

Swetnam: His Principal Rules and Guards for Rapier and Dagger

M. Alison Kannon
Dame Rosalind Delamere

Introduction

Published in the early 17th Century, Joseph Swetnam often seems to get lost in a sea of earlier Medieval and Renaissance masters. Sadly, he has often been overlooked and discarded in favor more popular teachers such as Saviolo, Fabris, and Di Grassi. But Swetnam's treatise, *The Schoole of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defense*, contains many theories and a great deal of information that is beneficial to the modern historical fighting enthusiast. His principal rules offer an in depth guideline to help fighters develop a "true defense". Likewise his guards provide a plethora of ways for a fighter to ward his body from attack and, in many cases, tempt his opponent into attacking specific areas he is already prepared to defend. Along with George Silver, Joseph Swetnam provides us a window into the world of the English martial arts of the Elizabethan and Early Jacobean ages, a world often disregarded in favor of the flashier and more popular European martial arts. In this article we will begin our study of Swetnam with his principal rules as well as his guards. We will investigate not only how they are formed but also the benefits they offer to modern historical fighting enthusiasts.

The Principal Rules of True Defense

Before beginning his discourse on fighting, Swetnam takes the time to lay down "seven principal rules where on true defense is grounded"¹. These seven principles cover such cornerstones as distance, time, and place as well as several other precepts that make up the foundation of almost every martial art.

The first principal is that a fighter must learn and be able to **maintain a good guard** for the entire length of time that he is in danger of being attacked by his opponent.² *It is not simply enough for a fighter to have academic knowledge of the guard, that is not enough to provide protection against an opponent. Only being able to properly frame a guard that provides a good ward against an opponent will protect a fighter.*

It is also imperative that the fighter be able to maintain his guard for the duration of the fight. The guard is only able to provide protection as long as it is in use. If a

¹ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.82

² Swetnam, Noble Science, p.82

fighter ceases to maintain his guard during the fight he makes himself vulnerable to attack from his opponent.

Secondly, a fighter must have a good understanding of **distance**. A fighter must be able to stand so that he is outside of his opponent's range but close enough that he can still reach him with a step forward and an attack. When he does attack his forward foot and hand must move together. He should also take care to keep his rear foot firm on the ground so that he may more easily regain an en-guard position once he has finished his attack.³

The best way to gain a true understanding of distance is by practicing with other fighters. However, if that is not possible, a fighter may gain a good knowledge of distance by practicing alone and using a wall to represent one's opponent. When using a wall for practice a fighter should be standing with his rear foot approximately 12 feet from the wall and should be practicing with a rapier approximately 4 feet long.⁴

Distance is a fundamental concept of fighting. It is important that a fighter understand and be able to determine not only their body's distance from their opponent, but also the distance covered by his and his opponent's range of attack.

It is vital that a fighter have an understanding not only his own range, but also the range of his opponent. Once he understands these ranges he will be able to determine not only when he is within range to attack his opponent but also when he is within their range and in danger of being attacked himself. Once a fighter has obtained an understanding of range and distance he can then manipulate them to his advantage.

The Third Principal Rule that a fighter must keep in mind is that he must have a good understanding of **place**. There are several "places" that a fighter must understand: the **place of the weapons**, the **place of defense**, and the **place of offence**. However, Swetnam is chiefly concerned with the **place of offence**, meaning the place on a fighter's opponent which is most vulnerable to attack; the place the fighter is most able to hurt his opponent without overly endangering himself.⁵ *A fighter needs to have a good understanding of how to spot or create openings in his opponent's defense. Otherwise he runs the risk of creating openings in his own defense while executing ineffective attacks on his opponent. If a fighter wants to be effective at endangering his opponent it is imperative that he understand his opponent's vulnerable areas and be able to attack them and manipulate them to his advantage.*

"**To take the time**", the fourth rule, dictates that a fighter should take care to strike his opponent the moment he is given an opportunity to do so. He must take care to both defend himself and attack his enemy in the same time. He also must take care to attack quickly and not allow his opponent to regain his guard or else he will lose his advantage.⁶ *If a fighter does not take care to defend himself when he attacks his opponent then he runs the risk of leaving himself vulnerable to a counter attack and places himself at a disadvantage to his opponent. Similarly, if he does not take care to attack and defend in the same time but takes multiple times to complete these movements he also leaves himself open to a counter attack by his opponent.*

³ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.82-83

⁴ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.83

⁵ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.83

⁶ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.83

Swetnam's Fifth Principal Rule concerns "**keeping the space**". The **space** can refer to two things. The first is the space between a fighter and his opponent which is covered in the rule concerning **distance**. The second concerns the space between attacks, which is what Swetnam discusses in his fifth rule. Swetnam cautions that a fighter must take care to mind the space between his attacks, meaning that when a fighter charges his opponent with a blow or a thrust he must take care that after his attack he takes time to regain his guard and defense before attacking again. He cautions that a fighter must attack with discretion, mindful of what he is doing, and that he should not charge forward needlessly or rashly. If a man does not attack mindfully and allows his emotions to control his actions during the fight then he makes himself vulnerable, no matter how skilled he may be otherwise.⁷

It is also imperative that a fighter possess **patience**, the subject of the sixth rule. A fighter must have patience in order to govern his own emotions, an ability that is vital to a fighter's success.⁸ *If he can not govern himself he leaves himself vulnerable to his opponent and allows his opponent an undue advantage.*

Finally, a fighter must **practice** and practice often. Not only is practicing good exercise for maintaining health but it also helps a fighter firmly entrench the skills that he has learned of the Arte of Defense. If a fighter finds himself in need of the skills he has learned they will be readily available to him if he has taken the time to practice.⁹

The Seven Principal Rules that Swetnam discusses may seem like common sense but they are the same basic principals that help to make up the foundations of all the martial practices that make up the Arte of Defense. If a fighter does not understand the purpose of a proper guard and can not form one to protect himself then he is open to attack from every angle. Similarly all fighters have to be able to understand distance in order to know where they are in relation to their opponent and at what point they or their opponent is within range of attack. He also has to be able to understand when he or his opponent is vulnerable to attack so that he is able to both protect himself and assault his opponent. The rules are basic but that is because they help make up the very basics of the fighting art and are necessary to both attack and defend.

On Holding the Rapier

Swetnam suggests three ways that a fighter may hold the rapier. The first is called the **Natural Fashion**. This grip is formed by holding the rapier with the thumb forward or on the rapier blade. The second manner is formed with the whole hand held within the pommel of the rapier and the thumb locking the fore-finger in. You may also hold the rapier so that the thumb and fore-finger join at the smallest part of the grip. The third and final method is called the **Stokata Fashion**. This grip is formed by having only the forefinger and thumb within the pommel of the rapier. The rest of your fingers are held around the pommel and the button of the pommel is held against the inside of the little finger.¹⁰

⁷ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.83-84

⁸ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.84

⁹ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.84-85

¹⁰ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.92-93

These descriptions may seem vague and confusing at first but upon closer examination we can see that that is not necessarily the case. In the Natural Fashion the sword should be gripped so that the palm and fingers of the hand wrap around the grip of the sword and the thumb is held so that it is touching the base of the sword. This adds extra stability and strength to the guard making it ideal for executing cuts. The second and unnamed guard is framed similarly to the Natural Fashion but rather holding the thumb so that it touches the base of the blade the thumb is also wrapped around the grip of the sword where it held so that it touches the first finger. Finally, in the Stokata Fashion the grip of the sword is only held with the thumb and first finger while the rest of the hand is held wrapped around the pommel of the sword.

A fighter should spend time practicing these grips until he is skillful with all three. Now it's true that a fighter will be likely to favor one grip over the others just as a personal preference but it's very important that he still be skillful with all three. There will be times when one grip will be better for executing a particular attack or defense than the others and it may or may not be the same grip that the fighter generally prefers. For example, Swetnam prefers the **natural fashion** for executing wrist blows because this method of holding the sword adds more strength to the blow than the other two methods and allows a fighter to execute the attack more swiftly¹¹.

On Guards

True Guard of Rapier and Dagger



Fig 1: The True Guard of Rapier and Dagger¹²

To frame the **True Guard of Rapier and Dagger** (Fig 1) a fighter should begin by holding his rapier low, approximately pocket level, keeping the arm and elbow relatively strait but not locked. Similarly, he should hold his dagger up at approximately cheek level. His dagger arm should also be relatively straight but unlocked and he should be holding his dagger slightly forward of the body. The rapier should be pointed up so that he can see his opponent clearly with both eyes. The point of the rapier should be approximately 2 inches closer to the body than the point of the dagger and at about the same height. His torso should be bowed slightly toward his opponent with his shoulders and he should hold his rapier with his thumb touching tip of his fore finger to add strength to his grip. Finally he should keep the heel of his front foot in line with the middle joint of his big toe as indicated in Figure 1.¹³

The sword should be carried so that the edge is straight up and down. If an opponent attacks with a blow it should be parried with the edge of the sword by bearing

¹¹ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.93-94

¹² Swetnam, Noble Science, p.86

¹³ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.85-86

the rapier after the rule of the backsword.¹⁴ *This action creates a strong parry while still protecting the edge of the blade.*¹⁵ *Thus it allows a fighter to both protect himself from attack and the edge of the blade from damage so that his subsequent attacks will be more dangerous for his opponent.*

Swetnam cautions that it will do a fighter no good to practice his guards and techniques if the fighter does not heed the advice and reasons that Swetnam gives to using those guards and techniques. For example, a fighter could stand perfectly in his true guard but if he does not observe the correct distance when he is fighting his perfect guard will not help him.¹⁶

Swetnam also discusses several reasons that his True Guard for Rapier and Dagger is beneficial to fighters. The first reason he gives is that the True Guard closes off the line of attack that an opponent could use to attack with a blow to your wrists. In addition, raising the dagger over the rapier pulls the dagger away from a position where it could potentially bind up your sword. Also, raising the dagger to a higher ward position and turning the point down provides additional protection to a fighter's head and upper body.¹⁷ *Protecting the hands and wrists from attack is vital for a fighter. Often they are among the most vulnerable body parts because they are generally the furthest extended and the closest to one's opponent. This makes them an easy target and one that an opponent doesn't have to exert or overextend himself to attack. The hands and wrists are important to protect because, although wounds to them are not mortal, without them one can not hold their weapons or defend themselves. Pulling the dagger out of line from the sword prevents a fighter from getting bound up in his own weapons and making himself vulnerable to attack from his opponent while he is bound. Having the dagger in a higher ward position also allows the dagger to ward the head and upper torso. This benefits the fighter because it adds an extra layer of protection to two areas of the body where wounds are often mortal.*

The Crosse Guard

To frame the **Crosse Guard** a fighter should hold his dagger with the point upright with the hilt held at approximately the same level as his **girdle-stead**¹⁸. He should not place his thumb on his dagger's blade. Rather he should hold it firmly. Finally, the point of his rapier should be under his dagger hand.¹⁹ *In his treatise Swetnam refers to a picture that does not appear to be available. However, based on the description of the guard we can conjecture that it is framed similarly to the True Guard of Rapier and Dagger but with the dagger held lower, at waist level, rather than at head level as in the True Guard. The sword is still held low but with the tip of the sword held below the dagger.*

This guard will make it appear that your central torso is unguarded and will make that area a prime target for your opponent. If he attacks you with a thrust to your central

¹⁴ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.86

¹⁵ Clements, "The Myth of Edge-On-Edge Parrying in Medieval Swordplay"

¹⁶ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.86-87

¹⁷ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.89-90

¹⁸ The waist. Nares, A Glossary, p.365

¹⁹ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.105

torso above your girdle-stead you should parry his attack away from your right side while maintaining the point of your dagger in the upright position. You should then step in with your left foot and thrust at the part of your opponent's body that you think is the most open. However, if your opponent attacks you under your girdle-stead then you should defend his thrust with your rapier by beating it downward. You will then need to take advantage of the opening you have just created with an attack of your own. Remember, it is extremely important the fighters take care to attack and defend in one time.²⁰ *If a fighter uses two or more motions to attack and defend rather than attacking and defending at the same time he wastes valuable time and energy and runs the risk of creating an opening in his own defense that his opponent can use against him. Thus a fighter should always take care to attack and defend at the same time and to be efficient in his motions and the amount of time he takes to make them.*

The Stokata Guard

To frame the **Stokata** Guard you should stand with your feet at least 3 feet apart. Your dagger should be held high at approximately the same height as your cheek and your sword should be low, around the hip and upper thigh, and should be held slightly back. In the Stokata Guard the head and upper torso should be held slightly back so that they are farther from your opponent.²¹ Swetnam says that many of his contemporaries teach that this makes the Stokata Guard superior to other guards because it places the head and upper body farther from danger. However, he disagrees. While the head is held farther from danger the lower abdomen and upper thigh are closer to danger and more open to attack from your opponent due to the position of the guard. He maintains that a wound to the abdomen is more dangerous than a wound to the face and that the legs do not receive enough protection. Instead he further advocates the use of his True Guard to provide better overall protections to the body. However, he does take the time to describe the Stokata Guard so that his students will be familiar with it and so that if they are placed in a position where they are denied a better guard at least they will have some way to defend themselves.²² *Swetnam frames his Stokata guard very similarly to the way that Silver frames his. I do disagree that Swetnam that this guard leaves a fighter unnaturally open and is less protective than any of the other guards. Of course there are instances when one guard is to be preferred over another and there are situations where the Stokata guard is not the best choice however, that doesn't make it a weaker or more dangerous.*

The Lazie Guard

To frame the **Lazie Guard** you should hold your sword pointed down with the tip of your sword resting on the ground near your right side, one foot away from the left side of your body. The hilt of your rapier should rest on your right thigh and your dagger should be held under your rapier approximately one foot in front of the hilt.²³

²⁰ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.105-106

²¹ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.108

²² Swetnam, Noble Science, p.108

²³ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.110-111

This stance leaves your body open which you can use to bait your opponent into attack. However, you have to be very quick with your response if you choose to do this. When your opponent charges forward to attack you with a thrust you must quickly raise up the point of your rapier and your dagger and throw him over towards your right side.²⁴

Why the right side of the body? It is my belief that Swetnam instructs his students to throw their opponent towards their right side in order to get the best leverage for their throw. Swetnam's guards are usually framed with the right foot forward and this position generates the best leverage for a throw that starts on the left side of body and ends on the right side.

The Fore-hand Guard at Rapier and Dagger

When framing the Fore-hand Guard with rapier and dagger you should stand so that your rapier guard is under the hilt of your dagger. Keep the tip of your rapier pointed at approximately waist level on your opponent. Your dagger should be pointed upright and you can also lean it very slightly towards your left side if you prefer. Finally, both the hilts of your rapier and dagger should be held around your waist level.²⁵

If your opponent attacks you with a thrust while you stand in the guard you should quickly move your dagger towards your right side to close your guard and beat away his attack with your sword. However, you should take care to quickly regain your guard as a second attack is quite possible.²⁶

The Broad Ward

The **Broad Ward** is framed similarly to Di Grassi's Broad Ward. You should hold both your sword arm and your dagger arm out from the shoulders so that the center line appears to be open.²⁷

If your opponent attacks you with a thrust to the center of your body you should beat his sword towards your right side away from the body and attack with an over-hand thrust to his dagger shoulder. As you are thrusting remember to keep your thumb on the blade of your rapier as it will help strengthen and steady your attack.²⁸

Conclusion

Swetnam's treatise, *The Schoole of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defense*, contains a great deal of information that is beneficial to the modern historical fighting enthusiast. His principal rules cover many vital concepts such as distance, maintaining a good stance, timing, and patience. Without a proper foundation in these corner stones of the Arte of Defense a fighter can not develop a true defense, nor can he truly master the art. Similarly, Swetnam's guards provide several ways for a fighter to ward his body from attack and, often times, bate his opponent into attacking him. A prime example is

²⁴ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.111

²⁵ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.112

²⁶ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.112

²⁷ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.112

²⁸ Swetnam, Noble Science, p.112

the Crosse Guard. In the Crosse Guard a fighter deliberately creates an opening on his upper torso to tempt his opponent to attack that area. However, when the attack comes he is already prepared to parry the attack with his dagger and threaten his opponent with an attack of his own. The Lazie Guard also creates a similar opening by pointing the sword down towards the ground.

Although often overlooked, Swetnam's treatise is a valuable resource. He offers students of the Arte of Defense a different viewpoint on an area of the Arte of Defense that is not often studied: the martial arts of late 16th and early 17th Century England. Along with George Silver he is one of the few English teachers whose treatises we have access to. They provide valuable insight into a rich martial tradition.

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