

Camillo Agrippa. *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise*.

Ed. Kenneth C. Mondschein. New York: Italica Press, 2009. xciv + 138 pp. index. append. gloss. bibl. \$20. ISBN: 978-1-59910-129-3.

An assumed right to personal violence has long been a marker of maleness, despite the long-standing efforts of official authority to deny it. In the Renaissance, a dagger or sword was part of everyday costume, and served as the universal signifier of adult male status. Dueling remained a common practice despite repeated prohibitions. Elite males learned swordsmanship and related arts, and fencing masters armed with pedagogical systems stood ready to teach the newest methods. Behind them lay an array of treatises on the art of fencing, each expounding a slightly different system.

Camillo Agrippa was a Milanese architect-engineer, not a fencing master, but he published in 1553 a *Trattato di scientia d'arme*. Agrippa's novelty was to provide a geometrical framework for the fencer's poses and movements. He claims this gives a *ragionamento*, or reasoned account, of the whole process and facilitates learning. Agrippa is regarded as the pioneer who foreshadowed the later Spanish style known as *destreza*, a complex geometrical way of choreographing the fencer's movements. Ken Mondschein, a teacher of fencing at the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester, MA, a former Harvard Fellow and Fulbright Scholar, and a PhD candidate at Fordham, presents the only English translation of Agrippa's full text.

The world of fencing remains mysterious to the uninitiated (which includes this reviewer), and the best guide remains Sydney Anglo's *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* (2000). Following Anglo we can see how technological and social change affected fencing and its teaching. With the decline of armor, the medieval long sword shrank to become the "rapier," seemingly from the Spanish *espada ropera*, a sword for wearing with clothing. The rapier's most deadly blow was a thrust at the enemy, not a slash — after Agrippa, many rapiers were not sharpened along their edges, only at the point. But to thrust with a light sword requires very different bodily motions than slashing with a heavier blade, hence the need for a different system of instruction.

Perhaps because Agrippa was an architect-engineer, he seeks to simplify and rationalize fencing, reducing it to a set of “guards” or primal postures from which various attacks and defenses can be derived. His illustrations using nude male figures leave no doubt about the body’s position at each step. Printed capital letters identify the actions, and these simplify the syntax of the descriptive text, a technique that appears later in sixteenth-century books of mechanics. The magnificent illustrations, once thought to be by Michelangelo, are alone worth the price of admission, and Mondschein has altered their placement vis-à-vis the text, correcting some of the printer’s original blunders. His translation from the Italian is fluent and readable, though perhaps sometimes involving small sacrifices of scholarly scruple, as he himself admits.

Mondschein’s work is necessarily more focused than Anglo’s, and he sees Agrippa as both a seminal figure in fencing history and as the very embodiment of the Cinquecento virtuoso. Not everyone agrees: Anglo notes how both seventeenth- and nineteenth-century commentators held widely varying opinions about the importance of Agrippa’s geometrical system, although Anglo himself praises Agrippa’s “original and inventive mind” (49). For Mondschein no doubts exist: Agrippa represents a “paradigm shift” on the “cutting edge” of sixteenth-century fashion. And perhaps within the world of fencing masters and historical reenactors this is true enough.

One might have more confidence in Mondschein’s enthusiastic judgments about Agrippa had he shown closer attention to textual details. One does not want to harp on such minutiae; they mar an edition that, at its core, is a sound and highly informative translation. Indeed, this is certain to become the standard English version of the *Trattato di scientia d’arme*, and one regrets its shortcomings. There is now growing interest in early modern didactic “how-to” literature, and Mondschein’s Agrippa should go a long way toward demystifying all Renaissance fencing treatises and enhancing their standing as texts.

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