

Fencing Instruction and the Concept of Honor

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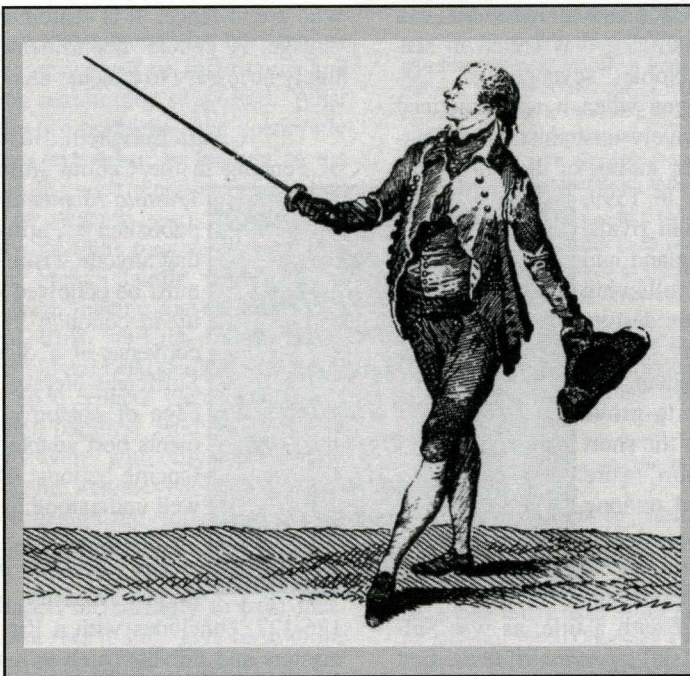
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We teach our students the fundamentals of swordplay, as our predecessors did for five hundred years, but do we, like them, instruct our pupils in the concept of honor? Judging by the behavior often seen displayed by contemporary fencers during competition, I would be inclined to say that this vital element in fencing instruction is no longer taught as part of the fencer's education. Or if it is, then the younger generation of fencers must be deliberately ignoring what they have learned. Indeed, fencers in international competition can be seen with regularity executing something before an encounter only vaguely resembling the traditional salute, turning their backs on the adversary and walking off the fencing strip, failing to shake the opponent's hand at the completion of a bout, or attempting, during the course of an encounter, to intimidate the director (referee) by glaring angrily at him and adopting an enraged simian, squatting posture, accompanied by raising an arm with clenched fist in menacing fashion. As I have remarked elsewhere, in the past such unseemly behavior would have been severely censured. And, unfortunately, the responsibility for this rests, to some extent, not only on the fencers, but also on their teachers.

Indeed, the concept of honor has wide implications, well beyond fencing, for it enters into many activities of everyday life. As is well known, young men from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century were sent to fencing schools both to receive instruction in swordplay, and to acquire the manners and polish of a gentleman, that is, an honorable, kind, polite, gallant man (*gentiluomo* and *gentilhomme*). Now, as the reader knows, the English word "honor," the French term *honneur*, and the Italian word *onore*, are all derived from the Latin term *honor*. And we know from Cicero (*Brutus* 81. 281) that since honor is a prize of virtue given an individual by the judgment of his fellow citizens, the recipient is both worthy of the honor and honored.

Arms and honor were, unquestionably, closely associated in the past. The practice of arms was linked comparatively early with the education of a courtier or gentle-

man. Baldassarre Castiglione, in his work, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, published at Venice in 1527, and widely read throughout Europe, stated (*Primo libro*, 17) that the principal and true profession of the courtier must be that of arms (...*la principale e vera professione del cortegiano debba esser quella dell'arme...*). And he adds (*Primo libro*, 20) that the courtier must know how to manage well every sort of arm, on foot and on horse, and know the advantages that there are in them, and above all to be informed about those arms ordinarily used among gentlemen (...*deve essere maneggiar ben ogni sorte d'arme a piedi ed a cavallo e conoscere i vantaggi che esse sono, e massimamente aver notizia di quell'arme che s'usano ordinariamente tra' gentiluomini...*).



Further in his book, Castiglione (*Quarto libro* 12) observes that good teachers do not instruct their children only in letters, but also in good manners and how to eat, drink, speak, and walk correctly (...*i boni pedagoghi non solamente insegnano lettere ai fanciulli, ma ancora boni modi ed onesti nel mangiare, bere, parlare, andare con certi gesti accomodati*). Applying this principle to the profession of the fencing master, it may be said that his instruction should also include

what was once deemed essential for the education of a gentleman, and this would include polite manners and a sense of honor.

Later in the same century the Italian fencing master, Vincentio Saviolo, in his book, *Vincentio Saviolo his Practise*, published at London in 1595, (*The 2. Booke* O3) laments the fact that honor is held in disdain by some who are born gentlemen:

But since all thinges fall to decaye, it is no reuaille though vertue (I speake with all due reuerence and fauour) bee not found but in few: for surelye there be many in whome nothing remaineth but the bare tyle of nobilitye, in that they be Gentlemen borne: who in their manners wholly degenerate from their auncestors, and make no account either of honour or dishonour....

Not surprisingly, a common expression in the Italian fencing community is *prendere in mano l'arma cortese*, to take in hand the courtly arm, that is to say, the sword. In other words, the sword has long been linked with nobility,

and it was regarded as a mark of social status, carried at the side of a *signore* or gentleman, whose dignified, polite, gracious, and courteous manner was designated in Italy as *signorile*, a word that does not easily translate into English, for it encompasses in its meaning more than simply gentlemanly behavior, as we think of it in this country today; it embodies the concept of lordliness. In this case the French term *seigneur* or lord is a proper equivalent of Italian *signore*.

The English word "noble" comes from the French *noble*, which is in turn derived from the Latin *nobilis* or known, noted, notable, famous. In French it is often used to designate high lineage. The same is true of Italian *nobile*, for one speaks of a high-born or aristocratic person as being *nobile*. Moreover, an activity suitable for such an individual can also be termed "noble." In fact, fencing was called in sixteenth-century England "the Noble science of Defence."¹ And this was the case even when it was practiced and taught by the rough and relatively unsophisticated English "maysters," like George Silver, author of the *Paradoxes of Defence*, published at London in 1599, who despised yet envied his Italian rivals, such as Saviolo, who came to England and quickly and profitably gained a following among the English nobility.² But despite his more rustic form of swordplay, Silver, nonetheless, styles himself a gentleman, and promises in the title of his work to prove "the true grounds of Fight to be in the short ancient weapons, and that the short sword hath advantage of the long Sword or long Rapier."

Fencing masters in the service of nobility were sometimes rewarded with a title, as was Salvatore Fabris, author of the *Sienza [sic] e pratica d'Arme*, first published at Copenhagen in 1606. We learn from the title page of his book that Fabris was elevated to the office of *Capo dell'ordine dei sette cuori*, or Head of the Order of the Seven Hearts, which in the Italian and German edition of 1713 was translated as *Obristen des Ritter-Ordens der Sieben Herzen*, Colonel of the Knightly Order of the Seven Hearts. A grateful Fabris dedicated his book to Christian IV, King of Denmark, who was his protector and benefactor, and signed the dedication with the words *Humilissimo e Deuotissimo Seruitore*, that is, most humble and most devoted servant.

And in May of 1656 Louis XIV, King of France, signed documents that enabled six of the twenty fencing masters in the *Académie des Maîtres en fait d'Armes de la Ville et Fauxbourgs de Paris*, who had engaged in their profession for more than twenty years, to receive hereditary nobility.³

Domenico Angelo Malevolti Tremamondo of Livorno was the most sought after fencing master in eighteenth-century London. He was described by Giorgio Rastelli, *La scherma* (Milano, 1942) pp. 26-27, as "...[a] perfect gentleman, complete fencer...a strong and famous fencing master, much loved by the ladies...[who] died in 1802 at the age

of eighty-six—[and] some days before his death he gave a lesson...." (...*gentiluomo perfetto, schermitore completo, molto amato dalle donne...un maestro di scherma forte e famoso, morto nel 1802 all'età di 86 anni—qualche giorno prima della sua morte egli aveva dato lezione....*). Angelo, himself a gentleman, was a teacher of gentlemen, and the head of a fencing academy that endured until the end of the nineteenth century.

In his *School of Fencing* published at London in 1787, p. 17, Angelo writes: "The Salute in Fencing, Generally Made Use of in all Academies, Among Gentlemen, Before They Assault, or Fence Loose. The salute in fencing is a civility due to the spectators, and reciprocally to the persons who are to fence. It is customary to begin with it before they engage. A genteel deportment and a graceful air are absolutely necessary to execute this."⁴

Cesare Enrichetti, Head Fencing Master and Director of Fencing in the Central Military School of Parma, in his *Trattato Elementare teorico-pratico di scherma*, published at Parma in 1871, pp. 33-34, observes that anyone wishing to be a good fencing master must be endowed with the following: 1) Morality in conduct; 2) Civil manners to be able to converse in a dignified way with students; 3) Sufficient literary instruction, and some knowledge of anatomy to be able to choose movements best adapted to the practical execution of fencing actions; 4) Communication skills to be well understood by pupils; and 5) Dexterity.

The *Manuel d'escrime* published by the French Ministry of War at Paris in 1877, pp. 126-127, concludes with a list of the obligations of fencing masters and *prévôts*, such as setting an example of calm and measured language, and loyal and irreproachable conduct, and the recommendation that there should be displayed in the *salle d'armes* statements such as "Honor and Country...Glory to God, Respect for the Masters, Honor to the Arms, and Long Live France" (*Honneur et Patrie...Gloire à Dieu, Respect aux Maîtres, Honneur aux Armes, Vive la France*).

Masaniello Parise, founder and first Director of the celebrated Scuola Magistrale Militare di Scherma in Rome, in his textbook, *Trattato teorico-pratico della scherma di spada e sciabola*, published at Rome in 1884, pp. 10 and 40, states that the sword remains the arm of the gentleman (*La spada resta l'arma del gentiluomo....*), and that the salute is a necessary courtesy toward the adversary and the spectators, and it is essential that every fencer does not omit this ancient and chivalrous custom, whether in the lesson or in the assault (*Essendo il saluto una dovuta cortesia verso l'avversario e gli astanti, è bene che ogni schermitore non trascuri questo antico e cavalleresco costume, sia nella lezione, sia nell'assalto.*).

It should be noted that the rapid erosion in contemporary fencing technique, and with this, the deterioration in manners and respect for the master, finds early expression,

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though quite inadvertently, in Paul Battesti's and Louis Prost's *Traité d'escrime*, published at Paris in 1963, p. vi, for these two classically-trained teachers write that the young person of today is attracted to sports that permit him to "play," that is, to participate, immediately, and so one should no longer impose a long and fastidious mechanical preparation before authorizing the student to free fence (*Il convient... de ne pas imposer à l'élève une longue et fastidieuse préparation mécanique avant de l'autoriser à faire assaut*).⁵ The authors recommend that the master, after having imparted to his pupil actions of the first level, give him actions for the assault. And so with a small number of offensive and defensive combinations of actions he will be able to engage in combat.

Certainly, Battesti and Prost would be horrified at what has resulted from the modification of instruction and shortening of the initial training period they suggested. What was omitted was of the greatest importance—the seemingly superfluous niceties of behavior embodied in fencing as the noble science and the rationale for such technical matters as hand positions and choice of weapon grip. The authors stated, for example, on p. iii that their treatise was written especially for fencers using the French handle, yet already at the time their work was published, fencing masters in France were lamenting the fact that their students quickly, and against professional advice, employed orthopedic grips, arguing that world-class foil and épée fencers were abandoning the traditional French and Italian handles. And by the 1970s both the French and Italian grips were, with only a few exceptions among top-level fencers, no longer visible in international competition. They were designated "obsolete" by the younger generation of competitive fencers.

Moreover, fencers tended increasingly to treat masters as midwives, whose function was to help give birth to the individual's imagined inborn fencing ability. And in competition one occasionally even saw a fencer deliberately ignore his master's tactical suggestions, or curse him for interfering in a bout by offering unsolicited advice. Such disrespectful behavior was both a breach of etiquette and an attack on the authority of the teacher, who was publicly humiliated and dishonored!¹⁶ In brief, the inmates began to run the asylum, and no one put a stop to it. Fencing masters simply shrugged their shoulders in disgust and walked away.

This was, indeed, far from the relationship that existed between teacher and pupil just twenty years earlier. Respect, honor, and discipline were the hall marks of those engaged in the noble science. Aldo Nadi, *On Fencing*, first published at New York in 1943, p. 290, could still state: "...in the creation of a fencer there are no short cuts. Mask on, the master's authority must be supreme." And earlier in the text on p. 37 he observed, "...no one can know anything about fencing before his first lesson, the 'born fencer' does not exist. The long and difficult process of creating a fencer precludes that assumption."

Unquestionably, the role of the fencing master in setting the standard of behavior for his students is absolutely critical. If he is honorable, dignified, and polite in his behavior, bearing, and speech, his pupils will imitate the example

he provides. Perhaps Maestro Aldo Nadi best expressed the obligation of the fencing master toward those he taught, when in the brochure to his academy he wrote: "It is the Fencing Master's strict moral duty towards his artistic ancestors to see to it that centuries-old traditions are respected, honored, and enforced."¹⁷ ♦

Notes:

¹Sloane Ms. 2530, 18, in H. Berry, *The Noble Science* (Newark, 1991) p. 77.

²W. Gaugler, *The History of Fencing: Foundations of Modern European Swordplay* (Bangor, 1998) pp. 25, 27-29.

³P. Lacaze, *Le Cahiers de l'Académie d'Armes de France*, "La maîtrise d'armes en France," III.

⁴It should be observed here that the salute is not only an act of courtesy that has come down to us through the ages, but it is also a measure of the adversary's level of skill. Maestro Enzo Musumeci Greco, who was an exceptionally-fine classical fencer, a highly successful competitor during the 1920s through the 1940s, and one of Italy's great teachers following World War II, commented that he was able to determine to an extent the potential strength of his opponent by his salute preceding an encounter. If this was smartly executed, and with elegance, it was likely that his adversary would have a strong technical preparation, and should be approached with extra caution.

⁵Gaugler (supra n. 2) pp. 387-390.

When Louis-Justin Lafaugère, author of the *Traité de l'art de faire des armes*, published at Paris in 1825, p. 340, was asked "Why are there so many poor rather than good fencers?" He replied that masters in general permit their students to engage in the assault too early, so that the latter, not having developed sufficient technical skill, yet eager to touch, set aside even that feeble knowledge they have acquired, and hurl themselves at their adversaries with bent arms and multiple feints (*Les maîtres laissant faire, en général, trop tôt assaut à leurs élèves, ces derniers n'ayant pas la main réglée et ayant l'ambition de toucher, s'emportent et mettent de côté leurs faibles connaissances...précipite sur l'adversaire à bras raccourci, les feintes se multiplient...*).

However, it must be remarked that already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fencing masters were confronted with the need to teach their students the essentials of combat as quickly as possible. But their instruction, of necessity, always included the same basic elements of swordplay, and these were firmly fixed by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Take, for instance, Marco Doccicolini's *Trattato in materia di scherma*, published at Florence in 1601, he begins by defining fencing as "...the art of managing arms well, with the principal end being self-preservation, and consisting of two parts, the one being defense, and the other, offending the enemy; and these two parts being so joined together, that in giving a rule to one, a rule is given to the other" (*La scherma, la quale è Arte di ben' maneggiar' l'armi, hà per fine principale, la salvezza della nostra persona, e consiste in due parti, l'una è nella difesa, l'altra nell'offesa del nimico; le quali due parti, son così congiunte insieme, che nel dar' regola dell'una si viene à dar regola dell'altra...*). And he continues by explaining guards and counter guards; imbrogcata; target; disengagement; feints; time, countertime, and half time; and principal point and cut actions (deeming the point thrust the best and most secure).

Francesco Alfieri's *La scherma*, published at Padua in 1640, differs from Doccicolini only in the order of teaching fundamentals, he deals first with (Cap. 5) fencing measure, and then (Cap. 7) fencing time, (Cap. 8) guards, (Cap. 12) disengagement, (Cap. 13) feints, (Cap. 16) counter guards, and (Cap. 18) point and cut actions (stating that all fencers by far agree that it is better to use the point than the cut).

⁶There is a tradition in fencing that goes back well into the period of the Renaissance, and probably much earlier, to respect and honor one's master. Achille Marozzo in his *Opera nouva*, first published at Mutinae in 1536, counsels the teacher to have his students swear an oath "...never to oppose your master..." (*...di non uenire mai contra al uostro Maestro...*). See Gaugler (supra n. 2) pp. 2, 434, n. 14.

⁷Aldo Nadi, *The Living Sword: A Fencer's Autobiography* (Sunrise, 1995) p. 17. The same principles are embodied in the work of Antonio Spallino, *Una frase d'armi* (Milano, 1997) pp. 38-53. One of Italy's most successful fencers in the post World War II era, Avv. Spallino adhered rigorously to the grand tradition he had inherited from his predecessors, and that was passed on to him by his teacher, Maestro Giuseppe Pisani di Castagneto.