

INTRODUCTION

The text that follows is taken from “The Rules of Fencing” published by Francesco Antonio Marcelli in 1686. This is mainly a rapier manual, although it also contains instructions about the use of other weapons, such as the sabre (which I translated earlier).

Chapter III

How to use the Smallsword VS the Smallsword

I list the sword among the short weapons, because a questionable use is now in vogue and the sword has been made into a smallsword¹, barely longer than one arm. Since this is the new fashion, it happens that, if you wear a smallsword and you have to fight in some brawl, with someone who has a rapier² or some other advantageous weapon, you have to die for fashion.

It happens daily to see fights of this kind, because everyone, friend of his own opinion and of fashion, more so than of his own good, walks in the path chosen by most people, but not by everyone commended. Having equal weapons, equal disposition toward the sun or on the terrain is not the rule for streetfighting, one has to fight with what gives him an advantage, or with whatever advantage he gains; while there are rules that help the one who has a disadvantage in weapons, so that he can defend himself, to tell you what I think: I see him in a lot of troubles.

Fighting with equally short weapons, smallsword VS smallsword, is to be done from a long distance, so that the target is always the arm or the hand of your opponent, because these are the closest targets, when you are far away, and because the wound will prevent him from holding his weapon.

One has to avoid closing in hand to hand combat range, but fight at sword point's range instead, because the smallsword has no problem hitting in close and so it happens that you end up stabbing each other; so avoid the actions that bring combatants close to each other and fight from a distance, insisting on making a good defense and striking the opponent in his closest openings to overcome him quickly.

Strikes should be thrusts, which are more effective, and not cuts, because the blade is short and the cut doesn't move a long way, so it will not have a good impact and will be of no expediency to you. Try to hit with the thrust which has a longer range and makes worse a wound to your opponent's arm and makes it possible to overcome him.

Skip chapter IV on single rapier VS rapier and dagger

Chapter V

How to fight with the smallsword Vs the rapier or the rapier and dagger

In one of Europe's most famous cities, where the most virtuous are born and grow up (I think you understood, without me adding anything else), two fencing masters³ of the district came to a

¹ Spadino in the original text

² Spada in the original text

³ Marcelli is most probably speaking about himself or one his relatives, who happened to be fencing masters as well.

quarrel, one of them had a smallsword, the other had rapier and dagger, they fought there with what they had. The first one was commiserated, because he was thought to be in great danger, the second one was blamed, because he, being they of equal rank, had such an advantage in his weapons. Know what? Sword and dagger were not enough to prevent the wound that was done in his arm with the smallsword. The rules of our profession help in all cases, if followed with common sense, and allow one to defend himself; when this is not the case, the rules are not to be blamed, but those who cannot use them as the art teaches. So, before you can blame the rules of the art, you have to examine the way the fighter applied them, because imperfection belongs to the bad practice of the fencer. Unde verò si que obscuritas litterarum (to use in my speech, what that great Orator said for a different purpose) nisi quia vel obtrectacionibus⁴ imperitorum, vel abutentium vitio splendor eius intercipitur⁵.

First of all, assume good position, with the arm extended and the torso to the side, well set for defence. Hold the point of the smallsword as high as your head, so that your whole torso is well covered behind this defence, your point will be held back, so that your opponent cannot engage and beat it. Do not try to poke with the smallsword, but act in “seconda intenzione” (do not attack with the smallsword VS the rapier, that is, but wait you have a good parry or bind), because, having a short weapon, you need to get close to hit and your opponent can hit you with his sword, before you get there. Do not try to keep your opponent away with half thrusts, because he may get you with a full thrust, then. Such actions don’t scare the opponent, because it is evident you cannot hurt with them, using a smallsword.

One must not time⁶ the opponent, because of his weapon’s short length, which is not enough to stop the adversary who has the long weapon; so, since one cannot hit, he plays times with questionable results, when both strike at the same time, the one with the long weapon will hit, the one with the smallsword will remain with his blade in the air, two or more palms from his opponent’s body.

One has to use “attacchi” and “guadagni”⁷, which are very good in this case and have to be done in first and second time. You will use them in first time, when you will have a good chance of engaging the blade, while the opponent, committed in his assault, will come forward with the point and, as you feel it under your blade, rush into measure to hit him and do not give him time to free the blade before he’s hit. You will use them in second time, after parrying an attack by your opponent, and, with this action, you must counter with a riposte, because it is done with the passo curvo⁸, so it allows to regain the measure one doesn’t have with the smallsword, or the one he lost because the opponent retreated backward.

⁴ Obtrectationibus in classic Latin.

⁵ Quote taken from Daniello Bartoli "Dell'hvomo di lettere difeso et emendato", Roma 1645; in this context, it means that the light is hidden by the abuse of the ignorants, not by a fault in the art. Bartoli doesn’t refer to the original author of the quote either, but to “that great Orator” as well.

⁶ Using a single time counter.

⁷ Specific actions of thrust based fencing, such as rapier fencing, aimed at the domination of the opponent’s blade (by covering his attack before it starts), here “attacco” is used in a sense more similar to the word of the Spanish tradition “atajo”, than to the modern Italian one, although I think with the smallsword it takes the form of a beat, in the end.

⁸ One of the steps described in the 9th chapter of the manual, this one is a cross step and so it ends with the left foot forward. A cross step normally covers a longer distance than a lunge.