



The Art of Fencing

Jean de Brye

L'Art de Tirer des Armes Reduit

à une Méthode plus Méthodique (1720)

Peek inside

Contents

Introduction	1
The Art of Fencing Reduced to a Methodical Summary	
Epistle	7
Preface	9
The Art of Fencing Reduced to a Methodical Summary	13
The First Part	15
Second Part	21
The Third Part	25
Fourth and Last Part	27
Approval	37
Other Books by LongEdge Press	41

The Art of Fencing Reduced to a Methodical Summary

The Art of Fencing is very useful and very necessary since it has for its aim the preservation of life and honour and that it contributes to the perfection of the body.

The Aim of the Art

Well taught, this Art fortifies the body, gives it grace, freedom, precision and lightness — indeed a sense of equilibrium. In a word, it gives great insight¹ into the beauty of the movements and ease of execution. Thus it is astonishing that we neglect such great advantages and that we want to employ so little time in order to acquire the possession [of them].

Its Advantages

The taste that the Nobility had in former times for this Exercise raised it to the highest point of its perfection. Their indifference made it fall. It is thus with all the Sciences and with all the Arts. However neglected they may be, they are not less considerable in themselves and their merit is not diminished.

Its decline

This reflection carries men naturally to leave to posterity a natural succession of the principles of the Arts and Sciences in which they excelled. We have already had several examples of them. But it seems to me that we have not enough of them and it is in order to animate the ablest to follow in their footsteps² that I will hazard to give the principle attributes of that which the greatest beauty consists in execution.

The Author's Intention

Indeed, all demonstrations that we can make of it on paper would give, with much pain, only a weak idea of this Art which must be taught in person³ by a good Master and by tangible examples.⁴ Thus all that which we can say about it in this little Treatise must be regarded only as a recapitulation and a regular progression⁵ of the principles that Masters and experience

*That one cannot do
without a Master*

1. *de grandes connaissances*

2. *à marcher sur leurs traces* - to follow on their tracks

3. *de vive voix*

4. *exemples sensibles*

5. *succession*

The First Part

The Simple Play

This first part contains knowledge of the simple actions and the foundations of the art of fencing, of which the first lessons consists more in the reasoning than in the execution, which in the natural order must always be preceded and accompanied by knowledge since without it it would be only possible to act by accident¹ and without principles. One must have certain rules and it is the exact observation of these rules which distinguishes the great Masters from those who act merely through habit.

It is therefore convenient that Students begin by being instructed that this manner of speaking, [lit.] throwing the weapons, comes from that of drawing the sword.² They must then be very attentive to the manner in which they are taught to hold it, recollecting that all is important in fencing and that one should neglect nothing in order to arrive at perfection.

*The Origin of the
Expression Fencing*

The sword well held, one teaches then that the blade has four parts: the strong, the semi-strong, the weak, the semi-weak.³ That of these two edges, there is only one of them which may be used in order to form the *appels* or engagements,⁴ the beating of the sword, and the parries, and it is from the five different positions of this edge that come these terms *prime*, *seconde*, *tierce*, *quarte* and *quinte* which serve to explain the different positions of the sword in the guards and in the thrust.

*The Parts of the
Sword*

Position of the edge

From this knowledge, one passes to the manner of being put well on guard, which is of a very great significance since it is from this first glance that one judges the skill of the Master and that one is advised⁵ in favour of the Student.

1. *au hasard*

2. *tirer des Armes* -- *Tirer* carries both the sense of shooting or throwing as well as the sense of drawing or dragging something

3. *le fort, le demi-fort, le faible, le demi-faible*

4. *les appels* ou *engagements*

5. *l'on se prévient*

16 The Art of Fencing Reduced to a Methodical Summary

In order to be well on guard, one must seek for good grace and surety. And in order to achieve it, one should place the two feet, the two hips, the two shoulders, the right arm and the sword on the same line, the heel of the right foot facing⁶ the ankle of the left; the sword in the position of *terce*, the pommel at the height of the hip, the point at that of the shoulder, the left hand at the height of the eye forming a semicircle; the left knee bent, the right extended in a free and flexible manner. Finally, the body should be straight, strong and free, equally weighted on the two legs⁷ so that one marks the equilibrium of it by a perpendicular line drawn from the top of the head to the middle of the ground which occupies the distance which is found between the two feet.

What it is to be on guard

Thus the principle rules which one must observe in order to be well on guard. But, in order to give this posture all its perfection, the good taste of the Master puts there the final touch⁸ and that the obedience⁹ and attention of the Student disposes him to explain in this action the nobility and the grace that one notes in persons who have that which we call “the weapons beautifully in the hand.”¹⁰

As it polite to salute¹¹ the Master who teaches and persons with whom one exercises, be it in pushing at the wall or making an assault, it is necessary to learn to make the salute in which one must seek, as in all the actions of this exercises, the good grace and freedom which enhances¹² the strength and produces precision, lightness and speed. All these qualities are acquired through the way in which the excellent Masters cause the movements to be made.¹³ We can assure that one will never be able to fence if one ignores or if one discards their principles.

The Salute

To these first lessons follows that which teaches making the *straight strikes*,¹⁴ that is to say, pushing a *thrust from the firm foot* and without disengagement.¹⁵

The straight strike or thrust from the firm foot

6. *vis-à-vis*

7. *également appuyé sur les deux jambes*

8. *la dernière main*

9. *docilité*

10. *les Armes belles à la main*

11. *Révérance des Armes*

12. *augmentent*

13. *[ils] font prendre les mouvements*

14. *les coups droit*

Second Part

Of Compound Play

The lessons of the first part put the Student in a state to execute with grace all the simple actions. But they are not sufficient for overcoming an enemy well covered by his sword or for surely attacking those who give openings¹ not thinking to push without worrying about receiving. It is necessary therefore for new means for combatting such adversaries. We find in *compound play*, which encloses without contradiction the aim of fencing and the most beautiful knowledge of this art since it contains all the means imaginable of unsettling,² attacking and beating the enemy, some plays and some postures that could be employed in order to attack and in order to defend oneself. It is also compound play which gives an understanding³ of all the ways of *passing*, of *siezing the sword*, of *deceiving the measure*, of *breaking away through the body's suppleness*, and of acting against left-handers. In a word, compound play can be regarded as the source of the science of Arms.

Of the compound play

The actions most used to unsettle his opponent and oblige him to open himself⁴ are *the appels of the firm foot*, or *engagements of the sword*, feints, half-strikes that others call *demi-bottes* or *attempts at the sword*.⁵ Some add to them the *double appels* and the *double feints of the firm foot in measure*. But these types of attack are dangerous and must only be employed against persons who lack speed and who do not know how to profit from these double movements. I will not speak here of the manner of executing these actions nor those which can be opposed to them in the defensive because they can only be understood through the tangible demonstrations⁶ of Masters. But I will make some reflections on the results of these actions, of which knowledge is greatly ignored, that are the entire rationale of fencing. I have nevertheless too much esteem for the Masters not to be persuaded that they teach their Students the results of these actions. But at the

Feints

1. *domnant beaucoup de jour* -- giving a lot of light, ie: creating an opening

2. *ébranler*

3. *intelligence*

4. *se découvrir*

5. *tentements d'épée*

6. *les démonstrations sensibles*

The Third Part

On the Manner of Parrying and of Fencing the Wall

This third part, as I have already said, is nothing more than an exact repetition and reflecting the two first [parts]. But in order to render this repetition perfect, the presence of a Master is necessary in the beginning and the Student must give him all his attention because, if in this repetition one develops any bad habits, they will be carried into the assault and the Lessons that one had taken at the *plastron* will become useless.

*That which is fencing
and parrying the wall*

In order to repeat exactly, it is good to be convinced before all things that the natural tendency¹ one has to give pushing at the wall is a great obstacle to the beauty of execution because, speed being not yet acquired, the bad usage that one makes of his strength renders all his actions constrained and disagreeable. Thus he is of good mind on this occasion to overcome this inclination and reflect that in straying from the rules one strays from perfection.²

*Important advice to
Students*

After this necessary warning, it should be observed:

1st: If one holds his sword well, one is on guard according to all the rules of the art;

2nd: After having saluted the person against whom one must push, he should see if he is in measure to fence.³

This can be judged at a glance by experienced persons. But in order to facilitate the knowledge in Students who have not yet the habit, we can give as a rule (foils being of equal length) that one is in measure for fencing on the firm foot when the weak of the sword of him who pushes engages the semi-strong of the sword of him who must parry and, in order to push, when the weak of him who pushes touches the weak of his adversary.

*That which it is to be
in measure*

The measure being known, he should throw⁴ simple strikes with the same precision as at the *plastron* and recollect⁵ this excellent Maxim: that good grace and

*Advice on the manner
of throwing*

1. *le penchant naturel*

2. *qu'en s'éloignant des règles, on s'éloigne de la perfection*

3. *pour tirer*

Fourth and Last Part

Of the Assault

The Student, readied, informed and fortified in the three first parts of this Exercise, will carry Victory in the fourth if he makes judicious application of the principles which he received and if he follows exactly the last advice which we will give him. For he should not believe with the Vulgar that there is a *secret strike*¹ reserved for Masters. It is a popular error from which he should be delivered and, in order to demonstrate it, it suffices to say that there are in Arms as many ways to defend oneself as there are ways to attack and that superiority and safety are only produced by speed and by the manner of taking the tempo. It is laid down as an uncontestable principle *that in one tempo well taken, there is no counter*. Yet this speed of hand and this precision to take the tempo can only be acquired through the understanding² of the principles and through long exercise. It is thus reasonable to conclude that the objective of fencing does not consist of a secret.

*That there is no secret
strike*

This maxim well established, the Students must be made to feel the necessity of exercising and of observing exactly the rules of the Art, principally in *the Assault* where they are abandoned to themselves and without help. This is why they must only undertake the enterprise when the Masters will judge [it] appropriate and only after being furnished³ with all the means capable of making them succeed.

The assault is the image of combat between two adversaries in which the most crafty⁴ and the better exercised must naturally stand the vanquisher. For it is in vain that one objects, diminishing the merit of this Art, that the most experienced are sometimes vanquished by the unskilled,⁵ since this triumph is caused only by accidents and circumstances which do not permit the more skilled of making use of the rules of the Art. Thus, all that one

*Definition of the
Assault*

1. *botte secrète*

2. *l'intelligence*

3. *s'être munis*

4. *le plus rusé*

5. *maladroits*