

*An Analyzation of George Silver's
Paradoxes of Defense*

Comparing the Theories of George Silver with
Those of Vincentio Saviolo and Giacomo di
Grassi

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George Silver-The Man

- Published his *Paradoxes of Defense* in 1599 in London
- His broad, sweeping arguments against Italian rapier set him apart from most of his contemporaries
- However, theories at their heart are not that different from those of his Italian contemporaries.
 - Often times we find that his theories on fighting are rather similar to those of his personal arch nemesis, Vincentio Saviolo.
 - His theories are also often very similar to those of Giacomo di Grassi, another Italian who was teaching in Venice in the 1570's and whose manual was translated into English and published in London in 1594.
- However, these men (Di Grassi, Saviolo, and Silver) do differ greatly in fighting styles and their theories begin to differ as we move away from fighting basics such as timing and measure and move more into the stylistic aspects of fights such as whether the cut or the thrust is a more favorable attack.

George Silver's Paradoxes of Defense

- Silver wrote his paradoxes not only to prove that the English broad sword held a distinct advantage over the Italian rapier, he also intended his *Paradoxes* to be a warning to Englishmen to beware of the "false" Italian teachers and to stay away from them (Jackson, p. 489).
 - "Fencing...in this new fangled age, is like our fashions, everie daye a change, resembling the Camellion, whoaltereth himselfe into all colours save white. So fencing changeth into all wards save the right." (Jackson, p. 491)
- He implores his fellow countrymen to return to the weapons of their ancestors who were wise enough to know the true weapons from the false and to defend their country with them. (Jackson, p. 493)
- Silver felt that not only had men been allowed to come to his country from another country to teach a fighting form that he felt was so grossly flawed as to put his fellow Englishmen in danger, but they had been praised for it. They had not been tested to judge whether or not they were as proficient as they claim yet they had been welcomed with open arms by his trusting countrymen.
- He feared that the teachings of the Italians gave their students a false sense of confidence and did not prepare them for a true fight and could eventually cost them their lives.

*“There are foure especiall markes to know the Italian fight is imperfect.
& that the Italian teacher’s and setters fourth of books of Defense,
never had the perfection of the true fight”. (Jackson, p. 501)*

1. In their own country they never fight unarmed, but generally wear mail shirts to protect their bodies and a pair of gauntlets to protect their hands.
2. Neither they nor their students are able to fight or practice without generally being hurt or killed.
3. The Italian masters never define any specific weapon lengths.
4. The cross of their rapiers are imperfect and not able to properly defend the hands when a fighter is fighting in the “guardant fight” which he feels is an utterly necessary part of the true fight.

(Jackson, p. 503)

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2. *Neither they nor their students are able to fight or practice without generally being hurt or killed. . .*

Two fencers wearing padded leather doublets and Venetian breeches. Note that their blades have been bated with corks covered with cloth. c1611 (Arnold, p.25)



- most men are wearing some form of protection when fighting
 - swordplay is being taught with live steel. Student's blades were generally "bated" or tipped with an object, often times a cork or something similar, to keep the point from entering uninhibited into an opponents body during practice, but it was still a long way from the practice foil or epee blade of the modern era and they were not always necessarily bated. (Arnold, p.25)
 - examples of fencing jackets from period that are slightly padded to help protect the body. (Arnold, p.25-26, 82-83)
 - Saviolo himself recommends wearing a mail glove to protect the hand from sword blades during parrying. (Jackson, p.228)
- Considering that at the time fighters are practicing with real blades designed to kill it would only seem sensible to wear armor or some kind of protection during practice
- It would be surprising indeed if anyone, including the London Masters themselves, was not wearing protection and even more surprising if those not wearing protective equipment never received an injury.

3. *The Italian masters never define any specific weapon lengths*

- Silver himself goes into great detail explaining to his readers the perfect lengths of many weapons commonly being used in England at that time, most of which are determined by the size and stature of the man wielding them.
 - To determine the perfect length of a man's sword he recommends standing with your sword and dagger drawn. You should then draw your sword arm back as far as you comfortably can and the perfect length is the length that you can draw just inside your dagger. (Jackson, p. 525-528)
 - In later paradoxes ("Of evill orders or customes in our English Fence-schooles...") he uses specific measurements (yards, and inches) to define blade length, which we will see later.
- Saviolo does not specify blade length in this Practice
- Di Grassi only specifies that the sword should be "of reasonable length".
 - Di Grassi does give some detail on dagger length though, saying it should be short enough to draw from its scabbard quickly, yet still sizable enough to defend against sword blows (Jackson, p. 61)

4. *The cross of their rapiers are imperfect and not able to properly defend the hands when a fighter is fighting in the “guardant fight” which he feels is an utterly necessary part of the true fight.*

- To get a detailed description of the guardant fight, we must look to his *Bref Instructions*.
 - two types of guardant fight, true guardant and bastard guardant.
 - “The prfyt [true guardant] is to carry yo r hand & hylt aboue yo r hed w t yo r poynt doune to wards yo r left knee, w t yo r fword blade fomewhat neer yor bodye, not bearing out your poynt, but rather declynyng in a lyttle towards yo r faid knee, y t yo r enemye crofe not yo r poynt & fo hurt you,...” (Jackson, p.587) “[B]aftard gardant...is to Carrye yo r hand & hylt below yoe hed, breft hye or loer w t yo r poynt down ward towarde yo r left foote, this...is not to be vfed in fyght, ecept it be to Croffe yor enemyes Ward at his comynge in to take the grype of him...’ (Jackson, p.588).
 - True Guardant is farmed similarly to Di Grassi’s High Ward and that Bastard Guardant is framed similarly to Di Grassi’s Broad Ward except that the tip of the sword is tuned slightly downward toward your left toe.

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- Di Grassi's High Ward



- Di Grassi's Broad Ward

4. *The cross of their rapiers are imperfect and not able to properly defend the hands when a fighter is fighting in the "guardant fight" which he feels is an utterly necessary part of the true fight.*

- In these positions the hand is vulnerable from the side with thrusts and cuts and from beneath with a thrust.
 - To better understand Silver's argument, we must examine weapons of the time period.
 - It would seem here that when Silver is discussing the hilts of rapiers he is referring to a style of hilt that was very simple with no knuckle bow, and no crossbar.
 - It probably had a side ring and possibly some protection such as a plate across the top of the hilt to protect the hand from thrusting attacks.
 - This guard is a much simpler style than those favored by the broad swordsmen, who generally preferred a hilt with a knuckle bow and cross bars to protect the hand from cuts
 - However, it would have offered very little if any protection from a cut, which the heavier hilts favored by Silver would have provided.
 - What it did offer was a lighter guard, which was not weighted down with features that protected against cutting attacks which the rapier play it was designed for did not incorporate as much of.

(Norman, p.26)

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- Here we find some of Silver's arguments to be partially valid and some seemingly unfounded.
 - His arguments about the use of armor and the dangers of getting injured seem unfounded. Most likely everyone practicing the Arte of Defense during the time period was wearing some form of protection as it was dangerous and it was only a matter of time before a student received some sort of injury.
 - He is correct that it does not appear that the Italian master's defined sword length however the relevance of sword length to the True Arte is arguable.
 - His arguments against the guards are seemingly correct in that the guards I appears are favored for rapier combat would not provide a great deal of protection from a cutting attack in the "guardant fight". However, cuts were not being used as heavily by the rapier fighters of the time period.

Of six chiefe causes, that many valiant men thinking themselves by their practises to be skillful in their weapons, are yet manie times in their fights sore hurt, and manie times slain by men of small skill or none at all. (Jackson, p.503)

1. They lack the four governors.
2. They do not understand or observe the four actions.
3. They do not understand the four times.
4. They do not understand how to fight with or against the variable fight.
5. Their weapons are too long and they can not uncross them quickly enough.
6. Their weapons are also too heavy to both defend and strike in due time.

1. *They lack the four governors.*

- Silver assumes that like good English men we know what the four governors are, so he does not go into detail about them in his *Paradoxes*, but in his *Bref Instructions* he does go into detail about them.
 - The first governor is judgment so that you know when your opponent is in range of your blade and vice versa.
 - The second is measure so that you can better understand movement and range.
 - The third and fourth governors are included together and cover coming in for an attack. Just as you are prepared to come in to attack, you must also be prepared to step out or back if your opponent does the same to you. (Jackson, p.583)
- Saviolo does not talk about “the four governors” by that name, but he does stress judgment, timing, and “readiness”. And he teaches measure through the drills, which make up his *Practice*.

2. *They do not understand or observe the four actions.*

- The four actions, according to Silver, are bent, spent, lying spent, and drawing back. Silver does not address these actions other than to say that every fighter, either skilled or unskilled, uses these actions when they fight and if they are properly observed that they will keep a fighter safe. (Jackson, p.503) Without further details on what these actions really are we can not compare Silver's theory on the subject with any other contemporary theories of the time.

3. *They do not understand the four times.*

- Unfortunately Silver goes into even less detail about the four times. He does not even tell us what the four times are either in his *Paradoxes* or his *Bref Instructions*.

4. *They do not understand how to fight with or against the variable fight.*

- In his *Bref Instructions*, Silver says that the variable fight refers to all types of fighting other than the 4 general fights (open, guardant, bastard guardant, and close) of which the most important are the Stoccata, the Imbroccata, the Mountanata, and the Passata. (Jackson, p.587-589)
 - Note that all four of these are Italian terms and Saviolo himself specifically refers to and teaches the Stoccata, Imbroccata, and the Passata and interestingly enough Saviolo's descriptions and definitions are very similar to those used by Silver. (Jackson, p.213-214, 246)

5. *Their weapons are too long and they can not uncross them quickly enough.*

&

6. *Their weapons are also too heavy to both defend and strike in due time.*

- With the broad sword style, fighters generally favor the cut and parry their opponent's cuts by forming the "true cross", which is formed by meeting their opponent's cut in the middle of his blade with a strike of their own so that both swords cross directly in the middle forming right angles with each other.
- With the rapier style, fighters generally favor the thrust over the cut and thus do not need to form the "true cross" to parry.
 - They rely on body voids, off hand parrying, and smaller sword parries.
- A shorted sword is needed for the broad sword style because a long sword would be awkward to move and cut with as well as to recover from a cross to block another attack. But if you are not fighting in that style and relying more on thrusts, you can lengthen the sword without sacrificing movement and recoverability.
- Also, while it is true that with the rapier a fighter would be unable to defend with a "true cross" and still recover in time to attack or defend from a second attack, that is not the style of fighting being practiced with the rapier. A fighter would have plenty of time to parry with an offhand weapon, make a smaller sword parry, or defend with a body void and still recover to make his own attack or defend another attack.

Of six chiefe causes, that many valiant men thinking themselves by their practises to be skillful in their weapons, are yet manie times in their fights sore hurt, and manie times slain by men of small skill or none at all. (Jackson, p.503)

- It is with closer examination of this paradox that we begin to see that Silver's theories, at their heart, are not very different at all from those of Saviolo and Di Grassi.
 - Range, measure, know when to come in to attack and when to retreat out of range
 - The Variable Fight (refers to all types of fighting other than the 4 general fights (open, guardant, bastard guardant, and close) of which the most important are the Stoccata, the Imbroccata, the Mountanata, and the Passata.) (Jackson, p.587-589)
- We begin to see differences arise in Silver's arguments that the rapier is too long to uncross quickly and to heavy to both defend and attack in due time.
- Unfortunately we do not have enough details about the four actions or the four times to properly compare those theories.

That the cause that manie are so often slaine, and manie sore hurt in fight with long Rapiers is not by reason of their dangerous thrusts, nor cunningnesse of that Italianated fight, but in the length and unweildineses thereof. (Jackson, p.507)

- Swordplay of any type in period was dangerous. Men practiced with live steel and little body protection. However, it is Silver's belief that more men are killed with rapiers than with short swords has nothing to do with the very real danger of period sword play or even that more men may have died because rapier play was more popular, but because of the rapier's length.
 - The rapier was generally longer than the broadsword favored by Silver. According to Silver, the added length made it nearly impossible to get recover from crosses or to avoid attacks with the dagger.
 - Silver is right in that the length of the rapier does make it very difficult to make or recover from a "true cross", but it does not appear that rapier men were making the cross to parry.
 - Rather, if we look at Saviolo and Di Grassi, they are relying more on body voids and off-hand parries.
 - They are still using the weapon to parry but they make no reference to the "true cross" or to any other parry that fits the description. (Jackson, p.43-46, 222-226)
 - However, Di Grassi, who is teaching 20-25 years earlier and a style similar to that of Marozzo and closer to the older broad sword style, (Castle, p.49) relies more on sword parries in his fighting than does Saviolo.

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- Let's remove weapon popularity from the mix. If more men did die due to the rapier, this statistic probably has more to do with the nature of the wound inflicted by the rapier than the weapon's length.
 - Since the rapier is a thrusting weapon, it makes a small wound on the surface, but the point thrusts deep into the tissues of the body.
 - Once a wound was made to the interior of the body there was not much that contemporary medicine could do. These types of wounds are notoriously difficult to clean properly and taking into consideration hygiene of the period, infection was almost a certainty, especially if the wound was to the abdomen where the organs of the gut contain abundant bacteria, which aid the body in digestion.
 - When these organs are injured the bacteria are free to enter the abdominal cavity where infection quickly spreads. With no antibiotics there was a lot that could be done for an injured fighter suffering from infection. If the body could not fend off infection on its own, the fighter was as good as dead.

*Of running and standing fast in rapier fight, the runner hath
the advantage. (Jackson, p.508)*

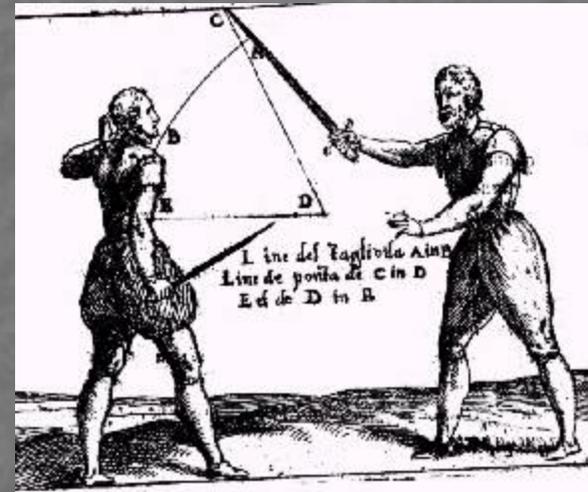
- Silver argues that the runner has the advantage because his motion makes him a less certain target than his opponent who maintains his stance. (Jackson, p.508)
- Saviolo would disagree and seems to believe that the man standing still has the advantage.
 - He cautions his students that if they find themselves in a situation where their opponent is running at them that they should maintain their ward. When he is close enough, they should thrust at their opponent. Since he is running he is neither in ward nor standing solidly and the harder he is running at you, the harder he will run up onto your sword. (Jackson, p.267)
- Di Grassi does not take a stance on this particular subject, but we can infer from his theories about stance that he most likely would have sided with Saviolo. He states “[a fighter] must have great care to make his pace, & move his hand at one time together: And above all, not to skip or leape, but to keep one foot always firme and stedfat...” (Jackson, p.33).
- If a fighter is running during a fight, he is generally not carefully considering his footwork. While it is possible to execute a carefully constructed running attack, it generally takes a great deal of experience and skill. Also if a fighter is running, while he would have to have at least one foot on the ground to maintain movement and keep from falling down, he is not standing firm or steadfast with that foot.

*George Silver his resolution upon that hidden or doubtfull question,
who hath the advantage of the Offender or Defender. (Jackson,
p.510)*

- At the time there were two thoughts on this particular subject. One was that the person who attacked first had the advantage and the other was that the person who defended had the advantage.
- Silver himself does not agree with either saying that if the fighter who attacks first has the advantage, then what is the point of parrying. Similarly if the advantage lies in defending than why should a fighter risk his life to attack. Silver holds that there is no absolute advantage in either attacking or defending. Rather he maintains than the advantage lies in having true pace, time, and space in the fight whether he is attacking or defending. (Jackson, p.510)
- Saviolo also seems to hold to the opinion that neither has any distinct advantage over the other.
 - He maintains that a fighter should stay in guard until he has gained an advantage over his opponent, through body positioning, etc. and at that point only should he attack whether that means attacking first or not.
 - However, there are times when he maintains that it is more advantageous to maintain your guard rather than to attack. (ex. when a fighter finds themselves being charged by an opponent)

Perfect fight standeth upon both blow and thrust, therefore the thrust is not onely to be used. (Jackson, p.517)

- Silver maintains that both the thrust and cut are crucial to fighting and that one is not necessarily better than the other. Often in fighting you will find yourself in a position that a thrust should be used to attack because it is faster and more likely to hit from your current position. Similarly, you will also find yourself in positions where a cut should be used to attack because the cut is faster from your current position. (Jackson, p.517-518)
- If we compare this with Saviolo's teachings we will find that Saviolo relies more on thrusts although he does occasionally mention cuts. The stoccata and imbroccata, two attacks most often used in his drills) are thrusting attacks. However he does use some cutting attacks, though more sparingly. The mandritta and the riversa are both cutting attacks.
- Di Grassi also says that the thrust is to be preferred over the cut, but that there are times when the cut is a better choice of attack. For instance, if a fighter has missed a thrust to their opponents head, etc. and finds themselves in a position with their tip over their opponents head, it would be faster, requiring only one movement, and a better choice to make a cut down into you opponents body rather than drawing you weapon back and thrusting which would require two movements. (Jackson, p.42)



One Movement: A-B (Edge blow)

Two Movements: C-D & D-E
(Thrust)

Of evill orders or customes in our English Fence-schools, & of the old or ancient teaching of weapons, & things very necessarie to be continued for the avoiding of errors, and reviving, and continuance of our ancient weapons, and most victorious fight againe. (Jackson, p.521)

- According to him, teachers are forbidding students from using a thrust when fighting with broad swords and from using a blow when fighting with rapiers. He continues to maintain that both attacks are necessary to the "true fight" regardless of what type of weapon you are fighting with. He feels that students should be exposed to everything they might possibly see because not exposing them puts them at a disadvantage in real world fighting.
 - Scholars should still be taught according to the old ways: first they should learn "their quarters, then their closes and gripes, striking with the hilts, daggers, bucklers, wrastlings, striking with the foote or knee in the Coddess, and all these are safely defended in learning perfectly of the gripes." (Jackson, p.523)
- He further specifies that students should be taught with weapons of the correct length. Students of average height should use a weapon that is 1 yard and 1 inch and tall students many use a weapon of 1 yard and 3 or 4 inches, but nothing longer. He says that the rapier should still be taught in the schools to anyone that wants to learn as long as those students are also taught with the broadsword as well. (Jackson, p.521-524)

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- Silver makes a strong argument for a complete education. Students should be exposed to all manner of tricks and techniques, especially if a future opponent might use them. Other teachers are passing on these techniques. For example, Di Grassi teaches a technique called the mustachio, in which a fighter using a buckler that has a "sharp point" or blade in the center executes an attack to their opponent's face with their buckler. (Jackson, 84, 88)
- Saviolo is also a proponent of a complete education. While he does prefer the thrust and feels that it is a superior attack to the cut, he still teaches cutting attacks. Not only will his students be faced with them when they find themselves against another Master's students, there are also times when a cut maybe a better choice of attack.
- Di Grassi also believes in a complete education.
 - Not only does he teach both cuts and thrust, he chooses to organize his manual based on which weapons are the least complex and which weapons a fighter is most likely to have available to him and the skill to use. (Jackson, p.56) He also instructs his students on both parrying with the weapon and body voiding, (Jackson, p.43)
 - Di Grassi also takes into consideration that there are both "deceitful" and "violent" aspects of the Art of Defense. Although he does not consider them to be aspects of the "True Art" he addresses them in his treatise on "deceits and falsings of blows and thrusts". Here is where he addresses the tricks and feints that fighters can incorporated into the repertoire and use against the other fighters such as disarming your opponent by hooking your fingers under the lip of their guard and pulling it out of their hands as they withdraw back from and attack. (Jackson, p.145-176)

Conclusions

- Silver, an avid proponent of the old broad sword style, is often viewed as the great enemy of Elizabethan rapier, a view he himself seems to encourage with sweeping arguments against the new Italian style, and a spokesman for the old ways. However, often times we see very specific similarities between his theories and those of his contemporaries and predecessors.
 - Ex. His views on the benefits of the cut and proper blade length conflict with those of the Italians but his views on timing and distance are remarkably similar.
 - Ex. His views on teaching students are very similar to those of the Italians, the same men he calls "False Teachers".
- However, their views generally tend to diverge as we look at theories that are affected by the differences in fighting style.
 - Ex. Views on blade length and the usefulness of the cut are influenced by the fighting forms of the respective teachers
 - Silver favors a shorter sword because it is easier to move in and out of cutting attacks.
 - Saviolo and Di Grassi favor a longer sword because they are not relying as much on cutting attacks in their fighting. Since they rely more on thrusts in their fighting they can afford to lengthen the sword without worrying that the sword will be too unwieldy to make the true cross.
- In the end, these men and their theories on fencing are not nearly as different as Silver would probably have liked to believe.

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Questions?