

Dagers of the Mind:  
Towards a Historiography of Fencing

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If historians from Karl Marx to Michel Foucault have dealt with conflict between dominant and subordinate groups as a primary theme in their work, it is arguably because of their European background. The notion of social class, it has oft been noted, is more in the fore of the French, British, or German mind than it is in the American. After all, one often-admired quality of American society is its supposed “egalitarianism.” The United States has had a civil war, but never a revolt of the *plebes*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, to the American-born student of European history, living in an ostensibly classless society, conflict and competition between social equals would seem to be a more authentically pressing issue than conflict between social classes.

Fencing—that is, a systematized method of civilian use of the sword, for both agonistic and antagonistic purposes—is a virtual repository of attitudes, norms, and codes for such dealings between social equals. It is, after all, rooted in the reality of the duel, the antagonistic and ritualistic combat between two adversaries, intended to settle a question of honor; that is to say, of social status amongst one’s peers.<sup>2</sup> Through the bourgeois appropriation of aristocratic,

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<sup>1</sup> Though many of the events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, from Bobby Seale at the Democratic National Party Convention of 1968 to the “Battle of Seattle” in 1999, have come close.

<sup>2</sup> We must here differentiate between the era of fencing practiced before the French Revolution, in which the sword was still worn as an article of masculine dress, as well as the “classical” era of fencing of the 19th and early 20th

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p. 2/38

chivalric ideals, such as the bearing of arms, the *code duello* thus participates in what the medievalist Johann Huizinga called an “aesthetic ideal assuming the appearance of an ethical ideal.”<sup>3</sup>

However, though the oldest existing martial tradition in the Western world, the Italian school of fence, reckons itself to be almost five hundred years old,<sup>4</sup> and despite the recent flurry of interest in the subject and translations of primary sources, the approach to the history of fencing is still in the proverbial dark ages. Some of the most well-known and frequently cited works on the subject are more than a century old, and are inundated with attitudes and assumptions that, while typical of their age, are badly in need of reappraisal. Yet, these selfsame attitudes are, in turn, very revealing of the mindset and mentalities prevalent amongst the educated elites in the mid- to late nineteenth century.

A study of these works would, arguably, be even more revealing of the “spirit of the age” than reading the works of writers such as Hegel or Nietzsche, since it would tell us what was going on not in the mind of the philosopher, but in the mind of the (admittedly well-dressed) man on the street—though it should be noted that fencing and philosophy have also inarguably influenced one another. Insofar as its power to testify to any particular *zeitgeist* goes, since fencing is, perforce, a pastime of the elite, the segment of society most likely to have been schooled in depth in the various mental habits and viewpoints of their culture, it will reflect a “pop culture” version of this culture’s biases. This group’s perceptions of, and thoughts about, their leisure activity will, logically, reflect their ways of thinking, not only about practical matters, but about their aesthetic tastes, their hopes, dreams, and ideals. An analysis of works on fencing and dueling will, likewise, provide us with the views of this upper crust towards conflict,

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century, and the contemporary *sport* of fencing. The historical reasons for these distinctions will be discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1924), 58.

<sup>4</sup> William Gaugler, *The Science of Fencing* (Bangor, Maine: Laureate Press, 1997), xxiv. (Dr. Gaugler is both a professor of classical archaeology and director of the Fencing Master’s program at U.C. Davis)

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 3/38

fair play, and the place of the aggressive instinct in society. In these aspects, in terms of social and intellectual history, it may be broader and even more valuable than a detailed, in-depth analysis of one influential historical writer, such as Ranke, Michelet, or Gibbon.

Likewise, the study is also of interest to historians of science, since fencing was reckoned to be not just a physical activity, contingent upon reflexes and brawn, but a science—an aesthetic science, subject to eternal and universal rules, as if the same Platonic truths embrace geometry, fencing, and art. The better we understand the clockwork of the universe, this school of thought goes, the better we can make it work for us. It was, in short, the ideas of the Enlightenment put into motion. The attitudes towards fencing will, therefore, also reflect attitudes towards knowledge and progress.

Before putting forth a critique of the subject, however, we must proceed, in the words of the sixteenth-century polymath and fencing theorist Camillo Agrippa, from “part to part, following the succession of the work,” before our purpose “is made manifest in the third part. . . [which] is very different from the writings that give birth to it.” We begin, then, with a brief historical sketch.

### **Towards Pedagogical Hegemony**

As Michel Foucault points out in his 1975 work, *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et Punir)*, a soldier in the sixteenth century “was someone who could be recognized from afar. . . through the qualities he innately possessed, through his experience of the military life, and, most importantly, because he played a soldier’s role in society.” To the late eighteenth-century military theorist, however, a soldier was “something than can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated restraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all

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p. 4/38

times, turning silently into the automatism of habit.”<sup>5</sup> In Foucault’s thinking, such discipline is the ichor that flows through the limbs of the modern society, binding it together in an all-pervasive system of power-knowledge. From the hospital to the school to the workplace to the prison, each individual is subjugated to the larger power, indoctrinated in its ways and means, and compelled to play according to its rules.

Though Foucault’s observation has since become almost a *reductio ad absurdum* in academe, we should note that his thinking concerning the training of soldiers—the *public* agents of violence—is extremely applicable to fencing—being, as it is, the abstraction, socialization, and pedagogy of *private* violence.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the process by which this art—which not coincidentally developed a rich literature in the same period that public warfare became professionalized—came to be regulated provides an object example of the social mutations of the last five centuries. Thus, while Camillo Agrippa could write in 1553 that “Just as a piece of wood. . . provided insomuch that it is straight, and strong enough. . . is sufficient and good for the purpose of making a multitude of geometrical figures. . . a man, governing himself with reason, and with art, ought to be able to perform agreeably in this pursuit [of fencing],” the *Manuel d’escrime* of 1877, issued by the French Ministry of War to discipline the mandatory fencing exercise of the military, mandates that “The instructor must temper his manner to the temperament, the character, the physical characteristics, and the intelligence of the student. . . while unceasingly correcting defective positions of the hand and the body, before gradually accelerating the speed of the movements, to encourage the essential precision and speed.”<sup>7</sup> The early modern gentleman is able to “perform agreeably” because of his very nature; to the post-Enlightenment pedagogue, however, the swordsman is made, not born.

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 135.

<sup>6</sup> The irony that Foucault’s critique of authority has become *de rigueur* and even cliché in educated circles does not escape us. In response, we say that this does not make his observations any less useful. Having been educated by Jesuits, he certainly knew power-knowledge from the inside.

Professional teachers of swordsmanship can be documented as far back as the twelfth century, invariably in an urban milieu—indeed, our evidence for their existence comes from municipal governments’ attempts to ban the profession as an activity liable to give rise to social disruption. In thirteenth-century Winchester, for instance, the occupation of fencing master was so disreputable that it was one that even a Jew might profess.<sup>8</sup> While chivalry had always had an aspirational component, and while medieval rulers had increasingly relied on common foot soldiers to provide the backbone of their armies from the fourteenth century on,<sup>9</sup> at the same time they frowned upon the better-off town-dwellers aping their betters too closely. Charles VI, for instance, harshly punished the leaders of the Parisian burghers who presumed to turn out armed *cap à pied* when he entered the city in 1382.<sup>10</sup> Much the same attitude was displayed, we can assume, towards those who wished to learn the use of weaponry.

The sea change in the profession of teaching arms began in the late fifteenth century as increasingly absolutist rulers, governing territories that came to look increasingly like nation-states and fielding military forces that came to look increasingly like standing armies, began to recognize and regulate this quintessentially urban activity. No longer were guilds (if they may be so-called) of fencing masters merely local organizations, formed by men who, if they had made such teaching their sole profession, were liable to be lumped in with actors, vagabonds, and other such n’er-do-wells. Rather, they were now granted a certain *dignitas*. In 1478, for instance, Fredrick III used his imperial jurisdiction over the cities of the Holy Roman Empire to grant the Frankfurt-based Brotherhood of St. Mark, or *Marxbruder*, a monopoly on teaching. A similar process had taken place in Spain by 1478, and likewise, Henry VIII granted a royal monopoly on teaching arms to the London Company of Masters of Defense in 1540.

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<sup>7</sup> *Manuel d’Escrime* (Paris: Henri Charles-Lavauzelle, 1877), 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Brand, “The Jewish community in the records of English royal government” in *The Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives*, edited by Patricia Skinner. (Rochester: Boydell, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Clifford Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

In politically disunified and war-torn Italy, no such authoritative hegemony could be imagined. It is also in Italy, dueling-ground of European armies, that Agrippa, deploring the “diabolical modern invention of artillery” that so ruined the “good ancient order of military honor,” devised the first wholly civilian form of swordsmanship. Though Agrippa’s play with long, straight thrusting swords was equally useful for the formal duel or the “improvident armed assault,” as the author put it, it was useless on horseback or on the battlefield. Yet for all of this, it was considered by contemporaries throughout Europe as just as worthy a performance of martial virtue as the charge with couched lance once had been—an obvious shift of the chivalric ethos, in the age of the professional army, from the public to the private realm. Agrippa’s system also assumed the antagonists would not be utilizing expensive defensive armor or mounted on well-trained destriers; consequently, if one was willing to wager with one’s own blood, the ethos of the sword now had a lower entry price in the early modern period than it ever had in the Middle Ages.

It is France, however, that came to dominate the international fencing scene, and so it is to Paris we must look for the roots of later developments. Certainly, the French masters were late in organizing: It was not until 1567 that Charles IX issued letters-patent to the newly-formed *métier* of the *maîtres in fait des armes*, specifying, amongst rules designed to promote the safety of students and the usual guild regulations for provision of widows, that anyone who wished to become a master in Paris had to serve a two-year apprenticeship and pass a practical examination, with any unauthorized teachers running afoul of both the guild and the royal authority. (Lespinasse, the historian who compiled and published the regulations of the various *métiers*—a very nineteenth-century project by very a nineteenth-century mind—somewhat spuriously gives the guild’s origin in the medieval heralds.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it is also to Charles IX

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Muhlberger, *Deeds of Arms* (Highland Village, TX: Chivalry Bookshelf, 2005), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Lespinasse, *Les Métiers de Paris* vol. 3 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1892), 597.

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 7/38

that Henri Saint-Didier, a “Provençal gentleman,” and therefore not a member of the guild, dedicated the earliest surviving fencing book to be printed in French, his 1573 *Traicté contenant les secrets du premier livre sur l’espée seule, mère de toutes armes.*)

Though the Wars of Religion gave French rulers something to worry about besides ensuring that the nation was being instructed in how to do violence in an educated fashion, both the ill-fated Henri III and his successor Henri IV still did their parts to try to ensure that fencing would be taught by authorized masters, with the former confirming the guild’s regulations in 1585, and the latter encouraging the young *noblesse* of France to attend the newly-formed and unabashedly royalist Jesuit universities, where fencing and theater were both key components of the curriculum. The Bourbons indeed made great use of the didactic power of instruction in the gentlemanly arts: In 1628 Girard Thibault dedicated his *Academie de L’Espee* to his patron, Louis XIII. This work, twin to Pluvinel’s *Menage Royale* and known as the most sumptuous fencing book ever created, both epitomized baroque style and gave an implicit endorsement to Thibault’s system of rapier fence, which was ultimately derived from a system devised by the Spanish nobleman Jeronimo de Carranza in the mid-sixteenth century, but was here elaborated with illustrations and figures influenced by notions of sacred geometry, and which implicitly endorsed the notions of divine order and the chain of being.<sup>12</sup> In 1643, Louis likewise confirmed the long-standing laws of the *métier*, and the following year endorsed detailed instructions for the apprenticeship and testing of new masters-of-arms in seventeen articles.

As great a patron of the art of arms as his father had been, it was Louis XIV who gave a royal imprimatur to the *métier* and raised it to a position of honor by granting it arms and by elevating six of its number to the nobility. On a more practical level, this meant that the manner of fencing in Paris would thereafter follow the dictates of its licensing board of masters—and, as in other

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of this, see, Kate van Orden’s excellent *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

matters of fashion, the rest of France, and indeed the world, would follow suit. François Billacois may overstate the case when he characterizes this endorsement as an absolutist reaction against the dueling nobility's subversion of royal authority, but there can be no doubt that Louis' preference for the short and elegant court sword that so often appears at his side in portraiture was as much a part of his system of aesthetic control as his dancing the part of the Sun in court ballets—and the fashion of Versailles remained the European standard for the duration of the *ancien regime* and even after, as fencing in Paris remained under control of the *syndicat* of masters of arms even after the Revolution had made the wearing of swords with male costume as anachronistic as craft guilds.

The most significant step towards an “Enlightened” system of fencing, however, was not the work of a Frenchman, but a French-educated Italian living in London. This was Domenico Angelo's famous *L'Ecole des Armes*. Angelo, a native of Leghorn, was well-known as a teacher of the Parisian schools of fencing and riding to the British upper-crust through much of the eighteenth century, and his book, published in English and French editions, underwritten by some of the highest-ranking nobility, and engraved with plates by such notable artists as Chamber, Gwyn and Ryland, was an instant classic. However, what is significant about Angelo's book is not the work as it was originally printed, but rather the fact that it was reprinted in that master-compendium of Enlightenment thought, the *Encyclopedie*. In keeping with the schema of Diderot's great propaganda project, Angelo's work was used to “name” fencing—and to name something is to have power over it.<sup>13</sup> *L'Ecole des Armes* was followed in 1799 by a work, *Hungarian and Highland Broadsword*, written by his son, Henry, and Thomas Rowlandson on military drills designed to familiarize soldiers with the use of the cutlass and broadsword—the very epitome of Foucault's disciplined bodies.

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<sup>13</sup> For a full analysis of the rhetoric of this publication, see William H. Leckie, Jr.'s contribution in this volume.

Unlike the tradition of medieval *manuscripts* that sought to preserve ancient knowledge, of which we have examples dating back to as early as 1300, or the early modern *treatises* that may be seen to have begun with Agrippa and sought to increase their authors' fame by sharing knowledge, illustrating the principles of the art, and systematizing a craft—in short, contributing to the ordering of the world—modern *manuals* of fence such as the *Manuel d'Escrime* that Captain de Bast published in Brussels in 1836 are didactic in nature.<sup>14</sup> Rather than merely preserving or disseminating knowledge, they intend to define, establish, order, discipline, and perpetuate a system of bodily knowledge, already assume a shared symbology in which the referent of a sign is known to the readership, and are intended for general use. The implicit rhetoric of a “manual” is that there is a correct, standard way of doing things, as opposed to the plurality of opinion that had prevailed earlier.

It should also be noted that Bast's work, besides being the first French-language fencing book to call itself a *manuel*, was also primarily addressed to the artistic flourishes of *foil* fence—an entirely agonistic pursuit. Yet, we can not say that this was entirely a bloodless, abstract activity. Fencing (and the activity it was symbolic of, dueling) in nineteenth-century France was full of meaning. The private trial by combat was considered an illegal atavism, to be sure, but an atavism broadly tolerated as a necessary performance of masculinity, as a tool of political and editorial rhetoric, and for the way it hearkened back to the *ancien regime*. The (Jewish!) captains Crémieu-Foa and Mayer's duels with Drumont, Lamase, and the Marquis de Morès were fraught with meaning extending well beyond the Dreyfus Affair itself and back to the liberal appropriation of aristocratic forms. Likewise, the damage done to Messonier's glorious Napoleonic canvas *The Battle of Friedland* by his son's over-enthusiastic fencing practice in the

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<sup>14</sup> Though printed works on fencing certainly existed before Agrippa, they, for the most part, share more in common with their predecessors, seeking to preserve traditional knowledge, rather than presenting a method from first principles.

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 10/38

studio only added to the painting's fame: In the inglorious aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, both the painter's brush and his son's sword proclaimed that the French are indeed martial!

Italy, the other great nation of swordsmen, might have come late to nationhood, but in the years following the *risorgimento*, national pride, as well as the demands of the military-political infrastructure thought necessary for a modern-nation state, dictated the need for a national fencing academy. Thus, the several styles of fencing practiced on the peninsula—the Neapolitan, the Sicilian, the northern “mixed school”—slowly drew towards pedagogical unity just as the French had in the previous century. The most significant step in this process was when the system of military instruction, based upon Giuseppe Radaelli's treatise *Istruzione per la scherma di sciabola e di spada* (published in Milan under by the Ministry of War in 1873), was replaced in 1883 by the system of the Neapolitan master Masaniello Parise, an ardent nationalist and advocate of a supposedly more “purely” Italian system of fencing. Indeed, in matters of the sword, all other European countries sought to follow the lead of France or Italy, the acknowledged masters, with the British, and Spanish following the former thanks, respectively, to the conquests of Angelo and Napoleon, and the German-speaking countries emulating the latter for the simple reason they were not French.

Parise's system, taught at the *Scuola Magistrale* in Naples, was the one that guided the training of the top-rated fencers in Italy and was thus seen most widely on the international stage—for counterpart to this forging of national culture was international rivalry, played out in a well-publicized series of competitions between French and Italian masters.<sup>15</sup> Fencing was also an integral part of the first Olympics of 1896, and though the gold in amateur's foil was won by a Frenchman, Eugène-Henri Gravelotte, masters' foil was won by a Greek, Leonidas Pyrgos, who defeated the French champion, Jean Maurice Perronet.

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<sup>15</sup> William Gaugler, “Epic Encounters between Italian and French Fencing Masters, 1881-1911.” *The Sword*, July 1988, 13.

### **Positivism at Sword's Point**

It was in this milieu that the three great nineteenth-century English-language historians of fencing wrote—Edgerton Castle, Captain Alfred Hutton, and the famous adventurer and explorer Sir Richard Burton, whose major contributions, respectively, are *Schools and Masters of Fence*, *Old Sword Play*, and *The Book of the Sword* (all published in 1892).<sup>16</sup> Castle deals with the history of the art itself, Hutton with the practical points of Renaissance swordsmanship, reconstructing technique from an antiquarian point of view, and Burton with the archaeology and development of the sword itself.

The most significant of these writers is Castle, who is still widely quoted as an authority in works on fencing. Burton, though a colorful character, is not as useful, since *The Book of the Sword* mainly deals with the evolution of the weapon itself, and thus is not of as much interest to the historian who wishes to deal with social conceptions of its use. Finally, though the bulk of Hutton's work deals with the actual technical aspects of the use of "old" weapons, the introductory portions are very revealing.

The primary assumption underlying the writings of these men is that human history since the Renaissance has, under the aegis of reason, been a continuing march towards ever-greater "perfection." Like the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt's view of the Renaissance, Hutton, Castle, and Burton display a strong moral and historical positivism. To them, the invention of fencing, begun in the glorious days of the Italian Renaissance, paralleled the progress of the scientific revolution and the evolution of the "modern" age towards greater moral, intellectual, and physical enlightenment and refinement, to a point, in fact, where dueling had vanished and the (civilian) study of the sword was wholly an academic, leisure-time activity. (At the time of

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p. 12/38

writing, no Englishman had engaged in a sword duel for decades.)<sup>17</sup> As Castle says in his introduction to *Schools and Masters*:

The author does not profess. . . to analyze closely the contents of *all* the books written on the **imperfect play of our ancestors**, nor to trace every link in the chain of [fencing's] development, from the “pancratium” of the fifteenth century, in which leaping and wrestling were of more avail than aught else, to **the courteous and academic “assault” of modern days, where elegance and precision of movement are more highly considered—or ought to be—than mere superiority in the number of hits.**<sup>18</sup>

As part and parcel of this bias, we see a strong tendency that, the later and further north one looks, the more “perfect” the development of the art is accounted to have been. Hutton, trying to say in a few paragraphs what Castle expresses in a book, is even more revealing. For instance, in his introduction to *Old Sword-Play*, he makes blanket statements such as:

. . .in Western Europe the long, handsome rapier had by degrees given place to the short walking sword, which, however, did not assume a settled form until the century following [the eighteenth]; but the Italians, who were the original teachers of our art, adhered to the earlier form. This change of pattern in the sword necessitated a change in the method of using it, and **hence arose the two great and only “schools” of fence**, the Italian and the French.

From this point on we deal with the French system alone, and we find that **as the short, light swords improved in their form, the art of wielding them advanced in precision and grace**, which latter quality may be said to have **attained its perfection** about the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

Hutton summarily drops his discussion of the Italian school as soon as it cedes to the French—the students have surpassed the masters. Likewise, he apparently does not feel the Italian school to have been “perfect” in and of itself, but rather only an antecedent to the French school, in which the art reached its ultimate culmination. In this, we might detect an obvious nationalistic and even racialist bias—fencing could never be “perfected” by those swarthy

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<sup>16</sup> For purposes of scope, we omit non-English historians of fence, such as Gelli and Moreno, though it should be noted that they show much the same nationalistic and positivist bias as the English-language authors.

<sup>17</sup> Castle, *Schools and Masters* (London: George Bell and Sons. 1892), 312

<sup>18</sup> Castle, 2. Emphasis has been added to the most telling statements by printing them in **boldface**

<sup>19</sup> Alfred Hutton, *Old Sword-Play* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), 1–2.

Ken Mondschein/ Dagers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 13/38

Italians. Similarly, Hutton ignores, and Castle dismisses, the Spanish school. While their southern cousins might have been inspired artists with brush, pen, and sword, it was up to the Northern European countries to give the Renaissance its true intellectual direction.

To Burckhardt, as well, the Italian despots were almost animalistic—to be admired for their fierceness and political effectiveness, to be sure, but still ruled more by a fiery heart than a cool mind. Ignoring the history of the communes, so important to the development of civic humanism, and to such movements as the Savonarolan millennial community in Florence, emphasis was placed on the “tyrants,” the great political powers and artistic patrons. Their epitome was Cesare Borgia, who was the despotic son of a Spanish pope of few scruples, and who was the admired hero of Machiavelli, whose very name was a byword for political cynicism and moral indifference. The Italians had genius, to be sure, as is seen in the art of Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, but the history textbooks then switched their focus (as they still do today) from the Italian wars to the theology of Luther and Calvin, or to the consolidation of the French state in the seventeenth century. The Italians were ruled by “tyrants,” the French by “autocrats.”

Fencing, likewise, was held to have been perfected by the “refined” French, who in this period pioneered the “small sword,” or “walking sword,” as Hutton calls it, that combined the functions of masculine jewelry and self-defense.<sup>20</sup> Even today, few costume dramas set in the seventeenth or eighteenth century seem complete without an *affaire d'honor* settled at sword's point.<sup>21</sup> Italian technique, meanwhile, remained “coarse” and “primitive,” using a heavier weapon that was little more than a scaled-down rapier. Physical labor and brute strength, in the

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<sup>20</sup> The small sword is also significant for being the direct ancestor of the modern sport fencing weapons used since the nineteenth century. The foil was the training tool for the small sword; in the nineteenth century, it was preliminary to learning the epee, a dueling weapon that came into use after the sword ceased to be a part of male costume. Once the technique for the weapon was established, it did change, but not as much or as radically as it did during the transition from rapier to small sword. (The history of schools of use of the dueling saber is complicated, but it is interesting that, as for foil, the Italian school uses much the same technique as was used for earlier weapons.)

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)

p. 14/38

most courtly fashion, were considered uncouth. The featherweight small sword provided a personal weapon as light, elegant, and refined as the spirit itself. Even if the “profession” of the gentleman was to carry a sword, the fashionable courtier of the Age of Enlightenment was determined that his “work” would involve as little actual sweat as possible.

This perception is borne out by a well-known anecdote of Domenico Angelo defeating a certain Dr. Keys in a celebrated early-eighteenth century contest. Keys, an Irishman of considerable size and strength, challenged the French-schooled master to a fencing match in a London tavern, which often served as venues for such entertainments. According to the memoirs of Angelo’s son and successor, Henry, the challenger cut “a tall, athletic figure. . . his shirt sleeves tucked up, exposing a pair of brawny arms, sufficient to cope in the ring with Broughton or Slack [two famous pugilists of the day].” Angelo, however, easily put by all of Keyes’ powerful attacks with small, skillful, and effortless motions, and then went on to score a number of unanswered hits on his exhausted adversary.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, what this meant to contemporaries can be easily interpolated: the intellect and science of the Enlightenment, or at least of the self-made gentleman and courtier of that era, had triumphed over brute force, as personified by the uncouth Irishman. Similarly, improvement in technique, with all its moral implications, is the logical and inevitable result of technological development. As Hutton wrote, “[The] change of pattern in the sword necessitated a change in the method of using it.” Moral, artistic, and ethical development go hand-in-hand with mechanical progress; the industrial revolution, according to this mindset, could only produce beneficial results. Technical improvement leads to overall improvement, just as oil painting is “superior” to panel painting.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Duelists and Dangerous Liasons* come to mind.

<sup>22</sup>Castle, 302

However, despite Hutton and Castle's impressions, it is not the case that the Italians were, in practice, inferior in any wise to the French in the practical application of the art of the sword. We find in contemporary accounts of contests between fencing masters that the southerners at least held their own. Whereas it is true that, the style of the "home team" was preferred as the most beautiful, elegant, and effective, we see in such events as the French tour of the Italian *Scuola Magistrale* in 1889, the visitors gave as good as they got.<sup>23</sup> Fencing was a common and widely followed sport in the late nineteenth century in such diverse places as Paris and New York, at least amongst the upper classes. Newspapers even employed fencing critics who, in many ways, filled the roles that both sports writers and theater critics do in modern mass media—for fencing was, as we have said, an aesthetic as well as an athletic exercise. As one such critic, the French fencing master Rupiere, remarked with obvious nationalistic bias:

The Roman masters have not yet abandoned theatrical postures, useless movements and contortions, and the continuous beating of the adversary's blade, which they search for in a monotonous fashion. . . but the attack executed from immobility [*i.e.*, in the French manner] is always superior to the attack performed with an advance [a typically Italian maneuver]. . .<sup>24</sup>

However, another French master, Victor Maurel, disagreed with the "sour grapes" approach and wrote this on the difficulty the French fencers had with the Italians:

Above all, the purpose of fencing to the Italian fencers is combat; their aim is to hit and not be hit. **We, instead, admire, above all, aesthetic bouts.** Here is the habitual expression, and we hear this heresy daily: "One beautiful hit equals ten bad ones." With this attitude, one can obtain only a conventional art that is no longer combat [*i.e.*, no longer has practical application], and that places one in a position of inferiority when faced with men who fence seriously.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gaugler, "Epic Encounters," 13. (*The Sword* is the publication of Britain's amateur fencing association.)

<sup>24</sup>Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, 13

<sup>25</sup>Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, 13

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 16/38

Or, on the other side of the Atlantic, a reporter for the *New York Times* noted of Prof. L. Vauthier of Paris, who fought an exhibition bout attended by Mark Twain and other luminaries on November 21, 1893, at the Fencer's Club in Manhattan:

Vauthier's style is very classic, and as far as possible from the styles which are purely old Italian, like the methods of certain Neapolitans or past modern French, like that of Masaniello Parise of Rome, or acrobatic, like that of Chevalier Pini. **He regards sword play for the duel as one thing, fencing as another. Sword play is the business; foil work is the game.**

The boldfaced words are significant. What can we read into this preference for “aesthetic bouts” and the “game” of “foil work” that rhymes so well with Castle's earlier comment on “the courteous and academic ‘assault’ of modern days”? Clearly, to this mindset, the artistic and the scientific are one—“beauty is truth, truth, beauty” as Keats said. But why, as far as fencing goes, was beauty more important than effectiveness?

Peter Gay, in *The Cultivation of Hatred*, the third volume of his great psycho-historical study of the nineteenth century European bourgeois mind, does not specifically handle fencing, though he does discuss the German student ritual of the *mensur*.<sup>26</sup> Still, Gay may give us a methodological pointer that can help us arrive at an answer. We would suggest that, by the formalization of violence, it is, in a way, controlled. The world is thus ordered, and the raw id, while acknowledged and given vent to, is removed one step from reality and thereby both

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<sup>26</sup>For those unfamiliar with the *mensur*, it bears some discussion here. Tracing its lineage back to the student duels of the Middle Ages and continuing on to this day, the *mensur*, or “measure,” is more a ritual or rite of passage than a duel or a sport. The adversaries, who are invariably drawn from two different *studentkorps* (dueling fraternities), are made to stand a sword's length away. The shorter is given a platform to stand on, so that they are of equal height. They are dressed in thick leathers, with their necks well protected, their heads covered by a leather cap, and their eyes shielded behind mesh goggles. However, their cheeks, chins, and faces are completely bare to the attacks of their opponent's razor-sharp *schlaeger*, which come in a lightning flurry as soon as the signal is given. The scars (*schmiss*) gained by this are permanent, but are a mark of pride amongst *mensur* aficionados. Indeed, a hundred years ago, such scars were quite fashionable, and a well-marked veteran would be considered quite a catch by the young ladies, for membership in a *studentkorps* indicated wealth, education, breeding, membership in the ultimate “old boy's club,” and a very bright future indeed. Moving, flinching, crying out in pain, or disobeying the rules, the referee, the doctors, or any of their orders in the slightest are absolutely *verboten*. Obedience and the maintenance of a stiff upper lip (provided that it is still attached to one's face) is all in the *mensur*. One can easily understand why this was thought to be an excellent manly exercise in Bismarck's Germany. In fact, Bismarck, a good *junker*, had himself had engaged in not a few student duels, in the days before they took this final form of immobile stoicism.

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 17/38

diffused and taken out of sight. The violent instinct, in other words, is both socialized and hidden, acknowledged and denied. Gay says of the *mensur*, for instance, that it “is a superb instance of the clash between the two meanings of cultivation, an exercise in aggression checked by accepted rules”—but this may be said, to an extent, of similar ritual, or indeed, of any sport.<sup>27</sup>

Further, in agonistic fencing, at least, the reality of conflict and death is given a veneer of sociability. In civilized society, which is to say *progressed* society, one is not in daily peril of one’s life. Saber-toothed tigers do not haunt Picadilly Circus, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting pedestrians, and Genghis Khan almost never leads his Mongol hordes down Bond Street, stopping to loot Sotheby’s on the way to Buckingham Palace. Likewise, we do not die in polite society; we “pass on,” and we are not fired, but rather “let go.”

By sweeping these grim realities under the rug, the euphemistic hiding away and disguising of war, sickness, and other unpleasantness is thus maintained. The reality of death at a sword’s point, always a reality in France if not in Britain, was likewise masked by the extreme academic formalization of the training. One does not *really* penetrate another man with cold steel, one achieves a “*touche*” with the “*fleuret*.” (The Freudian overtones of this need not be remarked upon.) The fact of violence is thus incorporated into the socially constructed, self-referential web of ideas that constitute “culture.”

### **An Embarrassing Lineage**

Thus far, we have seen several obvious nineteenth century ideas—progressive moral positivism, nationalism and racialism, and the conflation of aesthetic ideas, ethics, and scientific truth—crop up in our discussion.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, displaying another sort of pop Darwinism, both

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(He is recorded as saying when asked why he had no *schmiss*, “In my day, we didn’t parry with our faces!”)

<sup>27</sup>Gay, 9

<sup>28</sup>Another example of moral positivism, ethics, and scientific truth is embodied in the racialism of the imperial era. “Taking up the white man’s burden,” as Kipling wrote, involved acting in a paternalistic fashion to the “less

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 18/38

Hutton and Castle, in *Old Sword-Play* and *Schools and Masters*, completely discount any offshoots of, or strange Pleistocene antecedents to, what was seen as the final development of the evolution of the art. An excellent example of this is the Spanish school of fence, which in itself was a remarkable cultural artifact and which, as masters such as Girard Thibault demonstrate, was most decidedly an international phenomenon, yet is mysteriously glossed over in Hutton's work, and denigrated in Castle's:

It is a remarkable fact that in Spain, the reputed birthplace of systematic swordsmanship, so little progress should have been made towards what may be called the more *practical* use of the sword. Whilst the Italians, and, after their example, the French, Germans, and English, gradually discovered that simplification led to perfection, the Spanish masters, on the contrary, seemed to aim at making fencing a more and more mysterious science, requiring for its use a knowledge of geometry and natural philosophy, and whose principles were only explainable on metaphysical grounds.<sup>29</sup>

Castle likewise completely discounts the possibility of there having been a valid school of arms at any time before the Renaissance:

The rough untutored fighting of the Middle Ages represented faithfully the reign of brute force in social life as well as in politics. The stoutest arm and the weightiest sword won the day, even as did the sturdiest baron or the most warlike king. Those were the days of crushing blows with mace or glaive, when a knight's superiority in action depended upon his power of wearing heavier armor and dealing heavier blows than his neighbour, when strength was lauded more than skill, and minstrels sang of enchanted blades that nought could break.<sup>30</sup>

Later, he makes such ridiculous statements as, “. . .the habit of wearing defensive armour in battle, and, indeed, on most occasions out of doors, caused the sword to be regarded in the light of a weapon of offense only, sufficient reliance being placed on headpiece and carapace for protection,” and “The chivalrous science never had anything but a retarding effect on the science

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developed” races that, incidentally, happened to be wholly favorable to one’s own economic interests.

<sup>29</sup>Castle, 95

<sup>30</sup>Castle, 6

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 19/38

of fence.”<sup>31</sup> (No doubt, there were a great many Zulus and Hindus who would have disagreed with his position on “the reign of brute force” in British politics.)

Whereas this is to some extent true, to the degree that there was no specifically *civilian* form of armed self-defense for settling affairs of honor, this is not to say that there was no evidence of a system of systematic swordplay. The Royal Armouries are in possession of the first known *fechtbuch* (“fighting [or ‘fencing’] book”), written in Germany in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, and catalogued as Cotton MS I.33. Whereas the sword-and-buckler play shown therein is quite different from both Castle’s “modern” fencing and from what we are used to seeing as “medieval sword fighting” in the movies, the work is obviously Scholastic in flavor in that it seeks to systematize and explain a methodological system of all-purpose armed self-defense.

Castle seems to contradict himself, on not one, but on several accounts, in his attempt to fit established facts into his historical schema. He states that “beyond that fact that there were regular and well-known schools of arms in Spain during the fifteenth century, and the fact that Spanish bands—the best trained in the use of arms of all European troops at that period—overran Italy and the Low Countries during the sixteenth century, there are no reasons, notwithstanding the current opinion to that effect, to ascribe to Spain the birthplace of the art.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, he also says that Achille Marozzo (a Bolognese master of the early 16th century) “is generally looked upon as the first writer of note on the art of fencing. It would perhaps be wiser to consider him as the greatest teacher of the old school, the rough and undisciplined swordsmanship of which depended as much on violence and sudden inspiration as on carefully cultivated skill,”<sup>33</sup> but does not say how Marozzo was any different from the Spanish. The wide cultural contact between Spain and Italy, such as the occupation of the Kingdom of Naples or the election of a Valencian,

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<sup>31</sup>Castle, 19

<sup>32</sup>Castle, 46

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 20/38

Rodrigo Borgia, to the office of Pope, and the ascendancy of duels “in shirtsleeves” during this period, which we have negative evidence of in the form of the practice’s denigration by the master-at-arms to the court of Urbino, Pietro Monte (a Spaniard himself!),<sup>34</sup> does not figure into his history.

The cultured art of fencing, to this mindset, was necessarily a rational, humanistic invention, one that involved a degree of thought and sophistication impossible to what was seen as the superstitious, backwards medieval mind. Therefore, it was something that would naturally come into being with the Renaissance in Italy and the rediscovery of classical learning. Castle generally regards the early Spanish school as an offshoot of the medieval school, despite the fact that a perusal of surviving works will show that its propagation was at least in one notable instance a tool of early modern kingship.

Castle even handles, in a semi-favorable light, the German *Marxbruder*, who taught *der ritterliche kunst*, a systematic style of fighting with the long sword, and which incorporated such weapons as the rapier and smallsword as they came into fashion. This is a school that may be traced back to the mid-fourteenth century, placing it firmly as a “medieval” method that taught “medieval” weapons.<sup>35</sup> Yet, Castle does not consider it as such. It is as if the school’s survival into the eighteenth century, more than what it taught, validated it on the stage of history. (The fact that its proponents were light-skinned northern Europeans could not have hurt its case in his eyes, either.)

In this historical and moral positivism, we may see reflected a supreme confidence in one’s own world, and at least lip service towards the fruits of “progress.” Yet, there is also doubt. Ironically enough, there is a certain amount of reactionary interest, even of antiquarianism,

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<sup>33</sup>Castle, 48

<sup>34</sup>Monte is mentioned in Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* as a master of feats of arms. See Sidney Anglo, “The Man Who Taught Leonardo Darts: Pietro Monte and His ‘Lost’ Fencing Book.” (*The Antiquaries Journal* Vol. 69, (1989): 261–278).

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 21/38

inherent in the study of fencing, associated as it is with the privileges of the aristocracy. Even the emphasis on aesthetics above all is a strange and contradictory feature. Indeed, the entire purpose of Castle's friend Alfred Hutton's work on *Old Sword Play* is the study of historical weapons. We may then, if it is not too general a statement, include this nineteenth century interest in swordplay, old and modern, as an element of the "romantic" movement.

Yet, what is this chimera called "romanticism?" Like the Questing Beast from *Le Morte D'Arthur*, many have sought to capture its quintessence, but it has eluded them all. There are so many varieties, from the retro-Medievalism of Scott and the Pre-Raphaelites to the utopian idealism of the Chartists and the Socialists, to Byron's aristocratic rejection of the world and his foppish dissipation, that no definition can possibly encapsulate them all. In fact, romanticism can only be defined by what it is *not*, or, in other words, what it is in opposition to: modernity.

The romantic is disaffected with the modern age, with its soot-darkened skies and its replacement of vast tracts of countryside with housing developments, with its weapons of mass destruction and its poverty-stricken slums. Machines are efficient, but they are unbeautiful, replacing personal handiwork with mass-produced product and reducing the individual to no more than a variable in an equation of profit. The modern city, moreover, is an alienated place, where displaced strangers, brought in from intimately small villages, are housed in impersonal, identical apartment buildings.

Instead, the romantic longs for a utopia, either in the past or in the future, or hidden away in some undeveloped corner of the world, where their own vision of happiness is realized. Modernity is ugly and unaesthetic; the romantic vision is beautiful and aesthetic, a chiliastic hope for the ideal world. It is, as Peter Gay has noted, a "re-enchantment of the world"; in this case, the re-enchantment of supremely modern assaults of arms of nineteenth-century England with the colorful weapons of the glorious past. And, as the contemporary or near-contemporary

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<sup>35</sup>S. Matthew Galas, "Kindred Spirits." *The Journal of Asian Martial Arts* Volume 6, Number 3, 1997.

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 22/38

writings of Sir Walter Scott and the paintings of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood amply demonstrate, the image of the long-ago and far-away romanticized Middle Ages were seen as a more aesthetic, if brutal, time, when idealists, not accountants, held sway over public life. In France, this is reflected in the writings of Alexandre Dumas, where D'Artagnan and the Three Musketeers carve out their destiny in Riechlieu's France with a rapier's point. The image of the sword in such works as John Waterhouse's *The Accolade* is one of the tool and symbol of the just idealist, the fantastical knight-errant of Mallory who fought for love and honor, good and right, God and country, not for profit and money.

Learning to use the sword in the age of the six-shooter and Gatling gun is most certainly a rejection of unbeautiful modernity. Certainly, both Castle and Hutton seemingly identify with the weaponed gentleman of a bygone age. The duel, the idea of a man defending himself and his honor, was an anachronism in an age of shopkeepers, where a person's worth was increasingly considered only as what could be quantified into figures of production and consumption, and where the law court had replaced the dueling field. However, these nineteenth century romantics are not alone. Indeed, they were dreaming a dream that we have never quite woken up from.

### **Grim Awakenings**

The French duel of the nineteenth century, as described by Kevin McAleer in his *Duelling*, was often a comparatively bloodless affair, usually conducted between editors and politicians with *épées du combat*, or else wildly inaccurate smoothbore pistols.<sup>36</sup> Though there was much *elan*, pomp, and circumstance, there were relatively few fatalities, since it was usually stopped before a lethal wound was inflicted. Neither side truly wished to be kill or be killed, claims McAleer—to try one's courage, or at least make a good show of it, was enough.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it was

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<sup>36</sup> Kevin McAleer, *Duelling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> See McAleer, chapter 6. The great Italian champion Aldo Nadi, in his recollection of his own duel in his book *On*

Ken Mondschein/ Dagers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 23/38

more of a social happening, and the supposedly illegal affair would be well-covered by the press, with reporters remarking on the style and *panache* with which the duelists had conducted themselves. Even what was in theory deadly combat was, in fact, extremely conventional in all its aspects.<sup>38</sup> It was, in short, the *performance* that was important, not the combat itself. Therefore, we should not be surprised if *The Devil's Dictionary* defines a duel as “a ceremony necessary before the reconciliation of two enemies. A long time ago, someone died in a duel.”<sup>39</sup>

One the other hand, the favored dueling weapon of the Germans (according to McAleer) was a much more lethal rifled version of the pistol at murderous ranges, or, on other occasions, the dangerous and disfiguring saber. McAleer further suggests that this, along with the brutal *mensur*, may have something to say about the essential character of German society, as opposed to the character of French society.<sup>40</sup> A large segment of the German population, apparently, was more willing to risk death, pain, or other unpleasantness for peer approval, and was more conformist and obedient to authority, not just because it was authority *per se*, but because it was socially expected to be obedient.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the German duel was much deadlier than its French counterpart.

We should note, however, that being skewered with a meter-long piece of steel through the forearm in the French manner was hardly a pacifistic pastime, especially in an age before antibiotics. Furthermore, the French duel *was* not infrequently lethal, as the case of the unfortunate Captain Mayer illustrates. Finally, whatever their taste in performance aesthetics, come 1914, men of all nations died in the trenches with equal aplomb. When the command came

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*Fencing*, is both introspective, as only the modern mentality can be, and worried about the possible legal consequences of his encounter.

<sup>38</sup>McAleer, 190

<sup>39</sup> Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906). Hyptertext version by Mike Leung at <http://www.thedevilsdisctionary.com> (accessed May 25, 2007).

<sup>40</sup>The issue that enters into this, of course, is that of whether there is an “essential character” to the German national psyche. This has been of no small importance to historians of the Holocaust.

<sup>41</sup>The case of the German execution units in World War II, as recounted in Browning's *Ordinary Men*, comes readily to mind. Browning suggests that these groups, composed mainly of poorly-trained reservists, were willing to

from on high to storm that trench, the trench was stormed. Even when the bourgeois gentleman was willing to lay down his life, such as in a duel or in the opening days of World War I, it was for an abstract idea such as honor or love of country—an aesthetic ideal taking on the substance of an ethical concept in his mind and in the minds of the onlookers. Violence is still controlled, but the control is, as Nietzsche would say, “Apollonian”—placed under the domination of the will—rather than “Dionysiac”—transformed into an artistic form. We can see parallels between duel and the (ideal of) war in the way in which both the duelist and the idealistic volunteer soldier makes himself the subject of the onlookers, wishing to win acclaim, objectifying himself and his opponent. In their *agon* is played out both their own drama, upholding their status in the eyes of their peers, and exorcising the collective insecurity of their entire class, perched midway between *chevalier* and shopkeeper.

Nor should it be forgotten that this ideal was one that began with the feudal knight, who collected rents, administered justice, and rode off to defend Christendom, or at least his own bit of it, and was passed to the new *nouveau riche*, who, even if they were the “nobility of the robe,” still wore blades at their side. Thence, third-hand, was it traded down to the gentlemen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the duelist of the sixteenth century went out into the field to prove himself worthy of the esteem of his peers, the duelist of the nineteenth, with his internalized sense of honor, may perhaps be said to have followed the footsteps of his predecessor, either to the dueling ground or to the muddy charnel house of the Somme or the Marne, to prove to his peers that he was worthy of his *own* self-respect.

Of course, the aesthetic appeal of a beautiful death was quickly revealed to be no more than a mask, the rouge-brightened cheek of an aged courtesan who was yet acknowledged the most beautiful woman to ever live. It has been suggested, both by McAleer and others that the carnage

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commit war crimes not so much out of obedience, but because it was expected of them.

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 25/38

of the World Wars, more than the anti-dueling societies, was what helped to put a brake on the frivolous shedding of blood, and this seems a more than reasonable supposition.

We should therefore not be surprised that fencing took a distinct turn after the war, as the Federation International d'Esclime, founded in 1913, became the dominant international governing body. National governing bodies had, of course, existed since the late nineteenth century, but, having achieved national homogeneity, the next logical step in the progress of the art was to be international standards. Earlier international competitions had often foundered on technicalities of the rules: The Italians, following the teaching of their national schools, often favored a much heavier and longer blade than the French, and often asked a different target area be allowed, as well. The new organization made such conflicts a thing of the past, ensuring a rationalized, ordered, and quantifiable system for international competition.

What this hegemony also resulted in was an increasingly decadent didactic monoculture. "Fencing" came to be defined by the rules published by the FIE. No longer connected to the duel—despite some well-publicized attempts to revive the practice during the "twenty-year truce" of the interwar period—the activity slowly transformed into its own self-referential language as the positivist aesthetics of the nineteenth century ceded to the post-Enlightenment lack of faith in reason of the twentieth century. By the early 1960s, the fencing bout was no longer a diagrammatic rehearsal for the duel; it was an athletic contest won through whatever means would carry the day, regardless of their relationship to the actual techniques taught for use with sharps. Mirroring postwar developments in philosophy, literary criticism, and philology, the fencing bout, the conversation in steel, has come to have no meaning save the interpretation given by the initiates observing it, and, as the ideology of the sword has faded from our mental horizons, this circle is far more circumscribed than it once had been. In short, the text became ultimately self-referential, its intended meaning secondary to its interpretation.

So, too, with scholarly thought on fencing. Though there has been only one recent work on the history of fencing in the early modern era *per se*, there have been many which deal with dueling, thus giving us some sort of insight into what contemporary historians think about these matters.<sup>42</sup> McAleer's somewhat iconoclastic, but thoroughly enjoyable, *Duelling* has already been mentioned; another relatively recent study is Billacois' *Le duel dans le société française des XVI-XVII siècles, Essai de psychosociologie historique*. This work, however, has some serious flaws.

Billacois proceeds from a historical perspective admittedly influenced by the French Cartesian school. Though he admits the problems with attempting to reconstruct an extralegal practice through strict adherence to documentation,<sup>43</sup> he also makes use of a number of works, such as treatises on honor and dueling, in order to gain some perspective on the matter. Yet, nowhere amongst these is a treatise in which fencing masters, the recognized arbiters of the extralegal duel, invariably also included essays treating with the implications of the code of honor. To attempt a history of the social implications of dueling without using such sources is like attempting a book on human anatomy without ever dissecting a cadaver, or attempting a book on Roman law without ever learning to read Greek and Latin. Accordingly, he can not see the forest for the trees.

Furthermore, Billacois is unforgivably Francocentric, utterly dismissive of the significance of the duel in Spain or Italy. Whereas the English historians Hutton and Castle see the French as cool-headed and elegant, at least when compared to the Italians, Billacois subscribes to the myth

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<sup>42</sup> Five other works bear mention: J. D. Aylward's *The English Master of Arms* (1956), Arthur Wise's *Art and History of Personal Combat* (1972), William Gaugler's *The History of Fencing* (1997), J. Christoph Amberger's *The Secret History of the Sword* (1999), and Richard Cohen's *By the Sword* (2003). However, Aylward and Wise's books are mainly derivative of Castle, Dr. Gaugler's deals mainly with the technical development of the modern school of fencing and does not have a thesis as such; Mr. Amberger's is a series of essays on sword esoterica, and Mr. Cohen only deals accurately with the modern sport-fencing scene. None can be said to be a work of history in the academic sense; though all have made some excellent historical observations, they tend to be episodic and anecdotal—concentrating on the phenomon, rather than the nomenon, as it were.

<sup>43</sup>Billacois, 60, 72.

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 27/38

of the Gallic fighting-cock. Had he, however, even made a cursory survey of schools and masters of fence, he probably would have realized that the duel was not merely a foreign phenomenon imported into France, where, like American jazz, it achieved its “true realization” as a socio-artistic form. Rather, Billacois makes bald, unsupported statements such as, “the duel never had a properly native existence in the Iberian peninsula,”<sup>44</sup> while seemingly insensate of all evidence to the contrary.

Nor (as Sydney Anglo has criticized)<sup>45</sup> does Billacois examine the plethora of Italian fencing treatises, despite the fact that the custom of the early modern duel “in shirtsleeves” apparently originated in Naples. In fact, it was the Italians, not the French, who exported fencing masters to England and the Low Countries.<sup>46</sup> Moreover (and this is a subject unfortunately little-explored by historians), the French duel would seem to have been most in vogue at a time when the new “nobility of the robe,” bourgeois rising in social status, were in conflict with one another and with the old “nobility of the sword,” attempting to conform to the old military ideas of aristocracy and thus prove their worthiness. If the chroniclers and sensational accounts deal with the high nobility and the *mignons* in violent conflict, we should be no more surprised than at Froissart’s focus on martial exploits calculated to appeal to his patrons, or modern tabloid journalists’ obsession with celebrities. Billacois does not seem to handle this idea, either pro or con, in his book, instead merely pointing out that incidence of dueling diminishes in times of war, and that, in peace, Huguenots and Catholics were likely to find each other at the ends of each other’s swords.

Finally, Billacois suggests that dueling was the nobility’s self-destructive method of resistance to the king’s newly centralized power comparable with modern-day airline hijacking.

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<sup>44</sup>Billacois, 36

<sup>45</sup>Sydney Anglo, “*Le duel dans le société française des XVI-XVII siècles, Essai de psychosociologie historique.*” *The English Historical Review* Col. 103, No, 409, p. 978.

<sup>46</sup>See, for instance, George Silver’s *Paradoxes of Defense* (1597), in which the proponent of good, old-fashioned

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 28/38

This assertion is itself an excellent example of transferring the thought and concerns of one's own times onto a bygone age. Though, certainly, there is a political aspect that can be read into the duel, it was never meant as such. Dueling was, by definition, ostensibly a private affair, a performance played out in front of one's peers, and not a public political act. That "sticking it to The Man" was at the fore of the minds of seventeenth century duelists seems unlikely in the extreme; more likely, they sought simply to stick it to the one particular man whom they felt had insulted them, with or without the permission of centralized authority—though of course the latter's perceived weakness will facilitate the private satisfaction of honor.

The captivating "vision of two lightly-clad swordsmen engaged in balletic homicide" Sydney Anglo notes in his review of Billacois is what also flaws Professor Anglo's otherwise masterful *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*. This, the first major academic monograph on the history of fencing since Castle's *Schools and Masters*, appeared on the heels of a resurgence of popular romantic interest in historical martial arts reconstruction that began in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, rather than a social mechanism or a statement of culture, Anglo sees the early modern duel as a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*, with no quarter asked or given. Much as for Castle, the Renaissance was the era of manly men, whom we tweedy academics can safely admire from the safety of our studies. Likening rapier fencing to commando-style "all-in fighting," for instance, Anglo states, "Renaissance duels and armed affrays were analogous to war; and, to judge from the homicidal pages of the masters and the bloodstained record of personal combats, prisoners were rarely taken."<sup>47</sup> This bellicose statement, a counterpart to the zero-sum game that is modern athletic competition or warfare, would seem to be the *leitmotif* of the book—and it is disappointing coming from the mind of so great a historian as Sydney Anglo,

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English broadsword-play rails against the "false fight" of the Italian rapier  
<sup>47</sup> Anglo, 273.

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 29/38

for it is far too simplistic, replacing, as it does, Castle's positivism with the agnosticism and incoherence of the modern era.

To begin with, such an opinion displays an unfortunate lack of source criticism. Accounts of brawls and actions are not perfect mirrors of what actually happened, nor what was thought concerning personal combat. Rather, such accounts often served rhetorical purposes: Moralists played up the brutality of such actions, or else the protagonist made himself seem heroic in letters and memoirs, such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury's account of defending himself with a broken sword against five armed assailants, which Anglo relates as a (admittedly probably exaggerated) example of "total commitment to death and destruction."<sup>48</sup>

Masters, meanwhile, showed not the art of murder in their treatises (no matter how gory the illustrations), but rather the abstract art of fence, with such authorities as Capo Ferro recognizing different procedures would be followed in play and in earnest—and although the foremost masters always bore in mind that the rebated blade was meant to stand in for the sharp, it must always be remembered that there is a difference between *fencing* and *fighting*. The former displays an ideal; the latter its inevitably brutal and unbeautiful realization. The ideal nonetheless bears examination.

Anglo also dismisses the geometrical and mathematical didactic schema of these masters with the indictment that they "completely misunderstood the real nature of the actions they sought to notate."<sup>49</sup> Fencing, he says, is, after all, not dancing; one does not have a willing and cooperative partner. In this, however, Dr. Anglo demonstrates his lack of technical understanding of fencing and its pedagogy. Geometrical exempla such as those utilized by Agrippa, Carranza, Narvaez, and Thibault are not choreography, but rather illustrative principles that are realistically applied to the situation in real time. Rather than ensuring the adept sure victory notwithstanding

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<sup>48</sup> Anglo, 273–274.

<sup>49</sup> Anglo, 90.

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 30/38

grievous physical disadvantage, as Dr. Anglo alleges, they did what they intended to do and what they did quite effectively: To show how to make use of the principles of timing, leverage, and distance to ensure victory. These physical constants have not, and could not have, changed in five hundred years; read by one versed in the art of fencing, they make eminent sense.

While we can never truly enter into the *mentalité* of former centuries, but the break of continuity with the past insofar as fencing goes, as well as the violent history of the twentieth century, has led us to completely misunderstand many of the sources that have come down to us. To recover something of valuable from them, we shall need a new approach and a new way of reading them. We must here leave off tearing down the work of others, and suggest a methodology more conducive to gaining a true understanding of the past.

### **Towards a Historiography of Fencing**

First of all, it should be recognized that fashions in weapons and their use, be they part of one's costume or solely intended for use on the "field of honor," are, like the duel or the fencing bout themselves, social constructions governed by convention. The weapons used, be they rapiers, small swords, epees, sabers, pistols, or sledgehammers waist-deep in a Louisiana bayou, are an agreed-upon convention. The way of fighting, at an appointed place and time, with (ideally) an air of nonchalance, is conventional.<sup>50</sup> The code of honor is likewise a convention, being no more or less than what it is agreed to be by society. It is not based on one's own feelings of self-worth and inner life, the bourgeois, nineteenth-century development of which Peter Gay has excellently chronicled in *The Naked Heart*, but on the acclimation of one's

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<sup>50</sup>Errol Flynn returning his adversary's fallen weapon, for instance, is tactically ludicrous, but expected by the audience—Captain Blood or Robin Hood is a "good guy," and expected to abide by rules of "fair play." Much the same went for real-life duels, where one was not permitted to strike a disarmed adversary. Though the one is theatrical performance and the other is deadly combat, both are alike in that they are guided by the audience's expectations.

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 31/38

peers.<sup>51</sup> It is a relic from a time when one's outer self *was* one's inner self. From the first insult to the final blow, and the resolution afterwards, all is dictated not by the duelists themselves, but by the code. It is, in short, a performance of class, status, and community.

This “holistic” approach is the method utilized by Kate Van Orden in her recent and excellent *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France*. While not strictly a book on arms and their use, pertaining more to musicology and theater history, Van Orden's philosophy is worthy of emulation. Music, she writes, shared a common aesthetic vocabulary with other performatives such as fencing, dance, military drill, and equestrian ballet—or rather, music was the ordering principle behind all these forms, for they all reinforced a rhetoric of power and order: The rhythm and harmony of the music, in short, are a demonstration that God is in his heaven and all's right in the world. This does not limit the effectiveness of the fencing, or mean that it was no more than a dance—but it does show that the *pedagogy* and the manner in which this art was conceived were, in turn, harmonious with the rest of aristocratic culture. Moreover, as Van Orden points out, the fields were intimately related, for dance itself could be war by other means. So, too, with fencing: By understanding the microcosm, we may better approach the macrocosm.

The Spanish school of fence so maligned by both Castle and Anglo bears some discussion here—for, besides that fact that it was of great influence on the development of later schools of fence in other countries (Thibault, for instance, was, despite his baroque extravagance, basically Spanish in his methodology), it provides us with an excellent field, as it were, in which to set one historical construction against another for a trial by combat. In practice, the ideal of the Spanish method, as it took its final form in the seventeenth century, appears quite different from what we are accustomed to think “fencing” looks like. The swordsman stands erect, holding his weapon at

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<sup>51</sup>Liam Neeson, playing the titular Highlander, remarks in 1995's *Rob Roy* that “honor is the gift that a man gives himself.” Nothing could be further from the truth!

Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 32/38

a ninety-degree angle from his body. Rather than moving with a crab-like sideways shuffle, he will step naturally and elegantly, in the manner of a Spanish court dance. Nor is this movement the familiar forward-and-back of the fencing strip, but rather along the circumference of an imaginary circle whose diameter is formed by the blades of his sword and his adversary's, for (as our Spaniard will explain) this is a geometrically infallible method to remain out of harm's way. When he attacks, he will step off this diameter on an angle, avoiding the opposing blade while covering it with his own sword, but rather than employing the complicated vocabulary of the Italian schools, he will describe his movement in common Aristotelian terms known to all his educated contemporaries—raising the sword, for instance, is *violento*, while letting it fall is *natural*. The overall effect is one of elegant menace, parsed out in geometrical form.

While Castle summarizes the work of Jeronimo de Carranza, the sixteenth-century inventor of the school, as “the first of the long series of ponderous Spanish treatises on the ‘raison demonstrative,’ in which the ruling principle, after the Aristotelian method, is the ‘*conocimiento de la cosa por su causa*’ [knowledge of a thing by its cause], and the purpose, to demonstrate that a perfect theoretical knowledge must infallibly lead to victory, notwithstanding grievous physical disadvantage,”<sup>52</sup> in order to understand the Spanish school of fencing, it is first necessary to understand its milieu. This includes the fact that it proceeds from the Catholic faith in Platonic universals that so mirrors the modern debate over whether texts have any objective meaning, or if this meaning only exists in the mind of the onlookers. One ancient proof of the Realist position, which also has hermetic, Pythagorean, and kabbalistic overtones, is through mathematics and geometry. For instance, the square of the hypotenuse of a triangle will always be equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in such works as the various

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<sup>52</sup>Castle, 96. Oddly enough, the same might be said for Castle's own school of thought!

<sup>53</sup>The objection to this, of course, is that mathematics and geometry are likewise social constructions. This objection is dealt with by means of what has become known as the “big rock” proof. To wit:  
“You say that this triangle is naught but a social construction?”

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 33/38

Renaissance redactions of Horapollo's *Heiroglyphica*, the Platonic forms were envisioned as geometrical solids.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the position of geometry in the academic curriculum: To demonstrate mathematical truths.<sup>55</sup> The Spanish method was a rational method of fighting, proceeding by established principles in a way that could not help but succeed.

The Spanish school of fence was thus "scientific" in the sense that it used geometry as a proof of the efficacy of its system. The entire scheme, while conventional, as suits a ritualistic combat between equals, was also enmeshed in a complex, self-referential web of Scholastic philosophy, Christian doctrine, aesthetic taste, and scientific knowledge. It embodies the idea of *gracia* in all its connotations. Without understanding all of these, the affair of honor in early modern Spain is impossible to comprehend. The swordsman trained in the Spanish school uses his knowledge of the underlying foundations of the universe to affirm himself in a cool, detached, and scientific manner that, incidentally, is also a type of kinetic art. As Carranza himself said, "The solution to doubt is the invincibility of truth."<sup>56</sup>

Despite (or because?) of all this, it was also eminently *practical* in that it enabled the Spanish to become some of the most respected swordsmen in Europe. While all this may seem to be another example of social construction heaped upon social construction, it must be remembered that these techniques, or, we should say, *technologies*, work, just as medicine and aircraft and light switches do. Men (and women) were willing to stake their lives on the theories of these fencing masters, just as today, we trust our doctors, airline pilots, and electricians. To the Spanish gentleman of the early modern era, or the duelist of *fin de siecle* France, this was not a

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"Yes, I do."

"Is this big rock here likewise a social construction?"

"I would have to say that it is."

"Then may I throw this nonexistent rock at your head?"

"Er. . ."

<sup>54</sup>Today, of course, we know that the planets follow elliptical orbits.

<sup>55</sup>For further discussion of this, c.f. Aquinas' *On Being and Essence* and *Summa Theologica*, chapter LXXXV.

Ken Mondschein/ Dagers of the Mind (1998)

p. 34/38

perspective or an idea; it was truth itself laid bare in steel. A proof of its lasting quality is that it did not apparently die out until the nineteenth century, and that, in fact, the Spanish were long held to be some of the deadliest swordsmen around. Whereas the cultural relativist might argue that even the most necessary elements of the Spanish pedagogical system might be seen as no more than what they are agreed to be, the moral positivist might reply that certain laws of physics (such as rate times time equals distance) will always apply to both swords and freight trains. Likewise, certain biomechanical principles will likewise always be true, even if much of the rest is an edifice built upon this bedrock. There can be no argument against the fact that there are certain principles and practices that, barring accidents of chance, will carry one through most any encounter. The “science” of fencing might be seen as a combination of both practical observation and cultural artifact. It is the application of human reason, and human culture, to coarse and brutal reality. As such, it might be described with equal accuracy as both an “art” and as a “science.” Certain things are always going to be eternally true, and there is nothing quite like staking one's life on a mathematical formula to make one appreciate this.

This approach has limits, of course, for the technical aspects of the science of fence might, conversely, have remained static for centuries. For instance, the hand positions for parries, numbered in the French school from one to eight, are pedagogical constructions, used to describe more accurately various actions that might be taken during a match. When Hutton transcribes exercises for the broadsword or two-handed sword, he also translates the actions into the commonly understood language. Thus, Marozzo's colorfully named *porta di ferro alta* is “quarte,” the *cinghiara porta di ferro* is “tierce.”<sup>57</sup> While this would seem to imply a continuity of tradition, in that the same physical motions are merely described by different names, we must

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<sup>56</sup>Carranza, *De la Filosofia de las Armas*. (1569). Ironically, it is these medieval and renaissance philosophical roots that are the direct antecedent to the scientific moral positivism of the nineteenth century that claimed to have a monopoly on truth and which would later so disparage its intellectual antecedents.

<sup>57</sup>It should be noted that Marozzo's system of nomenclature was by this point at least a century old.

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)  
p. 35/38

ask if there is some overlooked cultural parallax here. Can a nineteenth-century Englishman fence like a sixteenth-century Italian, or would the conventions and training of his own school and his own time period—such as the use of masks and the supposed superiority of the parry-riposte action, as opposed to the counter-action in single time—limit him? Likewise, can a twenty-first century person ride a twenty-first century horse, or dance court dances, like a seventeenth-century gentleman?<sup>58</sup>

Fencing treatises are, first and foremost, artifacts of culture. Whereas we can not hope to know the “reality” of the duel, nor to exactly reproduce Renaissance fencing—we are, after all, twenty-first century people, performing these actions with modern safety equipment and for our own reasons—by understanding how the specific interpretation of these principles differed in each era, we can better understand the intellectual culture of the time. The *contrapposto* critical to the Mannerist idea of elegance is present in both Michelangelo’s Sistine Sybils and Agrippa’s vaulting combatants, and ideas of “real” and “ideal” are exhibited in both Bellini’s Madonnas and in Thibault’s elaborate engravings. In the end, the lesson is that fencing history teaches us not so much the “reality” of personal combat—for this, we can never hope to exactly know—as the milieu that produced such performances and the ideals that went with them.

It is admittedly true that, to some degree, the past is lost. We can not fence like men of a different century, nor can we truly understand their willingness to lose their lives on a point of honor, any more than we can philosophize as they did; for we do what we do for different purposes and with the benefit of modern medical care and safety equipment. To attempt such a venture is historiographical hubris at best and romantic antiquarianism at worst. We can, however, use the texts to recover the *mentalité* of the past. If, however, the adept examines how

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<sup>58</sup>The difference between these two is that the parry-riposte, performed with a lighter, quicker weapon, such as the “walking sword,” puts aside the attack, and then replies, in two actions; the counter-action seeks to deviate the oncoming steel in the process of striking back all in one action, or one “time”—a necessary efficiency with a heavier weapon.

Ken Mondschein/ Daggers of the Mind (1998)

p. 36/38

historical dialectic is reflected in the necessarily immutable principles of fencing, he can discover much about the society. Much as liturgical historians derive deep statements about community and society from the mechanics of church processions or at what stage in the liturgy the priest uncovers the pyx, one versed in the gnosis of the sword can use the material therein to uncover a statement of community and society. This, in the end, is how swords are beaten into plowshares.

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Ken Mondschein/ *Daggers of the Mind* (1998)  
p. 38/38

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