

## “Rapier Combat: A Social History” A Re-telling of the Findings of the Thesis for the Benefit of the Historical Fencing Community

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This paper is taken from my Honours Thesis, which was presented for my Honours qualification in History at the University of Queensland. A complete copy of the thesis is available from the author or from the Thesis Library at the University of Queensland, St. Lucia campus in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. I have not included any in-text referencing, as this is the result of the research, which I performed, this is more a re-telling of the results, which I found. I have, however, included a list of references, which were used at the end of this article. I also have intentions of going back and re-writing the thesis on which this article is based, and filling in all of the details which I had to leave out due to the restrictions that were placed on the thesis' length. It is hoped that through such research that a greater understanding of all of the aspects of rapier combat will be understood.

Firstly, it was important to establish exactly what this weapon called the rapier was and is. This particular debate is still current, and no doubt will continue to be debated. Especially considering that for audience, which I was writing to, this would be their first introduction to rapier combat, aside from the seminar presentation that was given during the second semester. The definition that was used was an amalgamation of the information about the weapon, combined with how the weapon would be used. The blade shape defines the way that the weapon would be used. As such, the rapier was described as a long slender bladed weapon, which was sharp on both the edge and the point. It is this weapon that the form of combat, which was described in the second chapter was designed.

Only once a definition of the weapon is gained is it possible to discuss the techniques of the particular weapon. A brief description of basic rapier techniques was discussed in the second chapter. What must be emphasised in the art of the rapier combat is that it is not about point scoring, or being graceful. It is about how to dispatch a person's opponents in the most efficient manner possible, and surviving the experience. The other thing that must be emphasised is that the rapier is a civilian weapon and not designed for use on the battlefield. The thesis established the rapier as a civilian weapon more than a weapon of war in the first chapter. The basic techniques were described in order to give the reader grounding in the type of skills that went into using a rapier in combat. It is these techniques which have been the focus of much research into the technical side of rapier combat, their description for this paper was only included so that it may be understood that there was an immediate lethal quality when it came to the rapier. It is only through this paradigm that duelling and the importance of education in the martial arts may be understood. The different styles of rapier fencing allude to the cultural nature of the overall form of combat and the styles themselves.

Rapier combat on the European continent faded out due to fashion, as the development of the French school demonstrates. It can however, be seen as a viable combat art due to the persistence of the Spanish school which survived for 300 years. Each one of the schools was based on a particular cultural basis, the Italians had the classical Renaissance, and the Spanish had mathematics, geometry and philosophy. It is the Italians and the Spanish who influenced the form of fencing in England, once they had supplanted the old English style. The gentry took to these styles to keep up with fashion. This was a very general description of the different schools of rapier combat, as the word limit was restrictive. It was designed to give a general impression of what was thought by each of the schools, in their approach to rapier combat. It was irritating to do as broad generalisations had to be made, rather than each individual point as there was not much room allocated for this particular chapter.

Along with the influence of the schools of fence, it is important to note that the masters, who wrote the treatises and taught at the schools, also wrote on the concepts of honour, duelling and the gentleman. It is these writings which would influence the formation of what is known as the "English Gentleman." It is however, important to re-examine the situation in England at the time that these new fashions were introduced. I was unfortunately restricted in this particular area of the research to English treatises, or those that had been translated into English. A great deal of this was going through each treatise and picking on the authors' impressions of the duel, the gentleman and honour. Saviolo's *On Honour and Honourable Quarrels* was of most use in this particular section, combined with Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*.

Elizabethan England is a wonderful time and place from which to examine all of the concepts. Firstly, many of the sources, that are most widely known, come from this place in this period, and there is a bounty of information on the subject. Elizabethan streets were not safe, and it is due to this that fencing schools flourished, even though there was much legislation to stop them. Duelling was also a real problem, it was of such massive proportions that it became somewhat of a common thing to read about, or hear about duelling. An education in civilian forms of combat was one way to stay alive. It was in this chapter that a basic overview of the situation in Elizabethan England was given, I used this place and period because it was from this time that most of the sources were at my disposal, and especially considering they were in English.

In England at this time, one can see a clash of the schools, between the English and the Italians and Spanish. This clash was eventually won by the forces of fashion, and so the Italian and Spanish ways were included into the martial schools in England. It was the influence of fashion, that created much of the trend toward the Italian and Spanish schools of fence, driven by fashions in clothing and weapons. Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* was the most use in this particular section as he describes his disgust at the "invasion" of the Italians. It was interesting to note that it was mainly through Saviolo's influence that the Spanish school was

known in England, even if under a different name, and not due to direct influence from the Spanish themselves. This is even more interesting considering the influence, which the Spanish had upon fashion in England during this period. This turmoil in fashion, and politics, is reflected in the literature of the period.

To Shakespeare the duel was a common occurrence, and appears in several of his plays, as do other social and political issues of the period. An examination of Shakespeare's plays reveals some of the thoughts of the Elizabethans, as the plays were written to their audience. They examine the social phenomenon of duelling and the problems with it in *Romeo and Juliet*. Also within the same play is demonstrated a definitive line in the social structure by the way Shakespeare arms the characters. *Hamlet* deals with duelling, revenge and honour, as well as duty. The duel at the end of the play demonstrates that not all duels were held in secret, but that royalty witnessed some. All of these concepts were important to the Elizabethans and these are expressed repeatedly in the plays of Shakespeare. His plays also reveal a great deal about the social side of combat in the period. Shakespeare's plays were of great use, unfortunately I was only able to use three due to the limited space allotted to this particular area of inquiry. I essentially homed in on those plays, which had the heaviest discussion of honour, and duelling. Needless to say that *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* were my first choice. I hope to go back and do some more research on Shakespeare's plays from this point of view and include more of this research in my re-writing of the thesis.

The question of honour is one that has raged for centuries and across cultures. With regard to the Renaissance and the gentleman, it is one of the most important concepts that must be addressed. The code of honour, which the Elizabethan gentleman lived and died by, was one that was not written down but was decided by society, one's peers and the individual. Small elements of it may be gained, but a complete picture is not possible. No broad rules may be found. A gentleman's honour is defined by his actions in a particular place at a particular time. Still it is a concept that must be wrestled with to understand the subjects that are being discussed. The "Gentleman's Code of Honour" depends on the definition of the gentleman, it is only through the paradigm of the gentleman that the particular type of honour present in the Renaissance may be understood. This was one of the most taxing of all of the chapters to write due to the wealth of information and the many different points of view. I really threw myself in the deep end with this one. Once again, Saviolo and Castiglione really saved me, along with some help from the other authors, which I used.

What is a gentleman? This is an interesting question. From a Renaissance point of view it must be seen that the gentleman of this period is actually a combination of many attributes. The martial aspect is one of the most important and is mentioned repeatedly throughout the sources. It is however, not sufficient to look at him from this singular aspect.

The influence of the Italian Renaissance had its effect upon the concept of the gentleman, he was also expected to be knowledgeable and courteous. The attributes were

defined in many texts, none so importantly as Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, which defined the perfect courtier and as such, the perfect gentleman. The texts, and especially Castiglione's, also stated what a gentleman should not be and as such defined what was not sought. It is the gentleman's code of honour that drove much of what the gentleman was. It is the martial aspect which is the main focus of this particular investigation, and it was the gentleman's education in the martial arts, and especially fencing which was the driving force behind the gentleman's education.

The gentleman was defined in a large part by the martial feats that he performed. To excel in martial enterprises it was necessary for the gentleman to be educated in the skills required. The martial arts were the main focus of the education of the gentleman, but such an education also taught various other aspects, that were important. Such attributes as temperance, and discretion were also taught in the schools of arms.

The schools themselves have been the subject of some inquiry, unfortunately there is little evidence of what was taught at the schools or what the schools looked like. It is only through an amalgamation of various references that a picture of these schools is possible. The schools themselves were the subject of legislation because it is thought that they bred duelling, and so were legislated against. As time passed, however, the standing of schools of arms increased and nobles were sent to them to be educated. The Masters of Defence were the educators at these schools, and their titles were well earned. A Master had to pass vigorous examination before they were allowed to teach, and it is from this that it can be seen that these men truly were masters of their professed art.

The gentleman also had to have knowledge of the duel, as it was a common part of Elizabethan England. The rules defining the duel, the Code Duello were complex and they defined everything of consequence with regard to the duel. It is a part of the period that has been somewhat misunderstood. Duels were common in Elizabethan England and also in many other parts of Europe. This was especially so for the upper classes. What must be understood is that the duel and the brawl were only really different on points of ritualisation. In both cases it was more than likely that both parties were there to kill each other. It is true that rules did exist for the duel and that some did follow them.

The duel has a long history. It was designed to settle disputes between two people. As a method of deciding such things it was reasonably successful. The judicial duel developed into the joust and when civilians were armed in the Renaissance, it developed into the duel of honour. Duels were considered illegal, but were continued with because it was seen as courageous to defy the law in the defence of honour.

Duelling is a much older social custom that grew to epidemic proportions in the Renaissance period. Thousands of nobles were either killed or maimed. They fought for something, an ideal in most cases, which they believed in. What must be taken into account is that previously such grudges were settled with bands of brigands, and spread much wider than

the duel ever did. The duel usually involved two people, and it was restricted to them. From this point of view duelling actually reduced the bloodshed. Through the chance of the occurrence of a duel, the nobility had to develop more temperance as such arguments became an intensely personal affair rather than one that involved many more combatants.

Rapier combat is an expanding area of research. Much of this research is focussed on the technical aspects of this form of combat. It is vital to understand the social aspects of the subject as a whole. This form of combat, and others, is the product of the influence of the period in which they are found. The social side of rapier combat explains why this form of combat developed as it did, and therefore explains the progression towards the rapier as a weapon and also toward the techniques, that were used to wield the rapier. This social side also explains why certain techniques were considered to be ungentlemanly, and also why offensive techniques took precedence over the defensive ones in the Italian school. It is only through understanding these points, that a complete appreciation of the subject may be accessed.

To bring these conclusions together required accessing sources from both types of research and it is hoped that both will be appreciated for the information they can bring. It is hoped that this paper will form a bridge between the research of academics and antiquarian-styled researchers in the area of rapier combat.

It is important to remember also, that there are really very few academics who are willing to tackle this big question, and it is up to us the so-called “amateur” researchers and practitioners, to research, and make readily available this information to all, so that the fine art that is rapier combat may be understood by many more people. What is also important is that we as researchers need to be in consultation with academics so that the research that is done can be truly regarded as of historical worth. It is only through a co-operation of both that this is possible.

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