

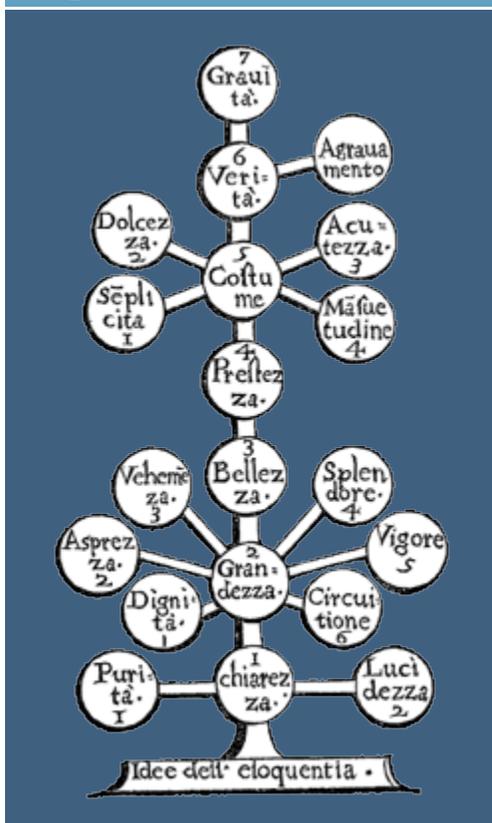
Philology in Historical Research

Some helpful tools for tackling the Renaissance fencing texts.

by Tom Leoni © 2006

One of the most unique aspects of the Western Martial Arts (WMA) revival is the fact that most researchers are amateurs as opposed to professional historians and academics. Many of us find this to be a blessing, since approaching the discipline as a tabula rasa means that no real pre-conceived ideas or patterns stand in the way of direct research. Even WMA researchers holding prestigious and recognized Classical Fencing Master's titles - such as Maestro Sean Hayes of Oregon - make sure that in their research they do not overuse the corner of the brain that contains their previous training. In this manner, they keep their investigation of pre-Classical systems unadulterated.

Hermogenes' rhetorical styles arranged in a tree diagram. From Campanile, 1606.



Such intellectual purism, however, comes with a price. Namely, the set of skills required for efficient and accurate historical research is not yet defined, especially since the WMA-revival movement itself is younger than two decades. Thus, the majority of researchers rely on what they perceive as "talent" and "passion" to rediscover these fascinating arts. The concept of passion is pretty much self-explanatory. What we call "talent" is a set of identifiable skills part of which we can actively cultivate and grow, plus intuition (which in most cases cannot be taught, so we will leave it aside).

In particular, there is a dimension that I have found extremely valuable in my research, and that I therefore make a constant effort to refine: philological skills. By philological skills I mean the ability to understand words, definitions, categories, written-speech styles and rhetorical devices used in the period source treatises. I firmly believe that without these skills - framed in their appropriate historical context - our effort as researchers is greatly impeded.

Before I move on to a brief overview of the elements of philology that I have found valuable, I would like to present an important premise. We should always strive to understand words and thought-processes not only as moderns, but also as people from the period(s) we study.

Of course, this can only be done by remote approximation, but the less remote the better. Fortunately, we have many valuable resources at our disposal in this regard, such as books on Humanistic and Renaissance thought, philosophy, art-history, aesthetics and even more specialized topics such as memory-palaces, physical culture, medicine, etc.

This point has been made clear in recent years by our good friend Bob Charron, the foremost student of Italian longsword master Fiore De' Liberi (1409), and I would like to give him the credit he is due in promoting this concept. Bob's research has proven that acquiring some of the "period sensibility" is key in recognizing important ideas that we would otherwise overlook or fail to understand.

Denotation and function

The field of philology is extremely broad and many parts of it overlap the discipline of logics, so I will allow myself some latitude in choosing what I consider the most helpful points in WMA research.

Firstly, the historical researcher should be able to understand every word in the text he studies. While this may seem like a superfluous statement, let me take it one step further. Words are multi-dimensional tools. At the very least, the researcher should understand not only the denotative meaning of the word, but also its function. Is a particular word used as an exact definition of something? Is it used as a synonym of another word and, if so, is the other word itself an exact definition of something? Or is a word used as a shortcut to a generic concept?

Without this skill, researchers are bound to make mistakes that range from complete misinterpretations to time-consuming wild-goose chases. And the problem is greatly compounded when the original text is in a language with which the researcher is only tangentially familiar.

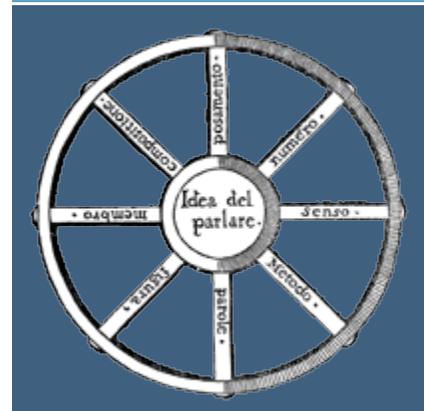
Denotation is the nature of the concept that the word represents in a particular context. Identifying the correct one for every word is not always easy. Obscurity, obsolescence or change of usage through the centuries are some of the reasons why. In many ways, the researcher's best friend is a good dictionary - and by good dictionary I don't mean anything less than a full-size Oxford. In case of Italian, many non-native researchers turn to the Florio (an Italian-English dictionary from Elizabethan times), while my personal preference is the 1600's-vintage Vocabolario Della Crusca.

While the Florio may give good approximations of words' meanings, the VDC provides extremely accurate and thorough definitions of how words were understood in Italy after the "linguistic reformation" spearheaded by Pietro Bembo in the first half of the 1500's. It was prepared over twenty-one years by the foremost late-16th-Century luminaries of the Italian language, and its definitions remained the orthodox standard until well into the 1800's.

Understanding word function is strictly related to understanding denotation, although it takes place on a higher level. Broadly speaking, I have identified three categories into which most words of fencing texts fall.

1. Standardized fencing terms. These are the least problematic to understand and translate, since they have little or no meaning outside the context of the art of fencing, and even when they do, the distinction is extremely obvious. Examples are mandritto squalebrato, cavazione, invitation (chiamata), feint (finta), etc.
2. Non-specialized words. This category should be also fairly straightforward to understand, since it is composed of terms that were used in common conversation. Example: you should place the weight of your body on the foot that is not the next to move.
3. Non-standardized fencing terms that have also a meaning outside of the art. These are the ones that present the highest number of challenges in researching and translating, because

Rhetorical elements of each stylistic form. From Campanile, 1606.



the same word can be used multiple times in the same text to mean radically different things. Examples: stringere, pass, inside, outside, etc.

Category 3 has created a lot of headaches in the WMA community because of two main reasons:

- They often have numerous synonyms that are used not only by authors in the same time-period, but often by the same master within the same text. The classic example is the word "stringere" (with the meaning of "finding the sword" - the historical version of the Classical "engagement"); it appears on the texts also as trovare, ritrovare, guadagnare, occupare, acquistare, etc.
- They have other meanings ranging in their degree of semantic or etymological relation. For instance (staying with "stringere"), its past participle "stretto" is also an adjective that means "narrow."

These two problems, respectively, lead to two common mistakes:

1. Over-interpretation of synonyms. This stems from the mistaken assumption that every term reflects a precise, standardized concept and that (therefore) different terms must mean different things. A basic example of this is the variety of verbs that masters use in relation to the object "a cut:" deliver, throw, saw, drop, etc. These words are used to avoid repetition, but are often over-analyzed to mean slightly different physical actions.
2. Misunderstanding of different meanings of the same word. The fact that a word has multiple meanings (even within the same text) leads to confusion and to misinterpretation when fewer than the whole range of meanings are known by the researcher. For instance, "cavare" is both the verb of the substantive "cavazione" (analogous to a disengage) and the generic word for "pulling out." For an egregious and humorous example of this kind of misinterpretation, I have known individuals who were convinced that period swordsmen practiced "disengaging the sword around their scabbard" - and they themselves spent countless hours doing so!

Definitions

As Renaissance thinker Erasmus said, every definition is an evil doing. However, even he may concede that without them many disciplines would be impossible to record and transmit. Regarding definitions in the context of fencing treatises, it is extremely important that we understand:

1. when the master is giving one
2. what it defines
3. what the nature and scope of the definition is.

Definitions are keystones of understanding not only what something is, but also (and sometimes especially) what something is not. The very etymology of the word "de-finire" suggests a border beyond which the non-essence of something is shut out.

Here is a practical example of why definitions are important. Many masters define fencing as an art, but do not go any further in defining what an art is. However, the researcher should immediately recognize that points 1, 2 and 3 of my list above are something that apply - and investigate accordingly.

In this case, our thought-process should lead us as follows:

<p>Step 1: The master is giving us a definition (fencing is an art), and stops there.</p>	→	<p>Step 2: We look up the period definition of "art."</p>	→	<p>The common period definition of "art" is precise, and should color our understanding of the discipline accordingly.</p>
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Instead (sadly), most researchers would skip this definition and rush to the "how-to" part of the book, thus setting themselves up to miss other important clues when they occur. (An art is by definition something governed by rules; rules must be found; to find them we need to look for them; to look for them we need to know that they exist; that they exist is explicit in the definition of art; failing to understand the definition of art means failing to look for and identify the rules; failing to look for and identify the rules causes research to be faulty and incomplete.)

Another common case is when a word is used not as a strict definition, but as a linguistic shortcut to take the reader to a broad idea. The word "rapier" is a perfect example of this. The sheer variety of hilt and blade-types that were called "rapier" at the time suggests that the term was not a narrow definition, but a shortcut to take the recipient of the term to a general idea. Ditto for how a rapier is understood today. The mistake many make is to confuse a broad genus with a particular species: thus, in the case of the rapier, they spend years determining what the exact dimensions of it must have been - as if it was a modern Stock-Keeping-Unit production model.

The correct identification and understanding of definitions often serves to clarify the template or "filing-scheme" into which the more particular pieces fit. Researchers should never underestimate the importance of definitions, which (we should remember) were one of the main elements of Socratic and Platonic dialectic.

Style

To think that the authors of Renaissance treatises were little more than physically-talented energumens with a limited education (especially compared to us!) is an unspeakable act of intellectual insolence. Worse, we moderns often tend to blame our failures in comprehension on their writing, complaining that they must have been much better swordsmen than they were writers. Are these accusations justified?

Printer's device from Campanile, 1606.



Just for fun, pick up your favorite period treatise. Read the dedication and meditate on its style. Then turn to (say) the chapter where the master describes the guards, and once more meditate on its style.

Even without knowing which treatise you have in your hands, I am willing to bet that the dedication is embellished with longer sentences, metaphors, oblique sentences, gerunds and subordinate clauses; and the chapter on guards makes much ampler use of shorter periods, verbs in the indicative, while few oblique sentences and no metaphors will be present.

The deeper I delve into my research of rhetoric and style, the clearer it becomes that Renaissance fencing masters wrote along very precise guidelines that were

commonly taught in their time. And recognizing these guidelines makes it much easier to understand the treatises and the arts they describe.

One of my luckiest finds in this field was a copy of a 1606 treatise on rhetoric by the Neapolitan Filiberto Campanile. In only 146 pages, he describes the rules of style as they were understood in his day - chiefly influenced by the Classics, such as Aristotle, Cicero, Marcus Fabius and especially Hermogenes. This book is one of the most consulted ones in my small collection, and it was thanks to it that I was able to not only refine my translation skills, but also understand many important structural elements in Fabris and other treatises that I may otherwise have completely overlooked. Yet, by contemporary standards, this book is nothing elaborate, especially when compared to the heavily-annotated commentaries in Latin that were common currency in universities all across Europe.

It is vital to understand that Renaissance style was based around a hierarchy of rhetorical complexity - three genera traditionally (plain, medium and grand) and seven genera in the more complete system of Hermogenes (clarity, grandness, beauty, swiftness, appearance, truth and gravity). Hermogenes' clarity was in turn composed by purity and lucidity - and it is highly recognizable as a deliberately-pursued trait of the better-written among Renaissance treatises. Instead, introductory material and (especially) dedications required a more elevated style, hence the more ample periods, oblique sentences, metaphors, gerunds, etc.

The treatise of Antonio Manciolino (1531) is a shining example of this stylistic dualism. Each introduction to his six books is written in a deliberately over-ornate "grand" style (also called "Asian" style, or in the case of something slightly auto-ironic, "euphuistic"). Here is an example from book III:

As poets sing of the wooly limbs of the goat-like deities, their horned brows, their lustful motions, or their earthen and rustic assaults, theirs are not words, but brush-strokes. Behold the doe-like goddesses in their long flight, one lifting her purple gown above the milk-white knee, her blond tresses now cascading over the ivory shoulders, now being fanned by the gentle winds, while another plunges in the clear running streams.	
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His instruction, on the other hand, is as clear of Hermogenes' clarity as can be. Here is an example from book VI:

Begin by gripping the partisan with your left hand forward and the knuckles of both hands facing up. Set yourself with left foot forward in a wide step, and with the partisan pointing obliquely to your left. If the opponent is in this same guard, or in any other for that matter, either one of you can start the action.	
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Failing to understand these stylistic categories leads to opinions such as that by turn-of-the-century Italian fencing historian J. Gelli, according to whom the same man could not have possibly written both the introductions and the contents to Manciolino's six books. In turn, this causes the researcher to discount or overlook important parts of the treatises that contain precious information - although it may be thinly veiled as a metaphor or other figure of speech.

Such is the case when Manciolino states, in the introduction to book III:

[by using synonyms whenever we can], we [should] escape tedious monotony, because there is nothing more detestable than the frequent repetition of the same word.

a statement he completes by giving examples of standard fencing terms that admit no synonyms (such as mandritto) and ones that do because they are not as specialized or standardized (such as passing, right, left). Although Manciolino is studied by many, this passage is all but unknown, almost surely because it occurs in a "euphuistic" introduction rather than a "clear" instruction chapter. And as I have stated above, misunderstanding the role of synonyms vis a vis standardized fencing terminology can lead to dead ends in one's research or fruitless and time-consuming wild-goose chases. Such is the cost of misunderstanding style.

Conclusion

These I have presented are only a few of the philological elements that I have found helpful in my "tool-kit." I am by no means saying that it is only by reading Aristotle and Hermogenes that one can approach the historical fencing material; but I am contending that without an understanding of a) language, b) definitions and categories of definitions and c) Renaissance style or Classical style the job becomes slower, harder, less accurate and more reliant on intuition alone.

Instead, by properly considering these elements it is easier to obtain clearly-focused pieces of information which, in turn, can be filed by equally logical criteria.

For, as I said, philology and logics are intrinsically related.