

Fight Books in Context: Martial and University Cultures at the Edge of Modernity

From Schools to Swords: An Introduction

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What is the cultural background of the masters of arms? What are the meanings of the scientific and philosophical references scattered in the fight books corpus? To what extent does the university culture permeate the whole society and specifically martial culture? These are the leading questions of the present issue of *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*.

This thematic issue is an unexpected output of the [Schol'Art](#) project – The early modern theories of letters and arts in the light of Scholasticism (France – Italy, 1500–1700), a research project that is carried out at the [Group for Early Modern Cultural Analysis](#) (GEMCA) of the UCLouvain, Belgium (2017–2023). The starting point of this interdisciplinary research is the observation that Scholasticism, far from ending with the medieval period, provided a lively intellectual framework for modernity.¹ Although this observation is now well-established in history of philosophy, its spread is slower in other fields where ‘Scholasticism’ is still a synonym of a boring medieval way to teach a theologically oriented Aristotle. One way to criticize this definition is to show that, without denying the specificities of humanist influence, and without losing sight of the ruptures introduced by modernity, it is clear that Scholasticism played a decisive role during the early modern period. More particularly, it is necessary to work on the interactions between the university culture—that is embodied by Scholasticism for the medieval and early modern periods—and the other fields of knowledge and arts. The Schol'Art project is conceived from this perspective: aiming at the relations of, on the one hand, scholastic philosophy (i.e. logic, ethics, physics and metaphysics) and theology, and, on the other hand, the theories of literature and art of the early modern period. Since the Schol'Art hypothesis proved to be fruitful concerning art and literature, it also appeared necessary to test it with more technical or ‘mechanical’ texts, which is where fencing treatises come into play.

I was beginning to work as a postdoctoral researcher on the Schol'Art project when I started HEMA in 2020. Since my first readings of late medieval and early modern fencing treatises, I have been struck not only by the amount of philosophical references, but also and more precisely, by the weight of Aristotelianism and by the consistency of the scholastic backbone supporting the texts: a particular pedagogical vocabulary, the obsession of providing fencing a rightful place within the classification of arts and

¹ ‘Scholasticism’ understood as ‘content and methodology that are used in the medieval and early modern universities, in particular in the faculties of arts and theology’.

sciences, and last but not least, the parallelism between fighting with words and fighting with swords. However and at first sight, it could have been a largely biased reading due to professional distortion. I was just seeing Scholasticism everywhere.

I would probably have left it at that, had it not been for two works to which I must pay tribute here. The first is the masterful critical edition (and French translation) of the Royal Armouries FECHT 1 (MS I.33) published in 2009 by Franck Cinato and Didier Surprenant. In the introduction, the editors convincingly argue in favour of a scholastic interpretation of the treatise. Such a thesis has been well accepted since then. However, this only applies to MS I.33. Something more was needed to take the plunge and extend the inquiry to the rest of the (heterogeneous) corpus. Pierre-Alexandre Chaize took the risk of publishing in 2013 an article titled ‘Quand la pratique est Logique. Clés de lecture pour aborder la tradition liechtenauerienne’.² In this article, Chaize provided enough elements to convince a historian of philosophy that looking for traces of scholastic Aristotelianism in fight books was worth the effort.

Naturally, the aforementioned works are not the only attempts to consider history of fencing within a broad cultural history and specifically within the philosophical culture of schools and universities. Within the limits of this short introduction, it is worth mentioning at least the following references: Matthias Johannes Bauer, ‘*Einen Zedel fechter ich mich ruem / Im Schwerd vnd Messer vngestuem*’, on the borrowings of fencing treatises from the scholastic methodology of commentaries on a canon of authorities; Paul F. Grendler, ‘Fencing, Playing Ball, and Dancing in Italian Renaissance Universities’ on the role of fencing within the Italian universities during the Renaissance; Kevin DeLapp, ‘Philosophical Duelism’, on a dialectical approach of fencing theorization; and Pascal Brioist, ‘La réduction en art de l’escrime au XVI^e siècle’ in relation to theorization and the sciences/arts classification.

In 2021, I started discussions with Daniel Jaquet, Pierre-Henry Bas and Franck Cinato. On the basis of these collaborations, a few months later, the GEMCA of the UCLouvain hosted a session on “Fencing Manuals and Scholasticism” at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Dublin (March 30th-April 2nd, 2022). The present issue originates from this session. Daniel Jaquet provides an overview of scholastic concepts and tools found in the fight books corpus (1400-1600) and paves the way for further research concerning the formation of both the authors and the intended readers and users of fight books. Pierre-Henry Bas follows the trail of the similarities between the art of dispute that characterizes the scholastic methodology, and the duel that is the core of the fencing practice. My own work has a more limited focus: together with Franck Cinato, I propose a close comparison between the 14th century *Liber de Arte Dimicatoria* (the aforementioned MS I.33) and Heinrich von Gunterrodt’s *Sciomachia et Hoplomachia: sive de Veris Principiis Artis Dimicatoriae* (1579), the first text which explicitly refers to I.33. This

² Chaize, ‘Quand la pratique est Logique’.

comparison aims at assessing more accurately what becomes of the scholastic features of MS I.33 in later related treatises.

Two additional articles complete this volume and improve its impact in the field. Miente Pietersma offers a study on the uses of Aristotelian Scholasticism in Achille Marozzo's *Opera Nuova*, with a particular focus on the epistemic efficiency of images. Finally, while the aforementioned articles focus on the end of the middle ages, the Renaissance and the edge of modernity, Karin Verelst's article aims at providing HEMA practitioners with an outline of the origins of the intellectual framework inherited by their authors from late antiquity to the medieval period, with an emphasis on logic and medicine.

I conclude by thanking the authors: this issue of *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* is the result of a collaborative effort of several months, and each of us worked hard to approach a field—either history of scholastic philosophy or history of fencing—that is not the one he or she originally specialised in. We do hope that this interdisciplinary endeavour will contribute to decompartmentalise both, and to study them in broader historical perspectives.

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