

The Fight of Joseph Swetnam with Rapier and Dagger:

Thrusts and Passages

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Introduction

As we have discussed before, 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 treatise holds a wealth of information on how the more continental styles of swordplay were being adapted and used in England. Previously we have studied his principal rules and guards and discussed how they can be used and adapted by students of Early Modern English martial arts and SCA combat enthusiast. In this article we will further investigate his thrusting attack, both how to execute and defend against them. In addition we will study Swetnam's passages and how we can incorporate them into our own fighting. 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. In this article we will continue to investigate his system and the benefits it offer to modern historical fighting enthusiasts.

Four Chief Thrusts

The majority of Swetnam's treatise is written for the rapier, specifically for rapier and dagger. While he does have several chapters dedicated to the fight of the back-sword as well as other weapons he spends far more of his time discussion the rapier. Naturally the majority of the attacks he discusses in the chapters dealing with the rapier are thrusts and there are several thrusting attacks that Swetnam advocates using when fighting rapier and dagger.

The first, a **Right Stock** or **Stockata**, is made by thrusting upwards from a low line into the body of your opponent. The thrust should be strong and quick. Standing in the Stockata guard¹ you should lean away from your opponent while you make this attack and the hilt of your sword should be held low.²

A variation on the Stockata attack is the **Slope Stocke**. This attack should be made to your opponent's chest or to the shoulder of his sword arm. To execute this attack you should slide your sword hand to your left side and thrust at your opponent slopewise with your knuckles turned inward. It's recommended particularly for the Cross Guard, Careless Guard, and Broad Ward when at Stockata would be less effective.³

¹ Kannon, Alison. *Swetnam: His Principal Rules and Guards for Rapier and Dagger*. 2008. Available at www.elizabethanmafia.com

² Swetnam p. 113

³ Swetnam p. 113

The **Imbrokata** is used as a feinting attack. To execute an Imbrokata you would feint low with a thrust to your opponent's knee or thigh. When he brings his dagger down to defend against your attack you should quickly redirect your attack upwards into his dagger arm, dagger shoulder, or face before he has time to recover his dagger.⁴

Another thrusting attack Swetnam discusses is the **Reverse**. A reverse should be executed in response to your opponent closing. When he closes you should step back with your right foot bringing your sword back to follow it so that your left foot and dagger are forward. When he attacks you should parry his attack with your dagger and counter attack with a thrust of your own bringing your right foot and sword hand forward together.⁵ *Withdrawing as your opponent attacks effectively voids your body away from his attack and stepping back in with your right foot as you execute your counter attack adds strength to your thrust.*

Defending Against a Thrust

Once Swetnam has outlined the manners in which a thrust can be executed he proceeds to describe how a fighter can protect himself from those attacks. According to Swetnam there are four primary ways to defend against a thrust.

The first is by catching the thrust with your dagger and securing its capture with a quick disengage around the blade. You want to make sure that your disengage is made with the wrist only and that you don't break the elbow joint.⁶ *This parry can be quite an effective defense against a thrust. It is important to make sure that it is executed quickly and forcefully however. If you do not perform it quickly enough your opponent can still power through to land his attack. Similarly, if you do not perform it with enough force you will have difficulty trapping your opponent's blade. Also, with enough force and proper quillion placement it is possible to use this defense to break your opponent's weapon. In a real world situation this outcome would give you a major advantage over your opponent. However, this does mean that if you are using this parry within the realm of SCA combat you should take care and use this parry wisely. There is no need to generate blade breaking force in SCA combat.*

The second is also done by catching your opponent's blade with your dagger. However, with this parry you want to keep the hilt of your dagger positioned at waist level with the tip of your dagger pointed up. In this position you want to parry the dagger stiffly, away from your body.⁷ *By positioning the dagger with the point up you effectively create a greater surface with which to catch your opponent's blade for the parry. You should hold the dagger at an approximately 45 to 50 degree angle relative to the ground. This will give enough edge to catch your opponent's blade with and enough of an angle towards your opponent that you can effectively trap and parry his weapon away from your body before it gets close enough to endanger you. If you hold your dagger straight out at a 0 degree angle (flat relative to the ground) then you won't have enough of the edge of your blade available to execute an effective parry. If your dagger is held straight up at a 90 degree angle relative to the ground then you won't be able to make contact*

⁴ Swetnam p. 113

⁵ Swetnam p. 114

⁶ Swetnam p. 91

⁷ Swetnam p. 91

with your opponent's blade to begin your parry before his weapon is within range to attack. With your dagger in this position he could very easily still strike your arm or shoulder before you have fully parried his attack away from the body.

The third way to parry a thrust is preformed with the rapier and will protect the entire body. It also provides protection for your dagger hand if you do not have a close-hilted dagger. When your opponent attacks with his thrust you want to bring in your dagger hand while extending your sword arm. You want to parry his thrust with the edge of your rapier, parrying him away from your body and your left side and taking care to keep the point of your weapon upright.⁸ *Swetnam's third parry is basically just a very simple sword parry executed so that you parry your opponent's weapon away from the body rather than across it. It is important to always remember to parry the attack away from the body to the outside rather than across the center line of the body. If you parry the attack across the center line of the body your opponent could still complete his attack by continuing his thrust forward as you parry, wounding you in the process. To most effectively protect your body from attack you need to remember to always parry to the outside line, away from the body.*

The fourth method is to parry the thrust with both of your weapons. According to Swetnam this can be done one of several ways. First you can parry your opponent's blade with both of your weapons pointed upwards. *In his description Swetnam references a picture that I have not been able to find in his treatise but says that both points should be kept close and that you should use both weapons to parry your opponent's thrust away from your left side.* Swetnam also suggests that you can position your rapier outside of your dagger and with your dagger form a cross by trapping your opponent's blade at the middle of your rapier approximately chest high. From here you should quickly turn down the point of your rapier and force his blade downward with your dagger. This method could also be used to defend against staff with rapier and dagger, as Swetnam promises to discuss later.⁹ *I don't normally advocate for using both of your weapons simultaneously to parry an attack. Part of the reason for having two weapons is to be able to attack and defend at the same time. If both weapons are tied up in defending against your opponent's thrust it leaves you vulnerable to an attack for another weapon he may have and at the very least deprives you of an opportunity to use one of your weapons to attack him once you have him trapped. For example, I am dubious about how effective Swetnam's first example, parrying your opponent's blade with both of your weapons pointed upwards, would be. Logically it would seem that tying up both of your weapons in parrying your opponent's sword would put you in a very vulnerable position, especially since you have taken both of your points offline in order to point them upward. Parrying another attack or making an attack of your own will now also probably take two motions: one to bring your point back on line and one to execute the attack or parry. However, Swetnam's description is very vague and without the picture he references more research is required to determine exactly how he intended this parry to be executed.*

⁸ Swetnam p. 91

⁹ Swetnam p. 92

Manner of a Passage

Swetnam advises that passages should be executed swiftly with agility and celerity¹⁰. *When a fighter makes a **passage**¹¹ he's closing on his opponent to make an attack. Because he's coming within his opponent's range to execute his attack it's important that he be quick and agile in order to avoid being injured himself.* A fighter must be skilled, practiced and make good use of his judgment. Furthermore he must not waste even the smallest amount of time.¹² *Time wasted, either because a fighter is not swift enough in his execution or uncertain about his actions, opens him up to his opponent for attack.*

In Swetnam's first example, if you see that your opponent, while he stands in any of his guards, holds his point aloft you should step in quickly and aggressively with your left foot. Place your dagger under his sword cross-wise¹³ and bear it upwards so that the tip is over your head. As soon as your dagger makes contact with your opponent's sword you should bring your own sword in to execute your attack. It is vital that in doing so you attack and defend at the same time and don't waste any time between parrying his sword upwards and bringing your own in for attack.¹⁴

If your opponent carries the tip of his sword at your waist level then you should step in quickly with your left foot, forcefully parry his sword away from your body with your dagger and then strike your opponent with a thrust.¹⁵

Similarly if your opponent is carrying his point near the ground you should step in with your rear foot, bring your dagger over his rapier to keep it down and prevent him from raising it to you, and make your attack, recovering to your distance afterward.¹⁶

Although it is not specifically mentioned in the previous three passages I would recommend that a fighter step forward with his right foot as he executes his thrust. This will add strength to his attack. It will also bring him far enough inside his opponent's range that his opponent would have to step back and withdraw his sword in order to bring it back on line to endanger the fighter.

Another option if your opponent attacks you with a thrust is to parry his attack, turning your dagger point down, and executing a thrust of your own while stepping in with your left foot.¹⁷ *In this instance I would not worry too much about stepping in with your sword foot. Because your opponent is coming for a thrust he may already be close enough that stepping in with your left foot will add all the strength to your thrust that you need. Instead use your best judgment to decide if closing further is needed.*

There are a few ways to defend against these passages. The first is a simple body void executed by stepping back just enough to let your opponent's attack miss and then stepping in with an attack of your own before your opponent can retreat. *This is a simple but effective strategy that accomplishes the objective while expending very little energy. However it does require an excellent understanding of distance and an intimate*

¹⁰ Swetnam p. 97

¹¹ Passage: the act of passing by your opponent while executing an attack.

¹² Swetnam p. 98

¹³ Cross-wise: perpendicularly to the sword. Similar to the true cross position.

¹⁴ Swetnam p. 98

¹⁵ Swetnam p. 98

¹⁶ Swetnam p. 98

¹⁷ Swetnam p. 99

knowledge of your opponent's range. Another option is to stand in your **True Guard** and when your opponent goes to begin his passage drop the tip of your sword slightly and defend his passage with your dagger by turning your dagger point down and parrying his attack away from your body. However, this defense on really works well if you opponent is attacking your torso. If he attacks in a higher line, like with an Imbrocakata to your dagger shoulder you should not lower either of your weapons. Instead you should leave your dagger and your sword up to help defend the higher line.¹⁸ *This is a more proactive strategy however it requires you to make a quick judgment about whether your opponent will attack your torso or your shoulder. If he feints for one and then attacks the other you could be left in a vulnerable position.*

Conclusion

As we have seen before Swetnam's treatise contains a great deal of information that is beneficial to the modern historical fighting enthusiast. His discussion of thrusts and how to defend against them is exceedingly beneficial to students of English martial arts as well as SCA combat enthusiast and living historians. His discussion of passages especially goes in to great detail on how students and fighters can efficiently execute attacks of their own while protecting themselves from their opponent's attacks. I've personally used the body void he discusses several times quite successfully.

Swetnam's treatise continues to be an extremely valuable resource to all students of the martial arts, especially those chiefly interested in the arts of late 16th and early 17th Century England.

¹⁸ Swetnam p. 100

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