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# The Contribution of Domestic and International Conflict In Renaissance Italy to the Sport of Fencing

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The Contribution of Domestic and International Conflict  
In Renaissance Italy to the Sport of Fencing

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With shrieking buzzers, electric score boxes flashing at every touch, and parents filming bouts, a twenty-first century fencing tournament seems far removed from the sport's roots at the peculiar confluence of honor and brutality. Yet the white uniforms of each fencer are an homage to ancient traditions dating back hundreds of years, when the same pale cloth was worn to show the bloom of first blood. Historian Ken Mondschein aptly summarizes these centuries of adaptation as such: "What had been a multi-purpose martial art equally suited to the battlefield, the dueling-ground, or a self-defense scenario increasingly funneled into a specialized art intended for an encounter between equals on a level playing field, be it an ostensibly friendly fencing bout or a potentially lethal encounter."<sup>1</sup> From Germanic tribes training to wage war with swords and having divine connotations under the reign of Charlemagne to the standardization of rules in response to frequent fatal duels and fencing being tailored among each country's universities and wealthy classes, the sport has evolved alongside Europe.<sup>2</sup> Of the three primary historical fencing nations—France, Italy, and Spain—the Italian doctrine was the most fundamental to the development of the modern Olympic sport, given its prevalence in the fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance, a critical era for the discipline. Italian fencing was a product of both international and domestic rivalry beyond the sport itself. Aesthetic epicenters such as the Florentine Republic and their cultural influence over other European countries, combined with an Italian society that prioritized honor and fostered rivalry, meant that the country's Bolognese, Florentine, and Neapolitan fencing schools were in an optimal position of burgeoning progress and social tension to be the foundation for all fencing that followed.

Italy was central to fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe during the Renaissance; a European powerhouse on account of the establishment of trade routes from the Byzantine

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Mondschein, "The Italian Schools of Fencing: Art, Science, and Pedagogy," in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, ed. Daniel Jaquet (Boston: Brill, 2016), 281.

<sup>2</sup> Julio Martinez Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, (New York: Scribner, 1961), 1.

Empire and Arab lands that flooded Italian ports with new products and ideas. Northern Italy was not rich in natural resources, but merchants in places like Venice and Genoa swiftly increased their wealth by distributing these contemporary, desired imports—such as silk, dyes and spices—throughout Europe. Even Byzantine scholars immigrated to Italy, bringing with them linguistic studies that revolutionized Italian academia.<sup>3</sup> The Renaissance was at the helm of this cultural progress, seen as a rebirth from the Dark Ages, rediscovery of Greek and Roman classics, and the hallmark of a new humanistic outlook that centralized mankind’s achievement.<sup>4</sup> Historical researcher Charles Lockett considers it “a period of dialectical interface between the West and Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures, where a constellation of technologies, goods, and ideas were exchanged back and forth, shaping all of these societies and changing world history.”<sup>5</sup> The Republic of Florence was a prime example of Renaissance impact, referred to as the “new Athens” by humanists. It was highly mercantile, attempting to remain independent while adhering to republican ideals under the oversight of the Medici family. No single factor explains how it flourished so predominantly, though one key determinant that contributed was the Florentine constitution, called the Ordinances of Justice, which limited the ability of nobles to hold public office, thus giving more autonomy to middle-class merchants, wealthy families like the Medici, and artisan guilds.<sup>6,7</sup> Despite these political disparities, the Republic largely presented a united front when confronted by other city-states, successfully evading invasion by

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<sup>3</sup> Biel, “Italy During the Renaissance,” ER Services, Lumen Candela, 2020, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-fmcc-boundless-worldhistory/chapter/italy-during-the-renaissance/>.

<sup>4</sup> “The Early Renaissance in Florence,” National Gallery of Art, accessed November 22, 2022, [https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/the-early-renaissance-in-florence.html#slide\\_1](https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/the-early-renaissance-in-florence.html#slide_1)

<sup>5</sup> Charles J Lockett, “The First Guns: How Gunpowder Overcame the Sword,” *The Collector*, January 18, 2022, <https://www.thecollector.com/first-guns/>.

<sup>6</sup> Filippo Paolini, “The Ordinances of Justice,” Dante Alighieri. Pathways Through Literature, 2020. <https://www.internetculturale.it/directories/ViaggiNelTesto/dante/eng/a17.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Sal Khan, “Florence in the Early Renaissance,” Khan Academy, 2020, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/beginners-renaissance-florence/a/florence-in-the-early-renaissance>.

the Duke of Milan and the King of Naples. Florentine ideals of freedom flourished as a result of their triumphs.<sup>8</sup> The absolute power of the Medici did not contradict this. Instead, the head of the Medici bank, Cosimo de' Medici, funneled financial support into the arts and left artists to their own prosperous devices. The Medici family also supported fencing, advertising tournaments as grandiose spectacles in Florence's Piazza Santa Croce and even hiring their favorite artists to commemorate the events.<sup>9</sup> Jacques Callot's *La Guerra d'Amore*, an etching of a bloody jousting event held in honor of Grand Duchess Maria Magdalena, demonstrated this fusion of Medici wealth, art, and sport.<sup>10</sup> The immense wealth of Florence made it the pinnacle of Renaissance Italy as well as the envy of Europe, and this affluence allowed for a love of fencing to flourish among the high classes.

Critical context for Renaissance Italian fencing is seen in both a progression of fencing globally approaching the fifteenth century and the development of the particular French and Spanish schools. The earliest examples of swordfighting date back to Luxor, Egypt, in 1190 B.C.E., with a practice bout featured on a temple built by Ramses III.<sup>11</sup> Ancient Romans, Persians, and Babylonians also used swords for both war and entertainment, with Roman gladiators further transitioning combat by blade into a sport that could be trained despite its local individuality and clear physical dangers.<sup>12</sup> Sport, defined as "activity providing diversion, entertainment, or fun" by the Oxford English Dictionary, was critical to European culture, considered a reaction to issues such as isolation in increasingly modern societies.<sup>13, 14</sup> Fencing

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kyna Hamill, "Schiaminossi, Callot and Fencing," *Print Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2009): 362, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43826099>.

<sup>10</sup> See Image A in Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> See Image B in Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. "Sport."

<sup>14</sup> Paul Dietschy and Richard Holt, "Sports History in France and Britain: National Agendas and European Perspectives," *Journal of Sport History* 37, no. 1 (2010): 95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jsporthistory.37.1.83>

reflected a desire for physical entertainment as a distraction from the lingering devastation of events such as the Great Famine and Bubonic Plague.<sup>15</sup> As an art, sport, and science, it contributed to the cultural changes in this time period, particularly upon the emergence of weapons made for practice rather than bloody duels, which were first noted by an Italian fencing master in 1550.<sup>16, 17</sup> Further indications of how fencing has developed as a sport are seen in the French and Spanish schools. The French doctrine indicates the importance of being influenced from other countries: many French masters acknowledged that their treatises were built on foreign traditions until the mid-seventeenth century development of an entirely French style. Despite the prevalence of dueling and the famed elegance of French movement, their early fencing required the guidance of other doctrines.<sup>18</sup> Spanish fencing, on the other hand, originated within its own borders—Spaniard Diego de Valera’s *Treatise on Arms* is widely considered the literary birth of fencing as a scientific art.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the compiled *Destreza Verdadera*, a Spanish doctrine that established what and how fencing masters should teach, was carried to the rest of the Spanish monarchy and beyond, earning a reputation for being a dangerous and efficient school that other countries were vigilant against.<sup>20</sup> The juxtaposition between these two schools, French as an amalgam of other doctrines, Spanish as a matter of national pride, is notable because it was the French school that was eventually practiced the most of the two.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew Vannelli, “Renaissance Intellectual Transformation,” (Lecture, St. Mary’s Academy, Portland, OR, November 15, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Mondschein, “The Italian Schools of Fencing,” 281.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Fare, “The Development of Fencing Weapons,” The Fencing Museum, 2013, <http://www.fencingmuseum.com/Large/2013/2013-01-latest-Essay.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver Dupuis, “The French Fencing Traditions, from the 14th Century to 1630 through Fight Books,” In *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, ed. Daniel Jaquet, (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 372.

<sup>19</sup> Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Manuel Ortiz, “The Destreza Verdadera: A Global Phenomenon,” in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, ed. Daniel Jaquet, (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 343.

<sup>21</sup> Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, 2.

This points to overall cultural influence, rather than location of origin, being a primary indicator of the popularity of a fencing style over a long period of time.

However, by this logic, both French and Spanish fencing could not compete with Italian dominance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the product of a strong reputation, diverse array of schools, and internationally revered masters such as Angelo Viggiani dal Montone, the first man to reference practice weapons in a 1550 treatise, and Lippo Bartolemeo Dardi, a founder of the Bolognese school.<sup>22</sup> Italian fencing in this period is described by Mondschein as being comprised of “individual, local strains and approaches, each a product of their own era, and each reflecting contemporary ideas of education, fashion, science, and conflict,” and renowned for its creation of the first great schools and the writings of their corresponding masters.<sup>23, 24</sup> In the modern day, facets of the Italian doctrine are seen in the national fencing styles of countries and continents such as Hungary, Austria, South America, and Germany.<sup>25</sup> Because there was no single established doctrine in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this capacity for global influence can be credited to the Bolognese, Florentine, and Neopolitan schools, highly localized in the universities of their respective cities, which taught fencing alongside subjects like law to students hailing from almost every European country.<sup>26</sup> The Bolognese school is an excellent example of Italian success, considered not only the wealthiest, but the best source of Italian fencing treatise books.<sup>27</sup> The most extensive of which was *Opera Nova*, “A New Work,” a treatise by master Achille Marozzo that was in such demand multiple editions were eventually published.<sup>28</sup> These fencing books, popularized by the invention of the

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<sup>22</sup> Fare, “The Development of Fencing Weapons.”

<sup>23</sup> Mondschein, “The Italian Schools of Fencing,” 280.

<sup>24</sup> Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Mondschein, “The Italian Schools of Fencing,” 302.

<sup>28</sup> See Image C in Appendix.

printing press, were critical to the spread—and therefore longevity—of every doctrine. The aforementioned Florentine and Neopolitan schools flourished as well, serving as prime illustrations of the diversity of techniques within the country. Florentines double wielded rapiers, while Neopolitans used one rapier and occasionally added a dagger. The teaching of fencing was similarly varied—in Italy, unlike in Northern Europe and Spain in this time period, fencing was not restricted to any particular regulatory system or guild.<sup>29</sup> This irregularity meant that individual masters needed to build their reputations by not only training successful students, but proving their own skills in combat. As such, the role of a fencing master was highly revered and competitive in Italy, often passed down as a family trade.<sup>30</sup> One such master who emerged from this environment was Camillo Agrippa. In his 1553 *Trattato Di Scientia D'Arme, Con Vn Dialogo Di Filosofia*, “Treatise on the Science of Arms, with a Dialogue on Philosophy,” another fencing treatise published and distributed on account of the printing press, he revolutionized the use of the side sword by heavily relying upon geometry to explain his techniques.<sup>31</sup> By sharing ideas through these printed books, Italian fencing became more cohesive as Agrippa and other masters developed a formal national style by the end of the fifteenth century, at least in the minds of other European countries, given the mass distribution of their similar treatises beyond the Italian borders.<sup>32</sup> Some of these printed works even made their way to the Elizabethan theatre, and were used to train actors who performed stage fighting scenes before enraptured crowds.<sup>33</sup> While there were still distinct schools that suffused Italian fencing with dynamic creativity, they were recognizable under a larger Italian umbrella. Thus, the work of these Italian masters

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<sup>29</sup> Mondschein, “The Italian Schools of Fencing,” 284.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 284.

<sup>31</sup> See Image D in Appendix.

<sup>32</sup> David Quint, “Dueling and Civility in Sixteenth Century Italy,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 7, (1997): 232, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4603706>.

<sup>33</sup> Stewart Hawley, “The Italian, Spanish, and English Fencing Schools in Shakespeare’s England,” *Quidditas* 30, no. 1 (2009): 119, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol30/iss1/8>.



partially accounted for the style's increasing dominance, and the various schools that they taught at which boasted eager pupils from all corners of Europe.

Yet despite this dominance, there was competitive tension in Italy fencing's relationship with those practicing the sport in France and Spain; compared to countries like Britain, where Italian masters simply took over the teaching of fencing because the sport had yet to develop a national flair in those locations. The Italian-French dynamic was highly combative as the French attempted to modernize Italian methods and were met with frequent resistance from Italians in the form of dueling competitions, as described by Mondschein:

Two great European fencing nations, France and Italy, both sought prestige in a series of well-publicized contests. Duels even occurred between representatives of the two countries, and the conflict was continued in the pages of journals and fencing books. The French might have argued their fencing was the most modern, perfected, and advanced, and, politically, their school may have been on the ascendency (culminating in the formation of the Fédération Internationale d'Escrime in 1913), but the Italians, possessing the oldest didactic works known at the time, were able to claim primacy in the invention of 'scientific' swordsmanship.<sup>34</sup>

Most French treatises in this period were stylized similar to those of Italian masters but never made the same impact in other countries such as Hungary, Austria, and Germany.<sup>35</sup> Even those that opposed the Italian doctrine, such as Henri de Saint-Didier, a renowned fencing master in the French royal court, frequently referenced Italian terms in his treatises because the style was so fundamental to explaining the sport itself. Indeed, much of Saint-Didier's work appears to have been written as a response to Italian fencing rather than the creation of a new style.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mondschein, "The Italian Schools of Fencing," 282.

<sup>35</sup> Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Dupuis, "The French Fencing Traditions, from the 14th Century to 1630 through Fight Books," 369.

Additionally, regardless of French refinement, the strength of Italian methods were preferred by institutions such as British military academies, thus explained by a British colonel: “As to the relative artistic merits of the two systems, we do not feel called upon to speak, but on two points the demonstration seemed to leave no doubt, namely, that the cut and the thrust on the Italian system are much more powerful, and that the reach is longer and the penetrating force greater.”<sup>37</sup> The tension of modernization was reversed in the Italian-Spanish relationship, because it was the Spanish who originally spread the practice of fencing via their armies, but Italians who grew famous for successfully teaching it independent of war.<sup>38</sup> Spanish masters critiqued new Italian techniques from the fifteenth century onward, and claimed that their unique *Destreza Verdadera* style was structured to defeat Italian fencers. Master Lorenz de Rada went so far as to suggest that only Spanish beauty could triumph over Italian posture.<sup>39</sup> Yet Spanish fencers’ fear of Italian fencing has also been noted—in one treatise, Spanish fencing master Miguel Perez de Mendoza y Quijada wrote, “Foreign nations [...] both Italian and others, [...] execute a very violent, swift strike. They execute it with much strength and brevity in the chest. They do this quickly, because of continuous practice in delivering this strike.”<sup>40</sup> The specific Italian reference is on par with the frequent need expressed by Spanish masters to defend against Italians, pointing to Italy’s inherent threat of dominance. Meanwhile, nations without strong fencing histories envied and idolized Italian fencing, rather than competing against it, and are perhaps the greatest testament to Italian influence. It was not merely Britain’s armies that turned to Italy for fencing; among British nobility, the “Italian invasion” was particularly pronounced. As Italians, some of them fencing masters, immigrated to London, the noble and upper classes frequented the fashionable

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<sup>37</sup> “Army Fencing,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1850 (1896): 1468, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20236286>.

<sup>38</sup> Castelló, *The Theory and Practice of Fencing*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ortiz, “The Destreza Verdadera: A Global Phenomenon,” 344.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Blair, “The Neapolitan School of Fencing: Its Origins and Early Characteristics,” *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 2015, no. 2 (2015): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1515/apd-2015-0012>.

fencing schools they established. Italian fencing swiftly became equated with status in Britain, with Italian masters teaching solely wealthy or prestigious pupils in closed studios, secluding their art from the public.<sup>41</sup> One Italian master, Rocco Bonetti, charged a high fee of up to £100 for each lesson, which a craftsman would need four months worth of wages to afford.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Bonetti categorically refused to teach those of middle class or below even if they found the finances; he claimed that the beauty of the Italian style should be reserved for the upper class, rather than commoners.<sup>43</sup> The Italian elites' attitude of withholding fencing for aristocracy, believing wealth to be the determining factor of right to learn, would endure in all countries it permeated. This appeal of exclusivity contributed to the overall British perception of Italy as high-brow, treating the Italian doctrine with reverence, rather than the fearful appreciation it was afforded in France and Spain, but all three countries nevertheless held an irrefutable respect for Italian fencing.

However, the competitive Italian environment that made fencing so successful abroad also led to warring city-states and a violent pursuit of honor that endangered society. Italy's division into smaller ruling zones like Florence often left these areas on shaky footing with each other on account of proximity and the unceasing drive for prosperity. Politics evolved accordingly, with the formation of leagues and alliances across city-states representing the increasingly necessary sophistication of Italian diplomacy to stave off all-out war throughout the country, and instead only allow for strife between specific areas that could be more swiftly resolved.<sup>44</sup> This points to a larger cultural issue: it was the immense importance of honor that led to conflict in its defense. In fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy, honor was social and economic

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<sup>41</sup> Hawley, "The Italian, Spanish, and English Fencing Schools in Shakespeare's England," 122.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Caroline Elam, "Art and Diplomacy in Renaissance Florence," *RSA Journal* 136, no. 5387 (1988): 814, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41377296>.

capital in need of constant protection, both legally and publicly. For instance, the mere act of insulting someone was a severe crime that could be punished with trials and high fines.<sup>45</sup> When the law did not prevail, fencing duels provided the means for this defense, transforming theoretical vendettas into physical fights that masters prepared their students for the inevitability of.<sup>46</sup> The duel was a fundamental part of aristocratic culture in Italy, with a code of conduct that eventually transformed into the rules of fencing bouts. Noble men used the controlled environment of a duel to settle scores and push back against city leaders who disapproved of these fights, given that they frequently turned lethal with the use of sharp Italian rapiers.<sup>47</sup> Bernardo Canigiani, Florentine ambassador to Ferrara reported one such fight to Cosimo de Medici in a 1573 letter that discussed a clash between a Bolognese soldier and the Cavalier Malvagia after a private conversation became public and led to a bloody street fight:

It happened that as the Cavalier Malvagia of Bologna, together with his son, was talking inside the courtyard with a Bolognese soldier, he unwarily came to blame and criticize a certain Bolognese gentleman who was the creature of the Malvezzi family: whence the soldier, when he found Malvagia outside the courtyard, said to him that he lied in the words that he had spoken in freedom (in Franchigia) shortly before to the prejudice of the honor of his friend.<sup>48</sup>

A key part of these duels, aside from the training that made one successful, was their publicization. *Cartelli di Sfida*, for instance, were written by offended parties challenging their opponents to duels and posted at public squares—like one Bolognese card written addressed to

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Davies, “Violence and Italian Universities during the Renaissance,” *Renaissance Studies* 27, no. 4 (2013): 506, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24420181>.

<sup>46</sup> Mondschein, “The Italian Schools of Fencing,” 187.

<sup>47</sup> David Quint, “Dueling and Civility in Sixteenth Century Italy,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 7 (1997): 232, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4603706>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

the visiting Prince of Crete by Italians Frangimandro the Proud, Lucidoro the Intrepid, and Gilprando the Shrewd, their creative qualifiers demonstrating the fierce pride associated with the challenges.<sup>49</sup> Often, these opponents would place written responses beneath, and many grudges became a battle of words for all to read, rather than culminating in a duel.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, *Denunzie* were part of the legal system in cities like Siena—officials placed denunciation boxes for citizens to anonymously slip *Denunzie* cards into, explaining their grievances and how their honor had been violated on paper for the government to handle. Ironically, the anonymous boxes were in highly-trafficked locations, such as the High Altar of Siena’s primary cathedral, making the filing of *Denunzie* public expressions of civilian involvement in disciplinary power.<sup>51</sup> Both the *Cartelli di Sfida* and *Denunzie* served similar purposes to duels, which frequently occurred on the open street, leading to intervention by peacemakers or authorities—thus, in a strange way, some duels led to resolution rather than bloodshed because Italian culture featured them so publicly, same as the posted grudges.<sup>52</sup> This paradox of evasive nobility and eager brutality is perhaps best summarized by historian David Quint, who claims that the duel “belonged to an aristocratic culture that embraced politeness, but never fully agreed to be civilized.”<sup>53</sup>

The Italian upper class’s love of honor, coupled with the practical application of pride in the duel, promoted competition and violence in the schools of Italian fencing; a reflection of the overall dominance of prideful conflict within the country. Rich young men were expected to be trained in rapier fencing, and carrying arms was a mark of nobility and reluctantly allowed by city authorities across Italy, who feared the potential ramifications of letting boys arm themselves

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<sup>49</sup> See Image E in Appendix.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

<sup>51</sup> Fabrizio Nevola, “Surveillance and Control of the Street in Renaissance Italy,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no. 1/2 (2013): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673404>.

<sup>52</sup> Quint, “Dueling and Civility in Sixteenth Century Italy,” 256.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

publicly but bowed to the sheer popularity of fencing as a pastime.<sup>54</sup> At the universities where they studied, students loved to host tournaments, but this ardor for the sport easily manifested itself as violence. Insults, assaults, riots, and even murders plagued university cities in Italy, such as the 1560 Bolognese riots, when five hundred armed men besieged the Collegio San Clemente.<sup>55</sup> Yet due to the prestige, foreign students, and wealth these schools brought into Republics like Florence, they were seen as worth the bloody investment.<sup>56</sup> For men, there was no escaping the social phenomenon of fencing, in both its increasingly refined training and the potentially deadly outcomes of learning the sport. Schools of fencing saw conflict not only between their students, but among each other. A prime example is the late Renaissance feud between the Neapolitan and Sicilian schools, taught at universities in their respective cities. The Neapolitan sword-and-dagger style was founded by master Giovan Battista Marcelli, famed for his powerful lunge and talented students, while the Sicilian doctrine predated him by half a generation—it was credited to Camillo Pallavicini in the fifteenth century, a prolific master who penned seventy-three treatises.<sup>57</sup> There was immense tension between the two, because Pallavicini's Sicilians saw the Neapolitan school as co-opting most of their older techniques and claiming to have created them. There was no resolution to this bitter conflict, because neither side ever yielded, though as historian Charles Blair notes in *The Neapolitan School of Fencing: Its Origins and Early Characteristics*, “Neapolitans did claim that the elder Marcelli invented some things, such as the stance (*la pianta*) and the straight thrust (*la stoccata dritta*). If pushed they would say that Marcelli did not invent them, but that he did perfect them,” pointing to the

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<sup>54</sup> Davies, “Violence and Italian Universities during the Renaissance,” 506.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 509.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 516.

<sup>57</sup> Blair, “The Neapolitan School of Fencing: Its Origins and Early Characteristics,” 9.

broader Italian cultural refusal to be wrong, believing that it endangered their honor—a fate worse than death at the rapiered hand of a well-trained Italian fencer.<sup>58</sup>

Late Italian Renaissance culture and fencing were inextricably linked, simultaneously causes and effects of the other. The transition from lethal duel to standardized sport can be credited to the Italian populace's—alongside other Europeans—desire to organize and improve during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With the increasing presence of gunpowder in Europe yielding early gun prototypes like the Arquebus, which rendered armor and swords largely useless in combat on account of its forceful shot, dueling was still a matter of fierce Italian pride but no longer had deadly connotations, placing it formally in the category of sport.<sup>59</sup> The eighteenth century French invention of the foil, a blunted practice sword, further decreased the dangers of fencing. Before this, in the mid-seventeenth century France came to the forefront of the fencing scene with a new doctrine that prioritized “fluidity of movement, the refusal of brutal actions and elegance, linking body to spirit,” according to historian Oliver Dupuis.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of this eventual French intersection, a testament to the global nature of fencing, it was the fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian dominance that most shaped the duel, and the sport, into its modern form. Italy's international role as the Renaissance epicenter translated to the global popularity of Italian fencing masters, healthy competition with other nations, and distribution of Italian-style treatises on newly invented printing presses. Taken in tandem with Italy's internally warring schools vying for greatness, prideful culture that put the duel to good use, and the wealthy status associated with proficiency at the sport, the sociopolitical climate of Italy was ideal for establishing the modern tenants of fencing. This research raises questions about the influence of fencing in other cultures throughout history, and whether or not a similar

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Lockett, “The First Guns: How Gunpowder Overcame the Sword.”

<sup>60</sup> Dupuis, “The French Fencing Traditions, from the 14th Century to 1630 through Fight Books,” 372.

mirroring effect is seen in additional societies. As a whole, fifteenth and sixteenth century fencing can be considered a mirror for Italian society at the time, born from international and domestic conflict both. By managing to be both noble and violent, popular and controversial, the increasingly regulated Italian duel formed an attractive paradox that captured the interest of countries and societies for centuries to follow.



Appendix

Image A: La Guerra D'Amore



Source: Callot, Jacques. *La Guerra d'Amore*. Florence, Italy: Medici, 1616. Taken from Kyna Hamill's "Schiaminossi, Callot and Fencing."

Image B: Egyptian Fencing Carved on Medinet Habu Temple

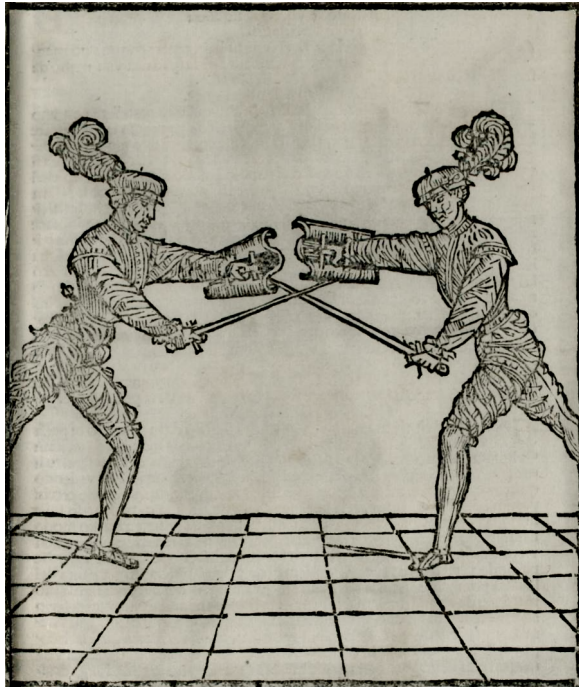


Source: Bayfield, Su. *Egyptian Stick Fencers Recorded at Medinet Habu. The Stone-Carved Images Show Competitors Who Wear Protective Headgear, Fence with a Stick Blunted at the Tip. A Knuckle Guard Protects the Hand.* October 17, 2012. *Columbia Classical Fencing.*

<https://columbia-classical-fencing.com/2012/11/03/parallels-between-classical-european-ancient-egyptian-fencing-bouts/>.



Image C: Panels from Opera Nova



Source: Marozzo, Achille. *Opera Nova*. Modena, Italy: D. Antonio Bergolae, 1536.

Image D: Panels from Trattato Di Scientia D'Arme



Source: Agrippa, Camillo. *Trattato Di Scientia D'Arme, Con Vn Dialogo Di Filosofia*. Rome, Italy: Antonio Blado, 1553.



Image E: Cartelli di Sfida for the Prince of Crete



Source: Frangimandro il Fiero, Lucidoro l'Intrepido, Gilprandro l'Avveduto, Cavalieri di Cento.

Letter to Prencipe di Creta, Cavalieri Compagni. "Al Prencipe Di Creta e Cavalieri Compagni."

*Biblioteca Digitale Dell'Archiginnasio*, 1639.

<http://badigit.comune.bologna.it/foglinfesta/dettaglio2.asp?lettera=5>.

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