

An Analization of George Silver's Paradoxes of Defense

Comparing the Theories of George Silver with Those of Vincentio Saviolo and Giacomo di Grassi in Order to Gain a Better Understanding of the Man behind the Myth

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George Silver is one of the most infamous names in fencing. Publishing his *Paradoxes* in 1599 in London where he taught, his broad, sweeping arguments against Italian rapier have set him apart from most of his contemporaries. Interestingly enough however, Silver's 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. Although Di Grassi is not as much of a contemporary of Silver's as Saviolo, his ideas were still available to Englishmen during the same decade that Silver's *Paradoxes* were published. However, these three men do differ in their 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.

To examine Silver's arguments and compare the theories he outlines within them to those of other masters of the Art of Defense we must delve into his *Paradoxes*. We should also take a moment to examine the motives behind Silver's arguments before we take a closer look at his *Paradoxes*. In his own words 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 them¹. "Fencing...in this new fangled age, is like our fashions, everie daye a change, resembling the Camelion, whoaltereth himselfe into all colours save white. So fencing changeth into all wards save the right."² He further goes on to implore 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.³ 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

¹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) Dedicatory

² Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) Dedicatory

³ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) Dedicatory.

with open arms by his trusting countrymen. This is probably the biggest motivation for Silver's arguments. He did not trust the new foreign teachers and 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. The Italians also competed with the native English teachers for students. Thus, claiming to be a voice of reason striving only to bring wayward Englishmen back to the true fight⁴ Silver set off to outline and argue his theories on fighting in his *Paradoxes of Defense*. Therefore we will examine a sampling of his *Paradoxes* and compare his theories and arguments with those of Saviolo and Di Grassi.

“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”.⁵

Silver begins his treatise by stating four simple ways to tell that the Italians were not fighting the **true fight**. His first reason is that 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. He goes on to state that neither they nor their students are able to fight or practice without generally being hurt or killed. Third, the Italian masters never define any specific weapon lengths. Finally, he offers into evidence that 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.⁶

It would stand to reason at the time that most men are wearing some form of protection when fighting. At this point in time 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.⁷ We also have examples of fencing jackets from period that are slightly padded to help protect the body.⁸ Saviolo himself recommends wearing a mail glove to protect the hand from sword blades during parrying.⁹ Considering that no one at the time is practicing or fighting at all with anything other than a real blade 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.

⁴ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) Dedicatory.

⁵ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.3

⁶ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.5

⁷ Arnold p.25

⁸ Arnold p.25-26, 82-83

⁹ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) p.16-17

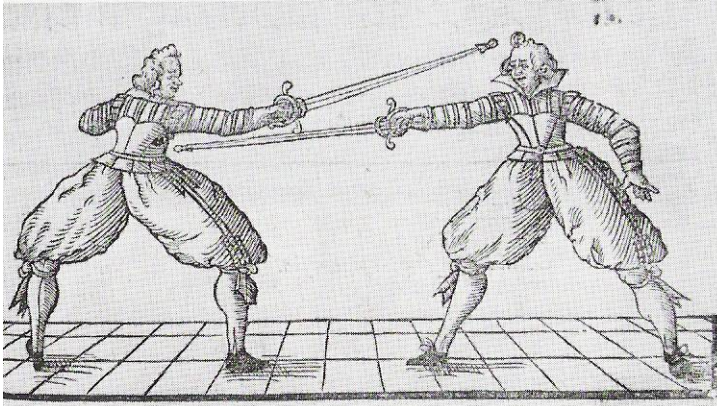


Fig. 1: Two fencers wearing padded leather doublets and Venetian breeches. Note that their blades have been bated with corks covered with cloth. c1611¹⁰

Silver also argues that the Italian fight is false because they do not define the length of their swords. 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.¹¹ Saviolo does not specify blade length in this *Practice* and 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.¹²

Finally, he argues that the hilts of their rapiers do not offer proper protection for the hand when using the "**Guardant Fight**, without which all fights are imperfect"¹³. Silver does not explain **Guardant Fight** in his *Paradoxes*. To get a detailed description, we must look to his *Bref Instructions*. Here he goes into detail explaining the four fights that he discusses in his earlier book. He explains that there are two types of **Guardant Fight: True Guardant**, which can be **Perfect** or **Imperfect**, and **Bastard Guardant**. The **Perfect Guardant** is framed by carrying your hand and sword above your head, but with the tip pointed down towards your left knee.¹⁴ You should hold your weapon so that the point is not too high or too low. If the point is too high your opponent could come in under your guard and if it is too low then they could force your blade against you, preventing you from warding with it. If you hold your sword in this position, with the point held too high or if you stand with your sword held correctly but your torso or head

¹⁰ Arnold p.25

¹¹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*. ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.27-30

¹² Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*. ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The offence of the High warde at Rapier and Dagger

¹³ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*. ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.3

¹⁴ Silver, George. *Bref Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*. ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.87

leaning forward, then it is known as the **Imperfect Guardant Fight**¹⁵. These imperfect positions put the body in danger of being attacked and place the sword in such a position to the body that it is difficult to defend against your opponent. The **Bastard Guardant** is framed so that you stand with your hand and sword held below your head, but at chest level, and your tip is pointed towards your left foot. *From his description we can surmise that **Perfect True Guardant** is framed 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. With the sword being held in these positions the hand is vulnerable from the side with thrusts and cuts and from beneath with a thrust. Here 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, and would have been lighter and quicker. 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.*¹⁶



Fig 2: Di Grassi's High Ward¹⁷



Fig 3: Di Grassi's Broad Ward¹⁸

¹⁵ Silver, George. *Bref Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.87

¹⁶ Norman p.26

¹⁷ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Di Adoprar si Curamente L'Arme Si Da Offesa, Come Da Difesa...Di Giacomo di Grassi.* <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~wew/fencing/manuals.html> (1570) p.18

¹⁸ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Di Adoprar si Curamente L'Arme Si Da Offesa, Come Da Difesa...Di Giacomo di Grassi.* <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~wew/fencing/manuals.html> (1570) p.19

*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.*¹⁹

According to Silver, many men that have been led astray by the Italian way of thinking are often times hurt or killed because the Italian teaching leaves out six critical teachings that he feels are vital to the art. The first reason so many good men are injured is because they lack the **Four Governors**. Secondly, they do not understand or observe the **Four Actions**. The third reason is that they do not understand the **Four Times**. Fourthly, they do not understand how to fight with or against the **Variable Fight**. The fifth reason is that their weapons are too long and they cannot uncross them quickly enough. And finally, Silver feels that their weapons are also too heavy to both defend and strike in due time.

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 **judgement** 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.**²⁰ *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.*

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.²¹ To learn more we can look to Hand's *English Swordsmanship*. **Bent** is the beginning of the attack when the sword and arm bent in preparation. **Spent** is the second part of attack when the attack has been completed and arm and sword are straight. **Lying spent** is the third part of an attack when the arm muscles relax before the return to the first, or **Bent**, position. **Drawing back** is the fourth part of an attack when the arm returns to the **Bent** position.²²

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*. However, just as with the Four Actions we can also look to Hand for a further discussion of the Four Times. The Four Times are the **Time of the Hand; Time of the Hand and Body; Time of the Hand, Body, and Foot; and the Time of the Hand, Body, and Feet**. The Time of the Hand is the amount it takes to move the hand and it is the fastest of the four. The Time of the Hand and Body is the time it takes to move the hand and then the body and thus it is the second fastest Time. Similarly the Times of the Hand, Body, and

¹⁹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.5

²⁰ Silver, George. *Bref Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.83

²¹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.5

²² Hand, Stephen. *English Swordsmanship: The True Fight of George Silver, Vol. 1.* The Chivalry Bookshelf. Highland Village, Texas. 2006 p.236

Foot and of the Hand, Body, and Feet are the times that it takes to move all of those limbs in turn and they are the third fastest and slowest times respectively.²³

We are luckier though with what Silver refers to as 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**.²⁴ *It is interesting to note that all four variable fights mentioned by Silver have Italian names and Saviolo himself specifically refers to and teaches the Stoccata, Imbroccata, and the Passata.*²⁵ *However, the difference is that for Saviolo these are actions. The Stoccata and Imbroccata are attacks where the fighter attacks under and over an opponent's sword respectively and the Passata is pace made forward or backward and similar to Di Grassi's Whole Pace. However, Silver uses them differently. While Silver frames them so that they might set up attacks similar to the ones these terms represent for Saviolo, the Stoccata, Imbroccata, and Mountanata are wards rather than attacks.*²⁶ *The Passata however is a little more complex, sometimes representing a movement similar to Saviolo's Passata and sometimes representing a ward framed with the fighter standing with his left foot forward, his sword held down at his right side and pointed at his opponent's belly. The dagger is held forward similarly to the way it is held in the Stocatta ward, but pointed also at your opponent's belly.*²⁷

Finally, Silver stress that the swords favored by “rapier men” are not only too long to uncross quickly, but too long to strike and defend 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. Rather 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.*

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.²⁸

²³ Hand, Stephen. *English Swordsmanship: The True Fight of George Silver, Vol. 1.* The Chivalry Bookshelf. Highland Village, Texas. 2006 p.235

²⁴ Silver, George. *Bref Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.87-89

²⁵ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) p.9-10 and The First Book

²⁶ Silver, George. *Bref Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.88-89

²⁷ Silver, George. *Bref Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.89

²⁸ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.9

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.*²⁹ 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,³⁰ relies more on sword parries in his fighting than does Saviolo.

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 weapons 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.³¹

The question of whether or not it is better to run or stand still in a rapier fight seems to have been a rather debatable subject of the time. Every teacher seemed to have his own opinion on the subject. Silver argues that the runner has the advantage because his motion makes him a less certain target than his opponent who maintains his stance.³² 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

²⁹ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The means how to defend, Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) p.13-14

³⁰ Castle p.49

³¹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.10

³² Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.10

your sword.³³ 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 a bove all, not to skip or leape, but to keep one foot always firme and stedfast...”³⁴ *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.³⁵

At the time there were two thoughts on the subject of whether the offender or defender had innate advantage. One side held that the person who attacked first had the advantage while the other maintained 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 that the advantage lies in having true pace, time, and space in the fight whether he is attacking or defending.³⁶ Saviolo also seems to hold to the opinion that neither has any distinct advantage over the other. Rather 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. For example, when a fighter finds themselves being charged by an opponent who is running intensely at them, they should maintain their ward and thrust at him when he comes in range. In this situation the defender has the advantage because just as he maintains his stance, his opponent is neither in ward nor standing firm. Also, the more intense his charge the more dangerous the defender’s stance is for him because his speed and momentum could easily run him upon the defender’s blade.³⁷

Perfect fight standeth upon both blow and thrust, therefore the thrust is not onely to be used.³⁸

³³ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The First Book, The First Day’s Discouse, Concerning the Rapier and Dagger

³⁴ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) Of Paces

³⁵ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.12

³⁶ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.12

³⁷ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) p. 18 and The First Book, The First Day’s Discouse, Concerning the Rapier and Dagger

³⁸ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.19

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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰

Fig 4:
One Movement: A-B (Edge blow)
Two Movements: C-D & D-E (Thrust)⁴¹



That the blow is more dangerous and deadly in fight, then a thrust, for prooffe thereof to be made according with Art, an Englishman holdeth argument against an Italian.⁴²

Silver writes this paradox as a dialogue between an Italian and an Englishman on the virtues of the blow over the thrust. The Italian maintains that the thrust is to be preferred because the blow “compasses like a wheel” and the thrust is a straight attack.

³⁹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.19-20

⁴⁰ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) When it is better to strike with the edge

⁴¹ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Di Adoprar si Curamente L'Arme Si Da Offesa, Come Da Difesa...Di Giacomo di Grassi.* <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~wew/fencing/manuals.html> (1570) p.24

⁴² Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.20

Thus the thrust is faster than the blow and more dangerous, especially if the attack hits the face or the body as the victim usually dies from his wounds.

Silver argues that this is not so. In an earlier paradox he has argued that the blow is not necessarily slower than a thrust and that both attacks are crucial to true fighting. He further argues that because the blow moves indirectly it is not as easy to defend against as the thrust. The blow must be “directly warded in the counter check of his force” which a fighter must do using a true cross if he is to parry the attack safely.

He goes on to add that he has known men that have been hit with a thrust and still managed to continue fighting and he has also known many men who recovered fully from their rapier wounds. As long as the wound from a thrust is clean, he argues, a man can live. However, a blow from a sharp sword can cleanly sever an arm or a leg and a blow to the neck is nearly always fatal.⁴³

There are times when a blow is the best choice based on time to attack, position, distance, movement, etc. And there are times when a thrust is the best choice of attack for all the same reasons.

*Saviolo prefers the thrust over the cut because generally the thrust is faster. He is also teaching the rapier style of fighting and the swords designed for this style are not designed for cutting because the style relies more on thrusts.⁴⁴ His drills generally revolve around the **Stoccata** and the **Imbroccata**, both of which are thrusting attacks.⁴⁵ However, he does teach cutting attacks in his Practice. He teaches both the **Mandritta** and the **Riversa**, both of which are cutting attacks, stating that it is important for students to learn these attacks because they will come across them in combat.⁴⁶*

Di Grassi also generally prefers the thrust over the cut for the same reason, but he does teach cuts and says that there are times when a cutting attack is a better choice than a thrust. For example if an attack goes past an opponent, it is often faster to make a cutting attack from the new position than to reset from the failed attack and try again.⁴⁷

As far as whether an injury due to a blow of a thrust is more dangerous, nearly any injury, especially an injury from a weapon, endangered the victim's life in period. The wound from a blow would mostly likely have been larger than that of a thrust. The larger wound would probably have had more blood flow and, if the blow were made to an appendage such as the arm or leg, it might have severed that appendage either to the bone or possibly in half. However, the wound from a thrust would mostly likely be smaller, with less blood flow from the wound. However, with the force of the attack focused completely on the point of the sword, the thrust wound might go just as deep if not deeper into the body as a wound from a blow might. Each wound has its own inherent danger. There is a greater danger of blood loss from a blow's wound, however, the flow of blood out of the wound does help clean the wound of infection. There is less

⁴³ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.20-22

⁴⁴ Norman p.26

⁴⁵ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) p.9-10 and The First Book

⁴⁶ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) p.11

⁴⁷ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) When it is better to strike with the edge

danger of rapid blood loss from a thrusts wound, but due to the nature of the wound, bacteria and dirt can often be carried deeper into the body's tissues and with less blood flow to help clean the wound infection becomes even more of a danger than it already was. As I have mentioned earlier, the thrust also poses a greater danger to the internal organs. A cut has to come in from the side where the torso and especially the abdomen has protection from the limbs while a thrust can be made straight on. A thrust made to the torso would almost certainly damage the internal organs, whose only skeletal protection now would be the rib cage, which not only had holes between the ribs but also only extends through the chest. A thrust to the abdomen is made especially dangerous because the abdomen has no skeletal protection and the organs of the gut contain abundant bacteria to aid the body in digestion. If these organs are injured bacteria spill into the gut cavity causing major infection. Even today, with our knowledge of antibiotics and sterile procedure, and blade injury to the head or central torso is extremely dangerous. An injury which severs a limb or a major blood vessel is particularly dangerous and life threatening not just because of the dangers of infection, but also blood loss.

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.⁴⁸

Here Silver argues against certain teaching methods in the English fencing schools. 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, or groin, and all these are safely defended in learning perfectly of the gripes."⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ *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. We already know other teachers are passing on these techniques. For example, Di Grassi teaches a technique*

⁴⁸ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.23

⁴⁹ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.25

⁵⁰ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.23-26

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.⁵¹

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.⁵² He instructs his students on both parrying with the weapon and body voiding,⁵³ In addition, Di Grassi 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.⁵⁴

Questions and answers between the scholear and the Maister, of the vantages and disadvantages betweene a tall man, and a man of meane stature, having both the perfect knowledge in their weapons.⁵⁵

This paradox is a dialogue between a master and student about whether a tall man or an average man has the advantage in a fight if both men have a “perfect knowledge” about their weapons. Silver maintains that the tall man always has the advantage over the average man because the taller man has a longer reach, does not have to move as far to gain the “true place”, his pace is longer, and because he is taller his proper sword length is longer than that of an average man. Because of this advantage, the shorter man must be careful not to fail in any part of his fight or he is in great danger. As long as he maintains a true fight and fights in the true time he will still be able to defend himself even though his taller opponent has the advantage.⁵⁶

Although every Master must surely have had an opinion on this particular subject, the only other opinion I can find is that of Saviolo. He says that if a tall man is fighting a shorter man, the taller fighter may have a great advantage over his shorter opponent due

⁵¹ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The Sword and Buckler

⁵² Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The Rapier and Dagger

⁵³ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The means to defend

⁵⁴ Di Grassi, Giacomo. *Giacomo di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The Second Part entreating of Deceits and Falsings of Blows and Thrusts

⁵⁵ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.45

⁵⁶ Silver, George. *Paradoxes of Defence. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972) p.45-46

to his longer reach and greater stride, provided that he know how to properly put himself “in ward”. However, if he doesn’t understand proper warding the shorter man could have the advantage. If the taller fighter loses his point the shorter fighter could easily attack him from underneath with a stoccata or a passata.⁵⁷ Di Grassi, unfortunately, does not address this point.

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. For example, while his views on the benefits of the cut and proper blade length conflict with those of the Italians, his views on timing and distance are remarkably similar. We also see that 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. For example, the masters’ views on blade length and the usefulness of the cut are influenced by their fighting forms. 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.

⁵⁷ Saviolo, Vincentio. *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practice in Two Books. Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals.* ed. James L. Jackson. (Delmar, New York: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1972.) The First Book, The First Day’s Discourse, Concerning the Rapier and Dagger

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