

The Arts of Fighting and of Scholastic Dispute: Two Types of Duels at the End of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance

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Abstract – Fencing and the art of combat in general can bring you to think of an argument, a serious conversation between two individuals or two groups. Conversely, intellectual disputes and discursive exchanges can be compared to actual duels with the difference that questions, answers, and reasoning replace gestures, defences, and attacks. This rather simplistic vision deserves to be questioned in regard to the medieval and Renaissance periods, in particular from the written productions resulting from the theorisation and the inscription of these two forms of interaction: the scholastic dispute and the art of fencing. This article aims to make the link between the mechanism of the scholastic dispute, which has existed since the Middle Ages and which persists in the Renaissance, and the world of the art of medieval and early modern combat, which is materialised through the treatises of fencing and wrestling written by educated masters-at-arms as well as the practice of public fencing competitions.

Keywords – fencing, fight book, scholastic dispute, disputatio.

I. INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance, combat took on different forms. Some fights were fast and violent, even improvised and brutal. This was particularly true regarding certain brawls between peasants and ambushes, such as those reported in letters of remission that were judicial documents in which the perpetrator of a crime or homicide explained his version of the facts in order to be forgiven.¹ On the other hand, most masters-at-arms, authors of fencing treatises and fight books of the same period (*Fechtbücher*) testify that a courteous style of fencing was performed, respectful of the adversary and of certain conventional principles. For example, an anonymous sixteenth-century Bolognese fencing master points out that it is more important and honourable to parry the opponent's attacks or to counter these techniques than to attack him first. This rather different, but complementary vision from the

* Special thanks to H el ene Leblanc for her many corrections and advice.

¹ Bas, "The true edge: a comparison between self-defense fighting from German "fight-books".

Germanic authors of the previous century² can be described on two levels: First, there is a technical level, which aims at noting the action of the adversary before reacting, in order to be able to counterattack or parry his attack correctly. Second, here is a second, more symbolic level: a passive situation, more dangerous and more laudable because it requires more skill; in particular the understanding of the other's reasoning (*ragionamento*) in order to produce a more relevant gestural response (*riposta*).³ Fundamentally, in fencing treatises, randomness rarely has a place in combat theorisation, which is a truth shared by several Italian fencing masters. As Antonio Manciolino writes:

The players who make many blows without tempo or measure, although the enemy may be hit unfortunately by them, are nonetheless censurable, and sooner are said to be children of luck than of art, but those are called grave and well-positioned players who seek to strike their adversary with tempo and grace.⁴

The exchanges of blows are logical and codified, with perfect movements and a clear distinction between the actions of the two opponents. In these features lies the analogy with another type of duel, verbal this time, such as the discussion between two individuals. The *disputatio* or dispute is a verbal exchange, a debate, codified since the Middle Ages and still present in the sixteenth century:⁵ 'when two or more differ from each other on certain matters, by opposing or questioning, and answering'.⁶ The objective of this interaction would be to impose one's ideas in a kind of dialectical and rhetorical contest. Some authors have highlighted this parallel between the duel of arms with the duel of words. For example, the Italian theoretician of honour, Giovanni Battista Possevino, in

² As the legendary master-at-arms Johannes Liechtenauer said: 'And when you close with him thinking that you have the correct measure and believe that you can reach him, and then you shall go at him quickly and with speed to the head and to the body. You will hit or miss and win the first strike and not let him come to anything as you will hear hereafter in the true teaching': *Und als veld wen her denne czu im kumpt und dy moße also czu im hat das in du[e]nkt her welle in im wol haben und irreichen / zo sal her kunlich czu im burten und varen / snelle und risch / czu koppe ader czu leibe / her treffe ader vele / und sal io den vorslag genynnen / und ienen mit nichte lassen czum dinge kome / als du das bernoch wirst ho[er]en yn der gemeynen lere. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs.3227a, fol 16r (anonymous, ca. 1389 or begin of the fifteenth century). Translation by David Lindholm.*

³ Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, MSS Ravenna M-345/M-346, p. 26 and 27 (Anonimo Bolognese, c. 1510).

⁴ *Li giucatori che senza misura & tempo fanno li colpi spessi, quantunque di quelli il nemico per sciagura giunga no sono nondimeno biasmeuoli et piu tosto della uentura che da l'arte sono da esser detti figli, ma quelli si chiamano giucatori graui & appostati, che cercano con tempo & con gratia ferir il suo Auersario.* Manciolino, Antonio, *Opera nova*, 1531, p. 4 and 4v. Translation by W. Jherck Swanger.

⁵ Ashworth, 'Traditional Logic', in *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 167.

⁶ *Cum duo vel plures inter se differunt de rebus certis, opponendo seu interrogando, & respondendo.* Micraelius Johannes, *Lexicon Philosophicum*, 1653, p. 337.

1553 in his *dialogo dell'honore*, addresses the hypothetical question of the duel between a man of letters and a man of war.⁷ Possevino explains that scholars and soldiers cannot face each other, because the man of letters has no honour in facing a duel with a soldier since they do not use the same weapons and do not fight for the same reasons. The scholar's weapons are his books, authors and their doctrine, but above all, he fights for the truth.⁸ The soldier's weapon is his sword, and the honour of arms is never deemed equivalent to the honour of letters and the quest for truth. In the same way, Montaigne uses a martial vocabulary when explaining how some men of letters and students lead a calm and peaceful intellectual life, which must sometimes be stimulated and awakened by debate and verbal interactions.⁹

The study of books is a languishing and feeble motion that heats not, whereas conversation teaches and exercises at once. If I converse with a strong mind and a rough disputant, he presses upon my flanks, and pricks me right and left; his imaginations stir up mine; jealousy, glory, and contention, stimulate and raise me up to something above myself.¹⁰

The parallel between combat and conversation is classical. In certain treatises of fencing, the introductory dialogues are an opportunity to debate the question of the most respectable profession between knights and men of letters¹¹. Although, as the saying goes, 'the pen is mightier than the sword',¹² factually, students are interested in handling weapons, as evidenced by the judgment of the Paris Parliament of August 20 1554 which asked fencing masters of the suburbs to settle inside the city walls so students could take fencing lessons instead.¹³ In some universities, students carried the sword,¹⁴ and it happens that they did not hesitate to participate in brawls with arms in hand.¹⁵

⁷ On fight books as treatises of honour, see Jaquet, "Personne ne laisse volontiers son honneur être tranché".

⁸ Pantin, 'La querelle savante dans l'Europe de la Renaissance', p. 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *L'estude des livres, c'est un mouvement languissant et foible qui n'eschauffe point: là où la conference apprend et exerce en un coup. Si je confere avec une ame forte et un roide jousteur, il me presse les flancs, me pique à gauche et à dextre, ses imaginations eslancent les miennes. La jalousie, la gloire, la contention me poussent et rebaussent au-dessus de moy-mesmes.* Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 8, ed. Villey-Saulnier. Translation by Charles Cotton.

¹¹ Especially for Angelo Viggiani dal Montone, *Lo Schermo*, 1575, pp. 6-9; 15b-18b.

¹² On this comparison, see Leblanc, 'The Hand to the Sword Like the Mind to the Word: Learning from Late Medieval Fencing Treatises', forthcoming.

¹³ Daressy, *Archives des maitres d'armes de Paris*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Grendler, 'Fencing, Playing Ball, and Dancing in Italian Renaissance Universities', p. 263.

¹⁵ Cassagnes-Brouquet, *La violence des étudiants au Moyen Âge*, p. 240.

However, present article will leave aside the material historical issue of fencing students and will focus on the relation between the art of the weapon duel and the art of the oral duel: the scholastic dispute. A caveat here: the present article does not intend to deny the influence of other kinds of philosophical genres on fencing treatises, in particular the one of philosophical dialogue.¹⁶ Rather, the starting point will be the following:

If philosophical dialogues were present in some fencing treatises from the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the scholastic dispute also persists in different textual forms during the same time period. The scholastic dispute is not a simple verbal or standardised epistolary exchange, it is a pedagogical method that organizes knowledge and sometimes culminates in writing, as it is the case with the *reportationes*: a textual intermediary between mere student notes and a preparatory document which, once revised by the master will give rise to a proper edition.¹⁷

The objective of this article is to take stock of some comparative elements between medieval and early modern scholastic disputes and their transcription in writing, and Renaissance fencing treatises with relation to different forms of duels of the same period.

II. THE DISPUTE, THE FENCING TREATISE, AND THEIR MECHANISMS

The scholastic dispute started to develop at the end of the twelfth¹⁸ or beginning of the thirteenth century following the rise of medieval universities. It is an argument or debate between two people framed and initiated by a third, more often a master, sometimes called *moderator* or *praeses*.¹⁹ This is not a free discussion, but a verbal exchange framed by rules aimed at a form of teaching, supervised by an authority. It is characterised by a dialectical method, which consists in reporting and examining opposing arguments of reason and authority around a question. The participants make these arguments. The master must reach a doctrinal solution through an act of *determinatio*. The goal is to reach a common truth and not to turn this dispute into a mere controversy. Dispute involves the art of dialectic, or logic as codified by Aristotle.²⁰

The first parallel between dispute and fencing lies in the organisation around the confrontation of two individuals, supervised by a third, the master. It suffices to consider the illustrations of a few works. During the fifteenth century, Germanic manuscripts and treatises typically depicted two opponents in static situations, with

¹⁶ Périgot, 'Antécédences: De la *disputatio* médiévale au débat humaniste', p. 43.

¹⁷ Weijers, *Le maniement du savoir*, pp. 146-148.

¹⁸ Bazàn, Fransen, Jacquart and Wippel, *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine*, p. 25.

¹⁹ Pantin, 'La querelle savante dans l'Europe de la Renaissance', p. 2.

²⁰ Périgot, 'Antécédences: De la *disputatio* médiévale au débat humaniste'.

guards, postures, or physical interactions such as attacks, defenses, arm locks, or wrestling techniques. However, some illustrations external to fencing manuals, as well as two later treatises analyzed here, introduced a third individual: the master. Indeed, in the last plate of the part devoted to the handling of the pike in the manuscripts of the middle of the sixteenth century by Paul-Hector Mair²¹ and in the introduction of one of the manuscripts and the treatise of 1570 by Joachim Meyer,²² there is an illustration of an individual standing, leaning on his long staff or quarterstaff. This character, which appears in several illustrations of public Germanic fencing competitions from the same period, called *Fechtschulen* or schools of fencing, is an important and essential figure in the assaults. He appears to be the master and referee who frames the fight. In particular, his quarterstaff is used to end the confrontation and the rules specify that it is forbidden to hit over or under his staff.²³ Thus, playful combat is supervised and initiated by a master, as it is the case for scholastic disputes.

Nevertheless, the mechanism of the dispute differs from the organization of real duels or those exposed in combat books. During assaults, the master does not decide who attacks and who defends. He does not determine a specific gestural problematic. Both players are free to use any guard position or stance of their choice. By contrast, within the scholastic dispute, the master is the main initiator and first protagonist of the exchange.

To recall the process of the dispute:²⁴

1. the master asks a question and a student, the *respondens*, answers by clearing the ground;
2. a second student, the *opponens*, opposes the first one;
3. the master intervenes to give his solution, called *determinatio magistrale*, and he usually ends with a response to the objections of the *opponens*.

The master ends the conflict. In this, the *determinatio* is comparable to a judgment during an armed assault. It appears from the reading of the sources and regulations of several European areas that such arbitration activity has never been clearly specified. If the master intervenes in the setting up of the duel, and at its end, it seems probable that his intervention lies above all in the transcription of the sequences in theoretical treatises.

²¹ München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.icon.393, t. I, pl. 12, fol. 187^v-188^r (Paul-Hector Mair, [*De arte athletica*], middle of the sixteenth century); Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis Palatinus 10825, fol 171^v (Paul-Hector Mair, middle of the sixteenth century); Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Mscr.Dresd. C.93/94, pl.12, fol. 199^v (Paul-Hector Mair, middle of the sixteenth century).

²² Lund, Universitätsbibliothek, MS A.4°.2, fol. 2^r (Joachim Meyer, c. 1560); Meyer, Joachim, *Gründliche Beschreibung der kunst des Fechten* (Strasbourg, Thiebolt Berger, 1570) frontispiece and book 1, ill. A et book 5, ill. F.

²³ Wassmannsdorff, *Sechs Fechtschulen (d.i. Schau- und Preisfechten)*, p. 10.

²⁴ Weijers, 'De la joute dialectique à la dispute scolastique'.

These technical sequences are called ‘pieces’ in German (*Stücken*). It should be noted that while in fencing treatises, writing remains the master’s prerogative, in scholastic disputes the students participate in the textual production by their notes and *reportationes* (although these are often revised by the master).

Paul-Hector Mair, who was not a fencing master but a citizen of Augsburg and a wealthy member of the city council, was one of the rare authors who provides a manuscript entirely in Latin, *De arte athletica*, while the majority of the other authors wrote in vernacular languages. In his introduction, Paul-Hector Mair states that the techniques illustrated in his book partly come from previous works. He also emphasizes that two competent fencers played the role of model, and thus that the book aims at representing a realistic gestural sequence. The majority of German authors offer sequences or pieces (*Stücken*) comprising several actions, at least two: a technique and the means to counter it, and more often three: the first fighter attacks, the second counters the attack or parries the first action, finally, the first reacts against the defense of the second in order to keep the initiative or even to hit his opponent. Paul-Hector Mair is one of the authors who offers the longest and most complete technical sequences with many different weapons, on foot or on horseback, with or without armour. These sequences or pieces can end with the separation of the two adversaries or most often with a fall or a blow reaching one protagonist.

Let us consider the following example, the 24th two-handed sword piece of the manuscript Mscr. Dresd. C.93 by Paul-Hector Mair (Fig. 1).



Fig.1. A Durchlauffen ('Run Through') with a Ringen ('Grapple'), Paul-Hector Mair, De arte athletica, middle of the sixteenth century.

When you come to the closing with the opponent, strike high to his head as you step inward with your right foot in front of his right. If he displaces this, then let your sword fall over behind your back, run your head through his right arm, grab with your right hand around his body towards his left side and with your left hand to the back of his right knee. Thus you throw him.

If you will break this, then let your sword fall and drop your right arm high over his left. Thus you may lift him with that.

If he has grabbed you like this, then yank your right leg back, release your right hand from his body and grab behind his right knee with it. Then thrust with your left hand into his chest. Thus you throw him back.²⁵

This exchange of blows and techniques is similar to a verbal exchange during an argument. Moreover, the composition, syntax and selected vocabulary suggest likeness with an alternation of arguments between the *respondes* and the *opponens*. However, there is a critical difference: in spite of many possibilities, the cuts, thrusts, guards, and techniques of fencing are limited compared to the verbal arguments. In a treatise, fencing is a combination of limited actions. In other words, once schematised, the technical content described in the treatise brings out a heuristic map or a tree of possibilities that would allow a contemporary reader to synthesise and associate several similar actions from different pieces. This construction of a mental map is not entirely modern. It refers to the process of *reduction in art* operated since the Renaissance, which consists in bringing together scattered knowledge and organizing it in a figurative and didactic process.²⁶ One of the most famous examples is the tree-like representation of the different guards and their declension by Angelo Viggiani.²⁷

In Paul-Hector Mair, the piece with a two-handed sword is translated as such:

If A is the first mentioned player and Z the second:

²⁵ Einn durchlauffen mit ainem Rinngen. Item wann du Mit dem zusechten zu dem mann kumpst. haw Im oben zu dem kopff. vnd tritt mit deinem rechten fuosz Innwendig fur seinen Rechten versetzt er dir das. so lasz dein schwert hinten uber deinnen Rucken abfallen. lauf mit deinerm kopff durch seinnen Rechten arm. vnnnd greiff Im mit deiner rechten hand umb. seinnen Leib hinnumb zu seiner Linncken seiten. vnd mit deiner Lincken hand nach seinem rechten. kniepus so wirfstu In. wiltu das prechen. so lasz dein schwert fallen. vnd fall Im mit deinerm Rechten Arm oben uber seinen Linncken. so magstu. In damit beben. hat er dich also gefasst. so zuckb deinen rechten schenckel. zuruckb lasz dein rechte hand vonn seinem leyb. vnnnd greiff Im damit nach seinem Rechten Kniepus. stosz In mit deiner Linncken hand Inn sein prust. So wirfstu In zuruckb. Translation by Keith P. Myers.

²⁶ Dubourg-Glatigny, and Vérin, *Réduire en art, la technologie de la Renaissance aux Lumières*; Briost, 'La réduction en art de l'escrime au XVI^e siècle', pp. 293-316; Bas, 'Restitution des gestes martiaux : évolutions et révolution au milieu du XVI^e siècle'.

²⁷ Angelo Viggiani dal Montone, *Lo Schermo*, p. 57, cit. in Briost, Drévilion, Serna, *Croiser le fer, Violence et culture de l'épée dans la France Moderne (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle)*, pp. 143 and 148. See also Jaquet, 'The use of scholastic concepts in describing fighting technique in European fight books'.

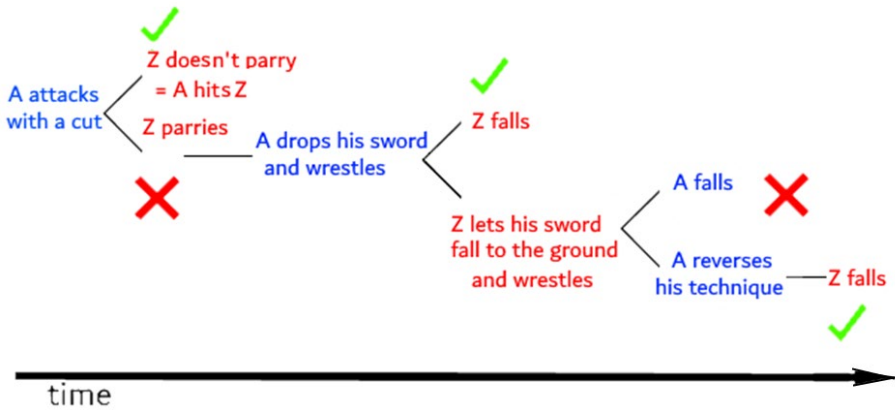


Fig.2 The interaction between the player A and Z in the 24th two-handed sword piece of the manuscript Mscr. Dresd. C.93

A and Z use several common tactical tools. The first is to attack with the edge of the sword. The second is to abandon the fencing phase to come and wrestle while keeping the sword in one hand with a well-known technique, the ‘running through’ (*Durchlaufen*). The third is to drop the weapon to accept the wrestling. The fourth is to reverse one’s position to counter the opposing action.

The choice of the initial situations and their outcomes is left to the author of the book. In general, some authors, through the multiplication and organization of techniques, present their system like Paul-Hector Mair by presenting problems with varied situations and similar solutions with different weapons. The last action is therefore not the only solution, but one solution amongst others. This element is comparable to the transcriptions of scholastic disputes. Disputes counter theses, not individuals. In both cases, it is not the opponent fencer or scholar who is fought, but his actions (for the former) or arguments (for the latter). Moreover, in both cases, the actions or answers are not definitive, but inserted in a chain. The final action is only one success amongst other potential successes or outcomes to the advantage of one of the two protagonists.

As Alain de Libera points out: ‘the scholastic dispute is not a duel between two opponents, but it is the discussion of a question, following a precise protocol, having as protagonists not two “adversaries”, but a plurality of speakers in a regulated device’.²⁸ On the other way, we can conclude that several fencing treatises are not reducible to a ‘duel paradigm’ and that they share in some extent the ‘dispute principles’.

²⁸ De Libera, ‘L’âge d’or de la disputatio’.

II.1. Reasoning, tactics and arguments

After having considered the structural mechanisms of scholastic dispute and fencing treatises, let us now turn to the way in which they organize reasoning and argumentation. In their textual works, fencing masters sometimes refer to authorities (*auctoritates*). The most important is that of Aristotle, ‘the philosopher’, often cited on the occasion of general remarks on movement, time, and the quantity and quality of the proposals which are taken up and developed in the non-technical parts of treatises²⁹ or the dialogues.³⁰ The second authority included in the Germanic treatises is undoubtedly Johannes Liechtenauer, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of fencing. Although his existence remains uncertain, the technical poem he has been attributed has been copied and glossed by several fencing masters who embodied his legacy. One of these is Joachim Meyer, who in his 1570 work is one of the few to comment upon the following statement:

To this Liechtenauer did speak. Before displacing guard yourself. Place yourself for advantage. With which he didn’t completely warn against parrying, namely that you should teach only strikes and how to damage, as was told above.³¹

By remembering these principles, fencers choose their tactics but textually, no master summons a martial authority to justify a technical choice directly in the piece. This is not the case for the dispute, which more often appeals to arguments of authority, namely quotations from ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians, as well as Church Fathers. Their sentences are then used as axioms.

The second type of arguments used in disputes is *rationes* or reasons. Once again, the targets are not ideologies or people, but statements. The reasoning of the dispute is dialectical. It does not have to be rhetorical, there is no persuasion, no *pathos*. This is just crude reasoning. The psychological situation of the adversary or the person applying the technique is rarely, if ever, directly addressed in most treatises.³² In this, fencing techniques and tactics can be compared to dialectical and logical arguments, influenced by no psychological factor.

²⁹ For example, Hs.3227a, fol. 22r-22v.

³⁰ For example, Angelo Viggiani dal Montone, *Lo Schermo*, p. 63v.

³¹ *Thut auch Lichtenauer meldung da er spricht : Vor versetzen hüt dich, Geschichts dir not es mübet dich. Mit welchem er das versetzen darumb nit gar wil verbieten, nemlich das du nichts anders dann zuhawwen lehren solt, dann wie es dein schad, wie droben gebürt.* Translation by Mike Rasmusson. Meyer, *Gründtliche Beschreibung der kunst des Fechten*, book 1, p. 15v.

³² Meyer, *Gründtliche Beschreibung der kunst des Fechten*, book 3, p. 99r.

Let us go a little deeper into details and take for instance the model that settles around 1200, as described by Olga Weijers. The argumentative and counter-argumentative mechanisms of the dispute match the sequence: *positio – oppositio – responsio*.³³

Oppositio is itself divided into three elements: *propositio – interrogatio – conclusio*. More important, the *responsio* to the *oppositio* can take three argumentative forms that can be assimilated to tactics in fencing or wrestling:

Concessio: the opponent said something true. An argument may be conceded if there is no counter-argument. The fencer or the wrestler must accept the movement or the force of the adversary.

Contradictio: the opponent said something incorrect. The argument can be refuted on its substance or on its form. The opponent has made a technical error and his attack can be countered or his cut parried.

Prohibitio: the opponent has said something that is unclear, unnecessary, equivocal, or that can be nuanced or completed. The fencer can then ignore this action or use it to his advantage and regain the initiative. For example, the opponent decides to drop his weapon to begin the wrestling while the other fighter can use his sword advantageously.

To continue, let us say a word of one well-known form of the dispute: the *obligationes*. Here, the objective is to lead the *respondens* to accept propositions that are contrary to the thesis that they are ‘obligated’ to defend or more generally to force him into contradictions. This tactic is comparable to the pieces of fencing in which the attacker is obliged to drop his sword to accept the wrestling that his opponent imposes on him at a much shorter range, where his weapon becomes unusable. He chooses to fence, his opponent imposes wrestling, he is then forced to drop his sword to fight correctly.

The conclusion of this section will go to memory that play a crucial role in the dispute as an oral exercise as well as in the duel. It is worth noting that in a rather innovative pedagogical approach, Joachim Meyer’s treatise recalls which techniques must be retained and mastered. One must immediately know how to execute them facing the adversary just as one, knowing the letters of the alphabet, knows how to place the letters in order to form words and sentences.³⁴ The greatest task of all authors and masters is to create exercises to help memorising these tactics and these sequences. However, the particularity of fencing is that it is about physical automatism. It is an ‘embodied knowledge’: a type of knowledge where the body knows how to act before the memory of the mind.³⁵

³³ Weijers, ‘De la joute dialectique à la dispute scolastique’, p. 511.

³⁴ Meyer, *Gründliche Beschreibung der kunst des Fechten*, book 1, cap. 9, p. 25r.

³⁵ Tanaka, ‘The notion of embodied knowledge’, pp. 149-150.

II.2. Similar practical goals?

According to Olga Weijers, the scholastic dispute as the discussion of a question by means of dialectical tools between the master and the students, must be distinguished from the ‘dialectical dispute’, during which a *respondens* must defend a proposition proposed by the *opponens*. The former is a method of teaching, the latter is more akin to a duel.³⁶ The *opponens* must cause the *respondens* to contradict himself. Some disputes are also called ‘quodlibetal disputes’, in which the initial problem is left to the audience and the public; it is a form of verbal duelling restored in 1452³⁷ that allows participants from outside the school.³⁸ It is an exceptional form of dispute which through its outward-looking organization could be reminiscent of the *Fechtschulen*. These fencing competitions were sometimes open to everyone and not just to members of the same brotherhood of fencers.³⁹

It is worth remembering that all fencing treatises do not systematically contextualise the application framework of the technical material they present. Some techniques can be used in both contexts of a free duel or a duel supervised by a master. Indeed, for authors like Joachim Meyer or Paul-Hector Mair, fencing is a universal combat art, which can be applied during playful contests and competitions, but also in the context of skirmishes and personal defence. This universal and polymorphous aspect is important on both didactic and pedagogical levels. The chivalrous art of combat and its textual transcription would above all be teaching methods composed of systems and examples. Without exact definitions of the context of its application, it is up to the reader or student to adapt their practice to the conventions imposed by the context and any regulations.⁴⁰

To identify common ground between the disputes and duels of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it is necessary to go further and supplement the fight books with normative sources and the regulations of other public competitions. The idea is that public scholastic disputes during which some students designated as champions are supervised by godfathers and must defend the theses of their master, share some important features with *pas d’armes* and duels of honour.⁴¹

³⁶ Weijers, ‘De la joute dialectique à la dispute scolastique’, p. 517. Other scholars do not necessarily distinguish disputes in this way. For example: De Libera, ‘L’âge d’or de la disputatio’.

³⁷ Weijers, *La disputatio dans les Facultés des arts au Moyen Âge*.

³⁸ Bazàn, Fransen, Jacquart and Wippel, *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine*, p. 165.

³⁹ Wassmannsdorff, *Sechs Fechtschulen*.

⁴⁰ Bas, ‘A new historical combat school? The Convention of the Sword Players’.

⁴¹ On *pas d’armes*, see Jaquet, “‘Personne ne laisse volontiers son honneur être tranché’”; Stangier, ‘Ich hab hertz als ein leb’; on duels of honour, see Cavina, *Il sangue dell’onore*, pp. 41-103 and Jaquet, ‘Six weeks to Prepare for Combat’.

In scholastic disputes, the different participants use similar instruments and arguments, but do not embody the same roles. The confrontation is of an asymmetrical nature. One might think that the same is true in fencing treatises where one of the protagonists must necessarily take the initiative in order to begin the exchange. This is especially true regarding various forms of playful duels organised at the end of the Middle Ages and afterwards. This is the case of some *Fechtschulen*, or public schools, where ritualised tournaments organised in the Holy Empire took place in which the loser of the duel would have to face another competitor in an attempt to defeat the previous winner.⁴² Flanders and Picardy host an even more developed an asymmetrical confrontation system,⁴³ in which the defender does not have the same tactical objectives and the same authorised techniques as his opponent, the attacker. For example, the attacker must hit the defender on a high-target area, ideally the head. The defender, on the other hand, can touch the attacker on different parts of the body in order to eliminate him.⁴⁴ Their means are practically similar, but their tactical objectives are quite different. This kind of confrontation appears also during prize games and *passage en défense*, a kind of public examination concluding a learning cycle, by which a student defends a prize in order to become a master.⁴⁵ A ritualised form that could be compared to *inceptio* in the university world,⁴⁶ a ceremony in the form of a public dispute that allows the student to become a master. Finally, in the same way that there are internal assaults in the brotherhood of fencers and inside fencing halls, there are private disputes such as the *disputatio privata, in scholis propriis*, which would also serve as training for public disputes or *disputatio ordinaria*.

In a nutshell, if knowledge is a weapon, dispute would be the art of wielding it. However, its perfect handling is understood through the faulty handling and the mistakes of the opponent. The objective of the scholastic dispute, much like the duel of fencing, goes beyond a simple victory at any cost. The intent is primarily pedagogical. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the authors of fencing treatises aim at sharing their knowledge and their truth. Explicitly pursuing this approach are some schools, particularly those of Hispanic origin such as the *Verdadera Destreza* ('The True Skill'), which contrast with the *esgrima vulgar* ('vulgar fencing')⁴⁷ and the Girard Thibault d'Anvers school with its

⁴² Wassmannsdorff, *Sechs Fechtschulen*, p. 13.

⁴³ Scrive-Bertin, 'La confrérie d'armes de Saint-Michel ou des escrimeurs lillois'; 'Statuts des maîtres du jeu d'armes d'Amiens', in *Recueil des monuments inédits de l'histoire du tiers état*, ed. by Augustin, vol. II, pp. 584-588.

⁴⁴ Bas, 'Escrimes et Joueurs d'épée en Flandre et en Picardie au XVIe siècle', pp. 107-119.

⁴⁵ Dupuis, 'Organization and Regulation of Fencing in the Realm of France in the Renaissance'.

⁴⁶ Bazàn, Fransen, Jacquart and Wippel, *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine*, p. 98.

Mysterious Circle.⁴⁸ However, unlike their scholastic masters, masters-at-arms are rarely willing to clearly state faulty actions or doomed tactics. This is not the case of Paul-Hector Mair who proposes actions that are bound to fail. The big difference is that the scholastic dispute usually begins on the basis of a text by discussing contradictory interpretations. Conversely, the fencing master or the author of the treatise may create the initial situation. The path is therefore not identical; it is practically reversed. The free duel would be closer to dialectical disputes focusing on the direct interaction between two opponents. If the fencing masters can criticise the opinions of their previous colleagues on various subjects, typically on the number of guards or attacks,⁴⁹ they, above all, criticize a system and not a textual production or a school of thought directly.

Finally, the goal of the scholastic dispute is to provide the correct answer to the question, to determine or to teach the truth while taking into account the various facets of the problem or its possible answers. It uses dialectical argumentation and syllogism. Authors of fencing treatises sometimes resort to similar mechanisms.⁵⁰ In the dispute, as in the duel, the quest for truth seems to be something that needs to be shared. According to Pierre Abélard, the dispute is not a real struggle nor the search for knowledge for a single man, rather, it is a debate between two individuals who consider a particular problem. It is the same in certain treatises on fencing like Paul-Hector Mair's, in which the problem is either gestural or tactical and, in both cases, exploited by two camps.

III. CONCLUSION

The fencing treatises and the scholastic disputes are the textual representations of two different forms of duels: the duel of weapons and the duel of letters. Although the playful fencing duel needs, as with disputes, the involvement of three individuals, the master and two opponents, the two types of confrontations are significantly different in many aspects. The most fundamental point is that, during a fencing duel, the master-at-arms does not impose a specific problem on the two protagonists, besides that of confronting each other and not continuing to fight when he interposes his staff. This is not the case in the scholastic dispute where the master initiates the interaction with his question and ends it through his *determinatio*. Nevertheless, some fencing treatises like Paul-Hector Mair's offer technical sequences or pieces which can be thought of as different categories of specific arguments and tactics found in disputes. They are used to respond to a specific tactical or gestural problem and lead to a logical result. In all cases, these gestural or verbal arguments are either parried or thwarted, not attacked. Fencing treatises very rarely

⁴⁸ Thibault d'Anvers, *Academie de l'espée*, 1630.

⁴⁹ For example Saint-Didier, *Traicté contenant les secrets du premier livre sur l'espée seule*, 1573, p. 6 and 7.

⁵⁰ Chaize, 'Les traditions martiales en Occident, essai de typologies d'après le corpus de livres d'armes'.

expose tactics to counter a specific school or strategy. Whether for disputes or duels, both forms of reasoning and registration are legitimised by complex interactions, tactics and mechanism. Polemics and heated debates have nothing to do with disputes. In the same way, aggression and pragmatic victory in a single action remain far removed from the idealised courtly and honourable confrontation. For some martial authors of the Renaissance, the practical purpose and the pedagogical approach were as important as the technical and theoretical progress. The same applies to the actors of the dispute who are in a quest for the shared truth that can only be understood and accepted if the opposing positions and arguments have been expressed, defended, and challenged in the sight of all.

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