

WMA in SCA: Agrippa's Fencing Theory

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Camillo Agrippa's 1553 *Treatise on the Science of Arms* was an important step in the development of the science of fencing as we know it today, though it also shows continuity with the past. As masters had been doing for at least 160 years (since Nuremberg Codex 3227a) Agrippa follows Aristotle in his conception of fencing time. In the fourth book of the *Physics*, Aristotle writes:

Time is the number of motion in respect of before and after
Tempus est numerus motus secundum prius et posterius

All fencing nomenclature comes from this: One movement is one time, or tempo, which can be longer or shorter relative to other tempi.

Agrippa's fundamental principle is to minimize the size of one's tempi, i.e.:

- The point goes before the hand
- The hand goes before the foot
- Moving one foot in a lunge is smaller than moving two feet

Agrippa also expresses other eternal principles of fencing in the language of a Renaissance intellectual:

- Blade opposition (that is, leverage)
- Lines of attack and defense (that is geometry)
- Moving from the center (the *vita*)
- Tactical thinking (that is, psychology)

Today, we are going to learn a *simple attack*, a *parry and riposte*, a *feint attack*, and a *counterattack* from Agrippa, using the aforesaid principles and his movement aesthetics. Note that these are of course the modern classifications of actions: Agrippa did not benefit from later standardization of terminology. However, he uses the same concepts.

Definitions:

- A simple attack is an attack made in one action—that is, one tempo. It can be in one line or change lines.
- A parry and riposte is a defense and return of the attack in two tempi. Agrippa correctly notes this “gives time to the opponent.”
- A feint attack takes at least two movements and thus two tempi
- To counterattack is to reply to an offensive action (either an attack or a feint) with an other offensive action, that is, to defend oneself and strike in one tempo

- Countertime is an action against a counterattack (note the Renaissance use of the word, however, usually means “counterattack”). We will not be doing this today.

A simple attack (I, 4):

...some people say they can raise a man out of a guard in which he holds his hand extended in this way by cutting with *mandritti* and *riversi*, with defensive weapons such as the dagger or the cape, or by seizing the blade with a *guanto di presa*. I reply that this is nonsense, for, as I have often repeated, someone who tries to beat the point of your sword aside with *mandritti* is only fooling themselves. That is because you can, in a single action, without moving your arm any, lower the point a little bit to evade the enemy’s sword, aim at his right side, extend your arm while rotating your hand, and step forwards with your right foot to hit him.

A parry-riposte (I, 6):

...if you are engaged with the enemy at the middle of the swords in wide third and he tries to attack on the outside by *forza* in order to give you a thrust in the chest, change from third into narrow second and, immediately after his blow passes by, thrust in third or wide fourth. If the enemy gains distance by moving his left foot close to his right and tries to ride in on your sword all in action, entering on the outside by *forza*, quickly return to narrow second and then push a thrust at him, ending the action in third or fourth.

A renewed attack (here with a grapple, II, 20):

if a fencer on guard in C uses a big action to attack someone on guard in D with a *mandritto* to the head, and the latter replies by parrying in A and cutting a *mandritto* to the head, the former can parry in front with a high cover, traverse forward with his left leg, and turn his left arm under his enemy’s right arm. This is seen above, where the letter V is placed by the victor and the letter Q by the vanquished.

A feint attack (I, 10):

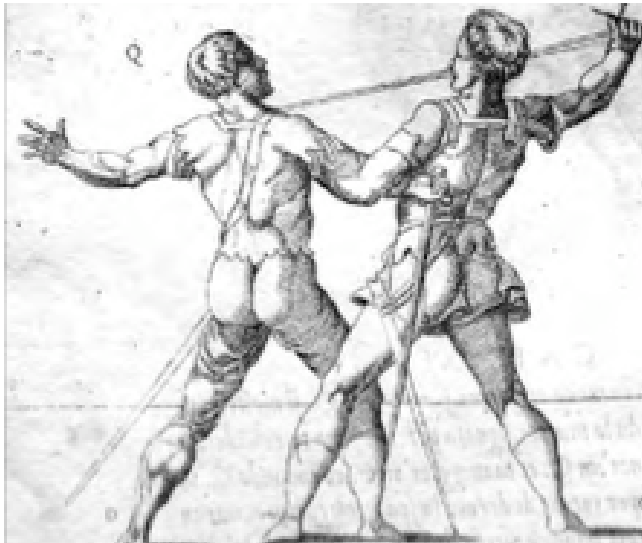
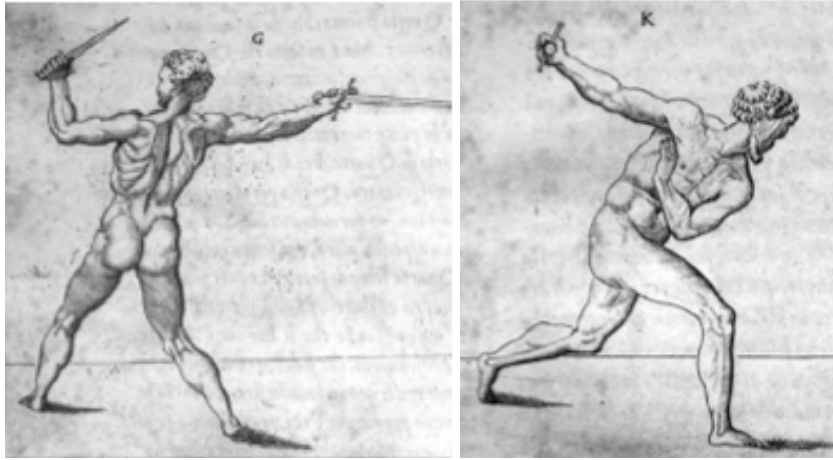
If you step back on guard in second, then you can feint a thrust as far forward as possible while simultaneously moving your left foot up against your right. If the enemy tries to beat your sword with his left hand, make a disengagement in time and step forwards to attack him in second.

A counterattack (I, 17):

If the enemy makes an *imbroccata* against you while keeping his rear foot firm, then at the same time that he thrusts, you should turn your body as in the following figure. Because of the way you turn, step to the right, and raise your hand into high fourth, the enemy will impale himself on the sword with his outside. Furthermore, you take yourself off his line—that is, away from his sword—because of the way you void your *vita*.

Another (I, 23, preceding the example with the ball):

If the two of you are in second in the same situation as above, then quickly find the enemy's sword with yours, again engaging the blade on the outside. If the enemy thrusts at the same time that you move your sword, then without raising or evading his weapon, you can easily hit him in countertime because of the number of the motion he has made.... When the enemy makes the sudden thrust as above, then in the same time, aim your sword at his right side in second, and, accompanying the enemy's sword with your left hand, step with your right foot to his left side, supporting your chin on your left shoulder and casting your eyes to the ground. This technique... should be done quickly and in one movement. It not only pushes the thrust into the enemy's chest, but also agilely voids and lowers your body, thus giving the weaker man a certain and sure advantage.



Illustrations from I, 17; I, 23; and II, 20

Please pick up a copy of my Agrippa translation at the Revival/Freelance Academy Pres booth!

WMA in SCA
Fencing Pedagogy 101:
The Options Lesson

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The aim of this class is to introduce a method of drilling tactical options, which is a method of internalizing a system of fencing. In this case, we will be using actions common to late sixteenth/early seventeenth-century rapier treatises, though of course, any source for any weapon, be it historical or living tradition, will do.

This material is repeated in my forthcoming *The Art of the Two-Handed Sword: A Translation of Francesco Alfieri's Lo Spadone with a Guide to Modern Practice* (SKA Swordplay Books), which participants are encouraged to acquire. The method is, of course, not original to me, but found in most modern coaching handbooks.

I: Theory

Options drills bridge the gap between practice and free play. It is, simply, a sequence of tactically linked actions that are practiced in turn. It is based off the *ladder drill*, in which a series of actions are done first blocked (AAA, BBB, CCC), then serially (ABC, ABC, ABC), and then, most difficult, randomly (CCABABBC, etc.)

Ladder drills make use of *foreseen* actions, whereas *options* drills build on this by using *partially foreseen* actions. A *foreseen* action is one with a known beginning and a known end. If Fencers A and B are doing the three actions in a blocked or serial fashion, each knows what is going to happen, making it a foreseen action. A *partially foreseen action* has a known beginning but an unknown end. In other words, the partner may do one of several things. If Fencer A is attacking but does not know whether Fencer AB is going to make one, two, or no parries, but the drill always begins the same way, it would be a partially foreseen action. An *unforeseen* action is, as the name implies, a surprise. For instance, we can add Fencer B randomly attacking Fencer A into the mix.

II: Practice

A. Salute

The salute is a fundamental point of etiquette that begins any class.

B. Warm-Ups

All classes should begin with a warm-up intended to get the body and mind ready to fence. Secondary goals include improving fitness and flexibility. Since most people don't have the leisure to be full-time swordsmen, warm-ups should incorporate as many fencing skills as possible.

C. Sample actions

Action 1:

Fencer A advances into measure, gaining the adversary's blade to the inside or outside. Fencer B does nothing, so Fencer A hits with opposition.

Action 2:

Fencer A advances into measure, gaining the adversary's blade to the inside or outside. Fencer B changes the engagement. Fencer disengages to attack and hits with opposition.

Action 3:

Fencer A advances into measure, gaining the adversary's blade to the inside or outside. Fencer B makes a disengagement to attack (*cavazione*), whereupon Fencer hits by time thrust, closing the line laterally and hitting in third or fourth.

As you can see, the actions have the same preparation; only the adversary's reaction changes.

WMA in SCA
Fencing Pedagogy 102
The Individual Lesson

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This class is intended as an introduction to the individual lesson—the method by which the knowledge and “feel” of fencing has traditionally been transmitted. This is an art that has been passed from master to student for centuries: We have documentation of it as far back as the 1500s, and it is no doubt far older.

The individual lesson is a form of operant conditioning. Essentially, the trainer (traditionally, the fencing master; today, the “coach”; for SCA purposes, a marshal or more experienced fencer) stands in for the adversary. They give the stimulus; the student gives the response. However, there are important differences between cues one gives in a lesson, and the way one actually fences!

Lesson Material

This method can be used to teach the use of any hand-held weapon. Techniques can be taken from any source (and the individual lesson is an ideal way to internalize a system of historical fencing). However, for simplicity’s sake, I am going to teach you today how to teach your student some techniques common to all late seventeenth-century rapier treatises: a direct attack, an indirect attack (that is, attack by *cavazione*), and a counterattack (that is, the time thrust, or so-called “stesso tempo parry-riposte.”)

Lesson structure

A good lesson is like an essay: It has a plot. We start slow, build, elaborate on our points, and then sum them up.

Lessons come into several flavors:

- Teaching: A new technique is taught, or an old technique applied in a new way
- Training: The student must perform specified techniques in a high-stress situation
- Warm-up: The student is prepared for a tournament bout

There are a few other types of lessons, such as the “check” lesson, but we won’t get into them here.

One *always* starts slow and simple and then builds from there. This begins at extension distance, then advance, then lunge. From there, we can introduce a new action. Actions are always slowly at first, then with increasing velocity and precision. Once all actions are introduced, we can do them serially, blocked, and randomly. We then throw in random actions, proceed from instructor-initiated to student-initiated actions, etc.

We will not be doing this all today! This is only an introduction in how to give simple cues. If you want to learn how to teach fencing, the US Fencing Coaches’ Association (usfca.org) is an invaluable resource.

Important Points

Unlike in fencing, the teacher’s knees are only slightly bent and he or she uses “cheating” coaching footwork. Needless to say, your blade presentation, timing, etc., must be precise—though intended to help the student, not hinder them.

Most importantly, one must have a good knowledge of fencing in order to draw proper execution and technique. This means one must know what the action one is asking for should look and feel like.

Since one is being hit repeatedly, one must wear somewhat heavier equipment, including a protective plastron and, if necessary, a mask cover. It is also useful to use a lighter weapon, preferably with a shell or bell guard. This is why I had you bring foils.

Most importantly: You can’t “win.” Get that out of your head. “Winning” is your student “killing” you correctly over and over and then going on to become a perfect exemplar of the Art/doing well in tournaments/whatever their goal is. The very worst “teachers” are those bullies who build up their own egos by beating their students into a pulp.

Pay attention to form; it serves function. Use fixing actions: Get the student to freeze on the hit and fix their form. (If they fall over, it’s a balance issue.)

An understanding of fencing theory and mechanics is *indispensable* for analyzing ancient fencing and for reconstructing it as lessons. We cannot get into all of this here; see your local fencing master for details.

The following are the watchwords of fencing: Distance! Timing! Velocity! If something is going wrong, you probably need to correct one of these.

WMA in SCA: Renaissance Spadone

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Thanks to the work of Alfieri, Grassi, the writer of the Anonimo Riccardiano, and living traditions of heavy sabre and great stick, we have a pretty good idea of the mechanics of the early modern two-handed sword. This class will teach these mechanics, which allow one to move in an efficient and integrated fashion. This material is equally applicable to longsword, and is found in my forthcoming work on Alfieri.

I. Salute

II. Warm-ups/footwork

III. Solo drills

A. Molinelli, Defined

A molinello is a cut made by moving the weapon in a circular fashion, meaning that at some point the striking edge or point will be moving retrograde relative to the target. This takes more time, but delivers more power. It also has additional tactical uses, as will be discussed below. Molinelli are made by articulating the shoulder, elbow, wrist, and/or fingers. One can also aid the action by turning at the waist and pushing against the ground with the legs. However, the majority of the power is generated from the greater velocity (and thus kinetic energy) of the center of percussion of the weapon as it travels on the circumference of the circle, as compared to hands, which remain relatively stationary as the center of rotation. The articulation of the fingers and wrists is thus critical.

B. Horizontal or descending molinelli, forehand and reverse

C. Ascending

D. Helicopter

E. Continual

F. With footwork

G. Changing lines

IV. Paired drills

A. Parry-riposte drill

The partners face each other at extension distance with the same foot forwards.

- Fencer A makes a horizontal cut at the right side of Fencer B's head, who, in turn, parries in seventh and ripostes by molinello to the top of Fencer A's head.

- Fencer A then parries fifth and ripostes by molinello to the left side of Fencer B's head
- Fencer B then parries first and ripostes by molinello to the top of Fencer A's head
- Fencer A then parries in sixth and turns a molinello to the right side of Fencer B's head. Fencer B parries seventh and ripostes to the top of Fencer A's head.
- Fencer A again parries fifth and ripostes by molinello to the left side of Fencer B's head and the sequence begins again

This is done continually, with Fencer A always parrying alternately in fifth and sixth and riposting by molinello to the top of the head, and Fencer A parrying first and seventh and riposting by molinello to the top of the head. Fencer A is thus making, by turns, a forward and reverse helicopter molinello, combining offense and defense in a single action, while Fencer B is making alternate inside and outside molinelli.

B. Circle drill

These drills teach the coordination of the hand and foot, as well. In each variation of the exercise, the orientation of the feet is maintained while taking circular steps. (Note that these can also be practiced with circular gather steps.)

- Fencer A makes a diagonal descending cut at Fencer B's right temple
- Fencer B parries in seventh while moving the left foot to his left in a circular step, thus defending both by blade position and displacement, and ripostes by making a molinello with a similar diagonal descending cut at Fencer A's right temple. This is coordinated with the right foot's following step.
- Fencer A, in turn, parries in seventh, adding the step, and ripostes with the same cut.

The drill is then performed in the opposite direction, cutting to the left temple and parrying first while circling to the right. The gather step may also be used.

The second circle drill is based on a horizontal molinello to the left temple, parried in a rising high fourth (head guard), first moving the point off-line to intercept the blow in a sort of "windshield wiper" motion, raising the hands to catch the blow on the forte and hilt, and then either bringing the weapon all the way around the head in a helicopter molinello (for larger weapons) or turning a tighter circle in front of the face (for smaller weapons) to make the riposte.

- Fencer A makes a horizontal cut at Fencer B's right temple
- Fencer B parries using the head guard while moving the left foot to his left, and ripostes by making a molinello that ends with a horizontal cut at Fencer A's right temple. This is coordinated with the right foot's following step.
- Fencer A similarly parries and ripostes, continuing the drill.

The drill is then performed in the other direction, targeting the left temple and making the parry in a rising high third.

C. Hit the target

This is both a control and a targeting exercise. One partner holds a target, which can be a weapon simulator, a stick, or any similar object. The other seeks to strike the target from each guard position with a direct attack or molinello without crossing the partner's body; i.e., if the target is held on the partner's right, then the cut must travel from the striker's left to right, outside to inside; if it is held above his head, then it must be a descending cut from high to low.

This drill is done progressively from extension distance, at advance distance, at passing distance, and at demi-lunge distance. Once proficiency has been gained, the task becomes to, at each distance, change from any given molinello to the one needed to strike the target while making as full a circle as possible. Cuts should be half-cuts, finishing with the point threatening the partner's face.

Finally, the partner can present a moving target, moving about, changing distance, and presenting targets in various lines at different speeds and intervals. Especially challenging is to strike twice from the same side at different distances (pass and then advance/gather step, or two advances/gather steps).

D. Hit the opening line

Since the “target” here is a person, this drill is only used after the student has proven he can hit an inanimate object with control. It is similar to the last drill, save that an element of timing is established. One partner assumes a guard (basic version) or makes continual molinelli (advanced version); the other, wearing full safety equipment, stands in a counter guard with the line of attack closed. The line of attack is opened, giving the attacking partner a window to hit the opening line with a direct attack or molinello. As speed and coordination increase, the tempo with which this window opens and then closes can gradually get smaller. The ideal timing is to hit the line as it just begins to open.

E. Invitation/parry-riposte drills

This is an extremely useful drill for integrating the parry-riposte mechanics and acquiring a sense of distance and timing.

- Fencer A and B are on guard with same foot forwards. Fencer A is in low guard; Fencer B is in high guard.
- Fencer A invites a descending diagonal cut by lowering his weapon to the invitation from the low guard. Fencer B must strike *as* he opens the line.
- Fencer A parries in first or seventh (as appropriate) and ripostes while making a diagonal passing step off-line, keeping the distance—in effect, moving on the perimeter of a circle, the radius of which is his weapon and arm extended to make the riposte.
- Fencer B retreats and Fencer A takes a lateral step back to reset to do the drill to the opposite side.
- After doing the drill with parries both in first and seventh, Fencer A can invite a horizontal cut by beginning in low guard with the outside line closed and then make the invitation by opening the line, moving the weapon to the other side of his body. He then closes the line he just opened and parries with the head guard (high third or fourth) and can riposte by molinello (making sure to close the line), by direct cut with the true or false edge, or by opposition (see 11.7.3). The footwork remains the same.
- The ascending cut is invited by extending the arms, making sure that the point does not threaten the adversary. Fencer B then makes an attack to the wrists or forearms. The parry is in seventh or second and the riposte by thrust with the same footwork as before.
- It is useful for Fencer A to sometimes *not* parry to ensure that Fencer B is always sincerely trying to hit.

This can then be done with footwork.

F. Second intention and feint attack (if we have time)