

CONTRIBUTOR

Dr Alexander Hay is Lecturer of Digital Journalism at Southampton Solent University, and comes from an eclectic humanities background, covering everything from sea monsters to music journalism and reader response theory. His martial arts experience is similarly varied, and he is presently studying boxing, while retaining an on-going interest in Historical European Martial Arts. His research interests include the history of journalism and online media, and how they intersect with a wide range of other topics and disciplines.

THE ART AND POLITICS OF FENCE

SUBTEXTS AND IDEOLOGIES OF LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY FENCING MANUALS

ALEXANDER HAY

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to demonstrate that historical fencing manuals and treatises are worthy of study not merely as historical documents but as works of both philosophy and literary merit, demonstrating, as they do, a clear ideological viewpoint as well as an engagement with the ideological and intellectual shifts of their time. The two texts chosen for this initial study, namely, George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* (1599) and Vincentino Saviolo's *His Practise* (1595), not only contrast with one another, which was Silver's intention, but also demonstrate an engagement with humanistic and social concerns. We cannot detach these works from the literary and socio-political contexts in which they were written, nor would the authors have intended them to be.

INTRODUCTION

Historical fencing and martial arts manuals have undergone a resurgence of interest in recent decades thanks to the efforts of hobbyists and researchers who have sought to recreate these fighting arts in a living context. Texts as varied as Talhoffer's *Fechtbuch* [1467] to Sir William Hope's *Advice to his Scholar from the Fencing Master* [1692] to early forms of syncretic martial arts like E.W. Barton-Wright's *The New Art of Self-defence: How a Man May Defend Himself against Every Form of Attack* [1899] have been resurrected and in some cases successfully taught and systematised, but with the obvious caveat of them being modern interpretations of hitherto dead arts. Naturally, this can only be a hypothetical exercise as, in many cases, and unlike some Asian martial arts, much or all of these Western styles' lineage is extinct and so the recreationists must start from scratch.¹

Yet beyond the sphere of recreation and what is, in effect, a very physical form of experimental archaeology, this article seeks to demonstrate that these manuals and treatises are worthy of study not merely as historical documents but as works of both philosophy and literary merit, demonstrating, as they do, a clear ideological viewpoint as well as an engagement with the ideological and intellectual shifts of the Early Modern period.

This, then, is also a study of a conflict between two very different approaches to controlled and systemic violence, as well as issues of culture and context and a growing sense of what in the long term would become nascent modern nationhood. As the article will demonstrate, the technical instruction of these manuals, while consisting of the bulk of their content, were not their sole primary purpose. Rather, they were used also as a means of articulating ideas about the notion of violence and the role it serves in a social structure favoured by the authors. The intellectual underpinnings of these texts demonstrate instead two competing ethical models and an attempt in both cases to integrate them into the context of Early Modern England, itself facing religious and political tumult as the Tudors gave way to the Stuarts and the complexities of a society in transition continued to engender both conflict and debate.

As this is an initial study and introduction to the subject, I have selected two authors and their texts to begin with. Firstly, this allows a sufficiently in-depth reading within the confines of a journal article. Secondly, it allows us to focus on two key figures and argue for their consideration not merely as fencing masters but as contributors to

Early Modern discourse and humanism. The two texts chosen for this initial study, namely, George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* [1599] and Vincentino Saviolo's *His Practise* [1595], not only deliberately contrast with one another, which was Silver's intention, but also demonstrate an engagement with political and social issues of the day; we cannot detach these works from the contexts in which they were written, nor would the authors have intended them to be.

THE LONDON CONTEXT

Before discussion of these manuals begin, however, the context in which they were written must be established. Both Saviolo and Silver were based in London – the former's *salle* located in the Blackfriars district, while Silver resided in the city as, in his own words, 'a gentleman'. London itself was now a huge city by the standards of the time with a population of 60,000 by 1520, which had rapidly expanded to 120,000 in 1582 and, by 1605, it was 200,000 [Briggs et al 2001: 21] – making it by far the largest urban settlement in England.

In part, this was due to low grain prices and so a relative absence of famine, the ongoing upheaval of the post-reformation era where government and authority became centralised in London [O'Connell 2000: 92], a general boom in England's population and the aggravating factor of enclosure, which led to both civil strife up to and including riots and civil disobedience in the English countryside [McDonagh 2013: 58] and the active eviction of tenant farmers by landlords, sometimes leading to the depopulation of entire villages [Everitt 1990: 171].

This rapid growth, then, represented both a surge in immigration from the rest of the country and precisely the transient and atomised environment where crime could flourish in a fashion not seen in the rest of England at the time [Briggs et al: 22]. One Italian visitor went so far as to say that England had more robbers and thieves than anywhere else [Cockburn 1977: 49], while social anxiety at the resulting increase in vagabondage and beggars [Carroll 1996: 21-22] and the ever lingering spectre of social disorder [Carroll: 34] that these marginalised men and women represented led to ever harsher attempts to regulate them. These measures included licensed beggary [Carroll: 42] and proscriptive approaches such as bridewells and limits on building, lest the increased accommodation encourage yet more people to move to the burgeoning city [Carroll: 21].

The transitory nature of this growing, chaotic population also made law enforcement a difficult matter. While the city lacked anything

¹ The use of a phrase culled from 18th Century bareknuckle boxing terminology at this point is quite deliberate on my part.

comparable to a police force [Briggs et al: 22], the comparatively well organised nature of criminal activity was certainly evident in the form of efficient fencing (of goods rather than of swords) and training of thieves' apprentices, as well as a disciplined approach to matters of turf and which network controlled which areas [Salgado 1995: 33]. By contrast, what passed for London's law officers may have had strict and even onerous laws to enforce, particularly those which targeted vagabonds and other undesirables, but the day-to-day enforcement of these strictures, both in the city and throughout the land was often uneven and even negligent. This was well known and even accepted, albeit grudgingly, at the time – the ineptitude of law enforcement being widely documented and commented upon, not least upon the stage [Salgado: 166].

Two aggravating factors here were both in the form, or rather, the source of physical violence. The first of these came in the form of discharged soldiers, a common problem at the time, as they found themselves unemployed and yet both inured to and trained in violence. As Gami Salgado noted:

Although the discharged soldier was a common enough figure on the medieval roads, his activities appear to have been more widespread and better organised in Tudor times. In 1589 for instance, soldiers returning from Drake's unsuccessful expedition against Portugal arrived in London just in time to create alarm and confusion during the festivities of Bartholomew Fair. Some of the city streets had to be closed off with iron railings and peace and order were not restored for six months. When we recall that soldiers on active service were badly paid [if they were paid at all] and discharged with only their weapons and their uniforms, we are unlikely to be surprised that so many of them turned to vagabondage or robbery with violence. They had the training, resources and opportunity to do little else.
[Salgado: 111]

The other aggravating factor came in the form of duelling, often to the death, not only among the nobility and gentlemen, but also among the population as a whole, due to the affordability of swords and what could best be termed as a duelling culture. The last example of Trial by Combat in England had only just taken place in 1571 [Morsberger 1974: 34] while duels over insults and, particularly, 'giving the lie' or accusing another of lying were commonplace [Peltonen 2003: 60]. The latter obliged the insulted to offer a challenge, which provided the more rash and bloodthirsty swordsmen with a ready supply of rivals to cross swords with [Morsberger: 53]. The causes of duels could verge on the comical – the author and parliamentarian Robert Ashley went so far as to say that turning down a duel on the grounds of mere illegality 'or the

rule of Conscience' was shameful [Peltonen: 77]. This frankly unhinged approach to resolving disputes even affected the authors and thespians of the day:

The martial dance [as a means of maintaining order between Reason and Passion] was a particularly fascinating notion to most of the great Elizabethan minds. Jonson, Raleigh, Sidney, Porter, and Wyatt were all at least as concerned with their status within the fighting community as within the literary community. Ben Jonson killed one of his actors in a rapier-and-dagger duel in 1593, Henry Porter was killed in a rapier fight in 1599. Christopher Marlowe was a notorious duellist, and died in 1593 in a Deptford tavern fight.
[Turner and Soper 1990: 53]

While common, this was not tolerated by the authorities. Marlowe was arrested for one fatal duel and only released after successfully arguing that the death resulted from self-defence [Morsberger: 68]. Jonson was branded for his slaying of Gabriel Spencer [Donaldson 2011: 232]. Complicating matters were the fencing manuals themselves: Saviolo assumed carrying a sword was an essential feature of rank and the display thereof [Peltonen: 62]. Silver, for his part, believed he was defending an English tradition of single combat as a means of obtaining knightly glory [Peltonen: 96]. Conversely, this violence predated them and not all fencing masters had the same attitude. In Giacomo Di Grassi's case, *His True Arte of Defence* instructed the reader to swear off violence (at least away from the battlefield) altogether:

Moreover, because this art is a principal member of the Militarie profession, which altogether [with learning] is the ornament of all the World, Therefore it ought not to be exercised in Braules and Fraies, as men commonlie practise in everie shire, but as honorable Knights, ought to reserve themselves, & exercise it for the advantage of their Cuntry, the honour of weomen, and conqueringe of Hostes and armies.
[Di Grassi 1994]

Nor was popular culture entirely enamoured of the duellists. Shakespeare's plays often satirised the practice and the practitioners, as demonstrated in blood-soaked tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, which not coincidentally alluded to fencing techniques very similar if not identical to those of Saviolo [Holmer 1994: 164-165], as well as comedies such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the duelling Dr. Caius and Parson Evans are both the butt of the joke and the means whereby duelling is portrayed as a social evil – a doctor and a priest ready to kill each other over farcical matters of pride [Morsberger: 48-49]. For his part, the Maldon preacher George Gifford and his 1594

Treatise on True Fortitude, which condemned duellists in spiritual terms, a rejection both of God's authority and that of one's divinely ordained monarch, was not unusual amongst religious figures who spoke out against the practice during and after this period [Clarke 1995: 289-290]. As Gifford says:

We are also as sure on the contrary part, that thys kinde of man-hoode, [if I may so call it] which uttereth it selfe in private quarrell, and bloody revenge, springeth from the lusts of man, as frō wrath, vaine-glory, and disdainefull pride... It plucketh the sworde out of the hande of the Prince, who is the minister of GOD to take vengeaunce uppon the evill doers... The fruites which it bringeth foorth, are quarrelling, rayling, horrible swearing, and cruell murders. This is the glory of their man-hoode.
[Gifford 1594]

We should not assume, either, that London was simply a series of street battles around which a city coincidentally coalesced. While the crime rate in London was high compared to nearby rural Essex where murder seldom occurred at all, alongside other violent offences only accounting for one in ten recorded crimes [Samaha 1974: 21], the vast majority of recorded offences in London pertained to crimes against property. In total, 93% pertained to this category, with violent crimes – while common – being dwarfed in comparison. Even if the means of recording crime were unreliable at the time, this gulf is still remarkable.

Meanwhile, if duels were an ongoing issue they had neither reached the relatively high levels as those that took place during James I's reign [Peltonen: 82], nor did they ever match the dreadful levels of death and maiming typified by the French experience at the time, where up to 8,000 men died at the point of a sword between 1598 and 1608 [van Orden 2005: 122]. This was not perhaps helped by French fencing instructors insisting on teaching their students with sharpened blades from the start, which reflected an even more violent aristocratic culture than that of late Elizabethan England [van Orden: 105].

Nor did the fear of crime itself particularly trouble Elizabethan Londoners, who seemed mostly inured to it by being in close proximity on a daily basis. It was taken as a given that some fairs were simply fronts for the sale of stolen goods [Salgado: 58] and many had experienced a stint in prison [Salgado: 165], regardless of their social status, with assault and debt as the usual causes for their imprisonment. Indeed, the duel simply fed into an existing context of homicide at the time. Murder or manslaughter had a particularly domestic tone to it, being often the result of impulsive acts of violence between family members, friends, employers and employees or acquaintances [Cockburn: 57].

Yet if violence did not frighten Elizabethan Londoners, it certainly fascinated them. Ballads and pamphlets dwelt ghoulishly on violent deaths and grotesque details, eclipsed in popularity only by a more literal folk devil in the form of witchcraft. The chap-books, in particular, were an early form of sensation journalism, often promptly written and published in the wake of notorious criminal cases [Langbein 2005: 46], and as we shall discuss later, the rhetoric of the pamphlets had another role to play in the development of fencing manuals. They also demonstrated a growing level of mass literacy and demand for reading matter amongst a burgeoning middle class of tradesmen, merchants and bankers that meant both Saviolo and Silver had an audience for their writing [Stevenson 2002: 55-56], which we will discuss in detail later on.

Blackfriars had its theatres and fencing schools, of course, but it also had bloodsports in the form of cockfighting and bear-baiting, with some bearpits converting easily into venues for drama and, indeed, being licensed for both [Ford 2006: 180]. Theatre, of course, was full of [staged] violence and sword-fighting, the latter carefully choreographed not only to demonstrate the actual skills of the actors but to appear as convincing as possible as the audience both knew what the reality looked like and could be expected to have an understanding of the techniques and terminology employed [Borden 2006: 137]. While staged duels, or rather, the plays they were part of, were popular, so too were prize fights, where swordsmen duelled before audiences in the form of sporting competition, which both influenced and often took place in the Early Modern London theatre.

It can be inferred then that there was an appetite for violence and so a corresponding demand for martial arts training. Elizabethan London had complex and even dysfunctional social dynamics which fed the readership for fencing manuals. This, in addition to London's being the focus of English literary and printing activity at the time [Sheavyn 1967: 127] ensured that *His Practise and Paradoxes of Defense* would not only be printed in London but would be written for and consumed by an audience based in that city and the surrounding counties of South East England. They are books written for a geographically specific readership in mind and, in part, this must be borne in mind when we consider not just their purpose but how their authors went about realising this. The first step, then, in contextualising these fencing manuals is to acknowledge they were products of a particular era in London's history; the next lies in the intentions of the authors themselves. In both cases, their aims were not simple instruction in swordplay, but rather, the articulation of a particular worldview.

'For whosoever will followe this profession must flie from rashnes, pride, and injurie'

SAVIOLO AND THE MELANCHOLY OF VIOLENCE

This is certainly the case with Saviolo. *His Practise* is, of course, primarily a means of instruction as demonstrated by its methodological structure and use of a dialogue between a student and a fencing master. The subtext, however, moves this beyond the prosaic as there is a strange melancholic quality to Saviolo's writing, as this example demonstrates:

Let us omit therefore as a speciall and extraordinairie cause, that sometimes God suffereth and permitteth the contrarie: and take this for an infallible rule and ground, that everie one renounceth and fosaketh that helpe which God hath appointed, as often as hee despiseth and contemneth this Arte, and that God hath given us wit and understanding to discern and know the good and the badde: which beeing so, it must needes followe, that if a man wilt not defend himselfe nor doo his best to obtaine victorie, he must be overcome although his quarrell and cause were most just and reasonable, because he will not use the meanes which God hath appointed, and therefore must blame himselfe only for his ill hap and successe. [Saviolo 1595]

For Saviolo, personal virtue alone is not enough to ensure success in this life; one must be willing and able to use violence in order to ensure one's survival and that of one's cause and values. In this sense, Saviolo betrays his Italian origins; contemporary thought there had long acknowledged a sort of pessimism where the best laid plans could be rent asunder by fate, and where violence could neither be prevented nor avoided. As Saviolo notes at one point, 'all things fall to decaye'.

We are reminded of Machiavelli's Fortuna metaphor, and his admonition to seize her roughly, but also his admission that no one can entirely escape the confines of their own natures [Roe 2002: 180]. The civic schools of Italian humanism, keen as they were to espouse a communal response to the vagaries of an uncertain world, also demonstrated a deep pessimism in regards to individual endeavour; as Felice Figliucci argued, man without society is reduced to a wild animal [Brann 2001: 222]. Saviolo's response to this is that the study of violence is therefore necessary, for where collective endeavour fails, individual violence prevails, but only as a last resort:

Therefore to conclude this matter, I woulde counsell and advise everie one, to give as small occasion of offence anie waie unto

anie as may be, and especially unto his friend, to whom hee is in anie sorte beholding: but when that hee is forced to laie hande on his weapon, to doe the best he can, as well in respect of his credite, as for to save his owne lyfe.

[Saviolo]

Here, violence is portrayed as a necessary evil, one where the student must learn sound principles but where the act of swordplay brings with it a deep lingering sadness. If unarmed combat at least allows the possibility of survival, if not avoiding injury, the very nature of a bladed weapon is to kill. While many duels were, at least in principle, based on the drawing of first blood, Saviolo does not spare his student or the reader the more likely reality of swordfighting. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Saviolo himself notes the absurdity behind some duels:

Whereof I hvae my selfe seene a notable example, passing through the Citie of Trieste, in the uttermost part of the territories of Friule in Italy, where I sawe two brethren, one a most honorable Captaine, and the other a brave and worthie souldier, who walking together in the streetes, were verie stedfastly eied of certaine young Gentlemen of the Citie, who stared the Captaine and his brother in the face something unsemely, and [as they tooke it] discourteouslie: wherupon they asked the Gentlement in verie curteous manner, whether they had seened them in anie place before, or whether they knew them. They answered no. Then replied the Captaine and his brother, Why then doo you looke so much upon us? They answered, because they had eies. That [said the other] is the crowes fault, in that they have not picked them out. To be short, in the end one word added on the other, and one speech following the other, the matter came from saying to doing: and what the tung had uttered the hand would maintaine...

[Saviolo]

Violence ensued, the Captain was wounded, his brother slain and the ringleader, 'misled by evill company', captured and beheaded, 'despite being very well beloved in the Cittie', the rest of his gang exiled. Saviolo uses this as a cautionary tale – all could have been avoided if the parties involved offered 'no occasion or opportunity for the effecting thereof'.

Nonetheless, he does not doubt the inevitability of such violence, regardless of the cause. Saviolo advises the reader to avoid provoking violence, but he provides no guarantee that it can be avoided altogether. One can't, after all, assume others adhere to the same standards of behaviour:

But if the injurie be such, that either murder be committed by trecherie, or rape, or such like villanies, then is it necessarye to procedde in revenging it...
[Saviolo]

In that sense, the main accusation levelled at Saviolo by his critics was true – he certainly advocated violence as a means of settling scores. Conversely, he also advises his readers to avoid all provocation, gives them grounds whereby a challenge can be refused and uses Christian imagery and theological arguments to support this argument. For Saviolo, violence was nuanced, and there was a clear demarcation between murder and justified violence, yet the latter considered revenge as valid a reason as self-defence to take up arms.

Again, this reflects a stoic fatalism underpinning *His Practise*; the reader is assumed to have a need to learn fencing method and the book certainly celebrates the technique and ensuing accomplishment that results from the mastery of such skills. Yet even during these moments of muted celebration, Saviolo reminds the reader of the seriousness of this study and its implications for life, limb and personal responsibility:

And therefore weighing and considering the greate daunger those men incurr that commit these things to the prooffe of the sword, Gentlemen ought to bee more slowe in fighting, except great occasion urge them, and unlesse they bee certaine to fight upon justice, so as they have great hope to obtaine Gods favour in it.
[Saviolo]

Given the mania for Italian influences (and swordfighting techniques) amongst English aristocrats [Kirby 2013: 15], alongside a less flattering view of them from the rest of the English and in popular culture [Kirby: 32-33], Saviolo's worldview must have seemed like an alien imposition for some. 'The Italianised Englishman is a devil incarnate' may have come from Italy itself, but it found currency amongst many Englishmen too, though they were more inclined to see a depraved nation collapsing in on itself through its foreign degeneracy than the sophisticated ideal some aristocrats saw [Clark 1983: 187-188]. Certainly, a vogue for the rapier and the Italians who taught it, including Saviolo himself, explains why he was able to publish *His Practise*, as one required a firm reputation as a teacher to do this in the first place [Turner and Soper 1990: 52]. Yet while his book was published in English, with possible assistance in its composition by his friend, the influential and well-connected translator and lexicographer John Florio [Yates 2010: 133-134], it still seems to be a foreign mindset expressed in English rather than a text written with the English in mind. In part, this is to be expected from an author who had probably only been in London for around eight years before he

wrote the book [Jared 2013: 16], and – as mentioned – the international and ever-shifting nature of London's population would certainly have made such texts inevitable [Briggs 2001 et al: 21]. Yet its very nature – the introduction and discussion of a particularly Italian worldview as well as Italian fencing methods – betrays its context. Saviolo's anecdotes are mainly Italian in nature; its culture and attitudes towards society and violence being very different from that of England.

What do we know of the author, however? Florio reveals he was ambidextrous and a surprisingly patient and forgiving character [Yates 2010: 133-134], useful traits for a teacher but also someone who had probably lived so long precisely because he knew when not to draw a sword. He was also a dancer, which presumably assisted his footwork, reflexes and coordination as a fencer. Also, given that it was as much a component of combat training amongst nobles as an essential courtly skill at the time [van Orden 2005: 92], this in turn suggests Saviolo's family was of high rank.

Florio also reveals that Saviolo was originally from Padua, itself significant as the city's university was an extremely popular destination for English scholars [Woolfson 1998: 46-48] – it may well have been a case of Saviolo recognising where a market for his skills existed. The fence instructor Rocco Bonetti had already succeeded in wooing English nobles with Italian fencing, and had opened a successful Blackfriars salle prior to his death in 1587 at the hands of the English fencer Austen Bagger [Turner and Soper 1990: 14-17], the same year Saviolo may have arrived in London.

Given his skills, Saviolo seems well-travelled and it is certainly possible that he took part in the 1570 war between the Republic of Venice, rulers of Padua, and the Ottoman Empire, as suggested by anecdotes featured in *His Practise*. This was a man who may well have witnessed violence both on and off the battlefield, and had an awareness of the cost to its participants.

It may also have been that he tired of his life in Italy – or at least life under the Venetians. The regular organised gang brawls for control over bridges in Venice, which were actively encouraged and participated in by the Republic's rulers [Davis 1994: 89], would see a ready stream of grave injuries, permanent maiming and deaths. In addition to sometimes involving tens of thousands of willing, violent participants, these *battagliole sui ponti* would involve weapons up to and including swords and pikes, as well as whatever implements tradesmen fighting squads would bring along. The bridge brawls would inspire similar side brawls between children or women (again, with similar festive glee and internal feuds within the two main Castellani and Nicolloti factions added even more violence to the situation. As a

Paduan, rather than a Venetian, Saviolo may simply have had his fill of such violence, and being ruled by such a republic may have been less desirable than England, with its Italophile nobles and scholars.

To Saviolo's eyes, London may well have seemed relatively sedate in comparison to life in Italy, still scarred by the Italian Wars and street violence of the kind he himself mentions. This too often reached absurd levels, up to and including duels over games of tennis and the works of Dante and Ariosto [Holland 2004: 61]. Certainly we can detect a sadness as well as resignation towards violence in *His Practise*, which contrasts with the delight Venice seemed to take in its institutionalised gang wars. The great irony here is that Saviolo may have been trying to leave behind the Italian violence he was accused of bringing with him to England.

With this in mind, what are we to make of *His Practise*? There is fatalism, vengefulness and tribalism here, but also moderation, kindness and compassion. Damning him with faint praise, Silver summarised Saviolo like so: 'For he professed arms, but in his life a better Christian' [Silver 1599]. In that sense, *His Practise*, while contradictory and perverse to modern eyes, nonetheless displays an earnest attempt to reconcile a need for violence with a sense of moral purpose and social responsibility.

'An Admonition To the Noble, Ancient, Victorious, Valiant and Most Brave Nation of Englishmen'

GEORGE SILVER AND EARLY MODERN POPULAR PATRIOTISM

George Silver had much to feel aggrieved at. As an exponent of the traditional backsword fighting of the English, he had seen his art and its practitioners slowly but relentlessly marginalised by their own nation.

The champions of this tradition had certainly hit upon hard times. From being instituted as *The Company of Maisters of the Science of Defence* by Henry VIII in 1540 to the time Silver wrote his treatise on these techniques, *Paradoxes on Defense*, instruction in English swordsmanship have been directly challenged and out-competed by Italian instructors. These newcomers had not only attracted the most prestigious students but charged far more in terms of tuition fees – Saviolo charged up to £100 a lesson [McElroy 1986: 197] – which deftly characterised their training as somehow more exotic and so more valid than the mundanities of the English methods.

This continues to the present time – many martial arts and weapons

have been sold to new audiences on a mix of the exotic and the potent, be it the Japanese *katana* or the ground fighting methods of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. This tendency to imbue the new with special powers or a certain mystique is not new – certainly it was something Silver and the Company of Maisters knew only too well in 1599. By 1580, most of the youths apprenticed to the Corporation were of a lower class background, while gentlemen and aristocrats increasingly favoured foreign masters or even studied abroad [Anglin 1984: 407]. The Company's monopoly had long since faded.

Worse indignities were to come. The 1572 Vagrancy Act listed unlicensed fencers as being on par with beggars, street performers, cony-catchers and other undesirables, risking imprisonment, fines and even flogging if they did not move on [Aydelotte 1967: 68]. For Silver, whose work certainly demonstrates a pride in the heritage of the art he loved, this must have seemed beyond the pale, and he placed the blame squarely on the 'Italian teachers of defence, by their false monstrations' [Silver] who had taken English swordfighting away from its rightful place in English society and left it, often quite literally, in the gutter.

To say that the English masters were in a difficult situation is an understatement. For them the only way they could demonstrate their superiority to the 'inferior' Italian methods lay in pressure tested duels. Silver and his peers reasoned that if they were to defeat an Italian fencing master, they could prove the validity of their skills and so justify their supremacy. This was a reasonable idea – credibility is key in all martial arts where the unskilled 'master' or out-and-out charlatan can be demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, to be inferior. Frustratingly, however, the Italian masters were having none of it. As Silver complains:

We caused to that effect, five or six score bills of challenge to be printed, and set up from Southwarke to the Tower, and from thence throughout London unto Westminster, we were at the place with all these weapons at the time appointed, within a bow shot of their fence school. Many gentlemen of good account, carried many of the bills of challenge unto them, telling them that now the Silvers were at the place appointed, with all their weapons, looking for them, and a multitude of people there to behold the fight, saying unto them, now come and go with us [you shall take no wrong] or else you are shamed for ever. Do the gentlemen what they could, these gallants would not come to the place of trial. [Silver]

Were Saviolo and his fellow Italians ducking a fight, however? It was certainly true that Saviolo refused to take up the English fencers on their challenges, not helped by him alternately describing them as

lacking ‘cunning’ or the inflammatory language he is said to have used during his argument with Bartholomew Bramble. Yet if we take into account Saviolo’s own views on violence as well as his own gracious behaviour to opponents such as Bramble, we can see a consistency in his approach. The Maisters didn’t want a violent street battle, despite one drunken altercation outside Saviolo’s school that could have escalated to bloodshed. They saw themselves as scholars and not brigands, after all, and any violence of this sort would have discredited them and their cause, and so they would not – *could not* – draw their swords in any other context. Bramble’s confrontation with Saviolo, for example, was primarily due to Bramble trying to persuade him to ‘play’ at his school. Saviolo, for his part, and as mentioned earlier, only advocated violence in cases of self-defence or the most extreme of provocations. His refusal to draw his sword in that sense was admirable, and betrayed a great deal of patience, but also little understanding for what the Maisters really wanted and needed – validation and treatment as peers. The tragedy for the Maisters was that their chances of proving their worth were latterly scuppered by a kind of pacifism. For other Italian masters, similar rules applied. Violence was something they wished to avoid for many reasons, and they had nothing to gain by crossing swords with those whose prestige depended on it. Once again, the English fencers found themselves at a disadvantage they could not surmount.

It is for this reason that the angry, resentful tone in *Paradoxes* cannot simply be dismissed as a bitter diatribe by one of history’s losers. Silver was unusual in that he felt a genuine sympathy towards other maisters, despite their low class origins, and also considered their marginalisation to be a disgrace. ‘I speak not against masters of defence indeed, they are to be honored, nor against the science, it is noble, and in my opinion to be preferred next to divinity’, as he says at one point. Silver the Gentleman had picked a side, and it was not the same as that of the aristocrats who had abandoned the backsword and the maxim that ‘English masters of defence, are profitable members in the commonwealth, if they teach with ancient English weapons of true defence’, as he put it.

With that in mind, *Paradoxes of Defense* should not be read simply as an instruction manual nor a diatribe, though certainly it has those features, but as a method for Silver to conduct his feud with the Italian masters through other means. Silver’s approach was threefold. Firstly, he had rank – as a gentleman, he could not be so easily dismissed as the lower class English swordsmen, and this also granted his writing authority. Secondly, Silver identified an existing civic patriotism in English national identity at the time and sought to ally his method of swordfighting with it. And thirdly, Silver’s style has strong parallels with the tone and preoccupations of a new form of popular writing, that of the pamphleteers.

In regards to Silver’s status, it is telling that there is little reference to his own training in his work. Descended from a Hertfordshire knight called Sir Bartholomew Silver in the reign of Edward II [Burke 1884: 927], Silver was prosperous enough to be involved in logging [Turner & Soper 1990: 79] and both George and his brother Toby took an active role in defending the old traditions of English swordsmanship by confronting Italian swordmasters, including Saviolo. Silver himself described his background like so: ‘having the perfect knowledge of all manner of weapons’ [Silver], but he provides no further details. This is not to say that Silver was illegitimate, any more than Saviolo, whose own swordfighting lineage remains unknown. Yet the important factor, as made clear on the frontispiece of *Paradoxes* is Silver’s rank of gentleman, as opposed to his status as a swordsman. This immediately contextualises the work; Silver’s social status is part of the treatise’s identity – one not only reads about English swordfighting here, but via a literate and well-educated English gentleman, key in situations where other maisters, and their students, were illiterate or too low down the social strata to make their voices heard.

Silver’s use of nationalism, meanwhile, tapped into an existing impulse that verged on the jingoistic:

And for as much as this noble and most mighty nation of Englishmen, of their good natures, are always most loving, very credulous, & ready to cherish & protect strangers, yet that through their good natures they never more by strangers or false teachers may be deceived, once again I most humbly to admonish them... [Silver]

Here Silver deftly invokes national pride while only criticising his intended audience in as gentle a fashion as possible. Notably, he cites English openness as the reason why ‘false teachers’ are able to enter society and spread their flawed methods. Such nimble flattery continues throughout the treatise. Austen Bagger is described as ‘carrying the valiant heart of an Englishman’ while, Silver argues, ‘there is no manner of teaching comparable to the old ancient teaching’ – and by ‘ancient’, one should read English, as is the case when he states that ‘truth is ancient though it seems an upstart’. Silver makes great use of this word – derived from the Latin word ‘ante’, or ‘before’. Silver’s association of it with Englishness serves two purposes. It seeks to demonstrate that Englishness itself is long established and so valid in and of itself [his references to Achilles, the Spartans and Ajax in the same breath are not coincidences], but that the swordfighting techniques he is defending are part of this heritage and so superior to the upstart methods of the Italians. Tellingly, while Silver alludes to classical mythology, he avoids allusions to Roman history because, of course, that would confer similar status upon his Italian rivals.

Silver was, of course, not alone in promoting Englishness at this point. Drama at the time was full of an English nationalism that was both protestant (but not excessively so) and legitimised by the weight of history [Ostovich, Syme and Griffin 2009: 15]. Writing only 11 years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Silver would surely have been aware of a prevailing fear of invasion, echoed again in theatre and popular culture as a whole, where fear of invasion is countered by a sense of national purpose and triumph [Munro 2009: 121]. This creation of a literary and dramatic Englishness, which took place on the later Elizabethan stage, came with what might be termed as a necessary xenophobia [Degenhardt and Abingdon 2011: 190]. It is no coincidence that this upsurge in national identity was particularly pronounced amongst Englishmen born in the 1550s and 1560s – including Silver himself [Cavanagh 2004: 72].

In this sense, it is not too much of a leap to read Silver's work in a similar light. Here, England, or rather its foolhardy 'gallants' led astray by fanciful notions of foreign swordfighting, are in peril. Yet the very traditions of Englishness can both withstand this and provide salvation. There was also an existing cultural uneasiness towards Italians alongside a passion for their culture in other quarters. From the great ambivalent Marlowe and his portrayal of Rome as a decadent maze of intrigue [Stapleton 2011: 40] to the often tart caricatures of decadent Italians, such as that of Robert Greene's Velvetbreeches, where even apparel becomes ensnared in this rigorous cultural brawl [Hentschell 2008: 120-125], Silver was simply echoing an already established view amongst many English.

This is not to say that everyone in England was a rampant xenophobe, especially in London. The disquiet towards foreign influences often co-existed (and indeed still does) with a pragmatic open-mindedness and, if not an absolute mania for the foreign, certainly a curiosity and willingness to engage [Howard 2009: 9-10]. As with all the other polemicists, Silver's real issue was Englishness itself and how it could be influenced, protected or, indeed, threatened.

Yet who was it that Silver was addressing in *Paradoxes*? Beyond the dedication to the Earl of Essex, Silver must have had a particular audience in mind. While the challenges Silver and his brother, Toby, issued to the Italians – up to and including a fight on top of a scaffold – were rebuffed [Stern 2009: 49], Silver still felt he could win the argument through his writing. Who he was attempting to influence, however, is key to understanding the real purpose of the text. One clue lies in a comparison between the following passages:

Alas, our Englishmen are the plainest dealing soules that ever God put life in: they are greedie of newes, and love to be fed in their humors and heare themselves flattered the best that may be.

[Nash 1594]

Remember Gentlemen, your lives are like so many lighted Tapers, that are with care delivered to all of you to maintain: these with wind-puffed wrath may be extinguished, which drunkenness put out, which negligence let fall: for man's time is not of itself to short, but it is more shortened by sin.

[Greene 1592]

Yea, who neglecting the holy and sure wisdome of God in his word, wherein are the onely honorable enstructions for polytyques, and honestest rules of governing our houses and owne person, do beate their braines in other bookes of wicked vile Atheistes and sette before them the example of Turkish and Italian practises, wherby the Lorde many times thrustes theyr hands into the neste of waspes and hornets while they seek the hony of the swete bee.

[Stubbs 1579]

These passages, by Elizabethan pamphleteers Thomas Nash, Robert Greene and John Stubbs respectively, all follow the same tone and rhetoric, as well as moralising and sense of a vulnerable yet pronounced Englishness that both needed to be celebrated and defended. (Not coincidentally, Greene's cautionary tale is set in the decadent environs of Italy.) If we refer back to Silver, we can see these similarities for ourselves:

To prove this, I have set forth these my Paradoxes, different I confesse from the maine current of our outlandish teachers, but agreeing I am well assured to the truth, and tending as I hope to the honor of our English nation. The reason which moved me to adventure so great a taske, is the desire I have to bring the truth to light, which hath long time lyen hidden in the cave of contempt, while we like degenerate sonnes, have forsaken our forefathers vertues with their weapons, and have lusted like men sicke of a strange ague, after the strange vices and devises of Italian, French and Spanish Fencers, litle remembring, that these Apish toys could not free Rome from Brennius sacke, nor Fraunce from King Henrie the fifth his conquest.

[Silver]

If we assume that Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* is a polemic, it certainly takes after the predominant polemic format of its time, the Elizabethan pamphlet. Silver's work matches the overwrought, dramatic and indeed sensationalist tone of the pamphlets, providing an uncanny preview of the lurid, alarmist and swaggeringly vulgar nationalism of the modern British press.

Yet why would Silver elect to make his arguments via the pamphleteers' style? As mentioned earlier the period saw the rise of a relatively literate middle class, and much printed material of this time was published with that audience in mind. While this meant content such as religious material or romances were popular, so too were moral tracts and instructional works [Clark 1983: 23].

While pamphleteering was popular, it was also poorly esteemed and even hazardous – as Greene and Stubbs each found out to their cost – but such considerations would have meant little to Silver, whose beloved English fencing had already hit rock bottom. Instead, a pamphleteer's tone offered access to a new audience who were more xenophobic and conservative than the upper classes, and so, it was reasonable to assume, more open to Silver's impassioned defence of fence. The Elizabethan pamphlet's puritanical tendencies went well with Silver's sermonising tone, and its satirical elements meant that Silver could also vent his frustrations at the Italians and their followers. The genre's general tone of threatened ruin and admonitions to an unwary England also sat well with Silver's agenda. His objective, then, was simple and direct. Having been denied the favour of high society, and limited to an audience on the edge of the underclass, his objective was the new English middle class itself. *Paradoxes of Defence* was his attempt to colonise the imagination of yeoman and craftsman alike.

Was it successful? In many ways, Silver had already lost. The reign of James I saw the importation of French fencing masters to instruct the Stuart princes [Turner & Soper 1990: 19], a state of affairs that would ironically have provoked both a proud Italian like Saviolo and a stalwart Englishman like Silver in equal measure. A brief reinstatement of the Company's official status in 1605 was precisely that [Shephard 2015: 426]. The sword-fighting techniques of the early Stuart period and so the 17th Century saw the continuing popularity of the rapier amongst civilians, now competing alongside the English broadsword, mortuary sword and other cut and thrust blades on the battlefield [Clements 2015].

Silver did outlive Saviolo, who had died sometime before *Paradoxes* was published, but this was his only victory. Part of his dilemma lay in the fact that he wrote and published his book in London; precisely the place

where new ideas would arrive and take root and new arrivals could easily become part of its fabric. Silver's passionate conservatism was railing against the very nature of the city itself – Saviolo was neither the first nor the last foreigner to die a Londoner. Silver, for his part, took up his sword and pen to preserve a still-extant tradition that was under threat not merely from foreign influences but the relentless progress of history itself.

CONCLUSIONS

It must not be forgotten at this point that the primary goals of these manuals was to provide instruction in swordfighting. For Saviolo, this was through the conceit of the classical dialogue; for Silver it was primarily in the form of critique and a defence of tradition. Nonetheless, we cannot disregard the fact that both texts were also part of an overall worldview their authors had attempted to articulate. This has implications for further research into the field. In this article, I have examined the two manuals chosen through a multi-contextual prism, in so doing, bringing these texts to a deeper level of study and critique. Similar studies for other manuals from this time, as well as before and after it, may yield similar insights. Such a process has not been exhaustive, nor should it be. How might a Marxist reading of His Practise or *Paradoxes of Defence* unfold? The near absence of women in Silver's work – apart from 'a pretty wench' who 'ran with outcry into the street: "Help! Help! The Italians are like to be slain"' [Silver] – may well be of interest to feminist historians, just as Saviolo's depiction of 'the valour and vertue of women' is also worthy of debate.

For re-enactors and contemporary students of Historical European Martial Arts this study also raises questions. How does a broader understanding of the context of these manuals affect how they are interpreted? Does such a study enable practitioners to delve deeper, or is contemporary practise unaffected? Greater collaborations between practitioners and academics may allow deeper insights for all concerned, as demonstrated by the recent Bronze Age Combat: An experimental approach project hosted by Newcastle University [Dolfini 2013]. In any case, as historical martial arts increase in popularity, so further study of it across the disciplines should be encouraged.

Finally, we have Silver and Saviolo themselves – here we have fully realised ideologies and an overlooked debate on ethics and values in the early modern period. Surely then an argument should be made for their texts to be seen not merely as instruction, but as rich and intriguing humanist works in their own right.

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