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The Fencing Duel in *Hamlet*

Key Words: history of fencing; fencing with rapier and dagger; duel between Hamlet and Laertes; fencing in England during Shakespearean times

Abstract:

The author's objective in this article is to present all the questions—including certain doubts and misunderstandings—connected with the fencing duel in Shakespeare's famous tragedy, *Hamlet*: its character, weapons used, exchange of rapiers and the fatal end. To achieve his goal and to make his arguments understandable and reasonable, the author: 1. carefully analyses the text of the play and available stage directions; 2. presents the state, development, theory and practise of fencing in England during the second half of the XVI century. To give an exact picture of fencing at that period in England, the author describes and analyses fencing of the period—the weapons, methods of teaching, fencing terminology. In doing so, he relies mostly on the book of Vincentio Saviolo, which appeared in English in 1595. (Incidentally, Saviolo was Shakespeare's neighbour.)

Introduction

“History has been defined as a way of looking at facts. Faced with a plethora, often contradictory, it is not surprising that historians prove selective, but it is curious how, with one accord, they refuse to face the impressive fact that, for generation after generation, every free Englishman went armed.”

J. D. Aylward

Fighting with various weapons (from primitive stone and wooden weapons to more sophisticated iron weapons) has been known to humanity from prehistoric times. Ancient legends, songs, poems and, later, novels and theatre plays are full of descriptions and scenes of combat with swords, rapiers, épées and sabres. For many centuries, lances, swords, battle-axes, rapiers, sabres, etc., constituted the basic weapons of different peoples, armies and individuals.

Armed combat, including various types of duels [3, 18]—“Judgement of God” duels, judicial duels, knights' duels (duels of chivalry), honorary duels (duels of honour)—are described in much literature and depicted on the stage. Fencing, fencing scenes and fencing terminology—Italian or Anglicised—of XVI century fencing schools are very often found in the works of William Shakespeare [22, 23, 24].

The most known and famous of such scenes is the duel between Hamlet and Laertes in *Hamlet*. The aim of this article is a description and analysis of that duel. The reasons for choosing that theme are the following: a) an immense significance of this particular scene in Shakespeare's play; b) many doubts about the ways this duel ought to be presented on the stage; c) the great popularity and value of *Hamlet*.

Before attending to that particular duel, I must devote a few words to fencing in the second half of the XVI century—when the great William Shakespeare lived and created.

In Medieval times, armoured knights fought with various weapons—with lances on horse-back and with heavy swords on foot. The swords were very heavy and often two-handed. The heavy swords were used to deliver blows aimed at destroying the armour and knocking

down the opponent; for defensive actions, they used shields. Combat with heavy swords was very simple, even primitive. Heavy armour and swords made fast movements, mobility, and fine technique and tactics simply impossible. Sheer strength and endurance played a vital part in such a battle. These fights were very brutal, relying on various violent traps and tricks.

The bouts based on chivalry and fair play took place at knights' tournaments and in duels of different kinds [6, 7, 10].

With the appearance of fire-arms in Europe, heavy swords and armour became obsolete. A new, much lighter weapon appeared—the rapier. It was lighter, of course, only in comparison to heavy swords; compared to small swords and modern sport weapons, the rapiers were quite heavy. The average rapier weighed about 1800 grams and, later on, a duelling rapier weighed 1300 grams.

Nonetheless, fights with the rapier were much faster and more mobile than those with Medieval swords. The rapier was a thrusting and cutting weapon, but, initially, practically only cuts were used, then cuts and thrusts and, in the last period of rapier fencing—the turn of the XVI and XVII century—thrusts were used almost exclusively.

The rapier had a very long double-edged blade with a sharp point, a cross-bar and a complicated set of protective rings guarding the fencer's hand. In the XVI century, in Spain, a hilt in the shape of a basket was introduced, known in England as the "basket-hilt".

The very name, "rapier", appeared for the first time in a French document in the year 1475, and its origin is probably the Spanish "espada ropera" (dress sword) [11, 14, 27]. Fencing with the rapier developed mostly in Spain and in Italy. In Italy, especially, many famous fencing masters lived and taught in different towns. Many of them wrote huge and detailed treatises devoted to the art of fencing. The Italian fencing masters taught in many other European countries, and a few of them taught fencing in London.

Fencing with the rapier was markedly more mobile—with fencers moving forwards, backwards and sideways. The lunge practised today was introduced only in the beginning of the XVII century by Giganti, in 1606, and Capoferro [4] from Sienna, in 1610. For offensive actions, in the XVI century, fencers used a short cross-over step, so-called "passo", the prototype of the modern fleche. The rapier was used for offensive and counter-offensive actions (attacks and counter-attacks) and, in defence, the fencers relied on evasions, retreats and the left hand, armed with a coat, chain-mail glove, or dagger. Defence with left arm against the opponent's cuts and thrust was quite dangerous. A famous French master, Vernesson Sieur de Lyancourt [8, 9, 19], mentioned this, writing, "How often have we seen the left hand wounded or stuck to the trunk when a fencer attempted to parry with it."

Fencing with the rapier—in terms of speed, technique, tactics, methods and choice of exercises—constituted a great progress compared to practise with heavy swords. Three new concepts and fencing actions deserve to be mentioned:

1. Fencing masters noticed and stressed the importance of the feeling of surprise in a bout, i.e., the ability to perceive, in a fraction of a second, an occasion to score a hit and take advantage of it. Italian masters called it "tempo" or "scelta di tempo" (literally, "time" or "choice of time"). To begin with the name, "tempo", was also applied to fast and efficient counter-attacks (stop-hits) and then the same word was used to describe a feeling of surprise (in French, "l'à propos"), a fundamental and basic element of a fencing fight.
2. The importance of distance, displacement and assessment of distance was noticed.
3. Certain weapon positions were introduced as basic positions from which offensive actions could start. Such basic positions were called "guardias". These positions became early models of parries, which were introduced later (with the small sword).

Various cuts, thrusts and other fencing actions in Italian fencing, and in the whole of Europe, had very versatile and highly complicated names. The unusual complexity, colour and diversity of fencing terminology in the XVI century was demonstrated—equally colourfully—by English writer Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) in his book, *Westward Ho!*. The following is a small fragment from it:

Thy fincture, carricado, and sly passatos,
Thy stramazone, and revolving stoccata
Wiping madritta, closing embrocatta,
And all the cant of the honourable fencing mystery.

Only Agrippa [1, 5, 7], a mathematician and engineer, great lover of fencing, builder of the famous obelisk in St. Peter's Square in Rome, author of a famous fencing text-book, and friend of Michelangelo (also an enthusiastic fencer) introduced very simple names for various weapon positions, which are still used today: prima, seconda, terza, etc. (first, second, third, etc.).

In rapier fencing, many new concepts of fencing actions were introduced which are known and widely applied today in the sport of fencing: disengagement, counter-disengagement, feint, counter-time (“tempo contra tempo”), etc. One can even say that the basis of contemporary fencing can be found in rapier fencing.

The great masters began to appreciate, apply and perfect certain rules of teaching-learning (didactic principles) and the principle of individualisation (although, they did not use these names). An eminent Italian fencing master, Salvatore Fabris [12], from Padova, mentioned certain psychological-tactical types of fencers. He wrote, for example, “Sapersi governare contro i grandi, i piccolo, i deboli, i forti, e contro i collerici, e i flemmatici,” (“Know how to act against large and small ones, against weak and strong ones, against collerics and phlegmatics.”).

Fencing in England in Shakespearean Times and the Duel in *Hamlet*

“In a fencing bout on the stage, it is not adversaries who are acting, but partners, trying to help each other in order to present, as well as possible, distinctly and realistically, the depicted fight.”

I. E. Koch

Fencing, before it reached its present sport character, underwent, for many centuries, immense transformations. For hundreds of years, a utilitarian character of fencing—preparation for combat and duels—was markedly predominant. Only during the second part of the XIX century, the sport character of fencing came to be more and more prevalent (although military training and preparation for honorary duels still formed an important part of fencing training). Even in those very remote times—apart from drills preparing for “real” sharp fights—demonstrations, exercises and displays of the art of yielding thrusting and cutting weapons were popular.

The marked significance of fencing in the history of humanity had—as already mentioned—its reflection in songs, poems, literature and in the theatre. One of the most known and dramatic stage duels is contained in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*.

In spite of the fact that Shakespeare's drama is so well known and so frequently performed on the stages of theatres all over the world, the fencing duel in *Hamlet* is frequently presented in a simplified, conventional, unconvincing and unrealistic manner and—what is more important—contrary to the historical truth and even the play's text. To state, exactly, what the bout between Hamlet and Laertes should really look like is extraordinarily difficult. On this

subject a large discrepancy of opinion among connoisseur's of the theatre, of fencing, and of stage-fencing exists [15].

One thing is sure: Shakespeare, describing and installing in his work the scene of a duel, meant sport fencing and not a duel with "sharps", not a fight for life and death. In such a sport duel, conventional hits were counted, executed with practise weapons and fenced to a given number of hits scored.

H. Granville Barker, an expert on the work of Shakespeare, maintains that the traditional weapons in a Shakespearean scene are "foils"—practise weapons of the Elizabethan epoch, which was very different from foils of later periods and today. They were much heavier than contemporary foils, with a long and quite heavy blade, and differed from sharp rapiers only by the fact that the cutting edges and point of the blade were dull. At the beginning of the XVII century, a protective ball, as large as a walnut, would be put on the point of practise rapiers. Professor Dover Wilson also expresses the opinion that Hamlet and Laertes ought to fight only with contemporary foils (practise rapiers) and without daggers.

A similar view is also stated by the eminent expert on stage fencing, I. E. Koch [17] from Leningrad (St. Petersburg). He states that the noblemen of the XVI century traditionally fought with cutting, thrusting rapiers and shields. In street fights and brawls, the rapier was used for offensive actions and the left arm, with dagger or cloak, was used for defence. In fencing salles, maintains Koch, only rapiers were used and thrusts gradually became more and more popular (fighting with rapiers without a dagger, and rapiers of the transitional period, also without dagger, became "fashionable" only at the beginning of the XVIII century. – author's note).

Koch argues that in the scuffle in Shakespeare's play, Laertes and Hamlet's exchange of rapiers would be very difficult if, apart from the rapiers, they used shields or daggers. Rapier and dagger were well suited to fencing fights in those times, but progressive and fashionable youth in the fencing salles learned to fence with only one weapon, the rapier. Fighting with one weapon did not yet become a method of fighting with "sharps", it was only used as an exercise in the fencing gym. Hamlet and Laertes devoted a lot of time to fencing exercises and wanted to demonstrate their skill at fencing with one weapon only—a rapier without shield or dagger.

According to the Russian professor, the exposition ought to be as follows: the scene presents a sporting duel in the presence of the King, Queen and Royal Court. The match is a result of the King's deal with Laertes. The King maintains that, fencing for twelve hits, Laertes will not have an advantage of more than three—"Osric: The King sir, hath laid that in a dozen passes between yourself and him, he shall not exceed you three hits;" (V, ii)—which proves that Shakespeare did not envision a real duel with sharp weapons, but a sporting bout for a given number of hits. The sporting character of the bout is a ruse to mask the true deadly intentions of the King. As a result of the King's plot, Laertes is supposed to take a sharp weapon and—to make the wound deadly—lace the weapon's blade with poison:

King: . . . he being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all contriving,
Will not peruse the foils! So that with ease,
Or with a little shuffling, you may choose
A sword unbated, and in a pass of practise,
Requite him for your father.

Laertes: I will do't,
And for that purpose I'll anoint my sword:
I bought an unction of a mountebank
So mortal, that but dip a knife in it,
Where it draws blood, no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the Moon, can save the thing from death. . . .
(IV, vii)

Practise weapons of those days, states Koch, did not have a sharp point, but, instead, a protective ball. An experienced fencer, as Hamlet is, would notice, of course, the lack of the protective ball, but might not notice that the cutting edge of the blade was not properly dulled. Laertes' plan, then, is not to hit Hamlet by means of a thrust, but a cut. (Here I, contrary to Koch, must include that protective balls on the blades of practise weapons were only used at the beginning of the XVI century. In Shakespearean times, the point of a practise weapon was simply dull.)

Hamlet is looking forward to his fencing bout but, before it begins, wants to make up with Laertes. Hamlet announces that he wants to fence honestly in brotherly rivalry. The attitude and words of Hamlet make a big impression on Laertes who, perhaps, gives up his intention to kill his opponent in the duel. This, Koch suggests, explains Laertes' rather passive attitude at the beginning of the bout. The fact that the Queen drinks the poisoned wine forces, in a way, Laertes to fight in earnest—he has to take Hamlet's life, and in a short time, too—because the death of the poisoned Queen would reveal the secret plot. The fight, to begin with, friendly and polite, becomes more and more ruthless, sharp and brutal. Finally, Laertes cuts Hamlet's side, wounding him. Hamlet responds with a "street" action, depriving Laertes of his weapon and raising it up, triumphantly. Now, Laertes throws himself upon Hamlet and snatches the rapier from his right hand (the one with which Hamlet fights) and only now, too late, does he realise the fact that the poisoned, deadly rapier remains in Hamlet's possession. Hamlet, surprised by Laertes' brutality and desperation, attacks aggressively, trying to hit his opponent. Laertes, realising that the weapon in Hamlet's hand is poisoned, tries to hit him at any cost, but trips and falls down and, at that moment, is hit.

Professor Koch's arguments, although extremely interesting and suggestive, invoke certain doubts of mine. Thinking over, in detail, the text of *Hamlet* and analysing the English language of the period and Shakespeare's characteristic vocabulary, as well as the fencing style and fencing terminology of those times (many of Shakespeare's plays are full of fencing terminology—Italian and Anglicised), I have come to the conclusion that Professor Koch makes a mistake, both in the choice of weapon and the description of the duel.

Studying the literature and illustrations in fencing textbooks of Shakespearean times, it can be seen that practise weapons were dull, but mostly did not yet have protective balls at the blade's point. The point of the blade, like the edge, was simply blunt. From Shakespeare's text, it seems clear—it is surprising that Koch does not notice it—that both protagonists hit each other, not with cuts, but thrusts (I remind, once more, that the rapier was a cutting and thrusting weapon). In the talk, loaded with fatal consequences, between the King and Laertes, the King says, ". . . you may choose a sword unbated", to which Laertes responds, ". . . I'll touch my point,/With this contagion. . . ." Continuing the plot, the King remarks, "If he by chance escapes your venom'd stuck. . . ." The word "stuck" occurs only in *Hamlet*, but there is no doubt that it means the same as the word "stock" in *Merry Widows*, thus "thrust" with the weapon (Italian, "stoccata", French "estocade" or Spanish "estocado"). Finally, it is worth paying attention to the words and stage direction in Act V, in which Hamlet announces, "The point envenom'd too,/Then venom to thy work. (*Stabs the King*)"

Regarding the choice of weapons with which both opponents had to fence, Hamlet's discussion with Osric is very revealing:

Hamlet: What's his weapon?

Osric: Rapier and dagger.

Hamlet: That's two of his weapons; but well.

(V, ii)

Scripts of theatre plays of Tudor's epoch usually contained many detailed directions, including those related to fencing scenes. Unfortunately, the first script of *Hamlet* got lost and the stage directions in other editions are very scant. I think, however (in fact, I am sure) that the

above quotations support my doubts regarding Professor Koch's, and others', views. Besides, I may remind that although the stage directions for *Hamlet* are rather scarce, we still know pretty well what kind of fencing was prevalent in England during the times when Shakespeare lived and worked.

In 1599, in England, an English nobleman, George Silver [25] (he stressed his nobility by always adding "nobleman" to his name) published his work, entitled *Paradoxes of Defence*. Silver, who without undue modesty emphasised that he possessed "ye full prfyt use of all manner of weapons", passionately criticised the Italian school of rapier fencing, reigning then on the British Isles and the European continent. He presented his rather original system of fencing, partly based—strangely enough—on the very sharply criticised theories of Italian masters.

Some of Silver's views may be considered progressive. Among other things, he advised using weapons that were shorter and lighter than the rapiers that were commonly used in those days. He was also one of the first to describe the principle and importance of parry-riposte—although in an actual fight he relied more on evasions, mobility of displacements and counter-attacks; he also described various ways of disarming the opponent, incidentally based on the teachings of the Italian masters which he criticised, including Marozzo [20].

Silver, in his *Paradoxes of Defence*, very colourfully, and using beautiful and quaint old English, underlines the values of fencing (this is one of my favourite quotations), "The exercising of weapons putteth away aches, griefs, and diseases, it expelleth melancholic, cholericke and evil conceits, it keepeth man in breath, prfyt health and long lyfe." His words are very true. The physical, mental and emotional effort of fencing promotes health, psycho-motor capabilities and a long and active life. In Medieval times, when an average man's life was very short, indeed, fencing masters were very active well after the age of seventy and eighty, giving energetic lessons and even taking part in duels. Recently, in the United States, there were tests of various kinds of exercises to be used in fitness clubs to ensure good health, active attitudes, motor co-ordination and endurance. Strangely enough (not for me!) the greatest all-around influence on motor performance, the cardiovascular system, and the state of health, as it turned out, was the result of exercises based on fencing, especially footwork.

Coming back to Silver—his views on fencing, fighting and ways of teaching were rather not popular: in Europe, in those days, the Italian school of rapier fencing reigned all-powerful and was undergoing certain transformations—a slight decrease in weapon weight, a gradual increase of the use of thrusts over cuts, the first attempts to use a more modern variety of lunge starting with the front foot, etc.

Grassi's textbook [13], written in Italian in 1570, appearing in English in 1594—a few years before Silver's work—was probably already a little outdated, taking into account the above-mentioned changes in the Italian school.

It seems sure that more topical and up-to-date might have been Vincentio Saviolo's textbook, written in English and published in two volumes, of which the first was devoted to fencing with rapier and dagger and the second to honour and "honorary quarrels" [21]. Saviolo's book appeared in 1595—two years before the first performance of *Hamlet*—and was—at that time—very modern. The author, himself, stressed that he had "changed five or six sundrie manners of plaies, taught by divers masters, and reduced unto one by no little labour and paine". It is worth adding that the expression "sundrie" means versatility, diversity and . . . unnecessary details. Also—as the great connoisseur of fencing, J.P. Aylward [2], noticed—Vincentio Saviolo was Shakespeare's neighbour in Blackfriars, so it is quite probable that Shakespeare consulted with Saviolo about the fencing scenes in his famous drama. Anyway, there seems to be no doubt that Shakespeare, when describing the duel, meant fencing with the rapier and dagger of his time, probably based on the fencing school described by Vincentio Saviolo.

Before we describe the fencing school of Master Saviolo—one has to isolate it from the flow of digressions of a literary and philosophical nature—it is necessary to reconstruct and

describe what the weapons of that time looked like. Saviolo, himself, does not describe the weapons used and Grassi's description is rather disappointing because the master simply states that the rapier possesses two cutting edges and a sharp point.

From other sources [5, 7, 27, 28] and numerous museum weapon collections, both in Poland and other countries, we know that the blade was flat, one and a half inches wide at the hilt, with a varied length (but always much longer than the small swords of the later period).

Although the queens, Mary and Elizabeth, tried to limit the length of the blade, their restrictions in this matter remained rather ineffective. Master Swetnam [26], for example, recommended, minimally, that the length of blade be four feet.

The part of the blade with a square cross-section, on which one puts the grip, was rather short, the pommel rather heavy (as a counterweight to the long blade), and the hilt consisted of a crossbar (quillons), the ricasso of the blade and several guards (knuckle-guard or knuckle-bow, diagonal counter-guards, upper side-ring, etc.). The defensive value of these protective guards was rather doubtful. Later on, these many guards were substituted by a cup-hilt. The average weight of the entire rapier was about 3 - 4 pounds. Rapiers used for duels were generally lighter.

It was not easy to yield such heavy weapons (although markedly lighter than the Medieval heavy swords), especially with such a long blade. This is why it was difficult to parry, in today's meaning of the word—the essence of which is deflection of the opponent's blade with one's own weapon. Therefore, the rapier served practically exclusively for offensive actions (attacks and counter-time) or offensive-defensive actions (counter-attacks, stop-hits or stop-hits with opposition). For defensive actions, the left hand with dagger, or protected by a chain-mail glove, was used. The dagger had a simple crossbar with an external ring which was supposed to protect the thumb which was straightened along the blade. The length of the blade was twelve inches.

The weapons of Hamlet and Laertes were foils. Of course, not meaning the modern sport foils, but meaning the practise, dull weapons of that time. "Foil", in Shakespearean times, meant the same as "blunted weapon" or "blunted rapier". A foil, in those times, was a simplified rapier, the cutting edges and point were dull. The entire guard was sometimes slightly different from a sharp weapon. The point of the blade was not bound nor did it have a protective ball. Only in the next century did the fencing masters—to avoid accidental injuries while executing fast movements—advise putting a protective ball, the size of a musket bullet, on the point.

From Hamlet's words, "This likes me well, these foils have all a length," (V.ii) we may deduce that in practise weapons, the blades of both fencers were the same, contrary to combat rapiers.

Now we must refer to the stage directions of early editions of *Hamlet*. From the talk between Hamlet and Osric, one may deduce that a duel with rapiers and daggers is foreseen and the stage directions from the year 1605 (second quarto) demand that the assistants bring the mentioned rapiers and daggers. However, in the stage directions from the year 1623 (first folio), the foils (practise rapiers) and chain-mail gloves are mentioned. In the year 1595, thus two years before the first performance of *Hamlet*, Vincentio Saviolo [21] wrote that noblemen generally use rapiers and chain-mail gloves. It is, therefore, possible that slightly later, in performances of the duel scene, to make it seem more up-to-date, rapier and glove were introduced. In the later periods, however, the anachronism was restored and, in the duel scene, the rapier and dagger were applied. I have already mentioned that Osric, in his dialogue with Hamlet, states that in the upcoming sporting duel, rapiers and daggers are foreseen.

In later editions of Shakespeare's play [24], the stage directions read, "Enter King, Queen, Laertes, Lords, Osric and Attendants with foils, etc." (V.ii) This "etc." might just denote daggers. In modern times, the correct stage directions call for rapiers and daggers—"Enter

trumpets, drums and officer with cushion; King, Queen, and all the State; Attendants with foils and daggers; Laertes; a table prepared and flagons of wine on it.”

Today, to make the scene more modern, or to make the task easier, or simply demonstrating a lack of knowledge of the history of fencing and the principles of stage fencing, Hamlet and Laertes sometimes fence only with foils (rapiers). It is against the historical truth and illogical. Even more illogical—and “not to be accepted”—is such a presentation of the fencing duel in which both opponents apply parries, footwork and various fencing actions based directly on modern sport fencing.

Now fencing in Shakespeare’s times will be discussed in more detail. The most typical fencing textbook of that period is the work of the aforementioned Vincentio Saviolo [21]. His “practise” is described in the form—as was then customary—of a dialogue between a wise master and an inquisitive pupil—in this case between Master Vincentio and his pupil, Luke.

Master Vincentio begins his teaching by giving his pupil a rapier with the instruction that he may hold it “as he finds most commodious”—but warns him that under no circumstances should he put his finger on the crossbar of the hilt. This very general instruction pertaining to the way to hold the weapon seems slightly bizarre as it is well known that the proper way of gripping a weapon depends on the efficacy and accuracy of wielding it.

Rapier, for a long period of time, was a side weapon of noblemen in Western Europe (like sabre in Poland, Hungary and other Central and Eastern European countries). Rapiers hung on sword-belts attached by means of a clip to the belt. It was possible then—in the case of assault or attack—by means of one movement, to disconnect the sheath, sword belt and rapier. The sheath, once the rapier was drawn, could be thrown together with the sword-belt on the ground, to pick it up later on after a successful end of the fight.

From the movement of taking the weapon from the sheath comes the first fencing position, which Agrippa named as “prima”—later on called the first, or prime, parry, used today in foil, epee and sabre. In the first position—“guardia prima”—the armed hand was high above the head, on the left side with the point of the weapon directed down, slightly to the left and forwards. In the basic fencing position, on-guard, the right foot was placed slightly forwards, the knees slightly bent, the body weight was slightly more on the back leg and the armed hand was straightened forwards in the direction of the opponent. The left arm, with dagger, was straightened forwards or, in the case of the hand being protected by a chain-mail glove, it would be at the level of the face. The trunk was a little bit tilted back to be able to avoid hits to the face—both in actual fights and during exercises. Since the introduction of masks in the second half of the XVIII century, the trunk in the on-guard position has become more erect, or even slightly tilted forwards.

Vincentio instructs his pupil not to stay in one spot, immobile, but to move constantly and be always ready for movement sideways, forwards or backwards, depending on the need. Grassi [13] equally underlined the importance and necessity of mobility and an active attitude in a bout. Vincentio explains that one can execute hits with the cutting edge, called “*madrittis*”, and cuts with back edge, “*riversas*”. He, however, advises his pupil not to use the cuts at all, but to rely, in a bout, exclusively on thrusts. The thrusts—as the master explains—are much more efficacious and faster than cuts and proves this by presenting a special highly complicated diagram (which slightly resembles some specialists of sports science of today who conduct, for a long time, highly complicated experiments, using very expensive equipment and announce the results of their research—which had been obvious to everyone for years—in the form of highly complicated equations, formulas, tables and so on). As a matter of fact, in Ancient Greece and Rome, it was known and accepted that thrusts are more deadly, faster and more precise than cuts and do not require bending the forearm, as one must do when cutting and which, of course, is dangerous and warns the opponent. Advice to rely on thrusts was logical, sensible and in accordance with new views and practises of fencing in those days—because rapier gradually became a thrusting weapon (the successor of rapier—the small sword—was an exclusively

thrusting weapon, with a triangular blade, not fit at all for cuts). In that period, only Silver, in his *Paradoxes of Defence* [25], advocated cuts, trying, in a very complicated and unclear argument, to show the superiority of cuts over thrusts. His theories on the subject did not influence the reigning theory and practise of yielding the rapier.

Master Vincentio distinguishes two main varieties of thrust: “imbrocata”—executed above the opponent’s weapon—and “stoccata”—below the opponent’s rapier. Against imbrocata, one should defend, moving the hand or dagger to the right to parry it. However, against stoccata, one should parry, directing hand or dagger to the left. The parry with left arm, to be efficient, ought to be executed in such a way that the dagger (or hand armed with chain-mail glove) meets the opponent’s blade more or less in the middle of its length. All thrusts ought to be directed toward the opponent’s trunk or face, which is reminiscent of the conventional valid target—trunk—in foil fencing, starting in the second half of the XVII century. Swetnam, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the best use for a thrust is against hand, arm and leg as the nearest targets for the attacker. This, in turn, reflects the practice of exercises in bouts with modern epees, beginning in the second half of the XIX century.

Although fighting with rapiers was quite lively and very exhausting, its theoretical bases—apart from the complicated terminology—were relatively quite simple. The offensive actions—mainly attacks—were, of course, applied and, in defence, counter-attacks with rapier—in the form of stop-hits or stop-hits with opposition—and parries with dagger were applied. The recommended counter-attack was an offensive-defensive action, executed with rapier accompanied by a simultaneous parrying, with the dagger, of the opponent’s action. Nowadays, fencers compete, moving forwards and backwards, more or less in a direct line on a rectangular strip. In the epoch of rapier fencing, the fencers moved with a semicircular movement to the right and left (and also forwards and backwards), trying to avoid the opponent’s “guard”.

One of the movements used in an attack recommended by Vincentio, the essence of which was the movement of the front foot forward while executing an offensive stroke, resembles a modern, very short lunge (earlier, in attacks, the cross-over step was mainly used in attacks). The master explained it in the following way: “by running the right foot forwards you may give him a stoccata.” Grassi equally mentions the lunge, expressing it in such a complicated manner: “somewhat forward to the end that the thrust may reach the further.”

Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, also mentions the lunge, writing, “Pass with your best violence.” (V.ii) Most probably, Shakespeare refers to “pass”—a cross-over lunge. Also, in many other plays, apart from *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows a wide knowledge of contemporary fencing terminology—for example, “pass”, “passado”, “Come, sir, your passado!”, “the passado he respects not”, “ach, the immortal passado”, “your passes, stoccadoes”, “To see thee fight, to see thee foin”, “He will foin like many devil”, “alla stoccata”, and many others. A wonderful and very colourful collection of fencing terminology can be found in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It is so witty, that it is worthwhile to quote a small fragment:

O he’s a courageous captain of compliments: he fights as you sing prick song, keeps time, distance, proportions, rest me his minim rest, one two, and the thirist in your bosom, the very butcher of a silk button, the gentleman of the very first house, of the first and second cause, ach the immortal passado the puento reverso, the hey!

Taking into consideration such descriptions of fencing with the rapier, one may get the impression that the cold and practical Englishmen became fascinated with the colourful presentations of ideas, the rich and complicated vocabulary, the exotic and bombastic terms, and the philosophical and poetic descriptions of Italian masters.

Saviolo’s school, activities, opinions, and methods of teaching fencing gained great recognition and respect in England.

Arstona's very original and specific verse in his work, *Scourge of Villainy*, seems to indicate the great admiration for Master Vincentio and the already mentioned fascination with the romantic presentation of fencing and the colourful and original Italian fencing terminology:

*Och, come not within distance Martius speaks
Who never discourseth but of fencing feats,
Of counter time, fincture sly passataes,
Stramazzone, resolute stoccatas:
Of the quick change with the wiping madritta,
The carricado with the imbrocatta.
The honourable fencing mystery
Who does not honour? Then he falls he in again
Jading our ears, and somewhat must be sain
Of blades, and Rapier hilts, and surest guard,
Of Vincentio and the Burgonian's ward.*

While positive and complimentary opinions of Vincentio's school of fencing are very numerous, let us go back to the description of his methods and to *Hamlet*. In Vincentio Saviolo's textbook, after a lecture presented in a charming garden (which emphasises—equally valid today—the great importance of verbal explanation in fencing training), the master begins the exercises. The drills have the character of a short exchange of fencing strokes, by which the pupil learns, not only how to execute certain fencing actions, but equally—and what is extremely important and sometimes underestimated by fencing masters nowadays—their application in a bout or in exercises resembling bout conditions. The master begins with an evading movement aside, at the same time thrusting toward the pupil's trunk. The pupil, Luke, who took to heart the master's teaching and Grassi's recommendations about the importance of mobility, avoids being hit by a fast step to the side, at the same time counter-attacking with his rapier, which is parried swiftly by the master's dagger. It seems that Luke is slightly disappointed by the lack of success of his action because the master consoles him by assuring him that although he did not manage to reach his opponent, he at least learned how to defend himself. To stress the importance of the moral above, Vincentio gives a clever imbrocata, which hits the pupil (contrary to what modern sport scientists very often claim, learning by mistakes and errors is quite important and efficacious).

And so, fencing was full of courtesy and dignity, resembling, in a way, dances of those times—with fencers executing half-turns, turns, evasions, moving backwards and then forwards, practically not changing the distance of twelve feet which ought to separate two accomplished fencers. Early enough, the maestro instructs his pupil that, "Those who set upon their enemies after the fashion of Ramaes for the most part come to misfortune." It is, in a way, a warning against an excessive and overdone application of Grassi's principle, "he vanquishes that is more nimble." Overexcited, Luke throws himself upon his adversary—the master—(perhaps, after the fashion of Ramaes) and both fencers—the teacher and the pupil—find themselves in such a position that they cannot efficiently yield their long rapiers (of course, we assume that in those days they knew that too high a level of arousal diminishes the efficacy of performance, though they could not know of the experiments and first law of Yerkes-Dodson). In such a situation, the favourite and recommended action of Saviolo was a punch to the opponent's head, which, as he puts it, "stayeth the fury of a man", but the pupil's privilege saves him from it. Now the master executes a classical (in such circumstances) action: he catches the pupil's hilt, trying to snatch the rapier from his hand.

Shakespeare knew that action and appreciated its importance in a fight, instructing, in the folio edition, "in scuffling, they change rapiers." In the quarto edition, there are no such stage directions. Rove, however, gives the following directions, "Laertes wounds Hamlet, then, in scuffling, they change rapiers and Hamlet wounds Laertes."

Here, we are faced with difficulties which Master Saviolo cannot help us solve. It would be possible to catch the rapier with a hand protected by a chain-mail glove; but how is it possible when the left hand is holding a dagger? Probably, the only solution would be throwing the dagger away or quickly putting it under the belt.

F. A. Marshall and V. H. Irving, in their study of *Hamlet* [16], write, “How the change of rapiers took place is not exactly known.” F. A. Marshall, in his book *Henry Irving’s Shakespeare*, describes the disarming as a gliding beat of the opponent’s rapier, after which, one catches with one’s left hand the hilt of the opponent’s weapon, pushing strongly downwards and then directing the dagger into the opponent’s breast. But Marshall’s words do not solve the problem: how does he catch the opponent’s hilt with his left hand while he is holding a dagger?

Judging by Saviolo’s wood-cuts, the speed of a fencing bout, in those days, could not be very high as the fencers were not only armed with heavy weapons (rapiers, as a matter of fact, in Saviolo’s book, are drawn in a very simplified fashion and do not look like real weapons of the epoch) but were clothed in full dress with huge hats with ornamental plumes. Vincentio maintains that knowledge of the art of fencing diminishes the difference between weak and strong individuals (this—but only in a certain sense—may be true today, in modern fencing). However, the weapons, clothing and equipment of XVI century fencers seems to indicate that to continue fighting, even for only a few minutes, one would have to possess good health, motor fitness, strength and specific endurance.

From among a real flood of instruction, advice and teachings which the great maestro showers upon his pupil, one more wise saying is worth quoting which—metaphorically—may have a certain value, not only in fencing, but in life, generally: “If a man sees another with a drawn rapier, let him defend himself, for it is not a matter of friendship.”

And so, describing the duel in *Hamlet*, we have managed to discuss the fencing in Shakespearean times. My reflections on this theme may be finished with the supposition that spectators from Blackfriars or The Globe Theatre, in Shakespeare’s times would not be fascinated by the ways in which the famous fencing scene in *Hamlet* is very often presented today. As it turns out, nothing is as simple or easy to comprehend as it might superficially appear to us.

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