political position, did not initiate a dueling encounter until Cilley had accused him of corruption—of having accepted a bribe. A slightly different insult generated the Clingman-Yancey duel. Clingman opposed the annexation of Texas, and Yancey charged him with being a traitor to the South, of betraying both his principles and his friends, of becoming mired in "the dark purlicues of party." "Ambition" was the insult tossed at A. G. Magrath by the editor of the *Charleston Mercury*. Other insulting words included calling a young man a "puppy" or calling any man a scoundrel, a villain, a coward, a dastard, a poltroon, or an abolitionist. But perhaps the most common precipitant of Southern duels in

volved the charge of lying. This charge, in part, was what bothered William J. Graves according to his account of his duel with Jonathan Cilley. Graves claimed he had a verbal acknowledgment of Webb's status as a gentleman, but Cilley refused to confirm it in writing, thereby casting doubt on Graves's word. The 1771 Charleston duel between Haley and Delancy began because Delancy "gave him the lie." In 1809 Henry Clay challenged Humphrey Marshall because Marshall called him a liar. The Thomas Hart Benton-Charles H. Lucas duel began after they met as opposing lawyers in a trial and accused each other of lying.³⁹

Although there are numerous exceptions, most insults—especially insults involving unprincipled political alliances, corruption, ambition, or lying—struck at the very heart of a man's status as a statesman, and not coincidentally at his status as a master as well. Southerners believed that a statesman and a master could be trusted with power in part because they shared the interests of their community, but the ideal leader also had to be a man of good character. An ambitious man, an unprincipled man, a man who deceived could not be trusted with power—power that could so easily be abused. An insult, in short, struck at the core of a man's claim to exercise authority in the South. It struck at the very thing that, in a gentleman's own eyes, made him a man.

Why did the duel seem the appropriate remedy for the kinds of insults that challenged a man's right to exercise power? Why, for example, did not James Watson Webb respond to the bribery charge by amassing proof of his innocence and printing it in his newspaper? Although Cilley, because he spoke his insulting words in Congress, may have been immune from a legal suit, why did not people like Benton and Lucas sue for slander when they accused each other of lying? The problem was that neither the publication of evidence of good character nor a suit for slander was the right theatrical display to erase the implications of an insult. To amass evidence in one's own behalf implied a kind of self-interest and self-absorption that did not conform to the disinterested pose of the gentleman and the statesman. If a man really had no ambition why should he go to such trouble to prove his innocence? If a man's word could be believed why should he need to amass additional proof? Similarly the suit for slander or libel carried the wrong message. To sue in court for one's reputation did not simply involve a great deal of time, expense, and keeping the issue in public view. The legal suit also carried the improper implication that reputation and character once injured could be repaired by the payment of monetary damages. A man who would take money in exchange for an insult was just the kind of man who might take money in exchange for his vote.

The duel, on the other hand, allowed a gentleman to display the proper qualities of character necessary for him to be trusted with power

The duel, in fact, duplicated the rhythms of the statesman. Just as statesmen periodically asserted their individual independence by resignations, reversals, and the breakage of political alliances, the insulted gentleman asserted his independence by issuing a challenge, stopping his normal worldly activities and connections, writing out his will, and facing his opponent alone in a moment that threatened death. Moreover, duels proceeded in a form that paralleled the ideal statesman's election: "friends" carried out most of the activity while principals remained passive. John Lyde Wilson's code of dueling offered advice to an insulted gentleman that John C. Calhoun might have given to a statesman: "When you believe yourself aggrieved, be silent on the subject, speak to no one about the matter, and see your friend who is to act for you as soon as possible." Once a gentleman acquired a second, Wilson suggested that he "leave the whole matter to his [the second's] judgement and avoid any consultation with him unless he seeks it. He has the custody of your honor, and by obeying him you cannot be compromised." Wilson advised that, once on the dueling ground, duelists, like candidates for office, "are to be wholly passive, being entirely under the guidance of their seconds."⁴⁰ Furthermore, the duel, like the oration of the statesman, inspired a kind of awe among people. Like the orator, the duelist never asked people to respect him, he simply displayed himself in a way that commanded admiration, even awe. Like the orator he did not directly converse with people by defending his character in the newspapers; he placed himself on a stage for all to see and admire. The form and style of his behavior carried the substance of his message. The duel embodied both the passivity demanded by republicanism and the assertion of power demanded by honor.

Orlando Patterson's comparative study of slavery and social death offers further insight into the reasons why masters saw the duel as a ritual that justified their right to govern. Masters in virtually all slave societies think of slaves as having chosen a subservient life—a life without honor, a social death—in order to avoid real death. It is the slave's fear of actual death that (according to the mythology of masters) makes him a slave. Masters on the other hand do not have this fear.⁴¹ And, of course, the duel perfectly demonstrates this. After facing death, the duelist is reborn into the world ready to assume his position as a master. This behavior, of course, reduplicates the actions of the statesman who resigns from office only to reemerge with an enhanced reputation and greater power. Both the statesman and the master must face death in order to be reborn into a position of honor and power.

Overall, then, the duel seen as a social drama offers a reflection of some of the central elements of the political culture of slavery. It displayed the ideals and rhythms of statesmen and masters. It demonstrated that

strange mixture of passivity and aggression that appeared in the statehouse and on the plantation. Moreover, it publicly expressed the unity of the gentlemen who exercised authority—that they all belonged to the same club. Even though these men might sometimes engage in bitter conflict—might belong to different parties or different families—the message of the duel was that they all were united. In short, the duel reaffirmed the hegemony of the ruling group in the South, displaying their values and their solidarity for all to see.