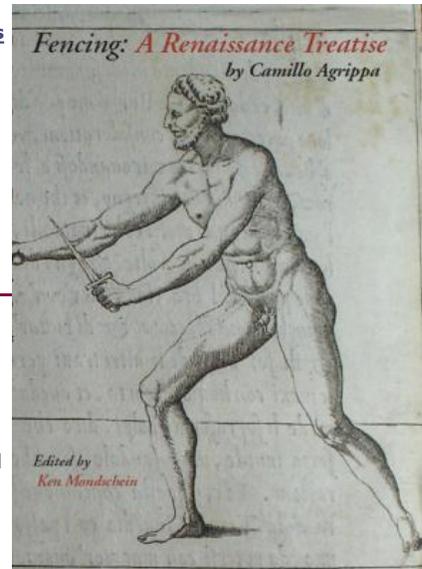


Ken Mondschein, ed.

Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise by Camillo Agrippa

New York: *Italica Press*, 2009. 234pp \$40(hb)/\$20(pb)/\$10(e-book). ISBN 978-1-59910-173-6 (hb) / 978-1-59910-129-3 (pb) / 978-1-59910-150-7 (e-book)

Fencing Historian Ken Mondschein has done the Western Martial Arts community a great service by translating into English the fencing treatise of the iconic 'Renaissance man' turned fencing master, Camillo Agrippa. *Trattato di Scientia d'Arme* (Treatise on the Science of Arms), originally published in 1553, is regarded by many fencers and fight scholars as the text that began the transition not only from the medieval 'cut and thrust' style of swordplay to the thrust-centric style typified by the rapier, but also the transition from viewing swordplay as an art to a science. Rightly so, Mondschein points out that in addition to scholars and practitioners of European swordplay, this text is a valuable resource for historians, art historians, science historians, and scholars of masculine identity in 16th century Italy.



In his Introduction (for which due credit must be given for managing to sneak in a quote from *The Princess Bride*), Mondschein begins with a brief biography of Agrippa. An engineer and mathematician by trade, Agrippa undertook the ambitious task of streamlining the practice of swordplay by applying to it tried and tested mathematic and geometric principles. The success of this attempt is demonstrated by the fact that his principles continue to be applied in fencing to this day.

Mondschein places Agrippa's text into its proper context, detailing the 16th century attitude towards personal combat and training in arms. He discusses the establishment of formal fencing schools in Europe and the changing trends in both weapons and methods of fighting throughout this period. He also examines the notion that proficiency in arms was a key element in nobility and courtliness. This mentality is epitomized in the private duel of honour; a phenomenon that emerged in the 16th century and persisted for almost four hundred years.

Mondschein attempts to identify the intended audience of Agrippa's work by examining the history of personal combat manuals from the late Middle Ages to the 16th century. He reveals how, with the advent of print, such works became more widely accessible and thus began to be directed toward a less exclusive readership. While Agrippa still presumes that his reader possesses a basic knowledge of swordplay, his teachings are more comprehensively laid out than previous texts that assumed the reader had direct access to a master. Agrippa's teachings were meant to appeal to the new 'self-made' men of the Renaissance; aspiring gentlemen unaffiliated with established powers seeking the martial prowess that they feel characterizes *noblesse*.

Mondschein prefaces his translation with a brief breakdown of the text; what is presented and how it is divided. He also takes an in-depth look in to the science, mathematics and philosophy underlying Agrippa's swordplay. This may seem daunting to the layperson, as this section is quite technical. However the reader's efforts to comprehend what is being discussed will be greatly rewarded, in that it offers the reader a look inside Agrippa's head to see the origins of his techniques.

The final section of his Introduction discusses the possible Hermetic undercurrents in Agrippa's system. This ranges from possible Pythagorean symbolism in Agrippa's geometry to the potential esoteric meaning of some of the text's more allegorical images, drawn perhaps from such texts as the *Hieroglyphica* (MS discovered in 1422 and first printed edition in 1505) and Francesco Colonna's, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Aldus, 1499). This is the only portion of the book, otherwise filled with solid and well-referenced ideas, that strays slightly into tenuous speculation. Although Hermetic, Pythagorean, and Neoplatonic ideas and symbolism exerted a wide influence on Renaissance art and philosophy, to suggest that Agrippa's manual has a second, symbolic layer of meaning to adepts with the right understanding seems a bit of a stretch.

Mondschein's chief concern in his translation is making the text accessible to modern readers. He explains that it was occasionally necessary to distil some of Agrippa's excessive eloquence into more concise passages so as to not bombard readers with the verbose style of writing characteristic of a 16th century man of letters. He manages to find a good balance between a simple, to-the-point translation, and preserving the spirit and

feel of the original language. Although the edition sadly does not contain the text in its original language, a link to a digital facsimile of the 1553 edition is provided at the end of the Translator's Notes. [ed. note: some images from the original are here] < <http://www.thearma.org/Manuals/NewManuals/Agrippa/agrippa.htm> > Where possible, however, Mondschein uses rich and copious explanatory notes to provide bits of the original text and explain the motivations behind his translation.

Since this is meant as a practical text for use by fencers and historical combat practitioners, Mondschein makes sure that the instructions for the techniques are translated as clearly as possible. In some areas he has translated terms and phrases using vocabulary that will be more familiar to modern practitioners. In other places, concluding that Agrippa's wording either had no modern equivalent or simply could not be better stated in another way, he has either given a literal translation or in some cases retained the original Italian.

The book concludes with an appendix in which Mondschein discusses Agrippa's rapier; a more robust weapon compared to the sometimes excessively-long and thin thrusting weapon that would emerge later as the rapier reached its peak in popularity. In this section, he provides the specifications (*e.g.*, measurements, dates, provenance) of a series of swords in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Mondschein's personal comments on each sword, however, are not as objective as they could be. Some of his bolder statements, in which he questions the utility of a particular sword, or even its authenticity, on the basis of his experience handling it, perhaps sells the pieces short and do not factor in individual preference in the features of a custom-built weapon. Although he may find it awkward and unwieldy, the man who commissioned it and carried it to defend himself could have preferred it that way. Apart from this, the only other feature that could have bettered this section would be accompanying images of these swords.

This edition will be a valuable asset to experienced fencers and historical combat practitioners, as well as those just beginning (for whom studying Agrippa's concise and effective system will be a good starting point). Mondschein succeeds in producing a translation that is modern and accessible without sacrificing the literary flavour of the period in which it was written. It is also heartening to see this text contribute to the growing trend of treating fencing manuals not just as resources for today's aspiring swordsmen, but also as a useful primary source for in-depth research within the wider academic community.

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