

INTRODUCTION TO RAPIER

Based on the teachings of Ridolfo Capo Ferro,
in his treatise first published in 1610.

A WORKBOOK

By Nick Thomas

Instructor and co-founder of the

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Version 1

Introduction

The rapier is the iconic sword of the renaissance, but it is often misunderstood due to poor representation in popular culture. The reality of the rapier is that it was a brutal and efficient killer. So much so that in Britain it was often considered a bullies or murderers weapon. Because to use a rapier against a person is to attempt to kill them, and not just defend oneself. A result of the heavy emphasis on point work and the horrendous internal damage that such thrust work inflicts.

Rapier teachings were first brought to Britain in the 1570's, and soon became the dominant weapon for civilian wear. Of course many weapons that were not so different were also used in the military, featuring the same guards and slightly lighter and broader blades.

The rapier was very commonly used with offhand weapons, and Capo Ferro covers a range of them. However for this work book, we will focus on single sword, which is the foundation of the system.

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Overview of the weapon

The first thing to accept as someone who already studies one form or another of European swordsmanship, is that you should not treat the rapier as something alien to you. Too many competent swordsmen begin the practice of rapier by treating it as something wholly new, rather than adapting what they already know.

The reality is that the rapier is one natural progression from early sword types, not something completely different. As you practice the rapier you should see the same basic principals being used that are shared between longsword, sabre, and most other sword forms. With this in mind, do not treat the rapier as a dainty or flowery implement, it is a brutal and ruthless weapon, and should be used and treated as such.

The Italian rapier fencing system is what most people refer to as linear, in that most actions are made in a straight line to your opponent, as opposed to regularly using circling or incline steps. This is not to say that such techniques do not exist in rapier, but that it is predominately straight line fencing, the theory being that the straight line is the shortest distance. The rapier relies primarily on 'stesso tempo' (single time) fencing. This is where you strike and displace (parry) your opponent's blade with single actions, as opposed to the parry-riposte which is common in smallsword and sabre, which is *dui tempi*.

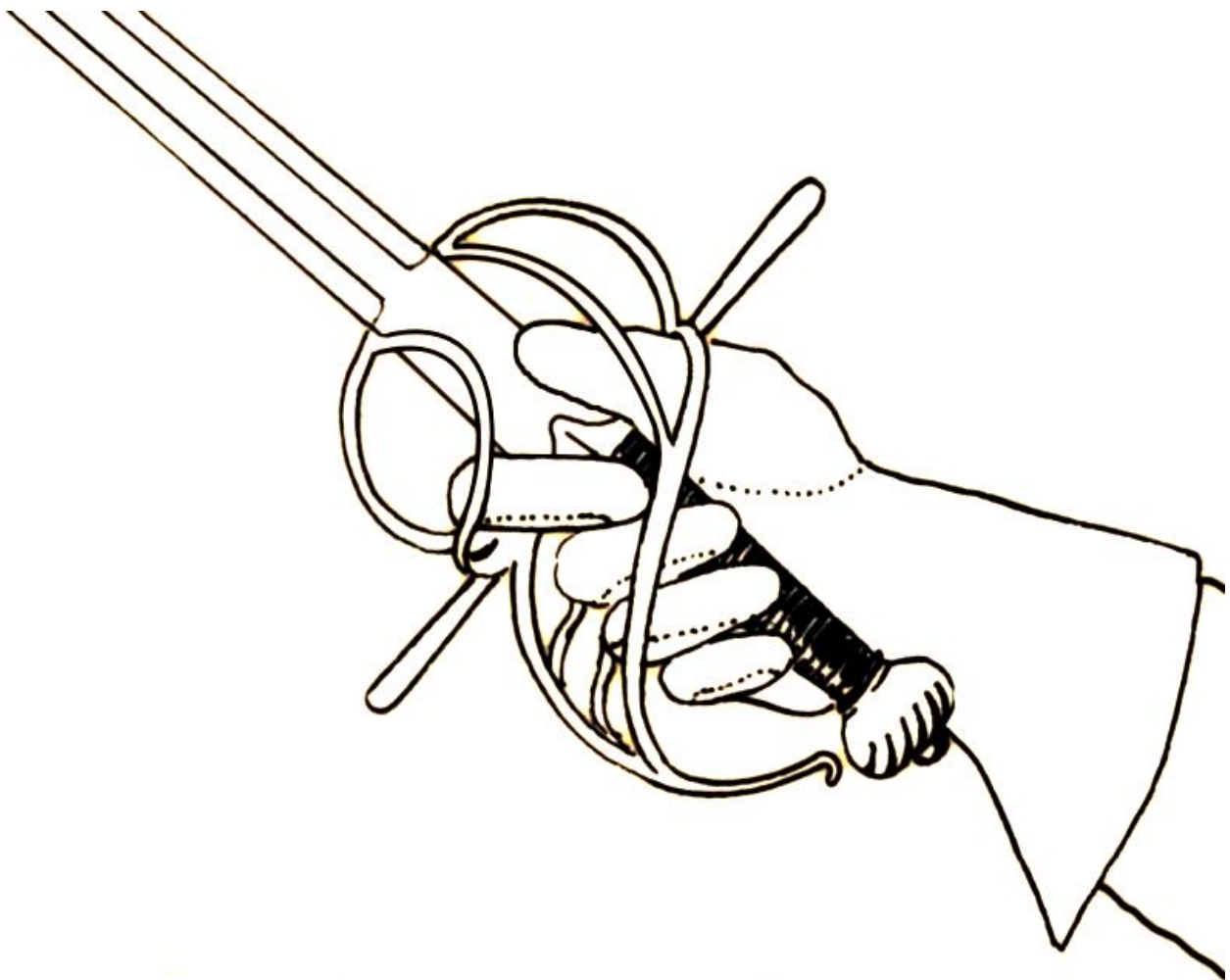
When considering the target zones and how you can inflict damage on your opponent, the entire body is a target zone to the thrust, but the cut is not used against the torso and shoulders. This is due to the fact that the rapier does not transmit as much blunt force trauma as many earlier weapons, but do not let that make you think that the cut is not useful.

Grip

There are several ways to grip a rapier, but for the practice of Capo Ferro we are only concerned with the one shown below. Wrapping the index finger around the quillion reduces stress and fatigue on the hand and provides excellent point control.

The thumb may either point up the flat of the blade, or rest on top of the index finger.

Your grip should be focused on the thumb and index finger, and many actions in rapier will require a fairly loose grip of the other three fingers to give you the greatest range of movement.



Guards

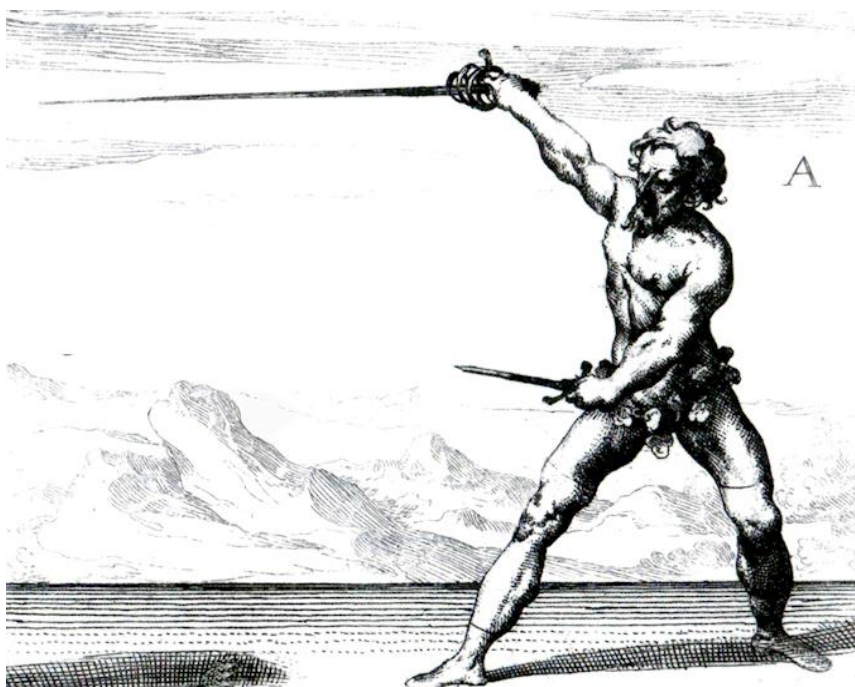
There are four primary guards and two secondary. The four primary guards refer to the angle of the wrist, meaning that the position of the body and height of the weapon can vary substantially. When starting out, it is best to keep an even body weighting. You will notice a range of upper body posture in Capo Ferro. The more upright or withdrawn your upper body is, the more defensive your posture. The more forward your upper bodyweight is, the more aggressive your stance is.

Notice the primary guards are all formed with an extended lead arm, this provides maximum defence, keeps your opponent at distance, and allows you to dominate their blade, as you will find out about later in 'stringering'.

Capo Ferro's favourite guard is third, unlike the other primary guards it does not cover any line (inside/outside), but is a mixed guard, easy to hold and quick to respond in any direction.

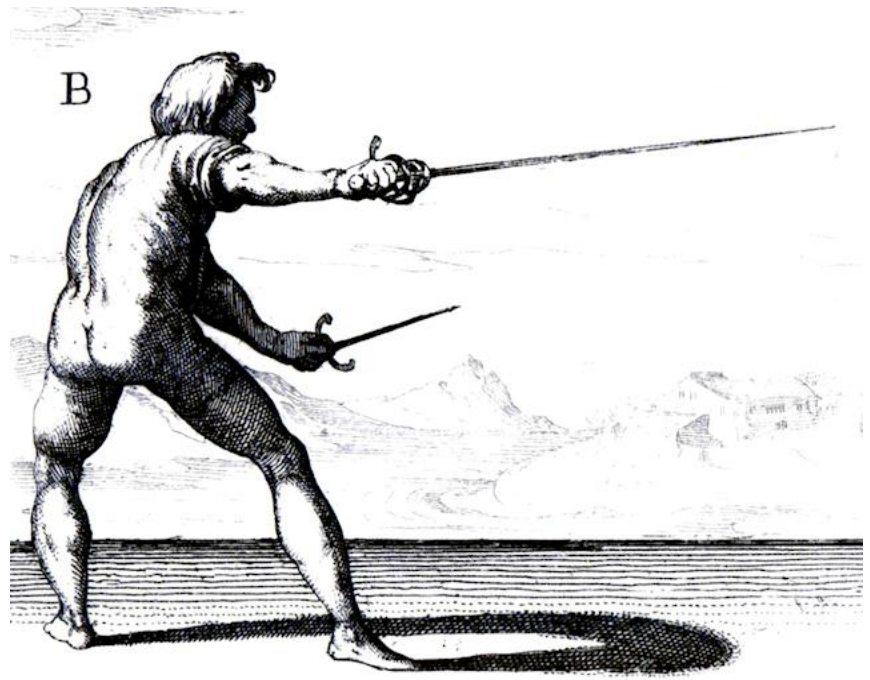
Prima/First

-called so because it is the first guard formed when sword is drawn from scabbard.



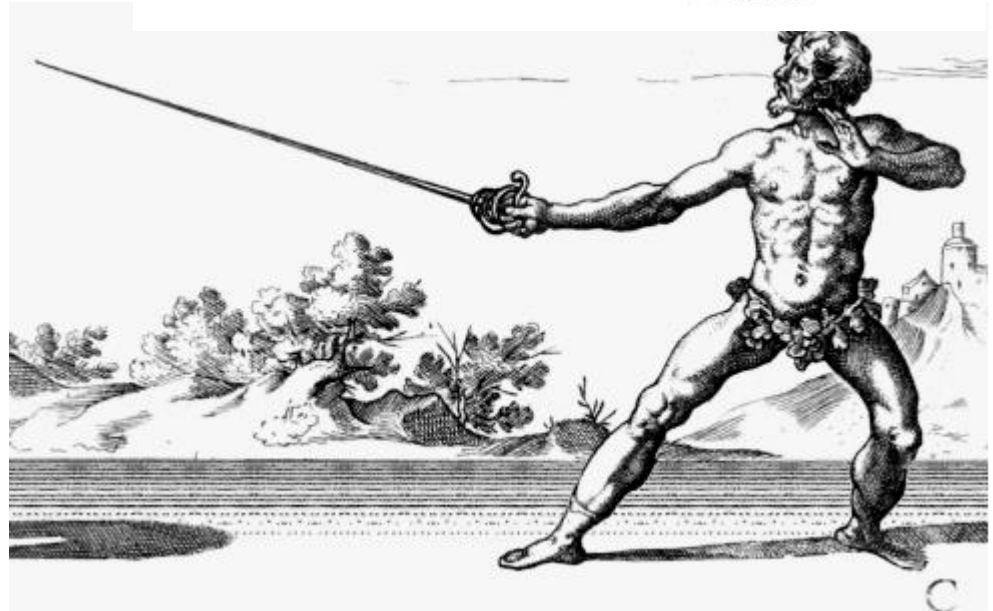
Seconda (Second)

-protects outside line



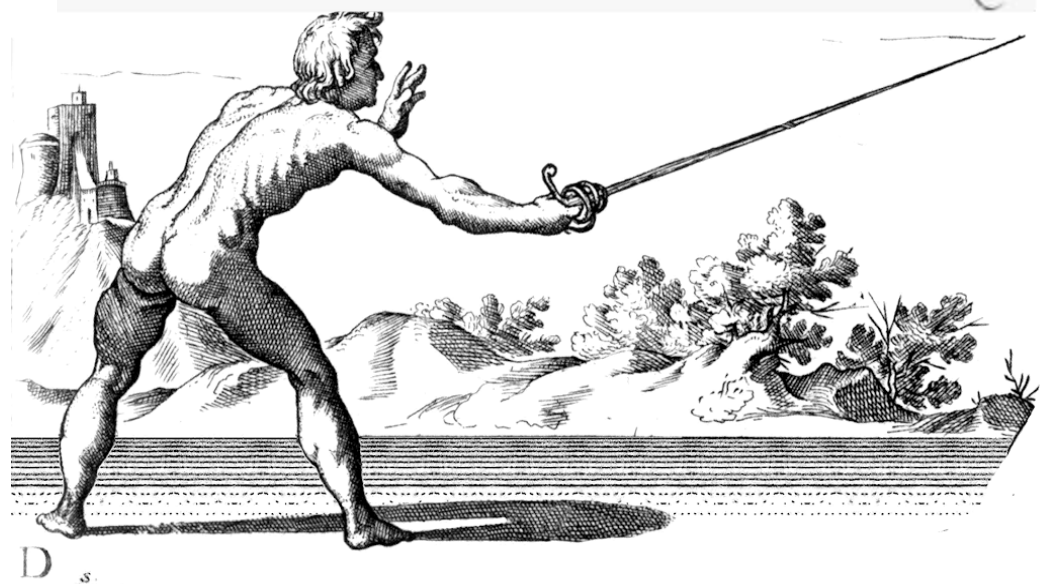
Terza (Third)

-divides body in two, does not protect any line



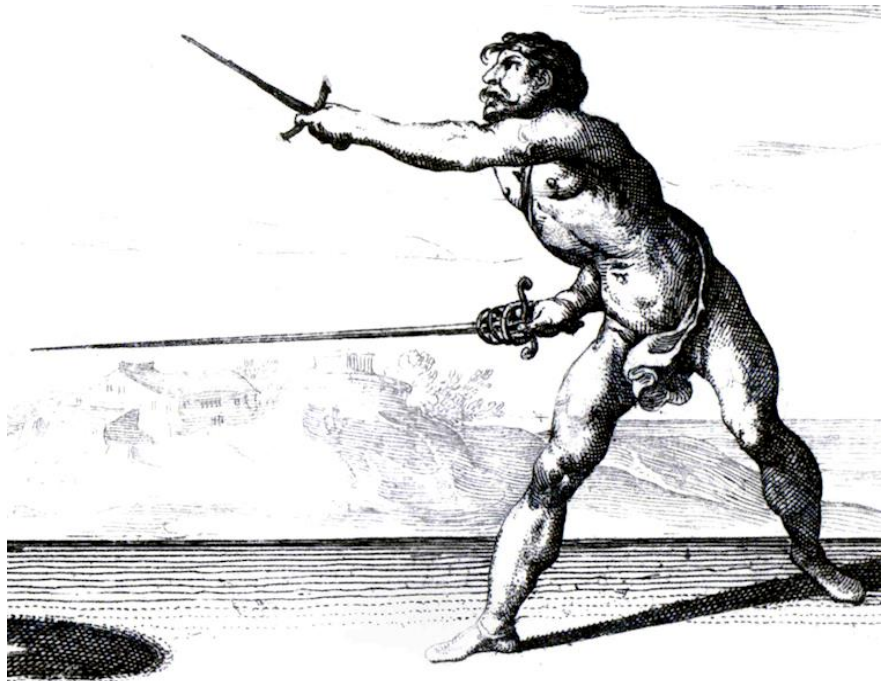
Quarta (Fourth)

-protects inside line,



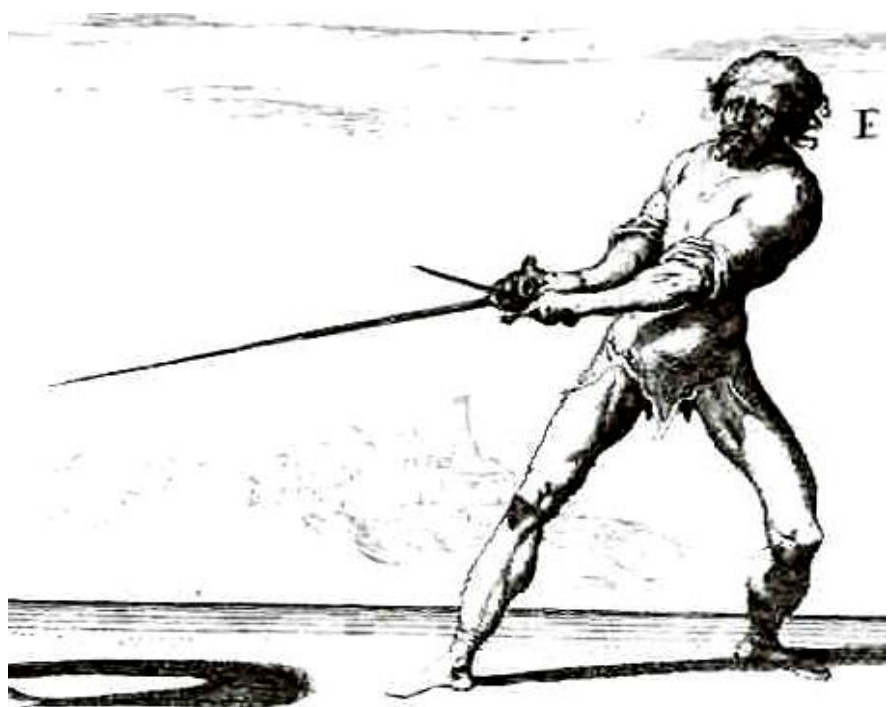
Quinto (Fifth)

-a withdrawn guard, usually only used with a dagger.



Sesta (Sixth)

-a low guard like alber in German longsword.

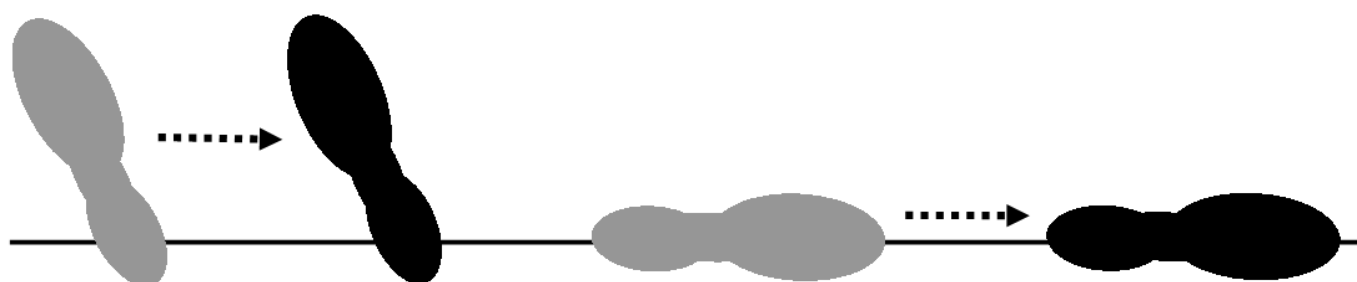


Movement

Those who study most other European sword forms will be used to having either foot forward and stepping through like a walking pace to change guard and distance, this is not commonly practiced with rapier.

In rapier, we never have the left foot forwards (for a right hander). Whilst there are a few notable exceptions, such as in Spanish fencing, and when used with the cloak, you should not make any kind of habit of having the left foot forward in guard. Having the left foot forward reduces the coverage of the sword to the body. It also means that you can no longer lunge, only pass, whereas with the right (lead) foot forward, you can both lunge and pass.

With this in mind, when adjusting distance, the right, or lead foot, must be kept forwards. Therefore, to adjust our distance we use the ordinary or half pace. This allows us to adjust our distance quickly without compromising our guard.

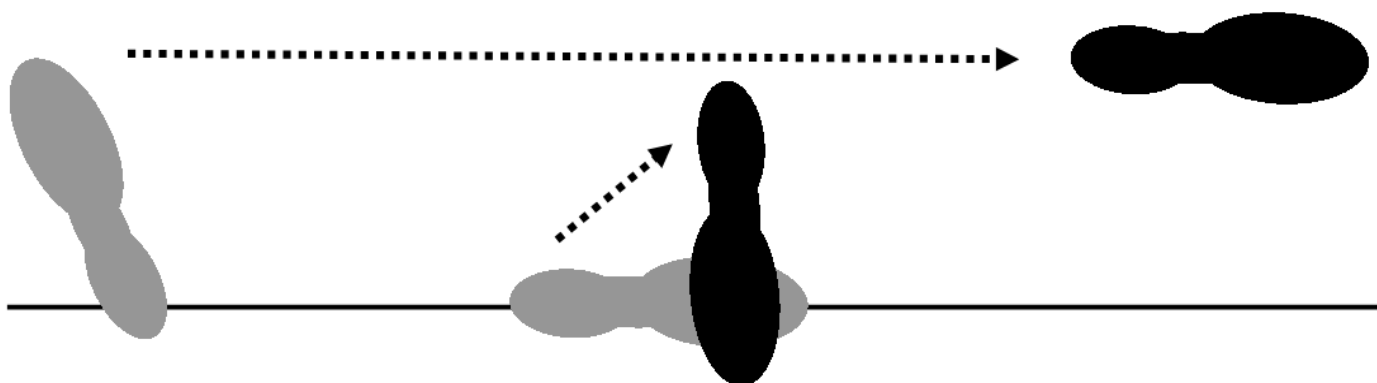


To step forwards, we move the front foot forwards, then follow with the rear. To move backwards, we move the back foot first, and then follow it with the front. The simple way to remember this is that the feet should never meet. There is a reason to bring the feet together, but this is a different step and not for adjusting distance.

Passing Step

This is the step most commonly known to longsword fencers, or anyone used to walking! This step is when one foot passes the other, reversing your footing. Unlike earlier weapon types, we do not use the pass to adjust our distance or change guard with the rapier, for the very reason that we never want to have the left foot forward in guard.

In rapier, the passing step is used for specific attacking and defensive actions. This is because we only want to have the left foot forward when the distance is closed into the narrow measure, when the left foot forward becomes an advantage. This is because when the left foot is forward at close/narrow measure, the offhand is available for holds and displacements, as well as the reach of the rapier being shortened, ideal for the close distance.



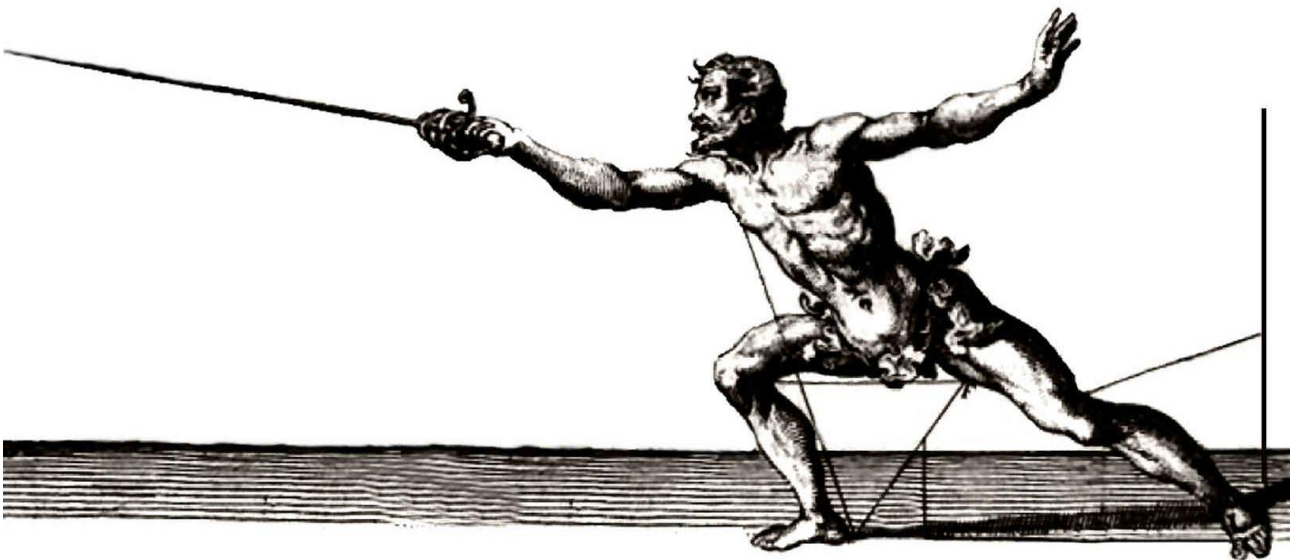
The important lesson here is to only use the passing step for a specific attack or defence. Usually the passing defence is used to close the distance to displace or grab the opponent's weapon, however, it can be used by stepping backwards against a very aggressive opponent, or a strike to the legs as will be seen later. The pass can also be used with dagger parries to provide strong reverse parries.

A passing step is quite literally placing one foot past the other and mirroring your previous footwork. All of the rapier masters are insistent on the usefulness of the pass and how it is an essential part of rapier, however, it is often used quite infrequently by many fencers today. This is because the pass is a movement which requires major commitment and therefore risk, meaning a good use of tempo and measure.

The Lunge

This technique is the characteristic method of attack in rapier. The lunge is the action of using the extension of the whole body in line to attack, usually with a thrust, but also with a cut. The lunge is still used in the modern sport of fencing with the foil and epee, and this is testament to the incredible efficiency and effectiveness of the move. The lunge was likely developed to the level we know it today in the middle of the sixteenth century, first seen in Agrippa's manual in 1551.

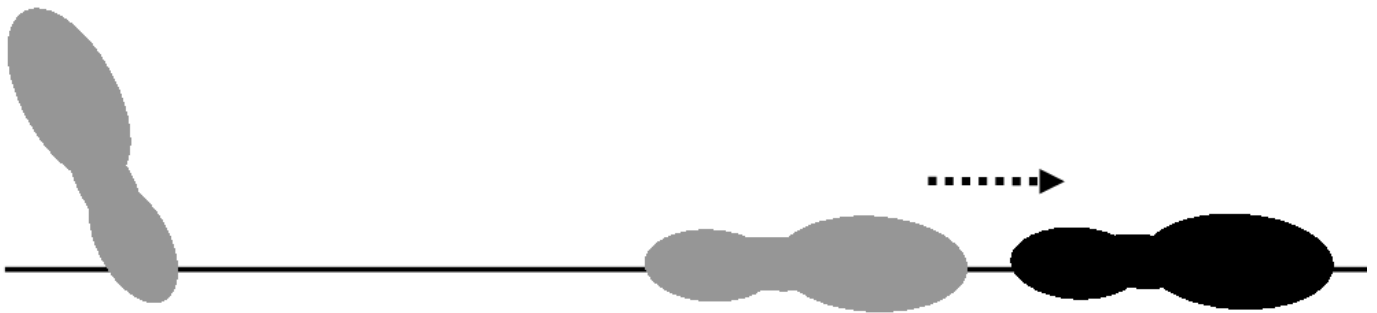
The lunge in the renaissance period was a mathematically calculated



movement which involves a surprising amount of attributes to work correctly. An experienced practitioner will make the lunge look as natural as walking, but the reality is that it can take some time to commit to muscle memory, and there is a lot that can go wrong, making it inefficient and even damaging to your body.

The lunge is by far the fastest way to attack from the wide measure, by all accounts it is a lightning fast movement of the human body. However, you must not assume it is the only way to attack, nor always the best. Certainly the lunge is the most commonly used manner to attack, but to forget the pass would be a big mistake. The lunge, despite being fast, leaves you in a vulnerable position, and lowers your posture, potentially leading to a weaker position. The pass on the other hand does not leave you in a vulnerable position (when closing to narrow measure), and keeps you upright and in a strong position.

When lunging, as with any attack, you initiate the move with the



sword arm, followed by the body, and finally the leg. This is both the fastest way to strike, but also telegraphs as little to your opponent as possible, as well as getting the sword out first to cover your line of attack.

There are many things to go wrong with the lunge, so pay careful attention to the following advice on what is likely to go wrong and that you need to focus on.

- The sword arm must be fully extended firstly and throughout
- The back foot should stay firmly planted to the floor, do not roll or drag it
- The lead foot should point forwards towards the opponent at all times

- The back leg should straighten
- The front knee should bend past the heel of the front foot
- Keep the heels in line to the opponent
- Keep the shoulders inline to the opponent

Notice with the lunge, the entire body is used to gain distance, and this is important to remember. Do not just step forward with the front foot, be sure the sword arm is fully extended, and that you bend at the hips and lead knee to get the maximum reach.

It is common for people to take too large a step with the lunge, only take approximately one shoe length from your guard posture, then using the bending of the knee and hips to gain further distance. The longer the lunge the slower the recovery time, there is a happy medium, based on personal preference, speed and flexibility.

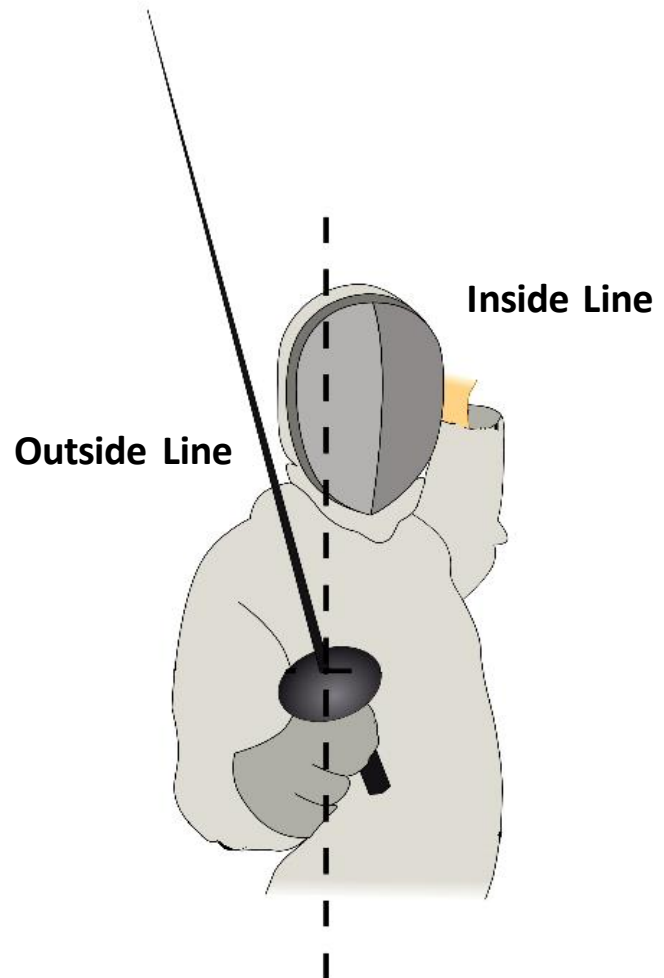
As for the offhand (the hand without a sword in it), this has a use. In modern fencing, the offhand is used for balance during actions, we do this in rapier too, but also use it for other purposes, such as open hand parries, grapples, and last resort defences to more vital areas.

When lunging, either throw the offhand out behind you, which allows the shoulders to be in line to your opponent, or keep it forward in front of the face. Throwing the arm back will allow for better reach and recovery time, keeping it forward will marginally reduce your reach but give better defence. Which of these you do is dictated by how safe you feel making the attack, as well as personal preference.

Lines and the Disengage

In rapier fencing, we divide the body up into two parts into the relation of the sword's position. This is a simple device to allow the explanation of attack and defence areas to be easily explained and taught.

The easy way to remember this is that the inside line is always where the offhand (the hand that does not carry the rapier) is situated. Therefore, for a right handed fencer, your inside line will be to the left of your sword, and the outside, to the right of your sword. When we attack an opponent, it is always in regard to which side of their sword we strike, as that defines the way we strike, in order to remain safe ourselves.



These lines are often called the lines of attack or lines of defence. We move from one line to another using the disengage. The disengage is by no means new to the rapier, longsword fencers will usually know it as the 'change through', changing to the other side of our opponent's blade. The disengage should be done in the shortest distance possible, and in most cases, this means moving under the opponent's blade, because to move over it, we have to move the entire length of the opponent's weapon.

Once you know what the disengage is, you may wonder why we use it, why is it an advantage to change to the other side of our opponent's weapon? In essence, this is all related to tactics. To strike an opponent, you may wish to disengage and strike quickly to their weak side, or feint and then disengage to strike on the opening you have created. The two lines are a constant battle of wit and tactics, because with single sword, you can only protect on one line at any one time. An opening is an exposed or unprotected area of your opponent where you can strike safely, we create openings by manipulating the lines, both directly with the sword, and with the trickery of feints.

Stringering

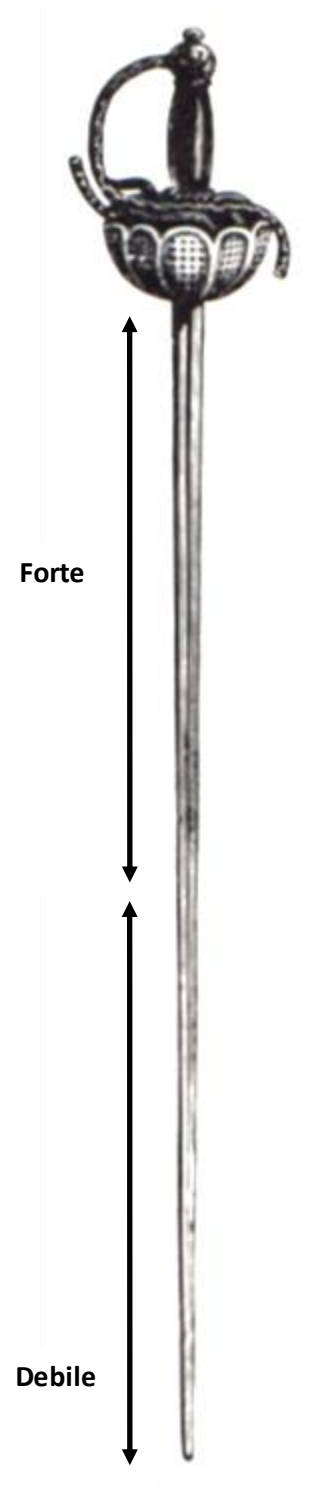
This theory or practice has no direct translation, though loosely means to gain or find your opponent's sword. These loose translations can lead to confusion and therefore the original term 'to stringer' is best used.

Stringering is to pre-parry your opponent's blade, either through direct contact, or simply alignment and no contact. To understand how this is done and why it is useful, you need to understand the principal of the strong and weak part of the blade.

PICTURE OF RAPIER STRONG AND WEAK

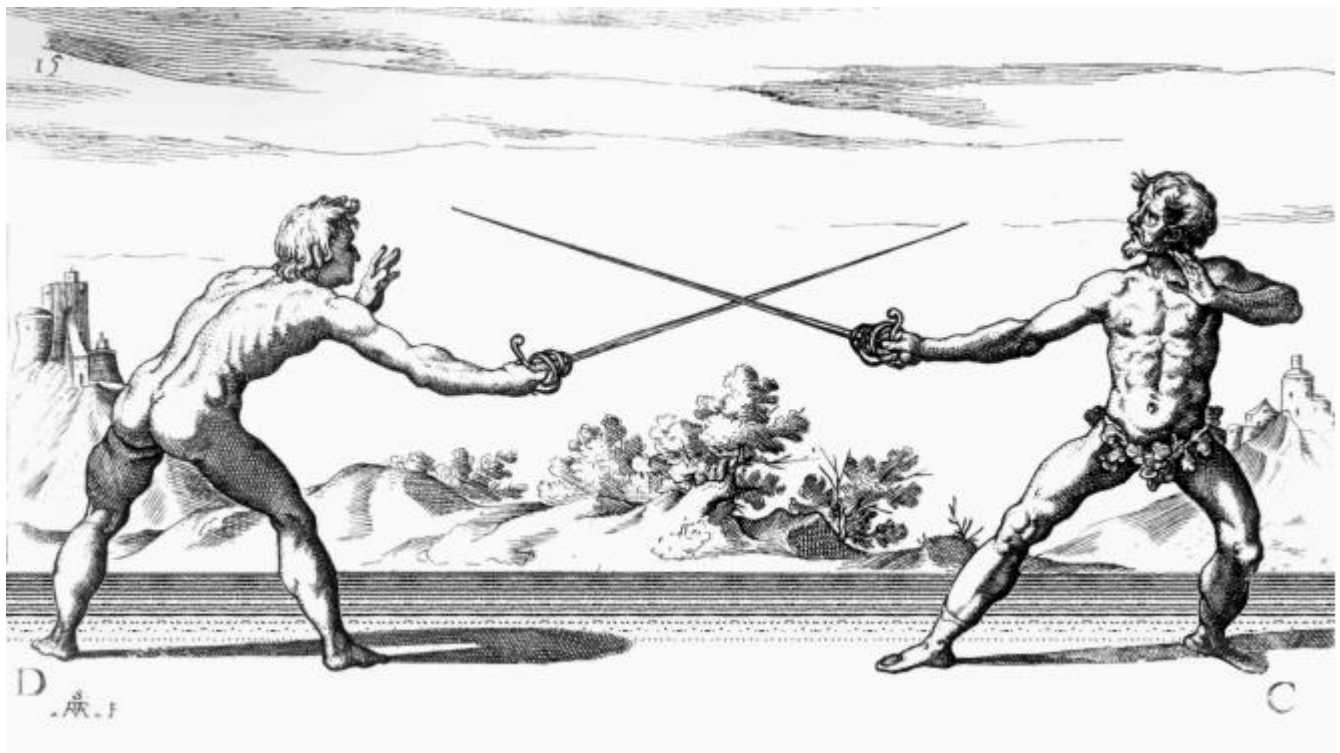
The strong (forte) of the blade is where you make your parries and displacements, the weak (debile) is where you strike with both cut and thrust. The forte is both the strongest part of the blade, but also closest to the grip, and therefore has the most leverage. The debile is the weakest part of the blade, as well as has the least leverage when in contact with an opponent's blade. However, the debile is obviously used to thrust, but also travels the fastest and furthest in a cut.

Many rapiers are not even sharp at the forte, often featuring a very thick blunt edge, to give a very strong parrying ability. In fact, the only



reason to have the forte sharp is to reduce the risk of your opponent grabbing hold of it during the fight.

To stringer your opponent is to place your forte against their weak, whether the blades are touching or not, is about the alignment. It does not especially matter how far along your forte is to their debile, only that where your blades meet, their blade rests further towards your hilt than yours does to theirs.



You can stringer your opponents blade in any of the primary guards. The purpose of stringering is to attain a tactical advantage over your opponent. By stringering your opponent you effectively pre-parry their blade, allowing you to strike or parry on the line that you have positioned yourself with relative ease and safety.

Sometimes, a fight can involve a constant cat and mouse game of stringers, disengages and further stringers by each party. Other fights may feature very little obvious stringering, but the principal will always exist in a single rapier fight. When using the single rapier, the

sword most be able to both defend and attack, both of those things are achieved by gaining blade domination over your opponent (for most actions).

If you chose to never study single rapier combat, moving straight to rapier and dagger, you may choose to never learn and master the principal of stringering and blade domination, because the dagger will enable you to always use one weapon to defend and the other to attack. Joseph Swetnam, the English fencing instructor, recommended a man should learn rapier and dagger first, as it is the quickest way to be able to defend yourself. However, the Italian's understood the importance of single rapier as a foundation, to not study it would leave your repertoire of techniques forever limited, and your form likely sloppy. The single rapier is called the Queen of rapier fencing, the foundation for everything else after it.

If stringering is so important, you may wonder what can be done once your opponent has stringered you, dominating the blade. You should never fear a stringering, as whilst stringering may put you in a strong position, it also indicates some of your intentions to your opponent. When you become stringered, you can either wait for the opponent to drive through an attack, working on the defence, you can disengage from the stringering, or you can drive your sword forward to attempt to stringer them.

Single rapier combat is largely about blade domination, a fight that is not will often be suicidal, because there are only a limited number of ways to strike your opponent with dominating their blade somehow.

In terms of how we achieve the position to stringer, you can begin to understand why the primary guards are all made with an extended lead arm. If you pull the sword hilt closer in to your body, you pull your strong further from the opponent's weapon, and therefore

remove the possibility of dominating their blade. There are of course reasons to use withdrawn guards, but they are more advanced techniques which you should not consider until you know how to use the primaries and stringer the opponent.

To stringer the opponent, you can extend the hilt further forwards, step closer to your opponent, or lift the hilt to align your forte against their debile. Understanding stringering is the first principal of the rapier fight that you need to know, as the first techniques you learn are founded on this principal of blade domination.

Distance

There are two distances in rapier, and they are called measure. The wide measure is when you have to lunge, pass or step to be able to strike your opponent, the narrow measure is when you can hit your opponent without having to move either foot, just reach with the body. If you are beyond the distance of the lunge or pass, you are 'out of measure'

When the term 'enter the measure' is used, it refers to a fencer entering into the distance of the wide measure. Rapier fights all begin at the wide measure, unless for some extreme circumstance such as confined spaces. If you fight from the narrow measure in guards then you will likely both die, neither having enough time to respond to the others attacks.

Understanding the difference of wide and narrow measure will teach you a lot about tactics in a rapier fight. The person who initiates an attack, must attack from the wide measure, whereas, providing the defender stops the attack, he may strike back (riposte) in the narrow measure, giving the attacker little time to respond.

According to this principal one would then assume that the defender always has the advantage. Whilst many rapier techniques are based on striking as a defensive measure, you should never underestimate the attack. Striking first can allow you to tactically control what is happening from the onset, and can also psychologically wound your opponent. Fight psychology is a very important aspect of fighting, and will be discussed later in this book.

There is no specific term for the distance at which you would grapple, but neither is there much in the way of grappling techniques in the rapier system. Grappling with a rapier can be a real problem, its long

length being clumsy and difficult to manoeuvre, generally if you have got to a grappling situation in rapier, it is because everything else has gone terribly wrong. The limit of grappling in Capo Ferro is basic single hand holds to allow a sword strike to be made.

Having a good understanding of distance is vital to a martial artist, whether it is fencing or boxing, it can make all the difference in a fight, below are a number of drills to better improve your distance work.

Tempo

This is the principal of time in fencing. Tempo is used to describe when you can attack an opponent, and how long the attack takes. Below are the principal 'tempi' in which you can strike:

Primo Tempo – striking with a single move from either the wide or narrow measure.

Dui Tempo – striking with at least two separate moves, such as a beat and a cut, or a parry and a riposte, two distinctly separate actions.

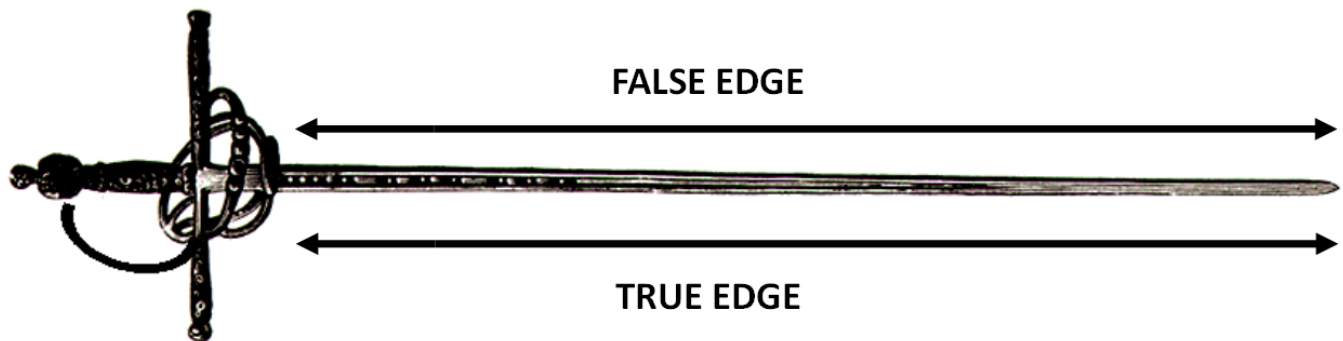
Mezzo Tempo – attacking either of the enemies advanced arms from the wide measure.

Contra Tempo – striking your opponent during his attack. This means to interrupt your opponent's attack, either through a single tempo defence, as you will learn shortly, or another action which allows you to strike with one action during their attack, such as a void.

Notice in Italian rapier, it is considered safest to attack during an opponent's move, whether they change guard, adjust their footing, disengage, or initiate an attack.

True and False Edge

A rapier, like the majority of European weapons, is a double edged weapon. Even many of the characteristic single edged European weapons such as backswords, cutlass and Sabre often feature a small



length of sharpened blade on what is called the back or false edge.

The true edge is the one that faces away from you when you hold the sword out in front in third guard, the edge that you would naturally cut with. The false edge is the edge that will face towards you when the sword is in front.

The simple rule you should remember as a beginner is that you always meet your opponent's blade with your true edge, whether you are attacking or defending. There are certainly ways to use the false edge, and also the flat of the blade, but they are more advanced techniques which are best left to after you fully understand why you would want to use them.

The true edge will always provide the strongest and safest position when placed against the opponent's blade. The advantages and disadvantages of meeting the opponent's blade with either true or false edge are explained in better detail below.

How to attack against a guard

Now using everything you have already read about stringering and the use of the true edge, you can learn how to safely attack your opponent when they rest in guard. The first thing that should be stated here is that when you attack someone in guard, we always use the thrust, because it can provide defence in its own action, whereas to cut you have to lift the sword blade, no longer covering the body.

Here are the most basic and safe ways to attack the primary guards. Notice that the simple way to attack First, Second and Fourth guard are to match them, but use displacement. The third guard is universal as discussed previously, not defending any line, and can therefore be attacked with any primary guard. However, if you simply remember the beginner's principal of always engaging your opponent's blade with your true edge, you will do well. These are not the only ways to attack each of the guards, but they are the strongest and simplest.

In order, each time you wish to attack a guard, be sure your true edge is facing your opponent's sword, extend the lead arm first, providing defence for the body and a strong blade engagement, and then follow the extension of the arm with a lunge. This is as simple as it is, to attack in the most basic fashion. Below you will see how this principal works against each of the primary guards. Note how the guard is always pushed out far enough to displace the opponent's weapon, and gain blade domination, making for a safe attack.



Remember, when manipulating the sword, it is the hilt that you should be moving, not the blade. Keep the blade online to your opponent at all times (with only a few noted exceptions), whether in guard, attacking or parrying. When you attack or defend, you will need to push your hilt in the direction of your opponent's blade, in order to displace it. This is best shown in the diagram to the right, where the straight line represents the imaginary line between the two opponents, the displacement is the angle at which the forte of the blade is pushed out to drive the opponent's blade away from your body, whilst the tip stays 'on line' to the opponent.

The Single Time Defence

Now that you know your guards and how to attack them, you in fact already know how to defend, because the basic defences are the same as the basic attacks. In stage and theatrical fights you will see many 'dead parries' being used, where the defender simply blocks the oncoming attack. In rapier, that kind of defence is a last resort, as yes it saves you from harm, but it was a wasted opportunity to strike your opponent and remove the threat before you.

Just as you matched your true edge up to the opponent's guard to attack them above, you will now do the same against their lunges. Therefore, if someone lunges at you in second on the outside line, you displace and strike them in second. If your opponent attacks in fourth on your inside line, you displace and strike them in fourth.

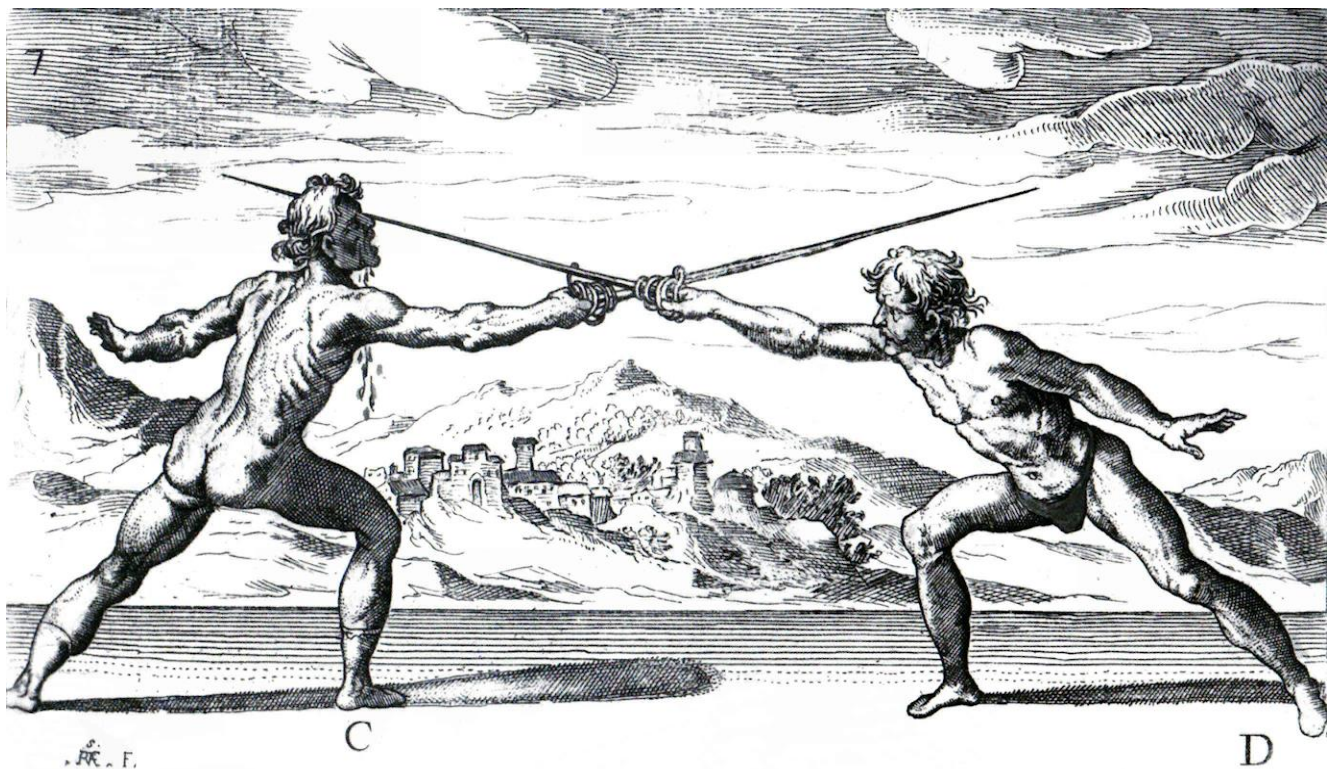
These displacements are one of the hardest things to learn and be able to use in a fight, which is why you would be able to more quickly become competent with rapier and dagger than single rapier. However, these techniques are some of the very panicle of rapier excellence, they are incredibly efficient, effective and safe once learnt well.

It is of note that when making a single time counter, you do not technically need to move your feet at all, because your opponent has lunged at you, entering into the narrow measure, allowing you to strike from a fixed footing position. However, a good fencer will learn to be quick on the recovery, and a bad fencer may strike short, both scenarios can rob you of your strike. Lunging during a single time defence will ensure that you strike your opponent well. However, when practicing in drills, be considerate of your opponent, either do not lunge into it, or stop short, or they will end up with many bruises. One thing you should certainly never do is to bend the lead arm when

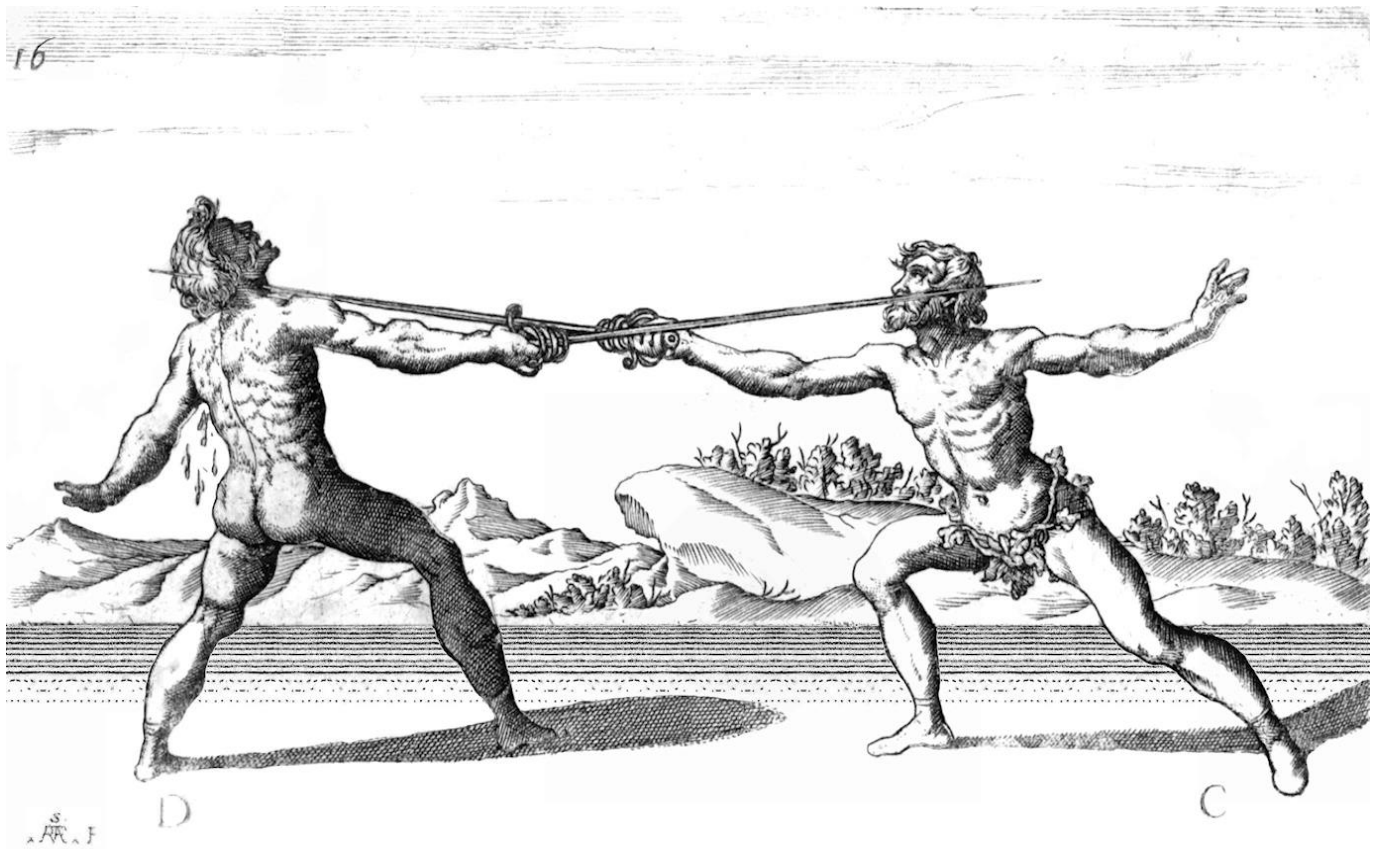
doing drills, you may think that it is being nice to your opponent, but it is teaching you both bad habits. Bending the lead arm during a thrust will simply lose your blade domination and lead to bad form.

Despite these actions being single time, it is best for a beginner to start off practicing them as a double time motion, until they are comfortable enough to make it one smooth action. Below are show a single time defence against the two most likely attacks you will face. If you opponent attacks with a lunge in Third, you may meet it with either of the below techniques as well. Note how below, both participants are infact making the same move, the same lunge in the same guard, but the defender used displacement with the domination of the blade.

Striking in Second on the outside line as the opponent lunges in second:



Striking in Fourth on the inside line as the opponent lunges to the inside:

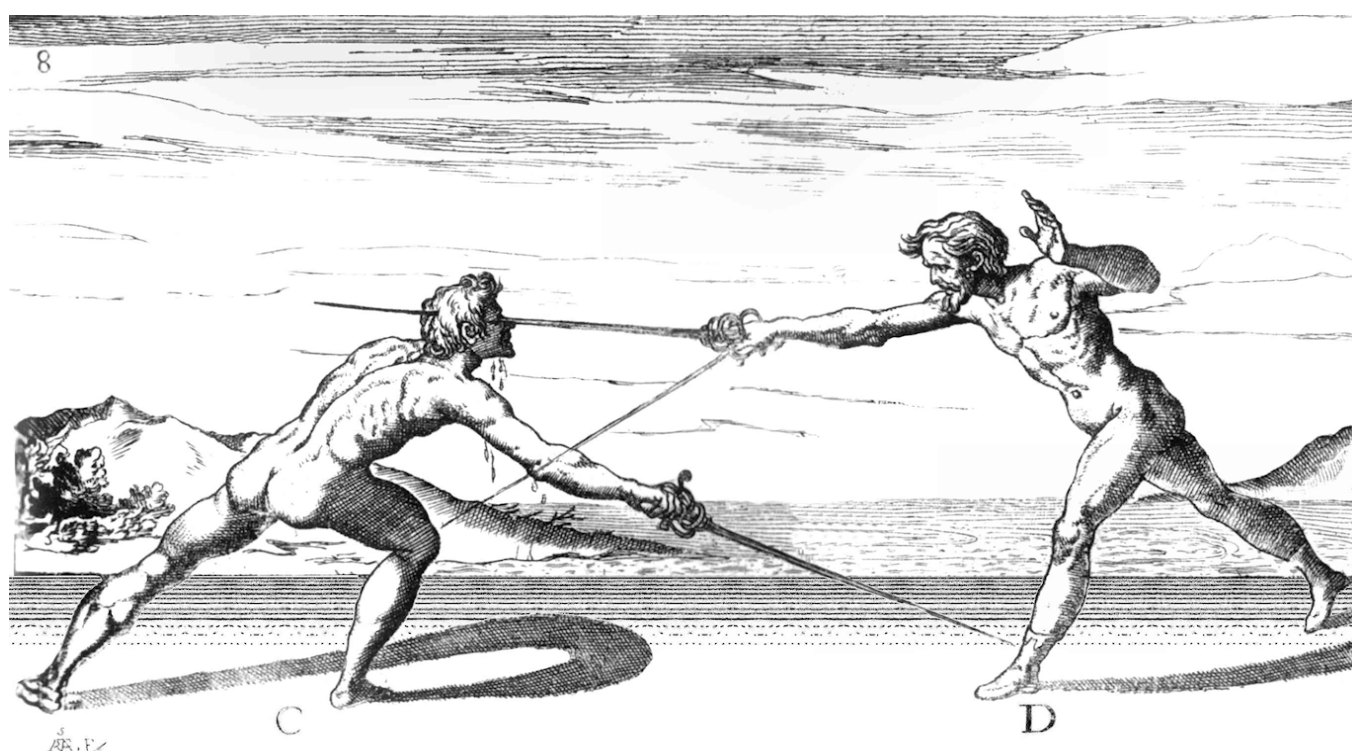


Going back to the principal of stringering, the strong against the weak, this principal is the key to this single time defence working. If you do not have the blade domination, you will likely both get hit. To keep the blade domination, you may often find yourself pushing your own hilt higher, or pushing your opponent's blade further from your body.

Do not move onto any other rapier techniques until you have full understood the principal of attack and defence with single time actions as seen above, it is the foundation of everything else you will ever learn about the rapier.

About attacking the legs

You will rarely see an attack to the legs in single rapier combat, except by those who are a little cheeky and likely suicidal. The simple reason for this can be described by the true against the false distance. The true distance is the shortest distance to your opponent, being the sword and arm in line and parallel to the ground. If you strike diagonally, you lose much of the reach, and the 'true' distance. This is best shown in the following image.



You will note here that the defender has moved his lead leg backwards, this is a precautionary measure, as just because you hit first, it does not mean you cannot be hit second. To attack the legs with the single rapier, you must attack with a shortened reach, and in doing so, expose the upper body, lead arm and head, all of the most vital parts of the body. Any training rapierist will always immediately strike to a vital target zone if you attack their legs, meaning the best you can hope to achieve is a minor strike if they were too slow, whilst you receive a vital strike yourself.

This principal is not unique to the rapier, it is taught in near enough every European sword form, and only changes when a companion weapon is brought into play. When you have a second weapon, such as a dagger, shield or cloak, that secondary weapon can allow you to safely strike their legs, by ensuring their sword does not land. In fact, when using companion weapons, striking the leg can often be an advantage, as defending the legs can be quite difficult with a dagger, buckler or shield.

The one time you will see leg strikes being used fairly regularly in single sword is in tournament settings, but never let that fool you. Attacking the legs in single rapier is very weak and very dangerous.

How to use Passing Steps

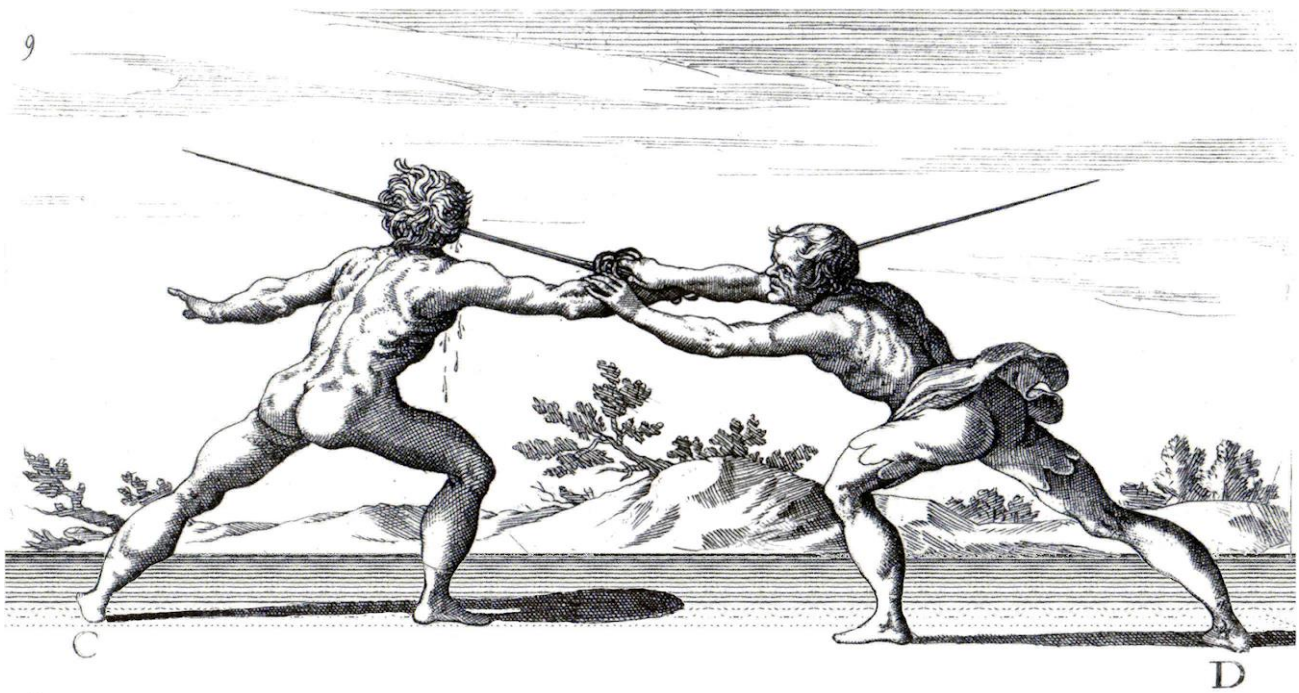
As discussed in the footwork section, we only use passing steps for specific purposes, never adjusting distance or guards. The defence against a leg attack seen above was one example of when a passing step is used, as it removed the lead leg from danger, whilst not reducing the reach to strike.

The passing step is also used in a very aggressive manner to close from the wide to the narrow measure. You can pass on both the inside and outside line, though be aware that it requires better timing than the lunge, as the recovery time is slower.

Passing on the outside line

This is a technique best used against an opponent who lunges at you on the outside line. Passing in this situation allows you to step safely past the point of their extended weapon, and allows your offhand to come into play, to either push their blade away to allow a strike, or more commonly, to take hold of their arm or weapon.

Once you have hold of their arm of weapon, you are free to strike them, but be aware, most people first reaction is to try and take hold of your sword. For this reason, once you have hold of their wrist or weapon, a cut is usually better than a thrust, because they have some chance of parrying or grabbing the blade during a thrust, whereas the best they can do against a cut is put their offhand in the way, which the cut will beat down, allowing another strike to finish them off.

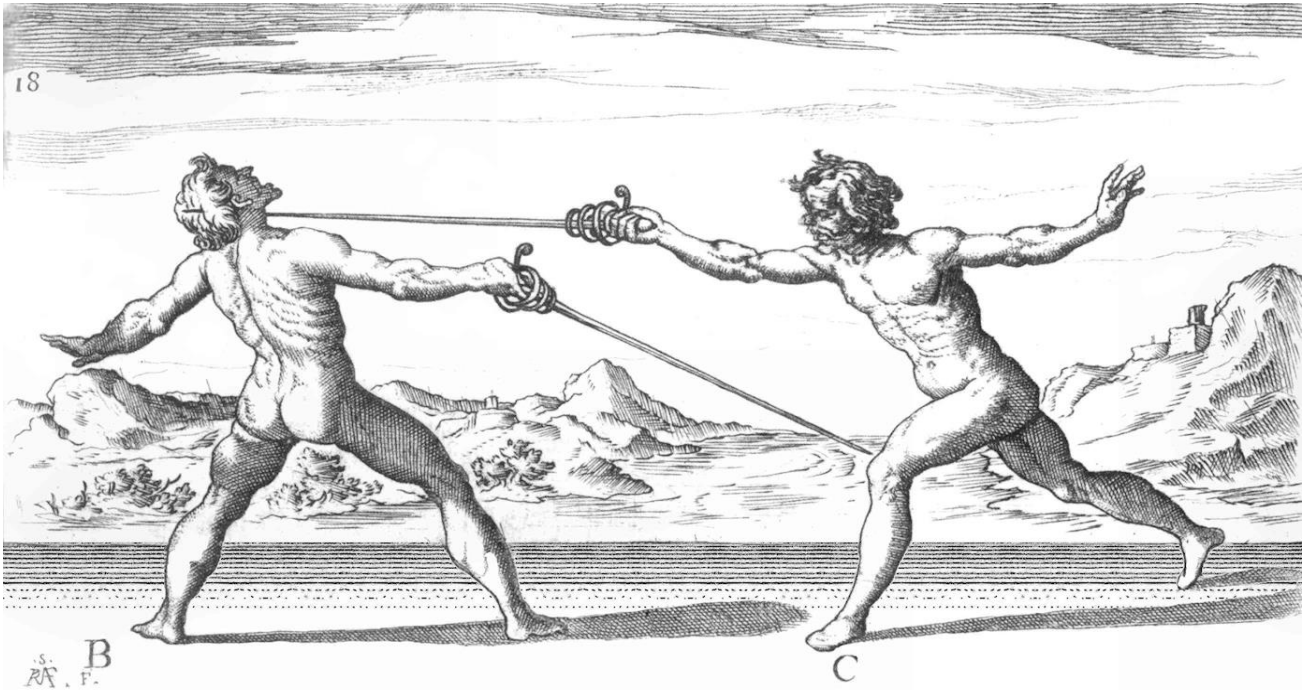


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In many ways, this is a good technique for an inexperienced fencer to use against a much better one, as rather than relying on a highly technical move such as a single time defence, all that it requires is a basic parry and a bit of aggression. This is not to say that you should rely on it or disregard other techniques, but it is a face worth bearing in mind.

Passing on the Inside line

This move is not at all natural to the human body, as it will require your upper and lower bodies twisting in opposite directions. To use this move, have your opponent wait in third guard on your inside line. Then you must twist and extend in to fourth, passing the rear foot forwards towards your opponent, whilst your lead shoulder twists towards the opponent's sword. When done correctly, this is a very safe and strong strike, however, you need good speed and timing to make it work. This is often used as an attack when your opponent disengages from the outside to inside line.



This technique closely resembles the fleche seen in modern sport fencing, and like the fleche, works well with explosive power off the line, meaning you launch quickly, often leading to several steps. To some, this may look like a suicidal leap, but when done with the correct blade engagement, it is a very strong and safe attack.

Feints

A feint is any action intended to provoke a predicted response. Essentially this means that a feint is a bluff, making your opponent think you are doing one thing, when you are actually doing something quite different. We use feints to create openings, making our opponent feel threatened on one side, compelling them to move their sword to defend, whilst creating an opening where we want to strike.

A common feint would be to throw the sword forward enough to make an opponent move to parry, whilst disengaging and striking on the other line. Feints are quickly learnt and often over used by beginners. Whilst feints certainly have their place, they also have a major weakness. When making a feint, you have no intention to strike, and if your opponent realises this, they can strike you whilst you have comparatively little defence.

Faking a thrust can be a common feint, but it can involve something as simple as a quick flick to suggest an attack, a beat of the foot, or any other signal which provokes the response you were after. Below is one of the most basic and common feints.

The feints here begins by the attacker feinting a thrust to the inside line, drawing the opponent into fourth guard, then immediately disengaging and lunging to the outside line. You may be naturally inclined to lunge in fourth here as it is the most natural, but remember that you will then not have a strong defence. It is far better to twist into your second guard to strike here, though third could also work if used correctly.

Cuts

Firstly, never underestimate the usefulness of the cut. Many descriptions of the rapier written by sword collectors and historians will tell you that the rapier was incapable of cutting, do not believe them. This is not a matter for debate, it is simple fact, you only have to look at the wealth of rapier treatise and the number of cutting techniques within them to understand the cut was still an important aspect to the system.

It is true that some rapiers exist that have no sharp edge at all, resembling a solid iron bar with a sharpened tip, however these are a small minority of rapiers, and should be treated as such. Having a cutting edge not only allows for a greater range of techniques, but also reduces the risk of blade grabs.

Before we discuss cuts in rapier, we must establish what a cut is. In rapier, a cut is the action of using both a blunt trauma strike, and a drawing, slicing action at the same time. This combined move is described as using a hewing action. Practitioners of weapons such as the longsword will be familiar with using the sword to slice as well, drawing the blade across a target to cause injury, this is not effective with the rapier, simply because you cannot apply enough leverage with one arm and the slender blade.

The next thing to understand about the cut is that it is not used just to cause damage to your opponent. A cut can be used to strike, to beat an opponent's blade, to parry, or to cover a line when recovering.

We rarely ever strike a cut from the wide measure, because to do so means lifting the sword, and creating an opening for our opponent to strike a thrust, though that is not to say we could not use such an action as a feint.

As a beginner, the most important aspect to consider is that you should focus your efforts on thrusting techniques, because whilst cuts are important, they should never be used in lieu of learning correct form or technique. That said, cutting techniques will be covered here as they are an important and useful element of the rapier system.

In a fight, you have to consider when you should use a thrust, and when you should use a cut. The answer is, thrust wherever possible, it will almost always result in a better strike. Cut when the thrust is not suitable, due to lack of room to do so, or it would be slower than making a cut. A cut therefore is an attack for an opportunistic moment. This is because a cut will rarely be fatal or even necessarily disabling with the rapier, but it can cause enough damage to create an opening for another strike, demoralise your opponent, and incapacitate or limit certain parts of their body.

In manuals which predate the rapier, it is common to have many terms for the different cuts and the angles which they are made. However, as rapier is more thrust orientated, the terminology for cutting is simplified.

Mandritto – a cut which originates from the outside of the body, cutting towards the inside.

Riverso – a cut which originates from the inside of the body, cutting towards the outside.

Fendente – a downwards vertical cut, usually to the head

Falso – a cut with the back/false edge of the blade. These can be further classified as 'Falso Riverso' for example, for a false edge cut made from inside to outside.

Cutting from a parry in Fourth, True and False

This is an alternative to using a single time defence. Notice this is a double time defence, and therefore not nearly as quick. However, this can be useful if you have made a dead parry in a panic, or your opponent has closed a lot of distance with you, when a thrust would be impractical.

For this technique, simply parry in fourth against your opponent's attack in fourth, and then either twist the wrist and cut with the true edge, or flick the false edge in.

Cutting from a parry in First

This is a technique rarely seen among many rapier practitioners, and yet is found in near enough every European sword form, whether that be sword and buckler, longsword, backsword, sabre, and indeed the rapier.

As previously discussed, the first guard is a very strong guard, and will often be used by a good fencer to defend against an enemies attack, however, it will often have a limited number of options once used as a parry. Cutting around from the first guard is a fantastically fast and powerful cut with the rapier. Many people will immediately say that this is too slow to use in reality, but any good rapier fencer will tell you otherwise.

As with the other cutting techniques, do not use this from the wide measure, it does not have enough reach and will only expose you. Use this when your opponent attacks into the narrow measure. A typical example of how this technique is used is shown below.

The opponent attacks with a lunge on the outside line. If their attack is stopped, they will be expecting to have to face a riposte on outside line. However, if you turn your hand and lift into the first guard, you will both parry and immediately move onto their inside line without

them even noticing. Immediately, in the same motion circle the rapier around and cut onto their head.

This action of circling is what a sabre fencer would know as a moulinet, the action is all in the wrist, circling the sword on its axis. This technique will usually be done in one motion, parrying in First and cutting around will be one smooth motion, if you stop at the parry, your opponent will likely recover before you have time to cut them.

Cutting from a high fourth parry

This is the equivalent of the technique listed above, but on the inside line. Yet again, many European sword fencers will be very familiar with such a principal. When your opponent strikes on your inside line, you lift into a high parry in fourth, and then twist the sword into a cut. This will usually be done with a passing step, simply to make it a safer action and place your body further from your opponent's sword.

Looking at this technique, you may wonder why you would simply have not used a single time defence instead of a dead parry. This is a valid point, this technique is usually used when your single time defence failed, either because of your poor alignment, or your opponent's displacement.

Using the false edge to parry

This is a technique not often seen by rapier enthusiasts, but it is very common for practitioners of earlier styles such as longsword or sidesword. Additionally, Capo Ferro does list this technique, just towards the end of this manual, meaning most people never get around to reading it. The reason this technique is not so common with the rapier is that it is usually used to create an opening for a cut, and as the rapier is point orientated, it is not considered so useful. Do not however assume then that this is useless to a rapier fencer.

False edge parries can be used well to create an unexpected opening against an opponent during their attack. They work as they displace the opponents sword using motion rather than a covering of a line, and follow on nicely into a counter. Whilst there are a few ways to use such a technique, we will just look at one common and effective one.

Wait in a low fourth or fifth guard. Have your opponent lunge at you in any guard. Lift the sword from its current position, with an extended arm and no twisting of the wrist, beating their blade out of the way with the false edge of your sword. It is common to continue the motion you have started and cut around to your opponent with a riverso. However, due to the rapiers speed, you may also stop at the beat of the sword and cut against your opponent with a mandritto.

Cutting to Parry and Cover

Capo Ferro describes at the end of his manual the way to defend against any strike. This is essentially using the first and fourth guards, and the motion between the two. This is indeed a very effective system, and the First guard (and its equivalents) is considered a very strong defensive guard in many sword systems.

When striking your opponent, whether the strike lands or not, you will likely recover back to the wide measure. Upon doing so, it is often possible to cut as your withdraw, this cut is both intended to attempt to strike your opponent, especially their lead arm(s), but also beat aside any counter they make whilst you make your way back to safety.

Using the offhand

The offhand is the hand which does not have the rapier, whether it carries a dagger, a cloak, or nothing at all. For this section, we are

looking at the use of the open hand, assuming it is either uncovered or has a simple leather glove on it.

Most people will instinctively not use the offhand for much at all when practicing rapier, but this would be a waste. To a sabre fencer for example, the offhand can only be hurt, so is kept out of harms way, with the rapier, heavy cuts are rarely our concern.

The offhand is used to balance the body for lunging speed and recovery, to parry opponent's blade, grab blades, hilts and wrists, and save more vital areas from injury is necessary. Some rapier masters advocated placing the offhand in harms way to save yourself serious injury and strike a deadly blow to your opponent. Whilst this would not be the worst way to end a fight, it should not be encouraged.

As discussed with the lunge, the offhand already has a use there. It can either be thrown back, getting the shoulders in line and providing balance for a long and fast lunge, or kept forward, to protect the face and offer other possibilities.

Open Hand Parry

This refers to the technique of using the hand to beat side the opponent's blade. This will always be used against thrusts, as the energy of a thrust is in its forward motion, and therefore it is easy to displace to the side with the palm, as opposed to the cut, which would be very dangerous to attempt to displace with the hand.

Many people have wondered about the potential damage to the hand when using an open hand parry. The reality is, you will receive little to no damage when using such a technique. The worst you could potentially receive is a light slicing action, though even this would be minor, considering the small amount of energy and distance that the

blade will be in contact with the hand. If you were to wear a plain leather glove, this minor risk would be entirely removed.

The question is, why would we use the hand to parry when we have a sword? As discussed throughout the single sword system, we must use the rapier to both defend and attack, and that will always mean a limitation to the number of techniques available, as well as the opponent knowing you must protect your body with your sword, making you to some degree predictable.

The open hand parry momentarily provides you with the same advantage you would have with a dagger, the ability to parry and strike simultaneously in different locations. Using a successful open hand parry means that your opponent has no defence from their sword while you strike, the best they can hope to do is leap out of the way or use an open hand parry themselves.

Just like a single time defence using the sword alone, the open hand parry should use defence and attack simultaneously, meaning the hand parries their blade as your blade strikes. If you attempt to first make a hand parry and then riposte, they will likely have stepped back before you can strike.

The next thing that most people wonder is, are open hand parries dangerous? The simple answer is yes. You are relying on a small defensive measure to protect you close to your body when you have a perfectly good sword. However, they are an important part of single rapier. One of the most important aspects of the open hand parry is that it catches most people by surprise, but the more you use it in your fencing against the same opponents, the less successful it will become, for the hand parry can be easily deceived.

As a general rule, open hand parries are best used against thrusts made to the inside of the body that are aimed between the throat and the waist. Outside of this range, the limit of range and movement of your offhand will have difficulty making such a move successfully.

One way to make this technique work well is to use the guard of sixth, with the sword withdrawn and the left shoulder brought forward. This invites your opponent to attack by exposing your chest, whilst brings your offhand forward to better make a parry, and your lead shoulder backwards, giving a long reach for the thrust.

You can also make the open hand parry with an ascending motion, as seen in Salvatore Fabris' manual, however the author finds this to be more dangerous. This is due to the fact that the descending action is a more natural scooping action.

Blade Grabs

Taking hold of an opponent's blade can quickly neutralise it, and allow you to safely strike your opponent. There is no doubt that you can hold a sharp blade safely, even when the recipient is trying to tug it from your hands. The simple rule here is that you can only grab a blade when it is static, and you need to quickly take a firm hold on it. A great many people have tested this theory with sharp blades, and there is no doubt that it works, but the author would strongly advise against trying this at home.

As for how and where to grab a rapier blade, well the further the blade is from the guard, the faster it moves, so to try and grab a blade close to the tip can be very dangerous. When grabbing a blade, you want to take hold of the forte, which is typically where there is the most material to hold, it is travelling at slower speeds, and is often not sharp at all.

Typically the time to grab a blade is once you have made a passing step into the narrow measure, as your offhand will be pushed forward giving the reach to do so. Aside from an occasion such as this where you have intended to close and grab the blade, there are other occasions where the technique you or your opponent intended has not work, and you have found yourselves at the close measure without anyone being struck. Whilst this may not be an ideal situation, it happens, and the decisive fencer who instinctively thinks to use such techniques as blade grabs, holds and dagger thrusts during this occasion will have a distinct advantage.

Hilt/Arm Holds

These are no different to grasping the forte of the blade. Whether you grab the wrist, hilt or forte is a matter of personal preference, occasion and reach. You may find that thick training gloves and/or arm protection make wrist holds difficult when sparring, but blade grabs will always be possible. Additionally, seeing as the weapon is the primary threat, the author would always rather take hold of the enemies weapon, rather than have it be dropped or swapped to their offhand.