

# **Objections and Admonishments on the Subject of Fencing**

**By Jacopo Monesi**

**A discourse on fencing from 1640**

**Translated by Piermarco Terminiello**

## Introduction and Historical Context

In 1640 Jacopo Monesi, a prominent master in his native Florence, published a short tract outlining his fencing philosophy: *Opposizioni et avvertimenti sopra la scherma*.

Only a handful of copies are known to survive, two in the Biblioteca nazionale centrale in Florence, and one in the Biblioteca sportiva nazionale in Rome.

Although almost forgotten today, Monesi appears to have enjoyed enduring patronage and recognition in his own lifetime at the court of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany under Ferdinando II de' Medici.

A court document, dating to 1621, indicates Monesi's role included instructing the adolescent nobility at the grand ducal court, a claim supported by the title page of his own work.<sup>1</sup>

*“Jacopo of the Armourer, master of fencing, is one of several masters to the pages, together with the priest Albizio Vecchi, the undermaster Frediano Tinolfi, Giovanni Migliorucci master of writing, Leonardo Migliorucci, Giovanni Pieroni the arithmetist and mathematician, Remigio Cantagallina master of drawing, and Pitti Agnolo Ricci master of dance.”*

Monesi's text contain little technical discussion, which he defers to a promised second volume that however is either lost or was never written. Instead, in this present work, Monesi strongly critiques many theories and methodologies of his peers. Behind a veil of formal language he excoriates those practices he views as frivolous, or detrimental to surviving an encounter in earnest.

Among other elements he criticises: feints, elaborate postures, mathematical concepts, excessive theoretical discussion, and dagger disarms, as unhelpful and impractical for a confrontation with sharps.

Monesi begs his readers' pardon more than once for his relative lack of erudition, yet seems well-read in terms of contemporary published treatises. Without naming names Monesi appears to clearly reference, again critically, the work of Docciolini (1601), Fabris (1606), Marozzo (1536), and Pistofilo (1621).

Alongside such direct critiques, Monesi includes less specifically targeted remonstrations. For example he objects to the pedagogical method of masters who employ a chestplate, or a cane in place of a sword. Similarly he leaves space for conventional discussion points of the period, such as where to look when fencing, or how to approach combat at night.

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<sup>1</sup> Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Miscellanea Medicea, 369, c.707. Cited by [http://www.scrimipedia.it/mediawiki/index.php?title=Iacopo\\_Monesi](http://www.scrimipedia.it/mediawiki/index.php?title=Iacopo_Monesi) (accessed 22 March 2017).

As indicated above, Monesi advocates a straightforward and direct philosophy of fencing. He eschews what he sees as unnecessary embellishments, or artefacts of *salle* fencing, and privileges what he considers practical for surviving an unpredictable and violent confrontation with sharp weapons.

He strongly affirms the efficacy of cuts, interspersed with thrusts; and favours simple and strong natural movements, stances, and attacks. In terms of pedagogy, he forcefully promotes the primacy of practising assaults, and laments that students in his day no longer assault with the frequency and gusto of earlier times.

An ungenerous critic might assert that the ferocious castigation of his peers, and overriding concern for "what works on the streets", evokes nothing more than the comments section of a modern internet forum, or perhaps casts Monesi as an Italian George Silver.<sup>2</sup> Indeed his polemical tone undeniably makes for a lively and entertaining read.

But more seriously, the content and tenor of Monesi's writing reminds us that no practice or theory ever stood uncontested. Furthermore that debates: over didactic methods, tactical and technical application, and transposing fencing from the *salle* to the street, were at least as familiar to Monesi and his contemporaries as they are to today's Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) enthusiasts.

Indeed despite his brevity, sparseness of technical detail, and acerbic argumentation, Monesi provides several invaluable insights into the fencing culture and training regimen of his age. The modern reader will inevitably greet some of Monesi's contentions with scepticism, but might acknowledge others as supporting long held suppositions.

A dissenting, critical voice, unquestionably enriches our understanding. Moreover Monesi represents a data point hitherto practically unknown in the English-speaking world. As such this master's brief but spirited offering can only be accepted as a welcome "addition" to the canon.

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<sup>2</sup> George Silver (1599) was a polemicist and gentleman-dilettante, noted for his outraged response to the spread of Italian fencing styles in Elizabethan England.

# **Objections and Admonishments**

## **On the Subject of Fencing**

**By Jacopo Monesi**

**Known as the Armourer**

**Master of Arms to the Most Serene of Tuscany, and Their Gentleman Pages**

*Dedicated to the Most Illustrious Sir Count*

**Francesco Piccolomini of Aragon**

**In Florence, at the New Press M.DC.XXXX**

*With Permission from the Authorities*

## *Most Illustrious and Noble Sir and Patron*

The shade of your Most Illustrious Lordship's great protection, has generated in me an uncommon yearning to bring to light that which has been hidden in the shadows of my intellect for many years. For some time I have had in mind to make public certain discourses on the most excellent profession of fencing, but the awareness of my scarce ability to articulate them, caused the heat of my enthusiasm to cool. This yearning only then emerges, through confiding in the patronage of your Most Illustrious Lordship, wishing to express these concepts in the best manner possible.

Therefore this is entrusted only to you, as has happened in the past with honour, once again I opted for your support in bringing this forth, so that anything that is deemed monstrous will nonetheless (protected by the greatness of your Most Illustrious Lordship) be embraced, and be appraised with a not less than benign eye.

Please deign therefore to protect it with benevolence, recognising it as a sign of my dutiful observance to your Most Illustrious Lordship's great merit, to which I reverently bow, praying for your every most coveted happiness.

Your devoted and most obligated servant  
Jacopo Monesi, known as the Armourer.

## *To the Benevolent Reader*

It has been for a number of years that despite the weakness of my intellect I have wanted to present my thoughts on the play of fencing, which has been my particular profession. But since the world has seen others elevated, and granted them brilliant ability with which they delight and are delighted, I considered it best to keep my thoughts buried within me.

Considering however that in some printed books you find an exorbitance of guards, and other extravagances, and witnessing this noble exercise reduced more to discourse than practice, the desire I have (if successful) to demonstrate the true play, and method of combat, made me resolve first to declare my objections, then to explain the correct method.

In conformance therefore with what the Most Illustrious Sir Silvio Piccolomini of Aragon<sup>3</sup> (excellent in this exercise, and more so in military disciplines) taught me, after my first master Cosimo Paradisi, in the chapters that follow I will narrate as openly as I can what is recounted.

But since the greatest detriment to this exercise, in my view, comes from neglecting to struggle with the sword in hand, in practising assaults, I will deal with this first, explaining the reasons why I believe this is, as I commence.

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<sup>3</sup> Silvio Piccolomini was a knight of the Order of Santo Stefano, and noted fencer and military commander of his age. In the dedication of his own treatise Federico Ghisliero declares himself a student of Piccolomini, Ghisliero (1587), while his skill at fencing is further referenced by Cappoferro (1610) in his introduction to the reader, and by the French chronicler Michel de Montaigne, Montaigne (1774) p.152.

*Might it please Sir Canon Carlo del Vigna to see if the present work contains anything repugnant to Christian piety, and public morals, and refer back. The 30<sup>th</sup> January 1639.*

Vincenzio Rabatta, Vicar of Florence

*In the present work, having reviewed it in all diligence, I found nothing repugnant to Christian piety, or public morals. 25<sup>th</sup> February 1639.*

Carlo del Vigna, Canon of Florence

*Most Reverend Father Inquisitor,*

*By your order of Most Reverend Father I have reviewed this present discourse on fencing, and I have not found anything repugnant to the Religion, or to public morals, judging it worthy of publication. 26<sup>th</sup> March 1640.*

Girolamo Rosati, Protonotary and Consultant of the Holy Office<sup>4</sup>

*This can be printed. Florence 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1640.*

Father Giovanni Angeli, Vicar of the Holy Office, by order of  
Senator Alessandro Vettori, Auditor of His Most Serene Highness

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<sup>4</sup> That is, of the Roman Inquisition.

## *Chapter One*

Ambition, which without fail is the cause of every ill, especially in virtuous exercises, I know to be the true basis and root of a rather notable vice. Every day we see youths of such ambition, that under the cloak of letting their virtue be known, out of all proportion, neglect the importance of possessing such virtue, and as soon as they arrive in schools to learn, having imbibed just a few lessons, allow themselves to be inflated by excessive pretension, and judge themselves to be masters.

Therefore it happens (and I speak in particular of this exercise) that in public schools, and especially in private houses, with youths of equal quality gathered to practice assaults, you find some who do not grasp the sword if not to teach, nor to learn in any other way. This outlook is so pernicious, that for this reason you no longer hear of people gathering for common benefit and practice, and to pass the time in the virtue of fencing.

Those who have distinguished themselves up until now, demonstrating their valour and knowledge, in my view did not take this route. Indeed anxious to prove their worth as gallant men at every occasion, in any place, and against any person, I believe they sought to learn. Because to understand a discipline well, you have to practise it, you cannot learn with theory alone.

It is not a good way to master a skill, to think you can attain it without effort and sacrifice. Those who think to proceed like this, infallibly discover through experience how much they have deluded themselves.

Another active and real problem I bring up, just as damaging as the first although stemming from the same ambition, is the disparity between people.

You cannot deny that an artisan (who delights in virtue as is understandable), can through his diligence and vivacity arrive at the goal of fencing well with the sword. Indeed because this exercise is extremely capable of elevating the most lowly individual, it often happens that by applying their spirit, those of base condition become more distinguished.

The damage therefore that ambition brings, is to be ashamed to practice assaults with someone of lowly hand. To not consider you could extract some fruit even from these people, throwing yourself into the profession.

This thought is erroneous, because it is essential to know that virtue levels all people; and that a virtuoso can be considered the equal not just of a simple gentleman, but of any prince or great lord.

These are the reasons I give, demonstrating why today assaults are dismissed, neglecting the chance to benefit from the luxury of living, before the waning of youthful years deprives you of every worthwhile activity.



## *Chapter Two – On the same subject*

You can clearly tell from my previous discourse how much damage ambition brings, and how it is a reason for not mastering this beautiful virtue of fencing. But I will now demonstrate furthermore how discussion of this profession, which today's students engage in more than practice, causes notable harm. The truth is that lessons taken in any subject in the day are of no use if their operations are not exercised.

That which pertains to bodies of reason: such as logic, philosophy, and so forth, must be put in practice with words alone, as they are necessary to expound such virtues. However in the profession of fencing words have no place to execute well what the students have learned from the master. Actions are needed when it comes to training your body for defence and attack.

This is not applied by today's youth, which is a further reason why assaults no longer take place, and students neglect to learn wielding a sword in hand well. It then follows that masters are judged and branded as inept in their craft, since they no longer produce students as they did in the past.

When youngsters come together, sometimes from the schools of different masters in this profession, instead of putting their studies to the test, with the cloak across their shoulders, as well as with the simple sword in hand, they begin to discuss among themselves: "If I delivered this thrust how would you parry it?".

The other replies "I would do it in this way, or like this" to which the first responds "But if it were a cut, how would you defend yourself" again its counter is added, and they carry on ad infinitum in this manner, disregarding gainful practice.

See if this is the best way to safeguard yourself, and benefit through the profession. Then test with a sharp sword (which could happen), whether these people would have time for such a parliament.

Action is required for exercises which engage the body, words cannot grant a student resolution to confront his opponent, or courage and practice to defend himself. This is as much as I thought to say on this matter.

### *Chapter Three – On putting mathematics into this virtue<sup>5</sup>*

I have never presumed to malign anyone who professes to teach this noble exercise, nor do I intend to now, recognising myself as the inferior to many gallant men who have practised this virtue. But we are permitted to debate upon the lessons of some, who have taught and teach through mathematics, with the addition of lines, circles, traverses and extravagant voids of the body.

For me, these are commendable for fencing in a clean salle, furnished with even tiles. Likewise it is impossible for two people not to put on a good display, when they politely retreat, then void, or advance with a neat step, putting into practice what they have learned from their masters.

But if I imagine them outside the tiled hall, that is in the streets, where confrontations most often arise, then I can't help but criticise and malign them, since it is impossible (for reasons I will explain) to put these actions into practice.

Someone who is confronted or deliberately summoned to combat, cannot I believe, as happens in large armies, bring with them people to dig; to resurface the street so they can put themselves in the right posture, and use their lines, and advances of ground, and binds of the sword in conformance with their lessons. Instead, being confronted, they are obliged to think how to stand firmly on their feet, to be vigorous in defence and attack, ready of hand, without such fine distinctions of footwork.

Furthermore those who employ the sword in this manner, can be called good and beautiful fencers, but in an open space, or street where stones, holes, and cracks can cause you to stumble, they are always in danger of defending themselves poorly from their enemy. In such cases most of the time the artifices of traverses, voids and lines are left aside, and they throw themselves into natural attacks, as is so often seen.

This itself is sufficient demonstration, although I can elaborate for greater clarity, that play founded upon natural reason is with no comparison much better than artificial play. The latter was invented for no motive other than satisfying the curiosity of youth. If it were otherwise, it would not be the case, not only in public schools but also in the presence of nobility with the intervention of great princes, that professors of play founded upon such twists of the body had been touched assault after assault, with cuts and thrusts, as is clear and manifest to a great many people.

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter might apply to Italian treatises which incorporate mathematical principles, such as Agrippa (1553), but arguably targets in particular the Iberian forms of the *Verdadera Destreza*, exemplified by Sánchez de Carranza (1582) and Pacheco de Narváez (1600).

## *Chapter Four – On a defined punto<sup>6</sup> to attack*

This seems to me an important subject, in order to be accomplished in assaults. I will merely state my thoughts on those who, as a principal maxim, hold and practise the opinion that it is better to attack only a single part of the body, namely the right shoulder, being the said *punto*.

Firstly, you must consider the reason why they observe this doctrine. I believe it is for no reason other than to strike either the nearest, or the most vulnerable part of the body.

If we suppose they hold this view, because they want to strike the nearest target, I completely refute their opinion. Hands and arms notwithstanding, I know how those who lean most stand, even their knees are closer and more likely to be attacked by the enemy.

If they wish to propose the other reason, that it is the most vulnerable part of the body, I can only oppose them entirely. It seems to me that the hands and arms are subjected to danger: both of being wounded, and of the intermediate outcome of losing the ability to attack.

Furthermore experience, which instructs in all things, shows us that in a good portion of combats you see wounds to the hands and arms. This is because these can more easily encounter the enemy's weapons. If they deem the area called the *punto* so vulnerable, I do not know which hands and arms are not in the same danger. In them you find veins, arteries and other very vulnerable areas which evidently have shown to cause the death of those wounded there.

This is as much as I can say on this particular. I urge everyone to take the whole of the enemy's body as the fixed *punto* to attack, and specifically the part that presents itself as most uncovered and furthest forward. There is much more that could be said, for example if your opponent is left-handed, or in other situations, but to avoid tedium I will omit it.

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<sup>6</sup> The term *punto* to signify a defined target area of the right shoulder is particular to the treatise of Marco Docciolini, see Docciolini (1601) p.33-37.

## *Chapter Five – On a predetermined measure*

In addition to the other pernicious matters in the virtue of fencing noted above, I absolutely detest the opinion of those who insist on, observe, and teach a predetermined measure. Since an opinion should not be proposed without foundation, I will prove this simple truth with active reason.

I have always observed, and heard, that people who are forced to fight, whether to defend themselves, or to confront someone who has caused them some offence, never have the benefit of being able to measure swords. Nor is this a given, since anyone can wear a sword of any length they please (speaking of Tuscany). They cannot even choose a piazza well suited for coming to blows, and neither are people equal in form, either in height or in build.

Now, if this is not the case, what is the point of habituating your foot, and arm to a predetermined measure? Moreover, you can easily see from experience that often there is no time to take measure, or the opportunity is denied, for example in badly paved streets, sometimes filled with a thousand pieces of rubbish, as mentioned above.

If someone, suddenly or intentionally, is obliged to fight, even if they find themselves in a nice, clean street, it is impossible for them to observe the measure of their steps; to defend themselves and attack, against someone who is naturally at ease in well-founded play, who naturally understands how to stay strongly on their feet, and deflect the enemy's blows, while at the same time attacking him, which seems to me the real principle.

You must concede, that this measure was invented simply for the encounters they like to conduct at royal pageants, which have been held several times in various places, and furthermore in itself to demonstrate how far they can extend their normal step. However it is absolutely unfit not just for combat in earnest, but even for the simple assaults you might practice.

## *Chapter Six – On voids*

There should be little difference between this chapter and the previous one, since having to discuss voids, which produce the same result as a set measure, my argument will differ little from the one adopted above.

Firstly, let us consider its effect, which is nothing more than a withdrawal of the body, either back or to the side, to defend against an enemy's attack. I say that this withdrawal is as dangerous as trusting in a set measure, and the reason is as follows: someone who by chance comes to blows with an enemy cannot know if they wield a longer sword, whereby in wishing to void they can be wounded. Nor can they know how agile the sword's wielder is.

More importantly, when someone evades a blow with a void, they must necessarily lose a tempo in having to return forward to attack. If set upon during this tempo (which the enemy may attempt) they will find it very difficult to recover.

For this reason therefore, as a rule of good fencing you should never concede voids. Besides it increases the risk of stumbling in the streets, which as noted above can happen when placing yourself in a set measure.

Seeking to avoid any mishap that can occur is the utmost of a man's prudence. The greatest threats that arise are those to life. Against these principal dangers man must apply all his judgement.

If we know that voids, traverses, and a set measure manifestly cannot save us from an enemy's attack, why not use that convenient and very useful remedy: not to be subjected to such attacks by staying well-grounded, with firm and stable strength of both body and arm. This will suffice on this topic.

## Chapter Seven – On feints

In the profession of fencing there are many frivolities and jests, or more accurately whimsies that you can use, either in public schools or in private settings. Among others there are feints. These can often be employed when fencing for enjoyment and fun, and similarly to improve your vision, since they also serve to train your eyes to be attentive.

But I like to believe that this practice was invented for nothing more than to defend yourself, or to attack your enemy, as the situation demands. In reality they reveal themselves as good only for entertainment, or to prolong lessons, and I am forced to say that feints are extremely dangerous to those who wish to perform them. They require two tempos, and in the true exercise of wielding the sword are manifestly unsafe.<sup>7</sup>

In earnest, as we know, arms are employed for only two reasons. The first is to defend, the other is to attack. How then can someone who is confronted, as we have said before, hold forth with contrivances like feinting over and under the dagger, to the outside and inside of the sword, against the speed of the enemy's blows (especially if they are strong)? Against cuts as well as thrusts, when he does not adopt any kind of posture, but advancing with such blows?

I have no doubt that those in this predicament, stirred by many motives, leave aside all feints and attend only to defending their lives as best they can. But can you imagine others, advancing phlegmatically to confront their enemy, to vindicate a wrong or harm done to them, redeeming themselves with the frivolities and jests of feints?

I will omit many examples, but fury transports them, reason is overcome.<sup>8</sup> Honour necessitates that they leave aside taught feints, and instead follow natural instinct, but since I have explained this already, I will not expound further.

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7 Another Florentine master, Marco Docciolini, is similarly sceptical of feints: “*These feints are employed in the following manner, by hinting to attack in one place only to deliver it knavishly elsewhere, being a mark of someone without experience in this practice of arms*”, Docciolini (1601) p.40.

8 Camillo Palladini, a Bolognese master teaching in Rome, likewise states that “*feints are disregarded in questions of honour, where men focus on thrusting into the enemy's chest*”, Palladini (c.1600) sig.37r.

The idea that the finer elements of fencing could be lost in anger is referenced not infrequently in the period. A discussion of fencing in the pedagogical text of Annibale Roero quotes the Sorrentine poet Torquato Tasso on this point “*darkness and fury take the place of art*”, Roero (1604) p.132-137.

## ***Chapter Eight – On contrattempo, mezzotempo and more***

To cover the present topic it is worth returning to the same discussion in the previous chapter. The various fancies and follies, along with feints, are invented by certain masters I believe, not only to retain students so they stay longer at the school, but also to confuse them. This way they unlearn the good and study the bad, and will always have to remain students.

This is the case with the invention of *mezzotempo* and *contrattempo*. These are brought to light, as I mentioned, only to keep the school running.

*Mezzotempo*, and other such terms, deform the good and true rules with too many fripperies. In reality you could never have a memory sharp enough to employ them in defence in a single tempo, or in attack.

These methods should be practised not in fencing, but in the realm of dance, where the variety of steps and agility of the leaps must astound the spectators.

But in this profession a single step, a single tempo must suffice. Deployed with the requisite accuracy and mastery it will always quash any *contrattempo* or *mezzotempo* you might encounter, and I profess that this is merely the truth.

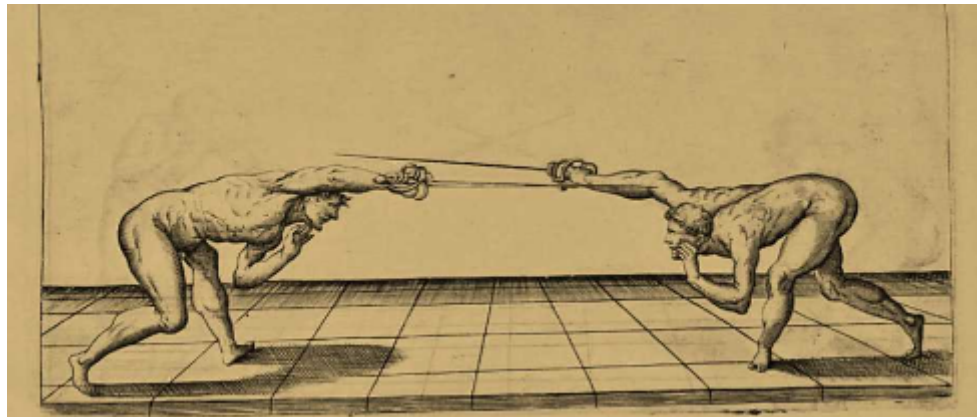
## *Chapter Nine – On the so misshapen published figures of this exercise*

If I believed myself alone, I would not dare to criticise the infinite sets of figures presented and drawn in published books. These are invented, I believe, to no other end but to demonstrate a multiplicity of distorted postures, which almost transcend the bounds of nature, and drag people towards the ridiculous, rather than to learning from viewing such contorted actions.

I would like to have some leeway, to leave some praise, but I see no way whatsoever, if not to say that these deformations are very suitable for clowns and tavern-singers, to entertain and extract money from a crowd. This is the praise I am able to concede.

If then I were to offer some polite criticism, I could begin by saying that these positions are monstrous, and impossible to witness within our profession. When have you ever seen people, either for enjoyment or necessity, employ such extravagant contortions, with their bodies so hunched and forced, and for the sword alone with the off-hand by the left ear, to employ it like a dagger to deflect thrusts?<sup>9</sup>

This is as far removed from the natural order as truth is from a lie. You do not take a sword in hand, to wield in earnest, with such exorbitant contortions. You should stand so you can operate naturally, all the more so when you find yourself on the street. There you may find many impediments, as I have said, and confirming what I have already said above, you must stand firmly on your feet, in a balanced posture from which you can draw strength to oppose the sword against all attacks, and as upright as possible so you do not become disordered.



*Fabris (1606) Plate 8*

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<sup>9</sup> This passage, and arguably the entire chapter, appears to be targeted at Salvator Fabris (1606), whose treatise is notable for its deep and sometimes contorted stances.



## Chapter Ten – On the guards and counterguards

There are many guards, great in number from various masters, which you can employ in the profession of fencing. To list them all, and discuss which of them is good or bad, would require a discourse beyond this brief one, expounded with an eloquence other than my own. Nonetheless my pen will write simply and plainly, to touch upon some of my thoughts.

Firstly, to demonstrate the extravagance of the guards invented, I will cite various names authors have given them, such as: *coda lunga e stretta*, *cingara*, *porta di ferro*, *beccapossa*,<sup>10</sup> *belincorno*, *prima*, *seconda*, *terza* and *quarta*,<sup>11</sup> and many others which I will omit, which together with these have been represented with figures in the books published up until now.

As to whether these are good or bad, any praise should be occasioned by their use. It cannot follow, although we have seen otherwise, that they endanger those who wish to employ them. However since no guard should be maligned without a basis, I will start by saying that in my opinion the guards to be employed should not be twisted or bizarre, nor overwrought with a paintbrush, nor measured with a compass, but simple and natural. In this manner the body finds itself stronger in resisting blows, and attacking when the occasion presents itself, without the manifest danger of stumbling and thereby compromising your life.

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10 These guard names are characteristic of the Bolognese school of fencing. In particular the name *beccapossa* is specific to Marozzo (1536).

11 Literally “first”, “second”, “third” and “fourth” respectively, this denomination of guards is first proposed in print by Agrippa (1553) sig. A1v. The sixteenth-century saw a number of disparate systems of guard names. Compare for example Marozzo (1536), the Anonimo Riccardiano (2009), Di Grassi (1570), Lucino (1589), Lovino (Bibliothèque Nationale de France MS Italien 959) and Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS. Urb. Lat. 1231.

Agrippa's system of nominating guards by hand position, from *prima* (first) through to *quarta* (fourth) rose to predominance during the seventeenth-century, being adopted by a great number of masters, including Fabris (1606), Gaiani (1619), Senese (1660), Di Mazo (1696) and Alfieri (1640), who added a guard he claimed as his own, the *guardia mista*. Capoferro uses Agrippa's terminology but furthermore briefly mentions a fifth and six guard, Capoferro (1610) p.44, guards which are treated more substantively by Ceresa (1641). Lesser known masters who followed Agrippa's scheme include: Maffani (1629), Christiani (Biblioteca Trivulziana Codex 256, c.1680) and Gorio (1682).

Nonetheless this system of guard nomenclature was not universal in the seventeenth century. Giganti (1606 & 1608) like Monesi largely eschews guard names, while Docciolini (1601) uses a system of guards similar to that shared by Altoni (2007) from circa 1540. D'Alessandri (1609) follows the naming convention set out by Viggiani (1575) while the Roman/Neapolitan school of the late seventeenth-century: notably Mattei (1669), Villardita (1670 & 1673) and Marcelli (1686) among others, employed its own system of guards.

## *Chapter Eleven – On those who wish to debate this practice*

To further damage this profession of fencing, in my opinion, some presume to debate over blows and postures of whichever sort, formulating and postulating in the manner of someone conducting a philosophical debate. Discussions on subjects like the one I have mentioned, should be performed with actions alone.

This occurs because upon the path of this practice it is difficult to arrive at perfection. Many who take the path, at the first resistance, by a simple act of will desist from the endeavour. Seeing themselves inadequate, they sharpen their intellect to appear the equal of professors, and with their propositions lead astray those striving to obtain a complete understanding.

This is undeniable. In the practice of fencing, to engage someone in debate and discussion as if arguing theology (in place of conducting assaults) achieves nothing but to deny opportunities to those who desire to learn, to become excellent in practice. This is the motive I ascribe for this behaviour.

## *Chapter Twelve – Against a set rule for combat at night*<sup>12</sup>

In this simple discourse of mine, I wished to oppose every extravagance that the meanness of my intellect has encountered in the profession of fencing. Therefore it seemed apt to contest also the opinion of those who hold a firm rule of giving true and real method of combat at night: that putting your hands to your weapons, you should quickly use them to seek the enemy's sword, and having found it you must liberally deliver attacks to wound him.

They add to this another rule, no better than the first, that is to keep your body hunched to create a smaller target.

I address each of these as follows.

If confronted in the dark at night, how can you find your enemy's weapon without being attacked?

Why must you remain hunched, being deprived of ability and stature in defence and attack, in place of a strong and comfortable posture, remaining upright on your feet without hunching over?

Such a false opinion I would deem unsuitable even for the daytime where you can clearly see the enemy's posture, and even when the enemy does not step to attack.

I firmly maintain that if you must fight at night, in such circumstances in the dark, you should deliver *dritti* and *roversci* as swiftly as you can. Anything else is futile, without proposing many additional considerations for such instances, which for the sake of brevity I will omit.

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussions on combat at night in Italian treatises, see for example Briccio (1613) sig. A4v-A5r, Marcelli (1686) p.90-91, and Calarone (1714) p.180-183.

## *Chapter Thirteen – On those masters who in giving lessons employ either a chestplate or a rod*

Among the other notable detriments, caused by various extravagances, are those masters, some who give lessons with a chestplate, others with a rod.

Masters who wear a chestplate during lessons leads to nothing else, in my opinion, than that students deliver blows with an exorbitant step. Since the blows do not harm these said masters, they do not realise that, although they wish to protect the student, with these thrusts they harm them.

They become habituated to committing their body so much with every blow, that it becomes unlikely they could recover when performed in earnest. Having delivered the thrust to their master's chestplate, they find resistance, lending them force to recover back, and they adopt the habit of abandoning their whole body into the attack.

Because of this with a sharp sword, not finding the resistance of the chestplate they have with the practice sword, they remain extended so far forwards that it is difficult (as stated) to avoid their enemy's attack. It can absolutely occur that instead of wounding their enemy, they are left injured.

Something similar can occur with students who are used to taking lesson from masters who hold a rod. Since it is much lighter than a sword it creates an extremely negative effect, giving rise to great setbacks. Its weakness, not having the same form as a sword, means whichever cut the rod delivers, it cannot force the student's sword to learn, as a sword would.

We can furthermore question, being habituated to parrying cuts from the rod, if when they receive cuts from a sword, they might become confused. Being disordered they might apply the lessons learned reluctantly, since they do not even learn resolve.

So I repeat, employing either a chestplate or a rod benefits only the master, and not the students.

## *Chapter Fourteen – On where some wish you to look when you fight*<sup>13</sup>

The variety of opinions on where to place your eyes during actions, both during assaults and in questions of honour, leads me to include this topic in this discourse of mine. Many want you to keep your eyes fixed to your enemy's face during combat. Others assert you should always watch the point of your opponent's sword.

I contradict both of these views. I say that keeping your eye on the point is of no use in combat, since it is unlikely your enemy's point ever stays still. Furthermore it is so fine that when it is brandished at speed, someone who trusts in this proposition greatly deceives themselves; knowing full well that sharp swords are not like swords in schools with a button, which is rather large, although some schools might not use them. Therefore I consider this proposition in my own manner.

I also criticise the other opinion, of watching your enemy's face, because while keeping your eyes there it is unlikely you can understand and clearly discern the operations he performs with the sword. Often these are away from the face, and he might feint with his eyes to attack in one place, only to move the hand to offend elsewhere.

Therefore finding fault with both of the above opinions, I hold that another area is more appropriate, necessary, and without subjecting yourself to deceits more useful, which I will relate in due time in another treatise.<sup>14</sup>

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13 This is a fairly common topic of discussion among contemporary Italian treatises. Alfieri (1640) p.54-55, for example contends that:

“...we must consider that the eye is capable of observing several objects simultaneously, due to the breadth of our field of vision, but cannot distinguish each of them with the same clarity.

If we view a man in front of us we can see all of him at once, and at the same time discern objects which are away from him. As regards our direct line of sight, and consequently which object we should be observing most attentively, on this point opinions diverge, and recommendations differ between one another.

To arrive at a conclusion, I consider that in the first stage we mentioned it is prudent to deceive the enemy with your glance, as if it were a feint. You should look in one place only to move to gain the sword where it is least expected, which in turn will disturb your opponent's composure and disorder him somewhat. Nonetheless, the steps you should follow while finding the measure are not worth observing when you reach the stage where you can wound or be wounded.

Some maintain that you should principally look at your opponent's eyes, reasoning that the eyes command the movements that men make. In this they commit a grave error. The eyes have no dominion whatsoever over the actions we employ. Without wishing to digress into subjects which do not pertain to my profession, the office which the eyes have in attacking is simply to indicate and uncover the targets we wish to strike. Those who hold the above opinion could be easily deceived by showing with your eyes that you seek to wound one spot, then wounding to another; all the more so since such movements are so fast that they are often difficult to observe with precision.

In my opinion it is safest to keep your mind and your eyes fixed where you anticipate harm will come from, that is your enemy's point (thereby observing also his hand), while at the same time viewing the opening you intend to attack.”

14 If Monesi ever penned another treatise, sadly there is no evidence of it.

## *Chapter Fifteen – To those who greatly criticise cuts*

Everyone must defend their profession with the rationales available, so I will not fail to show how mistaken are those who greatly criticise cuts in the practice of fencing.

Before opposing everything they state in favour of their position, I will explain the charges levelled against those who employ cuts.

The first is that cuts are not lethal, the second is that they are much shorter than thrusts, while cuts are further derided by the claim they are for brutes.

I refute the first by supposing, since death has taken many in our times by way of cuts, that no other reason is needed to affirm this truth.

I can counter the second with great ease, demonstrating how with the hand, and the same length of step and sword (when grasped), the same person can be wounded either by a cut or a thrust. This is better proved by experience than words (which I set out to do), as I have shown and performed many times in the presence of great princes.

I should raise a further consideration for those who criticise cuts, and it is this. When someone is confronted, and puts their hand to their sword to defend themselves, do they negotiate with their enemy whether to use only thrusts (speaking of Tuscan lands)? If they can wound with both thrusts and cuts, then why not employ cuts, and learn to defend against them?

I can only believe that those who criticise cuts, understanding only thrusts, either have no power in their cuts, or do not know how to teach them (if they are masters), or have no time to practise them if they are students.

In every profession, to remain ahead of others you must pursue every possible avenue, even if indirect, but all the more so the true and good path, since every day in questions of honour we see that the majority of wounds are cuts to the hands, arms and face. For this reason swords with a hollow were invented.<sup>15</sup>

Having explained the usefulness of cuts, I affirm once again that those who criticise them, claiming they are no good because they are for brutes, cause harm. An example of this is not keeping hold of the sword, so it falls to the ground, which has happened to many during simple assaults. Another is not having the ability to defend against cuts. I have useful advice to give in this regard, but to avoid being tedious, and admitting to discuss only superficial matters, I will not expound further, and will end my discourse of this subject.

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<sup>15</sup> In the original simply "*spada con l'incavo*". It remains unclear whether Monesi is referring simply to a hollow-ground blade or deep fuller, or perhaps an indentation at the grip that might conceivably aid in cutting, like on some later sabres.

## *Chapter Sixteen – Against numerous grips with the dagger*<sup>16</sup>

Having set myself to contradict falsehood with truth, I should say a few things on this subject. This is for those who strongly promote and encourage a multiplicity of grips with or against the dagger, many with a dagger and others unarmed, as something pertaining to the art of fencing.

I refute the quantity of grips described and delineated, and their operation, knowing very well as I have said elsewhere, that you do not negotiate with your opponent. This is from the many occurrences and events that are well-known without me having to describe them.

In fact I would dare say that the dagger is worse than the pistol, which can fail or misfire. The dagger is always loaded and ready to attack, and when someone has this weapon at their side and spots the opportunity to use it, I do not believe they will use it to threaten their enemy from distance.

Assuming they are not a coward, but resolute and courageous, they will approach as close as they have to. I doubt there will be time to counter, with any of these many grips that are supposed to defend against attacks, nor therefore would I say that dagger against dagger they could be of any benefit.

I will freely admit that some of the grips work in schools, of course, but as you know these daggers are without a point or a cutting edge. Many options can be proposed since there is no manifest danger.

I return to saying, that as a short weapon they are much quicker to draw, and more ready to wound. These grips are for the entertainment, and confusion, of students. This is what I have to say for now.

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<sup>16</sup> Depictions of dagger combat appear infrequently in contemporary treatises. Giganti (1608) sig. N3v laments that:

*“I cannot fathom why the play of the dagger alone is no longer practised. Perhaps masters no longer know how to teach it, or do not wish to. Or else it stems from the lassitude of men, ignorant of how important the play of the dagger is, who neglect to learn it.”*

However Marozzo (1536) sig.126v-148r, and Fabris (1606) p.250-255, do detail various unarmed defences against a dagger (the seventh and tenth of Marozzo’s plays assuming both parties have daggers). Giganti (1608) sig.N3v-P3r presents the dagger as a weapon of self-defence, matched against another dagger, sword and dagger, and spear. Despite this context of personal defence, he portrays opponents out of measure in a fencing stance, not dissimilar to the images in Palladini’s duelling system with the dagger, Palladini (c.1600) sig.64r-67r.

## *Chapter Seventeen – On a pike position that defends against any sort of missile weapon, including arquebus shots*<sup>17</sup>

I have seen many authors publish thoughts which objectively can barely be sustained. This prompted me to highlight one marvellous opinion, held by a master not only of fencing but of many trades.

In one of his books, he assigns a posture with the sword in the right hand and a pike in the left, profiled towards that side like a barbican. He asserts it does not merely defend against cavalry and infantry, but from any sort of polearm, and also from arrows, javelins and even arquebus or musket shots. The only caveat is that it must not hit the centre of the shaft, where it may break, which seems likely. I leave this to be pondered by anyone who professes the practice of arms. To authenticate this he claims to have seen it.

Emboldened by such a claim, I have taken common courage and confided to the pen that which was concealed in my mind. Because if such wonders have occurred they would refute not only my weak and poorly articulated arguments, but genuine and well-founded ones.

I do not blame that pikeman, whether his pike was whole or broken, if having to wield his sword he also employed his polearm. But with apologies, I can never have it believed that his haft could keep him safe from every attack, from every sort of weapon. Supposedly even the musket against which (the author says) the pike prevails, the musket ball skidding off one side or the other to be deflected without harm.

In truth I have not passed my years in war, where I might have witnessed such incidences, but have been in service of and enjoyed the company of many veteran soldiers. Foremost of all the Most Illustrious Sir Silvio Piccolomini of Aragon, a person of such esteem as is known throughout the world, having fulfilled many offices in war, for the Most Serene Highnesses of Tuscany and for other crowns. Yet I never heard from him or anybody else that the guard described is able to achieve what is claimed.

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<sup>17</sup> This is a clear reference to a chapter in *Oplomachia*, Bonaventura Pistofilo's pike, halberd and musket treatise of 1621, Pistofilo (1621) p.114-115.

*“When an occasion arrives where you must grasp your sword, I urge you never to abandon your pike, whether it is broken or intact. Instead employ it at least to defend. Anyone can understand for themselves from figure 79, how useful this manner of holding the pike can be for defence.*

*It protects against cavalry, infantry, and against any type of hand weapon; even against missile weapons such as javelins, darts, arrows, and similar arms, up to and including arquebus shots. As long as by chance they do not strike directly in the centre of the shaft, so that the balls instead skid aside, the man will be saved, as I have seen from experience.*

*You must comport yourself such that everything is covered by the pike, maintaining your arm high and firmly extended. Your stance must be sufficiently wide for greater stability, with your sword ready to attack.*

*If you then wish to return your sword to its sheath without abandoning the pike, or piece of haft left in your hand, figure 80 clearly demonstrates how without need for further explanation.”*





*Pistofilo (1621) p.115*

## *Chapter Eighteen – Some admonishments for those who wear a sword*

Any profession should be practised with every possible convenience, and a farmer who must be present when the grain is harvested in July should not wear a garment of heavy cloth.

Those who dedicate themselves to the profession of wearing a sword, so dangerous that we could say death always walks alongside it, in various respects should not wear any ornamentation of the body or clothes, or any other items that might disadvantage them when coming to blows.

An example more perilous than any other is high-heels, which can easily lead their owner to fall over. Or else sleeves that hang down from the tunic, which can subject someone who is confronted, or who confronts, to great trouble.

Likewise long hair, which when coming to grapple grants a clear advantage to the opponent, while bringing great danger to the bearer, even more so when curly in the extravagant style of today; also more specifically hair that comes to impede vision.

Also included among such impediments are clothes with large slashes, in the French fashion or in any other. They can cause no small detriment, being dangerous by hampering the drawing of weapons with the swiftness required.

I also wanted to mention those who carry daggers with a dangling rose.

This is for the benefit of all; because from the mishaps that have occurred, I am sure the impediments I have listed most often create danger for the lives of those who struggle with arms.

## *Chapter Nineteen – What moved me to write this discourse*

Everything we do in this world has an end, and every endeavour wends towards its outcome. Therefore I felt it apt to declare in this final chapter, which motives moved me to stain these few sheets of paper (so to speak) with my coarse and ill-adapted thoughts, and to expose myself voluntarily to the censure of innumerable fine intellects.

The reason is that I have found infinite authors, who by means of the presses have professed to enrich the virtue of fencing by demonstrating various sorts of guards and means of combat, and numerous uses of weapons. Knowing that all these operations were shown for the simple practice of wielding a sword, I resolved to designate the true manner of exercising this profession seriously. It consists of nothing more than the simple assaults which are conducted for pleasure.

The reason for writing this discourse was none other than a real and genuine desire for the aficionados of this art to recognise the true method of practising it, to not further maltreat it, and to employ the advice provided for the benefit of their person. This is the motivation, as I have said previously, and the intention.

May the reader appreciate the willingness of my spirit; and may those habituated to Ciceronian eloquence, and to the exquisite vivacity of extraordinary conceptions, pity my rude pen, whose lowly scribbles have aspired only to reveal the truth.

Lastly I wanted to set out how having learned the voids and traverses, I found them ill-suited to real combat with a sharp sword, and I criticise them.

Although I praise cuts in practice for their excellent defence, even more so at night where they are the quickest blow to find their target, I do not wish praise them by themselves, I commend them when mixed with a good many thrusts. A dagger can interrupt and defend against thrusts, but is comfortably negated by cuts.

And here I come to a close. If God grants me health in months and not years I hope to bring forth fruit that is useful, with the most straightforward method, apt for real combat, distinguishing the characteristics of different people: whether large, powerful, small or weak, with appropriate rules.

All in honour of our Lord God, and the most Blessed Virgin Mary.

THE END.

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