

Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books

*Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe
(14th–17th Centuries)*

Edited by

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The Italian Schools of Fencing: Art, Science, and Pedagogy

Ken Mondschein

To speak of a singular Italian “school” of fencing is to gloss over six centuries of diverse practices and purposes—from the first surviving written treatise by Fiore dei Liberi in the early fifteenth century to the formation of the *Scuola Magistrale* in the late nineteenth and the adoption of the modern “international” style in the twentieth—and to press them into the service of a nineteenth-century nationalistic construct. Rather than there being a singular, unifying, and eternal national character or even a uniquely peninsular approach to personal combat, we rather see individual, local strains and approaches, each a product of its own era, and each reflecting contemporary ideas of education, fashion, science, and conflict. This is especially true when speaking of our focal period, the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries.

All such sources nonetheless share certain necessary similarities. Fencing (like fighting) is what is called an “open” (as opposed to a “closed”) motor skill. In other words, actions are not pre-choreographed, as in a dance, but change in response to a dynamic environment. The concern of fencing masters has ever been to teach their students how to act in such a situation in a manner concordant with their sociocultural environment—the rules, written and unwritten, of how the encounter should proceed. Looking at such sources in this light, we can identify the sixteenth century, and particularly the Milanese engineer Camillo Agrippa’s *Trattato di Scientia d’Arme* of 1553, as a time of sea change. Whereas earlier authors have their students follow patterns, much as medieval artists copied models or writers copied letters; later authors, influenced by humanist ideas, emphasize a deductive approach to fencing pedagogy. With an increasing emphasis on fencing as a “science” and the realization of the necessities of print medium, masters presented their works as “discourses” or “reasonings” (*ragiomento* or *ragione*) intended to present a method of operating to a reader not personally acquainted with the author and his teachings. Such works, following Agrippa, often utilized contemporary ideas of the structure of the universe, such as number linking the macrocosm and microcosm.

Influencing the changes in these scientific-aesthetic systems were changes in the socio-cultural environment. With the rise of centralized states and their

concomitant court culture, what had been a multi-purpose martial art equally suited to the battlefield, the dueling-ground, or a self-defense scenario increasingly funneled into a specialized art intended for an encounter between equals on a level playing field, be it an (ostensibly) friendly fencing bout or a potentially lethal encounter. In other words, paralleling dancing and riding, the handling of weapons became a courtly phenomenon, a way to display class and breeding. The art and science of arms thus participated in the overall cultural changes taking place in the early modern world.

1 Historiography of Fencing

Modern writing on fencing, both that of Italian scholars and that of scholars of other nations, cannot be separated from its nationalist and scientific-positivist roots. The nineteenth century's concerns were those of the struggle against absolutism, justified by an ideology that included a strong belief in both what Herbert Spencer called "the law of progress" and in the nation-state—the flowering of a timeless national character into a sovereign political entity—as both the inevitable and most perfect mode of human social organization. Risorgimento Italy was fertile ground for these ideas, which are most evident in the writings of Jacopo Gelli (1858–1935). Gelli, a historian, military officer, and (ironically) advocate for the abolition of the duel, wrote several works on dueling and code of honor, as well as traced the development of fencing, in his *L'arte delle armi in Italia*. Like his English contemporary Egerton Castle,¹ Gelli was of the opinion that fencing, like all human endeavors, shows development from a primitive state to a more advanced and "scientific" one.² His chief concern is thus how closely previous authors presaged his own modern style of fencing; unfortunately, he not only viewed the past through this positivist lens, but also completely misunderstood the idiom of previous authors. For instance, Gelli believed that medieval modes of fencing remained unchanged through the eighteenth century and groundlessly accuses several authors of plagiarism. Similarly, he summarily dismissed the German medieval school of fencing and devoted many pages to refuting the opinions of both Castle and the sixteenth-century English critic of Italian fencing, George Silver.

This nationalistic concern is also seen in Francesco Novati's facsimile of the Pisani-Dossi manuscript of *Fiore dei Liberi*. Why did Novati, a renowned

1 Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fence*.

2 For a full treatment of historical positivism in fencing history, see my essay "Daggers of the Mind, Towards a Historiography of Fencing."

scholar of medieval literature, turn his attention to an obscure work of some artistic and historical merit, but dubious literary quality? The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of considerable nationalistic competition, and the realm of sport was no exception. In particular, the two great European fencing nations, France and Italy, both sought prestige in a series of well-publicized contests. Duels even occurred between representatives of the two countries, and the conflict was continued in the pages of journals and fencing books.³ The French might have argued their fencing was the most modern, perfected, and advanced, and, politically, their school may have been on the ascendancy (culminating in the formation of the *Fédération Internationale d'Escrime* in 1913), but the Italians, possessing the oldest didactic works known at the time, were able to claim primacy in the invention of “scientific” swordsmanship.

In this essay, I will employ the lessons of physical interpretation in the service of describing Italian fencing literature and practices as artifacts of socially contingent cultural practices. In so doing, I hope to show this subject’s relevance not just to those interested in the history of swordplay, but to historians of medieval and early modern Europe in general.

2 The Social Context

The Italian verb, *schermire*, “to fence,” is ultimately derived from the Germanic *schirmjan* or *skirman*, and is of considerable antiquity—besides being Latinized into *escrimar*, it has cognates in Spanish, Portuguese, Provençal, Bavarian, and Middle English.⁴ The culture of *la scherma* in premodern Italy, however, has two important elements that must be accounted for in any treatment of violence and its performance, the urban nature of Italian society, and Mediterranean honor culture.

Regarding the first criterion, the professional teaching of fencing, as with any martial art, is necessarily an urban phenomenon drawing on a population with both the desire and spare cash to acquire these skills. Italy certainly provided this environment, and ownership of weapons in medieval Italian towns

3 On this, see Gaugler, “Epic Encounters Between Italian and French Fencing Masters 1881–1911,” p. 13. Though it does not really bear on the subject of this essay, I should also note that there were also considerable controversies between Italian masters over whose method was better, such as the Roman-Neapolitan critique of the Milanese Giuseppe Radaelli’s supposedly less “pure” northern method of sabre.

4 Diez, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Romance Languages, Chiefly from the German*, p. 390.

seems to have been at least as ubiquitous as in the north.⁵ For instance, in Bologna, arms societies—confraternities for civic defense formed during the communal movement of the thirteenth century—were integral to the city's political structure,⁶ while Milan was, of course, the armory of Europe.

Insofar as participation in socially sanctioned violence goes, Italian burghers exhibited an interesting duality. On the one hand, they seem to have been less personally bellicose than their northern contemporaries and made greater use of mercenaries; Machiavelli's idea of a citizen-militia was dead on arrival.⁷ On the other, jousts and civic festivals-cum-brutal war-games such as the battles held on bridges and town squares in numerous cities were a vibrant part of civic life. Likewise, a martial ethic certainly existed in Italy amongst the aristocracy. "I judge that the principal and true profession of the courtier ought to be that of arms," as Castiglione has Ludovico da Canossa say,⁸ and military service, even if in the service of foreign princes, remained an ideal amongst the Italian aristocracy through the eighteenth century.⁹ By the mid-sixteenth century, the Italians had acquired the reputation as the tutors of Europe and the Delian Academy, founded in Padua in 1608, was an international center where youth from many nations came for instruction in the arts of fencing, riding, and mathematics.¹⁰ Francesco Alfieri, the fencing master there, mentions teaching "Italian, Polish, French, and German gentlemen" in his work on the

5 On arms in German towns, see especially Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany: Civic Duty and the Right of Arms*. On the keeping of weapons in sixteenth-century France, see, for instance, Marie-Anne Michaux's MA thesis, "Private Armouries, Arms and Armour in the Parisian Domestic Interior (1515–1547)." The best comparable work on Italy is Blastenbrei, "Violence, arms and criminal justice in papal Rome, 1560–1600."

6 Blanshei, *Politics and Justice in Late Medieval Bologna*.

7 The Italian lack of valor became something of an object of perverse pride, The fourteenth-century Florentine writer Franco Sacchetti (in story 150) tells a tale of a meek knight who is chosen *podestà* of Padua: To make himself seem fiercer, he has a crest of a ferocious bear made for his helmet, but, on the way to Padua has been elected to govern, he encounters a huge and somewhat inebriated German knight who claims the same arms, Rather than contest the matter, the Italian sells his crest at a profit, and each man departs thinking he got the better deal.

8 Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, ed. Carnazzi, p. 72.

9 See, for instance, Hanlon, "The Decline of a Provincial Military Aristocracy: Siena 1560–1740" and Claudio Donati, *L'idea di nobiltà in Italia*.

10 See Drévilion, "L'escrime italienne et l'éducation de la noblesse française"; and Del Negro, "L'Accademia Delia e gli esercizi cavallereschi della nobiltà padovana nel Seicento e Settecento." Galileo apparently argued of the necessity of mathematics to military science in his application letter to the Academy seeking the post of mathematician; it was

two-handed sword.¹¹ Likewise, we have several treatises from Italian fencing masters serving at noble courts in northern Europe, and Shakespeare's audiences understood Mercutio's calling Tybalt "the very butcher of a silk button" was a reference to the Italian fencing master Rocco Bonetti, who claimed to be able to hit an Englishman upon any button of his doublet.¹²

The teaching of fencing in Italy seems not to have been universally and strictly subject to a formal guild, patronage, or regulatory system, as were established in northern Europe and Spain in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹³ While Francesco Marcelli states in his treatise of 1686 that formerly masters had to be approved by a committee (citing the Bolognese masters Marozzo and dall'Agocchie, as well as the Spaniard Narvaez, as his sources),¹⁴ I am personally unaware of any surviving licenses, charters, or regulations from the early modern era. As for the social aspects of such organizations, while we find one Cosimo Paradisi recorded as a fencing master in the necrology of the Florentine *Arte dei Medici e Speziali* at the turn of the seventeenth century,¹⁵ Silvio Longhi, in his 2003 edition of Marco Docciolini's 1601 *Trattato di Scherma*, states that Docciolini was not inscribed in this guild, as he should have been.¹⁶ Three anecdotes bear this impression out: Vincent Saviolo, writing in England in the mid-1590s, relates the story of a master named Angelo of "Alezza" (Arezzo?) whose nephew, after years of apprenticeship, decided to set up shop on his own. This led to a duel between the nephew and a mutual

at Padua that he invented his compass to determine proportional divisions. See Favero, "Le matematiche nell'arte militare, secondo un autografo di Galileo Galilei," pp. 16–17.

- 11 Francesco Alfieri, *Lo Spadone*, p. 6; trans. by the present author as *The Art of the Two-Handed Sword*, p. 28. On fencing as part of humanist education, see Grendler's essay on Annibale Roero's *Lo scolare*, "Fencing, Playing Ball, and Dancing in Italian Renaissance Universities." Note that Salvator Fabris (q.v.) was also Paduan and returned to his native city before dying in 1618.
- 12 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* Act 2, Scene 4, line 23. See also Holmer's "Draw if ye be Men': Saviolo's Significance for *Romeo and Juliet*." The "silk button" claim is recorded by George Silver in his *Paradoxes of Defence*, p. 65.
- 13 See my introduction to *Fencing, A Renaissance Treatise*, xxv–xxvii. We do have some Venetian regulations saying that masters should not teach in private, for fear that they would sodomize their students. See Murray, *Homosexualities*, p. 149. On accusations of homosexuality made against Florentine masters, see Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, pp. 140, 158–59.
- 14 Francesco Marcelli, *Regole della Scherma*, p. 13. Dall'Agocchie discusses the process in his *Dell'Arte di Scrimia Libri Tre*, p. 8; exhortations not to teach without permission are found in several places in the first chapters of Marozzo's first book.
- 15 Tommaso Rimbotti, *Rime*, ed. del Puppo and Fabbri, p. 51 n. 6.
- 16 Marco Docciolini, *Trattato di Scherma*, ed. Longhi, p. 78.

friend who sought to avenge the old master's loss of income.¹⁷ This resort to an extrajudicial challenge seems to imply a lack of a legal means of resolving this dispute.

A century earlier, in a case from 1474, Johannes Angellus, Captain of Milan, reported to Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza that a "Master Ferando" from Spain had challenged local masters to a fencing contest in a public square. Two Italians appeared, a Master Zentille, "son of the deceased Master Pagano," and a Master Ferando from Capua. Angellus' concern was more for the unlawful public assembly than for the Spaniard's abrogating some sort of monopoly (in free cities of the Holy Roman Empire, the town council was usually petitioned for the right to hold a public competition, and Angellus is mainly concerned that they had not asked for such permission). The fact that two masters felt that they had to respond to a foreigner's challenge might mean that they did not enjoy a legally sanctioned monopoly and had to defend their prerogative, though they might have equally taken up the gauntlet for the pleasure of a public contest—albeit at great risk to their reputations. Teaching fencing could apparently be a family business, as is seen by Zentille's father, Pagano, also having been a fencing master, and would be exemplified in the seventeenth century by the Marcelli family.¹⁸ The document also details where the local masters held their schools.¹⁹ Finally, earlier in the early fifteenth century, Fiore dei Liberi (q.v.) relates in his autobiographies that he had to fight five duels with masters jealous of his teaching. Again, no legal method of conflict-resolution seemed to exist; it was entirely up to Fiore to defend his right to teach. So, while guild structures certainly did exist in Italy (especially in the Bolognese tradition), they seem to have been far from universally potent. Further research is needed in this area.

Regarding the second criterion mentioned above, "honor culture," while hardly unique to Italy or the medieval and early modern eras, did affect the particular forms interpersonal violence took.²⁰ Honor is both individual and collective: it involves one's own self-respect, of course, but also the community's acknowledgement of one's right to that self-respect. It is personal, yet

17 Vincent Saviolo, *His Practice*, 1.13.

18 Marcelli gives the portraits of himself and eight of his relatives in the frontispiece to his book, labeling them "fencing masters of the Casa Marcelli."

19 "Scuole di scherma in Milano nel 1474."

20 It has been incorporated into two notable works on dueling in northern Europe in the modern era, McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin de Siècle Germany*, and Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*. On the origins of dueling in Italy, see Cavina's "Science of Duel and Science of Honour" in this volume.

something that also reflects the status of one's family or clan. It is the highest value in an honor-based society; its opposite is shame. Any insults must be requited, or status is lost. Such insults are categorized in a strict hierarchy, with physical assault and attacks against the virtue of the women of one's family perhaps the most infamous and worthy of the most serious requiting—by violence.²¹ Such could go so far as to take the form of private warfare between clans and patronage networks. For instance, Edward Muir recounts in his *Mad Blood Stirring* the vendetta between the Savorgnan, Zambarlani, and Strumieri factions in sixteenth-century Friuli—a feud that resulted in murders, dismemberments, and ambushes.²²

Over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the performance of honor took a new form as the vendetta transformed into the duel.²³ This was directly connected with new codes of the rise of centralized powers and court culture. As Muir states, “courtliness erected rigid barriers between the human and the animal, condemning all animal-like behavior in men and women.... Thus good manners repressed emotions. The courteous denied or delayed all impulses, never admitted fear, controlled and channeled anger into the duel, and sublimated sexual appetites through elaborate flirtations.”²⁴ I should also note that it also coincided with the ability of newly potent rulers to suppress feuding clans.

The literature on the duel is voluminous, and I can only give a short précis here, but in general, we can say two things about it: The duel, at least before the 1560s, involved submission to a central authority whose task it was to grant the field and supervise the combat; and it involved conventional rules and a legal process. It was, in other words, a channeling of violence into a more socially acceptable means. While origins of this ritual begin with ancient Lombard law, the duel for point of honor—the type of duel that Italian fencing masters concern themselves with in their works—first began to assume its ritualized

21 The idea of a “Mediterranean honor culture” was first popularized in Peristainy (ed.) *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* and most famously articulated by Julian Pitt-Rivers, especially in his *The fate of Shechem, or: The politics of sex, essays in the anthropology of the Mediterranean*.

22 Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring*.

23 Notable works include Angelozzi, *La nobiltà disciplinata*, Bryson, *The Sixteenth-Century Italian Duel*, Cavina, *Il duello giudiziario per punto d'onore*, Donati, *L'idea di nobiltà in Italia*, Hughes, “Soldiers and Gentlemen: The Rise of the Duel in Renaissance Italy,” Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy*, and Quint, “Duelling and Civility in Sixteenth-Century Italy.”

24 Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring*, pp. 163–64. See also his *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* pp. 149–151.

form in the late fourteenth century. In Naples, Baldo di Ubaldi (1327–1400) and Paris de Puteo (1410–1493) both popularized and elaborated upon the foundations laid by Giovanni da Legnano (c. 1320–1383).²⁵ It was in the early sixteenth century that the duel for the point of honor became the subject of a prescriptive literature, with writers such as Girolamo Muzio (1496–1576) codifying the procedure; fencing masters such as Achille Marozzo and Vincent Saviolo also appended lengthy works on the duel to their writings (the latter of which is almost wholly drawn from Muzio). A duel could only be legitimately called for when a “hidden truth”—particularly an accusation of lying—needed to be discovered. Anything else was more properly a subject for the courts. What was at risk, therefore, was one’s honor—shorthand for face, social credit, standing amongst one’s peers, etc.

We can see as an early example the combats that Fiore dei Liberi’s student Galeazzo da Mantova undertook against the French knight Jehan le Meingre (called Boucicault) in 1395 and 1406—the former undertaken because of the latter’s comment on the Italian lack of courage, the latter to avenge his earlier loss. The 1395 fight took place in Padua before that city’s lord, Francesco Novello di Carrara and Francesco Gonzaga, lord of Mantua and Galeazzo’s kinsman, and was stopped before serious harm came to either. Similarly, in 1392, Galeazzo had defeated an English champion before the King of France. Much like the tournament, the duel thus became an arena in which centralized authority could exert itself.²⁶

In both earlier and later periods the format was roughly the same. The wronged party would have a *cartello*—a signed, notarized, and often published challenge—drawn up, stating what the accused had done. The recipient could then agree to meet them on the field of battle, or else draw up a reply of their own, typically accusing the plaintiff of lying—in which case, the plaintiff became the defendant. This maneuvering was often strategic, since the challenged party had the choice of weapons.

The duel itself was a ritualized combat, conducted before witnesses in a closed field granted by a ruler, and in a predetermined period of time—the contest would be ended by sunset. If one party touched their back to the palisade surrounding the field, their case was lost. The right of the first attack went to the accuser, which is why so much of early modern fencing literature concerns “agent” and “patient” swordsmen. Other stipulations, such as a prohibition against grappling or striking the opponent’s horse or (in earlier periods) a

25 Cavina, *Il duello*, pp. 90–91.

26 For more on royal sponsorship of deeds of arms in the context of the growth of centralized power during the Hundred Years’ War, see Muhlberger, *Deeds of Arms*.

specified number of passes, might also apply. At first, the expectation was that such duels would use normal military equipment, and even be fought on horseback, but by the close of the fifteenth century, Castiglione mocks those who “am themselves for cannonades.”²⁷ Conversely, his contemporary in Urbino, the Spanish master-at-arms Pietro (Pedro) Monte, deplored the “duel fought in shirtsleeves (*en camisa*)” on the grounds it did not conform to military usage.²⁸ Fashion, however, did not heed Monte’s complaints, and, though some challenged duelists called for armor or even bizarre equipment such as swords that would shatter if employed improperly, it was considered the best display of *virtù* to use the sidearms in common use—the sword alone or accompanied by a dagger—on foot and without defensive armament.

For all of this, the duel quickly passed out of the reach of rulers, even as fencing books continued to be dedicated to noble patrons. In 1549, the Council of Trent renewed the ecclesiastical prohibition against dueling, and in 1563, it specifically called upon rulers to prohibit the practice (The La Chaigneraie-Jarnac debacle had already taken place in Paris in 1547). The legal recognition of the duel of honor thus ended. However, the legalistic elements, such as the *cartelli* and treatises on how to conduct such affairs honorably, remained in place until the First World War.

We must not invest too much in the image of the Italian bravo eager to avenge any *punctilio* with blood. In fact, there is a certain irony that at the moment when Italianate fencing began to become fashionable in Europe, interpersonal violence was actually on the decline. Donald Weinstein has claimed that duels were rare in Italy, especially after the seventeenth century, and that *cartelli* often came to naught.²⁹ The record on rates of interpersonal violence in premodern Europe is spotty at best, but Pieter Spierenburg, in his synthesis *A History of Murder*, has redacted various studies and highlighted some trends.³⁰ Foremost amongst these is that violence seems to have been most common in urban areas and in times of economic stress. Studies of murder rates collated by Spierenburg from various studies range from 9–25 per 100,000 inhabitants in thirteenth-century Kent, to a high of 110 in pre-Black Death 1340s Oxford and a similar amount in late fourteenth century

27 Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, ed. Giulio Carnazzi, p. 76.

28 Anglo, “The Man who Taught Leonardo Darts,” p. 266.

29 Weinstein, “Fighting or flyting: Verbal duelling in mid-sixteenth-century Italy.” On martial performance in general, see the essays in Del Negro and Ortalli (eds.), *Il gioco e la guerra nel secondo millennio*.

30 Spierenburg, *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*.

Florence, to 47 for mid-fifteenth century Amsterdam and 38 in 1470s and '80s Stockholm.³¹ The early modern era finds a less sanguineous situation, 5 per 100,000 in late sixteenth-century Kent, 23 for Amsterdam between 1560 and 1590, between 20 and 36 in Stockholm from 1545–1625. However, some cities were safer than others. As anyone who has read Cellini's memoirs is no doubt aware, violence was endemic in Renaissance Rome (Camillo Agrippa's adopted home), with a high of 47.3 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in Rome from 1560–1585.³² Despite numerous decrees against the carrying of weapons, Romans commonly went about armed, with swords being the most popular weapons. Blastenbrei, in his study of Roman barber-surgeons' mandatory reports on injuries caused by assault, relates that the seasonal occurrence of violence in late sixteenth-century Rome strongly corresponded to both how effectively a particular pope could impose peace on the population and with the season—violence was higher both in papal interregnums and in times of want.³³

However, overall, we can say that, even as the level of state violence increased, civil society became a safer place in early modern Europe. The reason why was similar to that for the rise of the duel: a decline in violence was correlated with both the increased reach of justice and the internalization of codes of conduct. Similarly, the fashionableness of the rapier was associated with the growth of the state, or more, accurately, the culture of the court. Even the duel, which at its worst was socially sanctioned murder, actually represented a decline in violence. Better to have one or two or (as in the *duel des mignons*) four dead, than a private war between powerful families or magnates.³⁴ We must therefore see fencing as a distinct phenomenon from actual violence.

31 Ibid., pp. 15–16, 70–71.

32 Ibid., pp. 70–71; on Rome, see Blastenbrei, "Violence, arms and criminal justice", pp. 71–73.

33 Ibid., p. 77.

34 As with most Italian history, studies tend to be highly regional. For an excellent (if now somewhat dated) review article on violence, see Smail, "Factions and Vengeance in Renaissance Italy: A Review Article." More recent works include Angelozzi, "Il duello dopo il duello: il caso Bolognese"; Angelozzi and Casanova, *La nobiltà disciplinata*; Cohn and Ricciardelli (eds.), *The Culture of Violence in Renaissance Italy: Proceedings of the International Conference*; Thomas V. Cohen and Elizabeth S. Cohen, *Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome: Trials before the Papal Magistrates* and his wonderfully entertaining microhistory *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy*; Dean and Lowe (eds.), *Crime, Society, and the Law in Renaissance*; and Weinstein, *The Captain's Concubine: Love, Honor, and Violence in Renaissance Tuscany*. For a pan-European and cross-chronological perspective, see Muchembled, *A History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present*, especially chapters 4–7. For the situation in France, see Billacois, *Le Duel dans la société française des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: Essai de psycho-sociologie historique*.

However, even if death by the sword was becoming more uncommon, fencing remained an important performance. The wearing of swords was still a symbol of social class, and fencing was part of an elite education. In the age of courts and courtliness, Italian (and afterwards, French) fencing masters came to be the arbiters of taste. Italian masters taught a skill that was valuable to those who wished to fit into the *habitus* of this new world, and printers and masters alike recognized that fencing-books could be a profitable venture. (This is why the German written fencing tradition is by and large a manuscript tradition—it was an orally transmitted culture and a martial method that was not as fashionable in the age of print.) The sanguineous illustrations therein must not be taken literally; they served not only to educate the reader, but, as with the statistically rare self-defense and home-invasion scenarios so often cited by American firearms-rights advocates, also titillate him with the spectacle of idealized combats—a sort of martial pornography.³⁵

3 Terms of Art

Though the following discussion is intended for the non-specialist, fencing literature, like all bodies of technical knowledge, has its own vocabulary intended to explain in a few words what would ordinarily take many. Therefore, before proceeding, it is necessary to explain a few terms of art necessary to the discussion. Rather than explaining the various disparate terminologies used by master of the medieval and early modern periods—which all explain the same phenomena in slightly different terms, all similarly derived from Aristotle—I will use the unified language of modern fencing, which, besides being descended from the early modern Italian terms, explains the same physical realities in a convenient shorthand.³⁶

Tempo is the way in which the duration of fencing actions are compared. One discrete action of the body or weapon, whether circular or rectilinear, is one tempo. Obviously, one tempo may be shorter or longer than another—for instance, making a large, slow circle with the point will be a larger tempo than a small, fast semicircle. The term is, of course, derived from the Aristotelian

35 For instance, the rapier through the eye in Capoferro Plate 7 or the transfixed fencer in Fabris Plate 178.

36 A full account of the technical development of the Italian school (albeit one much geared towards the bias implied by its subtitle) may be gleaned from Gaugler's *History of Fencing*.

dictum of time being the “number of the motion with respect to the before and the after” in his *Physics*.³⁷

An *attack* is the initial offensive movement made by one or the other of the fencers, and is defined by the extension of the weapon towards the adversary. An attack made in one movement is a *simple attack*. A simple attack may be direct—in a straight line—or indirect—that is, moving around the adversary’s weapon (termed a *cavazione* in the literature).³⁸ The attack may be preceded by one or several *preparatory* actions. Chief amongst these in post-Agrippa, thrust-oriented fencing are the *stringere* in early modern works or *legamento* (engagement) in modern works, which place one’s own blade in such a manner that the adversary is simultaneously threatened and obliged to move his own blade, thus creating a tempo in which he may be hit. As a preparatory action, one can also make one or more *feints*, drawing a parry or parries, followed by the attack itself. This is termed a *compound attack* and is performed in two or more movements, and thus two or more tempi.

A *parry* (*parata*) is the act of defending oneself by diverting the opposing steel with one’s own weapon or weapons. A *riposte* (*riposta*) is the defender’s offensive action following their parry. A response by parry and riposte is thus two tempi. A *counterattack* (known as *controtempo* or *contratempo* in early modern fencing literature)³⁹ is to respond to an attack with an offensive action of one’s own—hopefully in such a manner that either the adversary’s steel is simultaneously diverted, or by moving so that his attack misses entirely. Finally, *measure* is the relative distance between the two opponents. These terms are the sum total of the fencing knowledge the reader will require to follow the discussion.

4 The Medieval Tradition

The earliest supposed fencing literature in Italy is a tradition of a manuscript supposedly written by a “del Serpente” and dating to the last decade of the thirteenth century. The most detailed reference to this is by Karl E. Lochner

37 *Physics* IV.11, 220a24.

38 This is not universal; Giganti (q.v.), for instance, considers the *cavazione* as two tempi. We may see the early modern *cavazione* contextually as not necessarily an attack, but any circular action.

39 Note that in modern fencing terminology, countertime is an action against a counterattack.

in his 1953 *Die Entwicklungsphasen der europäischen Fechtkunst*.⁴⁰ Ada Bruhn-Hoffmeyer, in her 1979 essay “From Medieval Sword to Renaissance Rapier,” likewise makes reference to a del Serpente writing a book in 1295.⁴¹ David Nicolle, in the text of *French Medieval Armies 1000–1300* (1991), part of the popular-audience Osprey series on military history, claims that this was written before 1280, and that it showed the Italian habit of using a lighter weapon and hooking one finger over the quillon—clearly an influence from Bruhn-Hoffmeyer’s racist ideas of martial practice being cognate with ethnic identity.⁴² The ur-source of the del Serpente citation is the Italian fencing master Blengini di Torricella’s 1907 “Handbook of Fencing with the Foil,” who claimed that “François” (Francesco) Novati and [Paolo] Gaffuri, Director of the Instituto Grafico in Bergamo, published in 1904 a description of the career of brothers Guillaume, Jacques, Thomas and Phillipe del Serpente, who supposedly taught fighting on horseback and on foot with sword, dagger, and lance in Milan in 1292 and then in Paris from 1293 to 1296, later moving to Iberia. Guillaume del Serpente supposedly wrote a book in 1295 whose title Blengini reported as “Fencing Rules, Rules concerning ways to attack and defend oneself with white arms.”⁴³ However, no such article, chapter, or book by Novati is known, and nothing in Cochin’s complete bibliography of Novati’s work suggests a candidate.⁴⁴ Sydney Anglo has suggested the misapprehension may come from the mention of Phelippe, a fencing master living on the “rue de la Serpente” in Paris in the 1292 tax-roll of Phillip IV,⁴⁵ Following Anglo, we must

40 Lochner, *Die Entwicklungsphasen der europäischen Fechtkunst*, p. 14: “Es hat sicherlich bereits früher Handschriften gegeben, die sich mit dem Probleme der Blankwaffenführung befaßten, wie beispielsweise jene Dal Serpentes aus dem Jahre 1295, doch sind wir nicht im Stande, aus der Existenz solcher Versuche auf irgend ein tatsächliches System, eine wenn auch noch so dürftige Volkstümlichkeit wie irgend einen Zusammenhang mit bleibenden Erkenntnissen oder Fortschritten zu schließen, Zu dauerhaften Fortschritten auf diesem engeren Gebiete waren ja auch noch die primitivsten Voraussetzungen nicht gegeben und der Mangel einer verständnisvollen wie begabtesten Neuerungsbestrebungen zum Scheitern verurteilen.”

41 Bruhn Hoffmeyer, “From Medieval Sword to Renaissance Rapier: The Evolution of Straight Bladed Thrusting Weapons,” pp. 52–79.

42 Nicolle, *French Medieval Armies 1000–1300*, p. 40.

43 *Fægteregler, Regler angaaende Maadet at angribe og forsvare sig med blanke Vaaben*. Quoted in Torricella, *Haandbog i Fægtning med Floret, Kaarde, Sabel, Forsvar med Sabel mod Bajonet og Sabelhugning tilhest, Med forklarende Tegninger og en Oversigt over Fægtkunstens Historie og Udvikling*, p. 28. The book was also published in German in 1909, though Blengini was himself Italian.

44 Cochin, *Bibliografia degli scritti di Francesco Novati, 1878–1908*.

45 Anglo, *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 322 n. 64.

take this tradition as spurious, perhaps a conflation of the French Phelippe and Novati's edition of the Pisani-Dossi manuscript of *Fiore dei Liberi*, which was published in 1902 by the Istituto Grafico.

Thus, pride of place for writing the first Italian fencing treatise to survive must go to the Friulian master *Fiore dei Liberi*, who taught a versatile art that included wrestling, self-defense against the dagger, sword, polearms, and fighting in armor on foot and on horseback with various weapons. *Fiore's* work comes down to us in four contemporary manuscripts—Morgan Library MS M.383, Getty MS Ludwig xv 13, the copy privately held by the Pisani-Dossi family, and one posthumous Latin translation, Bibliothèque National de France MS Latin 11269.⁴⁶ Two other *Fiore* manuscripts attested in the Estense library from 1436 to 1508, MS LXXXIV and MS CX, are currently unknown and presumed lost.⁴⁷ *Fiore* has been a major fixture in Italian fencing scholarship, beginning with Novati's 1902 edition of the Pisani-Dossi manuscript and Luigi Zanutto's 1907 *Fiore dei Liberi da Premariacco e i ludi e le festi marziali in Friuli nel Medio-evo*.⁴⁸ There have also been several recent editions and translations.⁴⁹

Most of our information on *Fiore* comes from his own writings. Judging from the length of time he claims to have studying arms in the introductions to his manuscripts, and the average age at which such study would have begun, *Fiore* was probably born c. 1350; he died sometime between 1409 and the 1420s. His father was a knight named Benedetto, lord of the town of Premariacco, which

46 On my discovery of this in the BnF, see my article, "Notes on Bibliothèque Nationale MS Lat, 11269, Florius de Arte Lutandi." There is also the poet and librettist Apostolo Zeno's copy of the introduction to Ms xv 13 in San Daniele del Friuli, Biblioteca Guarneriana Ms xxiv ff. 83–84.

47 Novati, *Flos duellatorum*, pp. 29–30.

48 Novati, *Flos duellatorum*; Zanutto, *Fiore dei Liberi da Premariacco e i ludi e le festi marziali in Friuli nel Medio-evo*.

49 Malipiero has published the Getty manuscript as *Il Fior di battaglia di Fiore dei Liberi da Cividale: Il Codice Ludwig xv 13 del J. Paul Getty Museum*, while an edition of all three Italian manuscripts was published by Rubboli and Cesari as *Flos Duellatorum: Manuale di Arte del Combattimento del xv secolo*. Leoni has also published a translation of the Getty as *Fior di Battaglia*. The Pisani-Dossi was republished by Rapisardi as *Flos Duellatorum in armis, sine armis, equester et pedester*. Synthetic treatments by recreationists include Galvani, Giralanda, and Enrico's *Flos Duellatorum 1409–2002: La pietra miliare della scuola marziale Italiana* (Rome, Libri del Circolo, 2002). See also my *Knighthly Art of Battle* (Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2011) and Martinez, "La Fleur des guerriers: métier des armes et art martial chez Fiore dei Liberi" in Jaquet (ed.), *L'art chevaleresque*, pp. 63–80. Francesco Lodà and I both have forthcoming translations of the Florius into our respective native tongues.

is located in the duchy of Friuli in the diocese of the Patriarch of Aquileia. The derivation of his surname is unknown, but may have originated with a Cristallo dei Liberi of Premariacco, who was elevated in rank by the Holy Roman Emperor Henry v in the twelfth century.⁵⁰ Fiore enjoyed popularity as a master of arms to the nobility, particularly amongst those of Visconti allegiance, and trained Galeazzo di Mantua for his combat with the French knight Boucicault in 1395.⁵¹

Since the Getty and Pisani-Dossi manuscripts are dedicated Niccolò III d'Este, Marquis of Ferrara and a noted literary patron, historians have tended to place Fiore as Niccolò's master-at-arms. However, there is no evidence of Fiore as actually having received payment for any services.⁵² As salaries of household members were not written down in the account books, Fiore was either very close to the Marquis, or, more likely, his manuscripts were diplomatic presents commissioned by the Visconti.⁵³ However, the posthumous MS 11269 is probably a Ferrarese production that incorporates very d'Este references to the Matter of France to the text, even as it reified Fiore's gruff soldierly voice into educated Latin verses. (Like Fiore's, the vast majority of later works would also be dedicated to a ruler—a topic that could fill pages by itself.)

The ambiguity with which Fiore describes his art underscores its manuscript context. Though he does mention some footwork movements (mainly turns and steps) and the use of the various postures and guards, he does not give detailed instructions, and how to perform these techniques must be deduced from context. Even in the Getty, the most verbose of the four manuscripts, Fiore does not describe how to cut or parry, though he does name the cuts and show some techniques involving parrying; nor does he give any explanation of tactics, timing, or any of the other things that are in a complete fencing

50 Novati, *Flos duellatorum*, pp. 15–16.

51 The last two students Fiore mentions in his autobiographies in the Getty and Morgan manuscripts, Giovannino da Baio and Azzo da Castelbarco, were either Milanese or fought combats sanctioned and presided over by Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan and also a noted patron of learning. Since Gian Galeazzo was not named duke until 1395, we can tentatively date Fiore's tutoring Giovannino and Azzo to after this date. Fiore also mentions training Giovannino da Baggio for a combat in Pavia in 1399, which at that time was a Milanese possession and home to the Visconti library. For more information, see my article, "Notes on Bibliothèque Nationale MS Lat, 11269."

52 Numerous English-language works on Estense Ferrara exist, of which the most notable are Dean, *Land and Power in Late Medieval Ferrara* and Gundersheimer, *Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Depotism*. Notable scholars associated with the mid-fifteenth century Estense court included Giovanni di Michele Savonarola and Guarino Veronese.

53 Trevor Dean, private correspondence with Greg Mele.

system. His techniques begin with the swords already crossed at long or short measure, but he does not tell us how to arrive there safely, or which figure was the initial attacker and which the defender. Techniques are cross-referenced back and forth in a manner that requires several readings to fully appreciate, with the same movements reoccurring in dagger, sword, and pole weapons. (See figures 11.1–3.)

This organization is fitting with the pedagogy of Fiore's time. Since the audience of a manuscript is by nature more limited than that of a printed book, we must see these works more as *aide-mémoires* than as instructional texts; the reader would have already received physical instruction in the pattern of movement that was to be replicated. This instruction would presumably be given by Fiore himself or by one of his successors. Fiore, realizing the transitory nature of this sort of knowledge, explicitly says in his prologues that he wishes to be remembered for his art, and so (despite having taught in secrecy in his lifetime), he is setting down his knowledge in a book.⁵⁴

Other works derived from the Fiore manuscript tradition exist, including several German manuscripts and Filippo Vadi's *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*.⁵⁵ The manuscripts in the so-called *Blume des Kampfs* group—the anonymous, textless Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. 5278 (after 1428), Ludwig VI von Eyb's *Kriegsbuch* (c. 1500),⁵⁶ and Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. 10799 (composed 1623)—all contain considerable stylistic and technical overlap with Fiore's manuscripts. The first two of these manuscripts also contain Konrad Kyeser's treatise on siege warfare *Bellifortis* (composed c. 1405). There are several possibilities here. First, Fiore, who mentions studying with a master "Johannes Suveno" ("the Swabian"), student of "Nicholai de Toblem," may have drawn on German models; in other words Fiore's own work may represent a now-lost transalpine literary and martial tradition. Second, one of Fiore's books may have served as a template for Cod. 5278, which seems to be the ur-text in the *Blume des Kampfs* tradition. Third, these may represent derivative works stemming from one of Fiore's

54 Morgan MS M.383 folio 2r: *Considerando io preditto che in questa arte pochi al mondo sen trovano magistri e vogliando che de mi sia fatta memoria in questa arte io farò uno libro . . .*; Getty MS Ludwig xv 13 folio 1v: *Considerando io predetto fiore che in quest'arte pochi al mondo sen trovano magistri e vogliando che di mi sia fatta memoria in ella io farò un libro in tuta l'arte e de tutte chose . . .*

55 Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma Ms 1342, Filippo Vadi, *Liber de Arte gladiatoria dimicandi*; translated by Porzio and Mele as *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi: 15th Century Swordsmanship of Master Fillipo Vadi*.

56 Nürnberg, Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg Ms B.26.



FIGURE 11.1 Dagger “masters” from Getty MS Ludwig XV 13 fol. 10r. Each has a mnemonic device to show the sequence of actions when defending oneself from a dagger attack: Take away the dagger, break the arm, put them in a joint lock (the key), and cast them down. Also notice that the ages of the masters increases as one progresses in the sequence of actions.

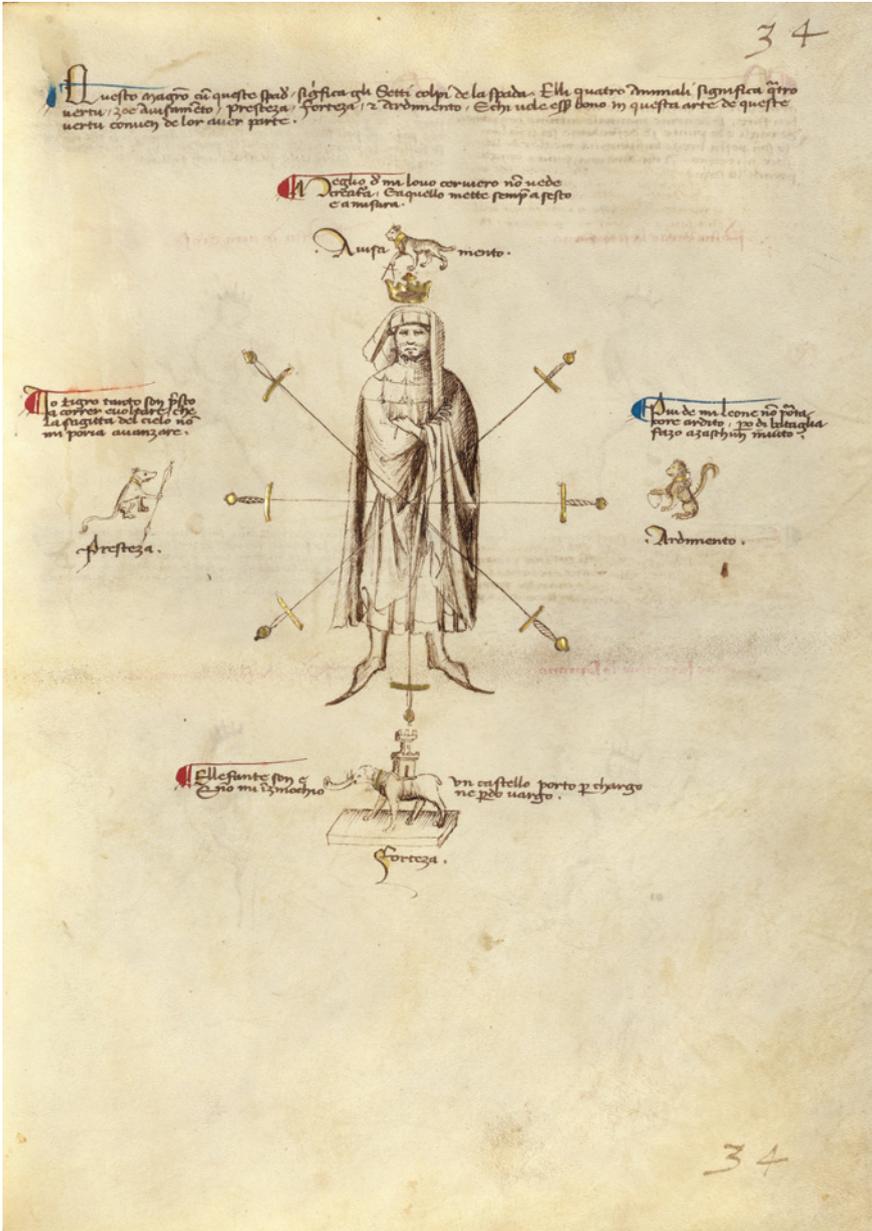


FIGURE 11.2 The “master of the seven swords” from Getty folio 32r. Besides naming the directions of sword cuts, the diagram shows the four qualities a good fencer should possessed personified as animals: A lynx with dividers for vision and judgment; a tiger with an arrow for speed; a lion with a heart for courage; and an elephant with a tower on its back for strength.

students. In any case, the *Blume des Kampfs* manuscripts show that martial teaching on the Italian peninsula was not by any means a hermetically closed vessel.

Vadi, who identifies himself as Pisan, might be the same Filippo Vadi who served Leonello d'Este as governor of Reggio and, later, as counselor to Borso d'Este—which would have given him ample opportunity to become familiar with Fiore's manuscripts in the Estense library. However, though *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* was clearly modeled on one of the manuscripts of Fiore dei Liberi, and the organization of its longsword, poleax, armored fighting, staff weapons, dagger-defense, and wrestling are similar to BnF MS Latin 11269, it is not solely a Ferrarese creation—it was originally owned by Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, to whom it is dedicated, and thus reflects the milieu of the influential court of Urbino. Accordingly, it develops its subject matter in new directions. Further, though the structure by which Vadi composed his book may borrow from Fiore's organizational schema, his fencing is not the same: He uses a longer sword, and changes some guards, as well much of the footwork. Like their modern counterparts, medieval and early modern masters were always aware that swordsmanship is not a static thing or that the methods of an idealized past might not be the most suited to today, but rather that fencing changed in response to a dynamic social, cultural, and material environment.

Quite aptly for the milieu of Urbino, which hosted luminaries such as Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Luca Pacioli, Vadi is notable for including a verse introduction presenting an overall theorization of fencing that incorporates a number of scientific ideas. For instance, Vadi presents the argument that fencing, like music, is a science, since the sword is subject to Euclidian geometry:

Geometry divides and separates
 with infinite numbers and measures
 that fill pages with knowledge.
 The sword is under its purview
 since it is useful to measure blows and steps
 in order to make the science more secure,
 Fencing is born from geometry
 [...]
 Music adorns this subject
 song and sound together in art
 to make it more perfect by science,
 Geometry and music together

combine their scientific virtue in the sword
to adorn the great light of Mars.⁵⁷

The idea of the relationship between fencing and geometry is not unique to Vadi: In a 1443 petition to the of Bologna, Filippo di Bartolomeo Dardi (died c. 1464) says that geometry “matches the art of fencing because in this there is nothing other than just measure, as I can demonstrate by lecture;” likewise, he says that he merited a post in astronomy because “astronomy . . . is by its nature geometrical.”⁵⁸

As with space, time. Building on the idea of astronomy as number in space and time, and a sole reference in the Paris manuscript of *The Flower of Battle*,⁵⁹ Vadi is the first writer to elaborate on ideas of *tempo*—an expression of timing that is quite different from the German ideas of *vor* and *nach*, though similarly rooted in Aristotelian physics. In keeping with the Scholastic philosophy on time laid down by Jean Buridan, Nicholas Oresme, and other thinkers in their commentaries on the *Physics*, time—*tempo*—can only be measured relatively, against other quantities, such as the movements of one’s adversary; thus, in his *segno*, or mnemonic diagram illustrating the qualities a swordsman must possess, Vadi places a pair of dividers over the head of his ideal fencer: “I am a sextant that can divide | O Fencer, heed my reasoning | since you will similarly measure time.”⁶⁰ (The master-at-arms whom Castiglione documented as serving in Urbino, Pietro Monte (q.v.), was also notable for his interest in natural philosophy.)⁶¹ This proportional division of time is evident in Vadi’s idea of *mezzo tempo*, a counterattack that interrupts the adversary’s action with a smaller, quicker movement. Similar conceptions of time—and the device of the dividers—reoccur in fencing books throughout our period. As in so much

57 Ms 1342, fol. 4r, trans. Mele and Porzio pp. 42–43: *La geometria che divide e parte / Per infiniti numeri emisure / Che impie di scientia le sue carte, / La spade e sotto posta a le sue cure / Convien che si mesuri i colpi e i passi / Acio che la scientia tasecure / Da geometria lo scrimir se nasce / . . . / La musica ladorna esa sugetto, / Chel canto elsono senframette in larte, / Per farlo di scientia piu perfecto / La geometria e musica comparte / Le loro virtu scientifiche in la spada / Per adornare el gran lume de Marte*

58 *la quale e conforma al arte del scrimere perche in quella non e altro che misura propria la quale posso per lectura demonstrare. . . . de quella si fo per meritarme dele fatiche passate in astrologia, la quale / e di natura geumetrare*. Archivio di Stato, Bologna, Comune, Governo, busta 318, Riformagioni e provvigioni, Serie miscellanea, busta 5. Thanks to Trevor Dean.

59 BnF MS 11269 f14v.

60 Ms 1324, fol. 15r; trans. Mele and Porzio pp. 88–89: *Io sono un sexto che fo partimenti / O scrimitore ascolta mia ragione / Cusi misura el tempo simelmente*

61 Anglo, “The Man Who Taught Leonardo Darts.”

else, by unifying the intellectual and the martial, the Court of Urbino pointed the way forwards in fashion.

Besides the Fiore/Vadi tradition, two other manuscripts must be included in any accounting of fifteenth-century Italian fencing works. The first is an anonymous, undated, French work on poleax fighting known as *Le Jeu de la Hache*, which may be a record of the teachings of a Milanese master named Ambrose.⁶² In 1440, Phillip the Good of Burgundy paid 12 *livres* to Ambrose, who had been his master of sword and axe for at least six years (calculating from a stated pay rate of 40 *deniers* per month).⁶³ This would make sense, as there was apparently a literary-martial tradition in northern Italy, whereas we have no other surviving French documents and, to judge from the fine presentation of the manuscript, *Le Jeu* was a *de luxe* copy prepared for a wealthy patron to commemorate his master's tuition.⁶⁴

The final fifteenth-century Italian manuscript on fencing is a short text contained on folio 105r of the University of Toronto's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Room MS 1020, known by its incipit "Hec Sunt Guardiae in Dimicatione Videlicet." This work gives a series of wards and counter-wards for master and student similar to those in Royal Armouries MS I.33—though whether the weapon is sword and buckler, or sword alone, is impossible to tell from context.⁶⁵ Judging by the calendar on folio 6r of the manuscript, this work dates to c. 1424. This is the only fencing work from Italy in *hausbuch* form,⁶⁶ the only solely in Latin, and the only to possibly concern itself with sword and buckler, a weapons form that, to judge from depictions in art, was common in medieval Italy as in the rest of Europe. The book's other pages contain a T-O map, a calendar, notabilia from the Bible arranged according to occasion, psalms, lists of unlucky "Egyptian days," and forms of addressing the nobility. The book was probably the property of a notary or scribe from Florence, as there are mentions of the Albizzi family and a Florentine church canon.⁶⁷

62 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France Ms français 1996, translated by Anglo in his article "Le jeu de la hache."

63 *Archives historiques et littéraires du Nord de la France et du Midi de la Belgique* Vol. 3, p. 186.

64 See also Olivier Dupuis' contribution in this volume.

65 Toronto, University of Toronto Ms 1020. On Leeds, Ms I.33, see Forgeng, ed. and trans., *The Medieval Art of Swordsmanship: A Facsimile and Translation of Europe's Oldest Personal Combat Treatise*.

66 A *hausbuch*, or commonplace book, is a personal notebook, as opposed to a presentation manuscript.

67 Les Enluminures (corporate author), http://www.textmanuscripts.com/manuscript_description.php?id=2999&%20cat=p2&, accessed March 21, 2014.

What all these medieval works have in common is their pedagogical model—the medieval idea of education as copying patterns. Much as artists' apprentices copied the master's works or aspiring literati copied the letters of Cicero, fencing students followed forms that, like *kata* in Japanese martial arts, were intended to work the correct techniques and tactical responses into their muscle memory. The Paduan humanist Gasparino Barzizza (1360–1431) even compared learning to write literature to learning to paint from following a master's model.⁶⁸ The written record reflects this, Fiore's works give a sequence of plays, or actions, to serve as exemplars; Vadi begins to strive for a theory of fencing with his verses, but ultimately falls back on the same teaching system that Fiore employed. In Fiore's own manuscripts, the system had been taken even further, a complex hierarchy of figures wearing crowns, garters, and both crowns and garters denotes techniques, counter-techniques, and counters to the counters. Similarly, *Le Jeu de la Hache* gives various paradigmatic "plays," or actions. "Hec Sunt Guardiae in Dimicatione Videlicet" simply gives formulaic sets opposing postures—if the master is in the guard of the long tail (*cauda lunga*), the student is in the cross (*cruce*), much as is illustrated at the beginning of Fiore and Vadi's sections introducing the guards used in the various weapons they teach. The teacher's voice, as it comes across in the text, does not justify or equivocate. There is no need to justify the model, which speaks with the authority of tradition—only to emulate it.

5 The First Half of the Sixteenth Century: A Transitional Period

If the medieval Italian tradition is somewhat scanty, this is made up for by the richness of incunabula and post-incunabula. The first of these is Pietro Monte's *De Dignoscendis Hominibus*, printed in Milan in 1492 by Antonio Zaroto Parmenion. This is not strictly a fencing treatise, but it is first surviving printed work dealing with personal combat and the first to be printed in Italy.⁶⁹ *De Dignoscendis* is rather something of a miscellany; it talks about psychology, humoral theory, and religious matters, as well as exercise (especially wrestling) and nutrition. A Spanish copy is Escorial MS a.IV.23; the section on wrestling also exists in Italian translation as Codex Estense T.VII.25 (again, as with the

68 *Gasparini Barzizii Bergomatis et Guiniforti Filii Opera*, ed. J. Furiettus, Vol. 1, p. 180. See Baxandall, "Guarino, Pisanello, and Manuel Chrysoloras."

69 The first printed books were by the Spanish masters Jaime Pons (1474) and Pedro de la Torre (1474), mentioned by Pacheco de Narvaez in his *Nueva ciencia y filosofia de la destreza de las armas*. No surviving examples are known.

Fiore-Vadi connection, pointing to some exchange of martial-arts writing between the courts of Ferrara and Urbino).⁷⁰ Monte's last works are more explicitly martial. These are *Exercitiorum Atque Artis Militaris Collectanea* and *De Singulare Certamine Sive Dissentione*, both published in Milan in 1509, the year of Monte's death, by Giovanni Angelo Scinzenzler. This first is, as its name implies, a collection of techniques for various weapons, both military and civilian, mounted and on foot; the other is a treatise on the duel.⁷¹

The richest and most important source of early printed Italian fencing books is the so-called Bolognese school. The authors in this tradition include Antonio Manciolino, who published the now-lost first edition of his *Opera Nova* c. 1523 and a revised version in Venice in 1531;⁷² the work of Achille Marozzo (1484–1553), also titled *Opera Nova*, printed in Modena in 1536 (with reprints in Bologna in 1546, Venice in 1550 and 1568, and Verona in 1615);⁷³ Giovanni dall'Agocchie, who published *Dell'Arte di Scrima Libri Tre* in Venice in 1572; Angelo Viggiani (d. 1552)'s *Lo Schermo*, published posthumously in Venice in 1575 and reprinted in Bologna in 1588; and Mercurio Spetoli's brief *Capitolo di M. Mercurio Spetoli da Fermo, nel quale si mostra il modo di saper bene schermire, & caualcare*, published in Bologna in 1577. Viggiani also exists as a decorated manuscript, created in 1567, that was presented as a gift to Maximilian II; the other notable manuscript from this tradition is the Anonimo Bolognese, which likely precedes any of the aforementioned works.⁷⁴

70 For a transcription and analysis of Codex Estense T.VII.25, see "Il primo manuale italiano di lotta: testo anonimo del sec. XV con introduzione e note," ed. Carlo Bascetta in *Annali della Facoltà di lettere e filosofia*, Università di Macerata, 7 (1974): 403–454.

71 See Anglo, "The man who taught Leonardo darts" and *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, especially pp. 236–238, as well as Fontaine, "L'athlète et l'homme moyen: le nouveau regard de la Renaissance."

72 Edited by Rubboli and Battistini as *Opera Nova di Antonio Manciolino* and translated by Leoni as *The Complete Renaissance Swordsman: Antonio Manciolino's Opera Nova*.

73 Edited by Giovanni Rapisardi as *Achille Marozzo: Opera Nova dell'Arte delle Armi*.

74 Viggiani's manuscript is Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Codex 10723; the Anonimo MSS are Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Ravenna Ms M345 and M346. I do not include in this list of the Bolognese tradition the 23-year-old Torquato d'Alessandri's *Il Cavaliere Compito*, which is less a fencing book and more a pedagogical dialogue between Braccioforte and his student Achille encompassing all the things a young nobleman embarking on a military career would need to know—similar to the *hausbuch* Nürnberger Cod. Hs. 3227a or the *Blume des Kampfs/Bellifortis* tradition. Only about a tenth of Alessandri's 108 pages (pp. 67–88, and then a last word on pp. 107–108) deals with the actual practice of swordplay. Like Viggiani, Alessandri (p. 67) exhorts his reader to practice with a sharp sword (*spada da filo*) instead of a foil (*spada di marra*). His fencing, especially his use of reverse cuts and the names of his guards, is reminiscent of Viggiani's.

The Bolognese school represented a common pedagogical and tactical model, with a common vocabulary and, one would assume, orthopraxy for guards and various other actions. It is concerned not only with the duel—Marozzo has a treatise on dueling, dall'Agocchie discusses how to train for a duel in thirty days, and Viggiani advises his student to practice with sharp weapons—but also with self-defense and with weapons one might wield in times of civil unrest or defense of the commune, such as polearms, Dall'Agocchie also has a book on jousting. The Anonimo differs from the rest of the Bolognese tradition in not only treating with the sword used alone against another sword or a pole weapon, or in conjunction with a gauntlet or various sorts of shield, as well as with the two-handed sword, but also uniquely in the Bolognese tradition giving instructions for poleaxe in full armor—all of which points to an earlier date of origin.⁷⁵ We have evidence of a continuity of teaching in Bologna going back to the fifteenth century: Filippo di Bartolomeo Dardi began to teach fencing about 1413, afterwards became in addition a professor of geometry and astronomy at the University of Bologna, as well as an astrologer for the commune; he, in turn, taught Marozzo's master, Guid'Antonio di Luca (died c. 1514).⁷⁶

The Florentine tradition comes down to us in several manuscripts. The first Francesco di Sandro Altoni's *Monomachia ovvero Arte di Scherma*, which survives in two copies as Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze MS 11.iii.315 and Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati di Siena MS L.v.23.⁷⁷ Altoni was possibly fencing master to Cosimo I de' Medici, to whom he dedicated his work. Since he used Cosimo's title as "Duke of Florence," the manuscripts are dated to between 1537–69. There is also the Anonimo Riccardiano,⁷⁸ which shows some similarity of techniques from the Bolognese school (for instance, false-edge parries that beat attacks away to the right side). The Riccardiano deals

What he teaches is mostly practical self-defense with sword and cape, though he speaks of teaching all weapons. On pp. 90–95, he also speaks of self-defense, including against dagger and pistol before concluding with some final philosophies concerning the study of arms.

75 Published by Rubboli and Cesari as *L'Arte della Spada, Trattato di scherma dell'inizio del XVI secolo*.

76 See Novati's notes to *Flos duellatorum*, p. 108, n. 179; Orioli's article in *Il Resto del Carlino*; and Pantanelli, "Scherma e maestri di scherma Bolognesi [sic]," pp. 45–49; Repertorio di tutti i professori antichi, e moderni, della famosa università, e del celebre Istituto delle scienze di Bologna : con in fine Università, pp. 56–57; Archivio di Stato, Bologna, Comune, Governo, busta 318, Riformagioni e provvigioni, Serie miscellanea, busta 5.

77 Altoni, *Monomachia: Trattato dell'arte di scherma*, ed. Battistini, Rubboli, and Venni.

78 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana Ms Ricc. 2541.

with sword alone, sword used with cape and dagger, pike, and two-handed sword (*spadone*). It also contains excerpts from Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, which would tend to point towards a Florentine origin. We may also tentatively add British Library Add. MS 23223 to this group; Piermarco Terminiello has noted some similarities with Altoni, pointing to a Tuscan, or at least central Italian, origin.⁷⁹ (A fourth author, Marco Docciolini, definitely hailed from Florence, but his printed treatise of 1601 is clearly a rapier work, and thus does not belong to this transitional period.)⁸⁰

The last transitional work needing discussion is the Neapolitan Marcantonio Pagano, who published his *Narratione di Marcantonio Pagano sopra le Tre Giornate della Disciplina dell'Arme* in 1553. This, as the title implies, is a dialogue not just on fencing, but on the art of arms in general, taking place in the home of a nobleman. It is not really a fencing treatise in the proper sense, as it is as much literary as technical and more conforms to Monte's early work. The action, as it were, takes place in a series of breathlessly described fencing matches that take place every evening between Mutio and Gerolamo. (Cesare Pagano, a relative of Marcantonio's who described himself as a "Neapolitan knight," wrote a similarly literary work in 1592, which was dedicated to Ferdinand, Archduke of Tuscany, and survives in the National Library of Florence.)⁸¹

However, despite the use of print, the rhetoric of instruction in the books of this transitional period is not much different from medieval models. Fencing, to Marozzo, Viggiani, and others of this tradition, is taught through forms and mock combats. While the *context* has changed to a civilian form of defense, the *pedagogical model* is still firmly rooted in medieval traditions of pattern-copying. To learn to fence from Achille Marozzo, for instance, was similar to being inducted into a craft-guild or *mestiero*, involving swearing oaths to God, the Virgin, and St. George. After the swearing-in, Marozzo has his students run through a series of guards with mnemonic names, such as the "guard of the long and extended tail," "head guard," "face guard," and "iron door guard of the boar," and then put them together into a series of one- or two-person lessons or *assalti*.⁸² His book, which gives only the student's role in these *assalti* and the barest hint of the master's part, is very much written for the teacher who already knows his art.

79 Piermarco Terminiello, personal correspondence.

80 Docciolini, *Trattato in Materia di Scherma*.

81 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, Magliabecchiana X1X 194.

82 Mondschein, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise*, p. xvii.

However, despite its pedagogical conservatism, the fencing of this period shows some important differences from the earlier era. Unlike Fiore and Vadi, the art shown in the fencing books of this period is a purely civilian one, making use of common sidearms—most frequently, the single-handed sword, used alone or in conjunction with auxiliary weapons—and not presuming the use of armor. Like their art, it is versatile: scenarios include both monomachia and defense against impromptu attacks with such weapons as daggers, as well as the use of hafted weapons. Italian fencing writers were beginning to explore the possibilities of the printed text, but had not yet realized its full implications for the transformation of knowledge. Learning was done by following a pattern—which is still true of teaching fencing motor skills today, but unquestioningly copying models was not an approach that appealed to the intellectual milieu of the later sixteenth century. It was Camillo Agrippa who would realize the revolutionary possibilities text brought to the codification of a physical art.

6 Camillo Agrippa and the Advent of the Rapier⁸³

To be sure, the term “rapier” is an anachronism when applied to Italian fencing: the weapon was always known as the *spada* (or *spada da filo* for a sharp-edged sword; *spada di marra* was used for a practice sword. The more recent terms, *spada da lato*, or “sidesword,” and *striscia*, a “long and narrow” sword, are neologisms that should be avoided, as must the antiquated curatorial tendency to apply the term “rapier” to any weapon with a complex hilt). Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that transformation of both weapons and the method of their employ took place in the mid-sixteenth century.

Alongside this, Agrippa represented a sea change in how fencing was expressed. His reader is not the student known personally to the master and in receipt of his teachings, but a consumer unknown to the author who has purchased this book because of a will to knowledge. Thus, while Agrippa’s system of fence—which was intended for the duel and self-defense as much as for sport—was not much of an innovation over previous masters (Altoni, for instance, also held with the primacy of the point), his method of

83 For a full discussion of the social context of Agrippa’s writing, please see the introduction to my translation of Camillo Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise*, ed. and trans. Ken Mondschein.

explaining it was.⁸⁴ His voice is not didactic, but argumentative. To Agrippa and his followers, fencing was a science subject to reasoned analysis, or *ragionamento*; the fencer-operator should train himself to perform the right action at the right time based on this analysis (see figures 11.3–5). Further, he deals with the sword alone, or in conjunction with a dagger, cloak, or another sword; hafted weapons and two-handed swords receive only the barest mention.

Whereas earlier masters employed cutting weapons and seemed to expect a certain order of play—attacks and feints followed by parries and ripostes, with the occasional counterattack where the opportunity presented itself—the conclusion Agrippa’s analysis inevitably arrived at was the superiority of the thrusting attack on the opponent’s preparation and the counterattack by time thrust, both of which made the smallest possible tempo. This was a method optimized for civilian combat out of armor, whereas the earlier systems were able to be deployed in a variety of scenarios, from sport to duels to warfare. In explaining this methodology, Agrippa self-consciously employed fashionable ideas of geometry, perspective, and science, all of which derived from a common belief of the importance of number linking the microcosm and macrocosm. While the idea of “improving” fencing was new—it arguably began with Vadi, who differentiates his play from that of his ancestors—Agrippa applies to it a steadfast confidence in his own reason and the new mentality of the Renaissance. He has made his fencing-book into a literary work that touches on many of the concerns shared by his contemporaries.

This was reflected in the structure of the treatise. Whereas previous authors were working within the paradigm of a medieval memory-book, either speaking in a voice of instruction to a presumed master or else simply listing techniques, Agrippa’s is the first *treatise*, speaking directly to the swordsman-operator, basing his arguments on elementary principles and not presupposing prior knowledge of any particular fencing tradition. In the first part, he dismisses the multiplicity of guards used by earlier authors, as well as the practice of holding the weapon chambered over one’s shoulder, and explains that four basic guards that keep the point in line are all that are needed. These four positions would become the basis for the guard positions used in fencing to this day. He then gives a geometrical demonstration of the superiority of the lunge. Following this, Agrippa then goes on to give a number of positions and actions derived from his first four guards, many of which are

84 My characterization of the rapier as a sporting implement might surprise some readers, but fencing was a courtly art form, previous and contemporary writers dealt with agonistic combat, and foils for thrust-oriented fencing were being made within two decades of Agrippa’s writing. See *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* p. xxv n. 24.

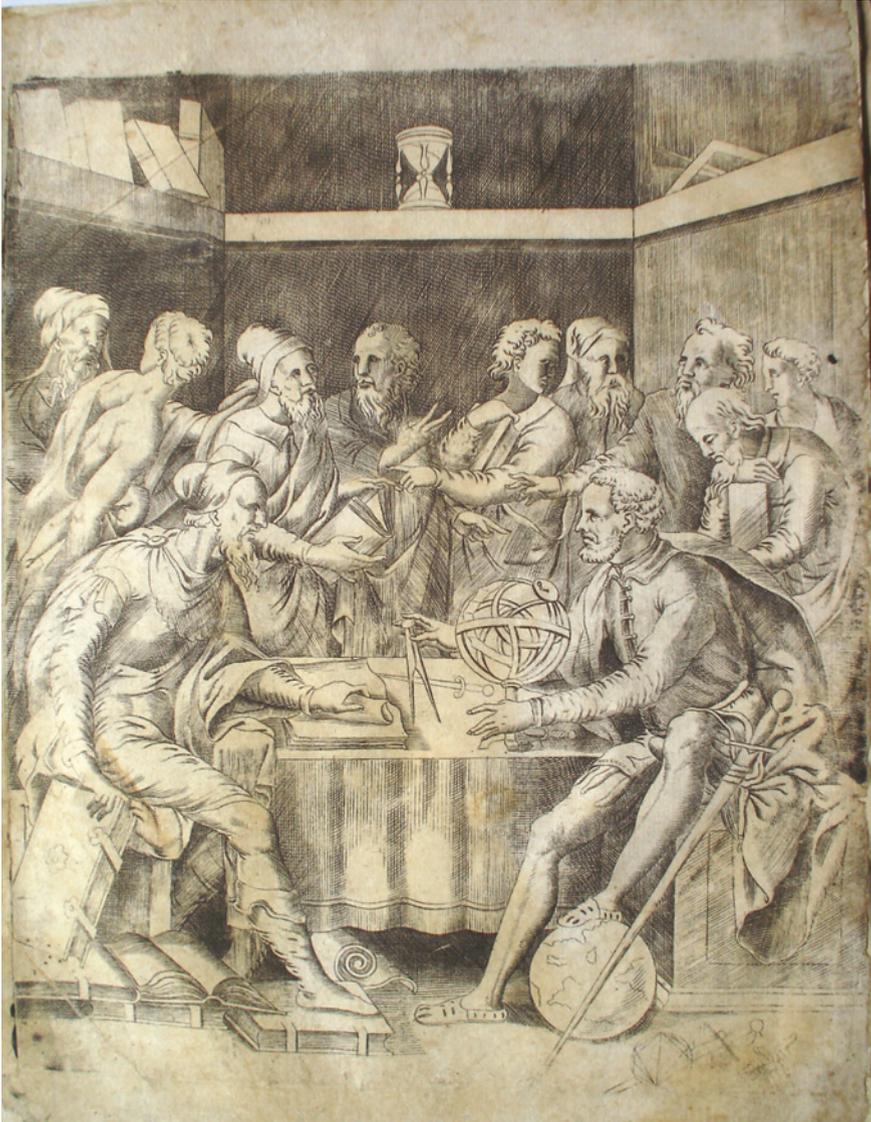


FIGURE 11.3 *Agrippa disputing with the philosophers. The author holds a dividers and an armillary sphere, suggesting his mastery of both practical and theoretical knowledge of the natural world. He is dressed fashionably and wears a sword. The globe is under his foot; near it are a geometrical diagram and a sword. The dagger on the table is pointing at the ludicrously dressed philosophers who are able to support their statements only with books. Measuring devices—a divider and square—are placed over Agrippa; dusty tomes over the proponents of traditional knowledge. Between the two is an hourglass representing the measurement of time.*

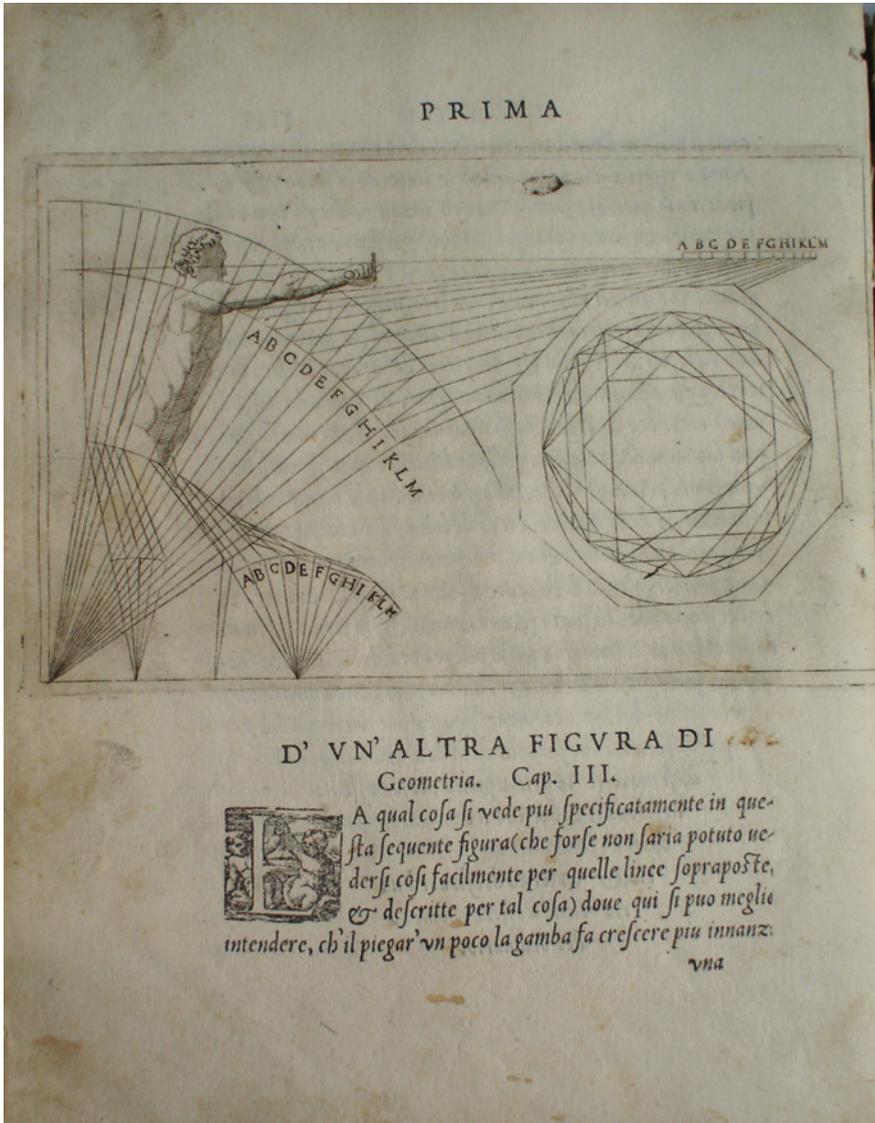


FIGURE 11.4 *Agrippa's geometrical diagram demonstrating the superiority of the lunge. The more the knee is bent, and the straighter the arm is extended, the further the sword's point reaches. Taking the Vitruvian scheme for building a temple according to the dimensions of the human body and turning it into a technology that can be used for any purpose, Agrippa has decomposed the human body into its geometrical possibilities and then used these ideas to show how best to achieve the practical end of skewering one's adversary.*



FIGURE 11.5 *The significance of the geometrical diagram, Agrippa tells us, is that just as a forked stick taken straight from a tree can be used as a compass to draw any number of figures—an action that mirrors the divine power of creation—so, too, can the human body, by its own nature, perform all the actions necessary to fencing. The human body is not only a metric, but a microcosm.*

accompanied by theoretical discussions and diagrams utilizing ideas of optics and art—especially likening the human body, as Vitruvius did, to a sphere. The second part of the book is composed of exempla that show these techniques in a tactical context. Finally, he ends with a dialogue on geometry and astronomy—which, like the entire work, is permeated with hermetic references—in order to demonstrate his mastery over concepts of time and space.

Agrippa's immense influence shows in the works that followed.⁸⁵ Alfonso Falloppia's *Nuovo et breve modo di Schermire* of 1584 is just what its title implies, a 35-page précis of fencing on the Agrippine plan, advocating guards that menace the adversary with the point and thrusts made in the tempo of his action. Girolamo Lucino, in his treatise of 1589, explicitly references Agrippa's work several times, even as he politely disagrees with some of his methods.⁸⁶ The Bolognese Camillo Palladini, who, like Agrippa, was an emigrant to Rome, in his manuscript *Discorso sopra l'arte della scherma* (after 1553 and before 1609), follows Agrippa's ideas rather closely, gives a geometrical demonstration of how to void the body, and names, amongst others, Agrippa's first four guards.⁸⁷ Docciolini takes things to the opposite extreme in his treatise of 1601, greatly simplifying fencing to the point of only using one high guard and one low guard and four counter-guards; his diagrams, reminiscent of the Spanish school, make use only of geometry.⁸⁸ (Docciolini, however, teaches a fairly standard form of Italian rapier.) Even amongst those who maintained an older style of fencing, we see an increased use of both reasoned explanation and of geometry; for instance, Giacomo Di Grassi, who published his *Ragione di adoprare sicuramente l'Arme, si da offesa come da difesa* in Venice in 1570, makes use of such diagrams in explaining his system, which places heavy emphasis on rather non-Agrippene withdrawn guards and feints. Similarly, though Giganti does not discuss geometrical conceits, Almorò Lombardo's preface to his work cites Agrippa in his discussion of how fencing is a science.

85 The Bolognese, notably, remained a distinct and coexisting tradition; the new did not shut out the old overnight!

86 Lucino, *Dialogo di Girolamo Lucino del uso della Spada*.

87 Palladini's manuscript, which had been in the collection of Arsène Vigeant, is currently held by the Vigeant/De Walden Library at the Wallace Collection. D'Alessandri, on p. 107 of his *Cavaliere Compito*, describes Palladino, "called the Bolognese," with two otherwise unattested teachers named Oratio and Cesare Cavalca Bo, as "Roman masters" and implies that he was still practicing by saying that these men "mettono l'armi in mano alli loro scolare" in the present tense.

88 Docciolini, *Tratatto in Materia di Scherma*.

Most notable is Agrippa's fellow northerner, the nobleman and soldier Frederico Ghisliero, whose beautifully executed *Regole di molti cavagliereschi esserciti*, written "for the instruction of the most illustrious lord Antonio Pio Bonello," was printed at Parma by Erasmo Viotto by 1587.⁸⁹ Like Euclid—or Agrippa—Ghisliero first gives theory, and then practice, before going on to explain things such as equestrian combat and fighting at the barriers. The first part, "On Theory" (*della theorica*) gives physical basis for the art, including the four humours and the Vitruvian plan of the human body. He also presents his theorems, such as the disposition of the human body in various stances and perspectives. He then gives his "practice"—how to actually fence using his principles. In short, like Agrippa, Ghisliero takes a human activity—fencing—and applies contemporary ideas of science to analysing it deductively; his book is thus not only literary, invoking as many ancient authorities as he possibly can, but also significant to the history of science as an illustrated book that attempted to reduce a physical phenomenon to its theoretical components. Certainly, Ghisliero was interested enough in natural philosophy that, later in life, he hosted Galileo during his period of Copernican crusading.⁹⁰

In keeping with the Europe-wide fashionableness of all things Italian, many surviving treatises were written by masters teaching in other countries; others were translated into other languages. The dukes of Saxony owned several copies of Agrippa,⁹¹ and Di Grassi was translated into English by one "I.G., Gentleman" for Thomas Churchyard and published in London in 1594 by I. Iaggard.⁹² Vincent Saviolo's *His Practise* was also printed in that city in the following year by John Wolff; the fact that Saviolo, who, with Bonetti, is one of two Italian masters we know of working in London in the Elizabethan era, had much of the earlier school in his teaching such as an emphasis on cuts and on left-hand parries, as well as in his authorial voice, which gives a didactic lesson plan in dialogue form, did not diminish his popularity. In France, Giovanni Antonio Lovino dedicated his 1580 *Modo di cacciare mano all spada* to

89 Ghisliero was born in the Piedmont c. 1560, died in Turin c. 1622, and wrote many other works on military science, unfortunately destroyed in a fire at the Biblioteca nazionale torinese in 1904. According to Anglo, *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* p. 68, only two surviving copies of his fencing treatise survive with hand-drawn illustrations; the one I examined is in the Scott Collection in Glasgow.

90 See Antonio Querengo's letter to Alessandro d'Este, 20 January 1616 in Galileo Galilei, *Opere*, ed. Antonio Favaro vol. 12 p. 243.

91 Von Bloh, "Treasure Rapiers in the Armoury of the Electors of Saxony at Dresden," in Capwell (ed.) *The Noble Art of the Sword*, p. 207.

92 The standard English edition is Jackson, *Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*.

Henri II.⁹³ Likewise, Girolamo Cavalcabo produced *Nobilissimo discorso intorno il schermo* (BnF MS Italien 1527), perhaps in the 1580s; it was later translated into French by “*le deffunct Paternostier*” and published in Rouen in 1597, and later re-translated by the Seigneur de Villamont and published in 1609; there was also a 1612 German translation by a young nobleman named Conrad von Einsiedell.⁹⁴ André des Bordes’ 1610 *Discours de la théorie de la pratique et de l’excellence des armes* is also clearly a translation of Palladini. In Denmark, Salvator Fabris, who was renowned in his own lifetime and who published his famous *Lo Schermo, overo Scienza d’Arme* in 1606, served King Christian IV; his work, which was reprinted in German into the eighteenth century, also exists as a presentation manuscript.⁹⁵ Viggiani’s presentation manuscript to Maximilian II has already been mentioned; also in Austria, Giovanni Battista Maffani dedicated his 1629 *Compendio e discorso di tutto quello, in che consiste la virtù delle spada con tutt’i modi è termini, che deve havere, tener’ e possieder un professore di questa virtù* to his patron Archduke Wilhelm Leopold.⁹⁶ Of course far more teachers did not leave writings—Rocco Bonetti has already been mentioned; likewise, Jarnac’s tutor 1547 duel with Châtaigneraie had been an Italian named Caizo; Fabris’ students taught in Germany. The list goes on; suffice it to say that by the turn of the seventeenth century, fencing in the style begun by Agrippa had become the *de rigueur* form amongst the European fashionable classes.

7 Performance of Rapier Fencing

What the rapier masters of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—including the luminaries Capoferro, Giganti, and Fabris—all shared in common with Agrippa are, first, the organization of their works; and, second,

93 Paris, Bibliothèque National Ms Italien 959.

94 The 1597 edition is titled *Traicté ou instruction pour tirer des armes*; the 1609 *Le Guidon des Capitaines*; the 1612 *Neues Kunstliches Fechtbuch* (Leipzig, H, Grossii, 1612). See Anglo, *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* p. 336, n. 86.

95 Fabris’ work was translated and printed in German four times by his students and others; reprinted in Italian twice; one Italian-German parallel text edition in 1676; and translated into English by Leoni as *Art of Dueling: Salvator Fabris’ Rapier Fencing Treatise of 1606*. See trans. Leoni pp. xiii–xiv for a full bibliography. The manuscript *Scientia e Pratica dell’Arme*, Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek GKS 1868.4040 is a richly produced early version intended as a presentation copy; *La Scientia della Spada*, Koninklijke Bibliotheek MS KB.73.J.38, is either a manuscript version or an abridged copy.

96 Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. 10784.

the realization of a fully theorized mode of fencing, with a technical vocabulary readily available to explain their tactical choices. An introductory section first explains principles—tempo, measure, blade opposition, etc., as well as philosophical concerns, such as if fencing is an art or a science.⁹⁷ These examples are then applied in illustrated plays, which both delight the reader with its many, varied, and bloody techniques and show the application of Art to Science in an elegant Mannerist gestural language. Even those such as Fabris, who disdained such ideas, were nonetheless beholden to their audience's expectations.⁹⁸

The basic scenario is this: The fencers begin out of measure. One fencer seeks to close the measure, positioning his blade (*stringere* or *guardagnare di spada*) relative to the other's without touching it in such a way that the second fencer is both threatened and unable to perform any action without first freeing his blade with a movement (a *cavazione*) that will create a tempo. The first fencer then uses the tempo of this *cavazione* to strike the second. From here, infinite variations suggest themselves: The second fencer may counterattack; he may attack the first fencer as he steps into distance; we may add different sorts of footwork (and associated elegant and athletic bodily contortions) on attack, defense, or counteroffense, etc.

While all masters following Agrippa would agree as to the superiority of the attack on preparation and the counterattack (as opposed to the parry-riposte, which makes a tempo in which the adversary can renew his attack), and most

97 Giganti, *Scola, ovvero, teatro, nel qual sono rappresentate diverse maniere, e modi di parare et di ferire di spada sola, e di spada e pugnale*, printed in Venice by Giovanni Antonio and Giacomo de Franceschi in 1606, reprinted at Padua in 1628 and French and German parallel translations at Frankfort in 1619, 1622, and 1644, translated by Leoni as *Venetian Rapier: The School, or Salle*; Capoferro, *Gran Simulacro dell'Arte e dell'Uso della Scherma*, printed by Salvestro Marchetti e Camillo Turi in Siena in 1610 and translated by Leoni as *Ridolfo Capoferro's The Art and Practice of Fencing*; Giganti's second book, aptly titled the *Libro Secondo* and dealing with the use of auxiliary weapons, long considered "lost," was published by Giovanni Fontani in Pisa in 1608; though mentioned by Alberto Marchionni in his 1847 fencing treatise, it was not brought to light until a copy was discovered in the holdings of the Vigeant/De Walden Library at the Wallace and published by Terminiello and Pendragon as *The 'Lost' Second Book of Nicoletto Giganti: A Rapier Treatise Rediscovered and Translated*. Note that in his 1676 German-Italian parallel text edition of Fabris, the former's student Johann Joachim Hynitzsch claimed Giganti plagiarized Fabris in the 1622 German edition and demanded the work's recall, but it is more likely that the publisher, De Zetter, included the extra material on his own volition.

98 Joachim Koppe, in his 1619 *Newer Discurs der Rittermeßigen und Weitberümbten Künst des Fechtens* quotes Salvator Fabris as spurning those who fence with ink and chalk lines.

used Agrippa's system for numbering guards and hand positions (Giganti, notably, did not), different masters still had distinct technical, tactical, and aesthetic variations. Some (such as Giganti) include compound actions such as feints, some (such as Capoferro) warned against them—though both made use of them; all preferred thrusts over cuts, though some (such as Capoferro) discuss cuts more extensively than others; some showed more athletic movement, such as Fabris' low evasions, while others (such as Giganti) kept to what would be more easily accomplished by the average fencer. This also suited different sorts of play: Feints, spectacular dodges, and athletic contortions work much better in a conventional bout, while a serious encounter would likely have more conservative play, and cuts, especially to the hands, are better suited to an encounter in earnest or dealing with an unskilled and brutish opponent than to a polite fencing match. (Interestingly, this debate is mirrored in nineteenth-century French works on the dueling sword, brought about in part by the encounter with the Italian school, which had retained much of the technical approach of the dueling ground.)⁹⁹

TABLE 11.1 *Classifications of Concluding Actions in Single-Rapier Exempla in Treatises by Notable Rapier Masters*

	Agrippa (1553)	Giganti (1606)	Fabris (1606) ^a	Capoferro (1610)
Simple Attack				
• Direct	3	3	7	1
• Indirect	2	2	1	5
Feint Attack	1	4	5	4
Riposte (cut or thrust)	2	1	2	4
Counterattack				
• Time Thrust	6	8	23	10
• Stop-Hit	1	1	—	1
Countertime	2	2	6	8
Feint in Time	1	—	1	
Renewed Attack	—	1	—	2
Total	18	22	45	35

a Book 1 only, which forms the basis for Fabris' art while omitting some of his more spectacular techniques.

99 Gaugler, "Epic Encounters."

In the preceding table, I classified the concluding actions in the single-rapier sequences given as exempla by some early rapier masters according to modern fencing theory. Note that the number of actions exceeds the number of illustrations, as the authors often explain more one possible action for a given illustration. It shows, by sheer weight of numbers, a clear preference for actions executed in a single tempo, such as simple indirect attacks and counterattacks. While these exempla are, of course, idealized depictions, they do give us an idea of the tactical emphases of rapier masters.

These suited the sorts of fencing performance then in vogue. The early Bolognese rules as recorded by Manciolino in 1531 describe fencing for points, with rules for grappling (one lifted off his feet is defeated), different points for hitting different targets (three for the head, and two for the foot, as it is the hardest to hit), and blows to the hands not admitted,¹⁰⁰ and allowing for a sort of “after-blow”: After first attempting unsuccessfully to defend himself (considered a characteristic of good fencing), a fencer who has been struck is allowed to show his undiminished valor to strike a blow in reply and “recoup honor,” so long as it can be done with a single step.¹⁰¹ (Marozzo also gives some rules in the first chapters of his first book, though his have more of the air of safety regulations such as prohibiting new students from fencing and grappling.)

Compare this to the rules of fencing as a courtly phenomenon as described by the master and scholar in Battista Gaiani’s dialogue of 1619.¹⁰² Gaiani’s master states that a master always works to one of two ends—utility (that is, to teach his students), or to defend his honor—and describes several sorts of *assalto d’honore* in this latter case: First, there is the courteous bout, undertaken before a ruler, to show his skill and honor. Second, there is the courteous bout to satisfy a gentleman who wishes to test himself (in which case the master must use all his knowledge and ingenuity, since it would not be seemly for the master to be overcome by the non-master). Finally, there is

100 This fencing convention of not allowing hand hits as too easy is also mentioned by Giovanni Battista della Valle in the section on dueling (specifically on whether someone wounded in the head should be considered the victor over someone wounded in the hand) in his *Il Vallo, Libro continente appartinente à Capitanij, retenere etfortificare una Città con bastioni, con novi artificij de fuoco aggiunti, come nella Tabola appare, et de diverse sorte polvere, et de espugnare una Città con ponti, scale, argani, trombe, trenciere, artiglierie, cave, dare avisamenti senza messo allo amico, fare ordinanze, battagliaioni, et ponti de disfida con lo pingere, opera molto utile con la esperientia del arte militare*, first published prior to 1521 and reprinted in Venice nine times (here citing the fourth edition of 1535, p. 58).

101 [*R*]icuperar l’honore. Manciolino, *Opera Nova*, pp. 3–6 at 6v.

102 Battista Gaiani, *Arte di Maneggiar la Spada a Piedi et a Cavallo*, pp. 5–8. See also Terminello, “Giovanni Battista Gaiani (1619)—An Italian Perspective on Competitive Fencing.”

the third and gravest sort of *assalto d'honore*, which takes almost the form of a duel, with an assigned time and place and chosen seconds. It also has conventional rules: Only the first attack and riposte or counterattack (*riposta di quel tempo*) are admissible; only thrusts may be made; and all hits must land on the body above the belt, since these are most conducive to the principles of *stringere* and *cavazione*. The seconds are to separate the fencers if they come too close, since this can lead to grappling, and is extraneous what the fencers are trying to accomplish. All of these assume a skilled and polite adversary; against someone who does not treat the master respectfully, but seeks to defeat him in any way possible, all bets were off. Gaiani also says that cuts were not suited to a polite match, since, unlike thrusting with foils, they can cause injury.

While there is a difference of context here—Manciolino is speaking of students, Gaiani the conduct of teachers—I wish to call attention to the subtext: Manciolino democratically allows his fencer to strike after being struck to “recoup honor,” while Gaiani is foremost about maintenance of unequal status. The master is elevated by being the client of princes and sought out by well-heeled amateurs; he must maintain his reputation, and thus his income, above all else. Accordingly, Gaiani’s contest is more abstracted and genteel; it disallows wrestling, and the first thrust landed ends the pass. This mirrors the class structure of the absolutist society of early modern Europe in which Gaiani’s master operated. Both provide for a somewhat conventional contest, but Gaiani’s is far more controlled.

In short, rapier fencing gave its adherents a form of martial training and performance that was both realistic preparation for armed conflict and wholly in keeping with contemporary ideas of art, science, and etiquette. (Giganti even calls his book “The School, or Theatre.”) From an urban pastime played between equals, fencing had become a courtly act, on par with dancing or riding, all the while maintaining at least a pretense of training for actual fighting. At least a passing familiarity with its tenets was an expected part of a young man’s education, not just in Italy, but also throughout Europe.

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