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“Make it a word and a blow”: the duel and its rhetoric in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*

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“Two households”: right from the very first words of its Prologue, Shakespeare’s tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* points to duality and contest as its defining principles. Over the five acts of a play which one critic calls a “demonstration of rhetorical fireworks,”¹ the playwright’s virtuosity renders the competitive background of human interactions in Verona through an infinite variety of rhetorical devices. Every student of *Romeo and Juliet* is of course familiar with its many puns, pulling meaning as it were in opposite directions, starting as early as the Prologue’s fourth line, “Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean”² (with “civil” as both what relates to citizenry and what is characteristic of civility). The play’s many oxymorons are equally famous, as in Romeo’s first speech:

O brawling love, o loving hate,
O anything of nothing first create,
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms
... (I.i.172ff)

Jill L. Levenson, the play’s editor for The Oxford Shakespeare, further notes at least a hundred lines in the play resorting to balanced repetition as a way of rhetorically rendering rivalry and alternation,³ as in Friar Laurence’s premonitory “These violent delights have violent ends” (II.v.9) when he joins the heroes’ hands at their ill-fated wedding. Sometimes such rhetorical effects are even stretched to the point of sounding oppositionally comical in the midst of the most tragic situations, as with the Nurse and Lady Capulet’s chiasmus when facing a seemingly dead Juliet:

NURSE.
She’s dead, deceased, she’s dead, alack the day!

¹ R. O. Evans, *The Osier Cage: Rhetorical Devices in Romeo and Juliet*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1966, p. 81.

² All quotes are taken from Jill L. Levenson’s edition of the play for The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

³ Jill L. Levenson’s introduction to her Oxford edition, p. 43.

CAPULET'S WIFE.

Alack the day, she's dead, she's dead, she's dead! (iv.iv.49-50)

All these effects are well known to modern critics and students, visible to readers and well heard by audiences in performance, whether or not they come to the play equipped with the rhetorical terminology allowing them to put a name on the phenomena which they do not fail to notice. But one closely related aspect which is almost totally lost on modern readers and audiences is the way in which stage fights respond to the play's rhetorical options by displaying a contest, not just of men, but also of styles and techniques, generations, social classes and national preferences. Retrieving some of those seldom noticed effects is the object of this article.

Let us begin with a few words about the background of duelling practices in England at the end of the sixteenth century and some of their connections with the theatrical world. It is difficult to date with precision the arrival of codified duelling practices from the continent on the English soil, but the country certainly did not stay immune to the spread of what Sergio Rossi calls the duelling "epidemic" all over Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴ The size and extent of that phenomenon are evidenced by a wealth of surviving duelling manuals in Italian, French and Spanish, which got circulated all over Europe before being adapted and translated into other European languages. These included English, with, for example, the translation of Giacomo di Grassi's authoritative Italian manual under the title *Di Grassi his true Arte of Defence* published in 1594, which happens to be the conjectural date of the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Along with the arrival of fencing manuals, major European cities witnessed that of Italian fencing masters. The first of these in England was Rocco Bonetti who, according to the testimony of George Silver – an English detractor of Italian fighting ways – leased a hall on the Blackfriars' premises to establish his school in the early 1570s.⁵ According to Silver, signor Rocco commonly boasted about his being able "to hit anie Englishman with a thrust vpon anie button",⁶ a feat which may have been remembered by Shakespeare in the characterisation of his duellist Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, humorously dubbed by his opponent Mercutio "the very butcher of a silk button" (II.iii.22). Rocco Bonetti was soon followed by another Italian, Vincentio Saviolo, who was active in London both as a fencing master and a dancing master at the time when Shakespeare was starting his career, and under whose name another influential fencing manual was published directly in English in 1595, under the title of *Vincentio Saviolo His Practise*.

I believe Sergio Rossi is right in stressing the decisive role of the late Renaissance Italian masters in making fencing a new art, "on a level with the accomplishments of poetic composition, conversation, dancing and riding" that a gentleman already had to possess.⁷ The connection between literary ability and the ability to fence according to the codes of civility is made as early as the very first words in Saviolo's treatise, in his address to the reader: "The meanes whereby men from time to time haue bene preferred euen to the highest degrees of greatnes and dignitie, haue euer bene and are of two sortes, Armes

⁴ Sergio Rossi, "Duelling in the Italian Manner: The Case of *Romeo and Juliet*", *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama*, ed. Michele Marrapodi et al., Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 112-124, p. 112.

⁵ George Silver, *The Paradoxes of Defence*, London, Edward Blount, 1599, p. 64.

⁶ Silver, *The Paradoxes*, p. 65.

⁷ Rossi, "Duelling in the Italian Manner", p. 113.

and Letters".⁸ By placing his volume under the aegis of Minerva, "the goddess not onely of studies but also of Armes", as he reminds his readers,⁹ Saviolo clearly presents sparring with weapons as a continuation of – or a variation on – verbal sparring. Accordingly, the structure of the first part of the manual, devoted to the technicalities of fighting with the rapier and dagger, takes the form of a dialogue between a fencing master and a student, and their cues and speeches alternate with pictures of two men demonstrating the various wards and techniques, making the work as a whole appear highly theatrical, with both verbal agon and performed contests. Page after page, we see the two men engaged in a dialogue in which the fencing jargon of "the dritta, the stoccata, the imbrocata, the punta riuersa"¹⁰ holds the part of so many rhetorical devices allowing the master to "drive his point home", as it were, both in words and in gestures. In this and other illustrated manuals from the period designed after the same fashion, fencing technique, complete with its terminology and jargon, is thus approached as a form of rhetoric in action, providing the competitors with tools to compose their works of art, and the connoisseurs with criteria to judge their achievements.

Although the first Italian or Italianate fencing schools like Saviolo's in which high fees were demanded from the students were primarily aimed at aristocratic circles, fencing enthusiasts and practitioners included people from all the walks of life. The long-standing "Corporation of Masters of the Noble Science of Defence", founded under Henry VIII, regularly organised prize fights, which were at least as popular as other forms of entertainment such as bear-baiting and play watching, and more often than not, these different activities took place at the same venues. *The Register of the Masters of Defence*, kept up to 1590, shows constant use of playhouses and innyards for the organisation of fencing prizes, and the *Diary* of the theatrical entrepreneur and owner of the Rose theatre, Philip Henslowe, mentions his having let his theatre on November 4, 1598, for one such event: "James Cranwigge the 4 of Nov. 1598 playd his callenge in my howsse & I sholde haue hade for my parte xxxs which the company hath receuyd & oweth yt to me".¹¹

The use of shared venues is one point of intersection between duelling practices and theatrical practices, but there are many others. If it is true that no eyewitness description of an Elizabethan stagefight is extant, documentary evidence is abundant on actors and theatre people engaging in fencing bouts outside the theatre and sometimes even involved in bloody duels. One of the most famous cases in this respect is the involvement of Christopher Marlowe in a fatal duel, leading to his brief imprisonment at Newgate, some years before he himself got killed in a dagger fight in 1593. Another well-known case is the 1598 duel in which Ben Jonson fought and killed fellow actor Gabriel Spencer. A report of that fight is included in the *Middlesex County Records*:

[Jonson,] with a certain sword of iron and steel called a Rapiour, of the price of three shillings, which he then and there had in his right hand and held drawn, feloniously and wilfully struck and beat the same Gabriel, then and there with the aforesaid sword giving to the same Gabriel Spencer, in and upon the same Gabriel's right side, a mortal wound, of the depth of six inches and of the breadth of one inch, of which mortal wound the same Gabriel Spencer then and there died instantly.¹²

⁸ Vincentio Saviolo, *His Practise*. In *two Bookes*, London, John Wolfe, 1595, sig. B1^r.

⁹ Saviolo, *His Practise*, sig. B1^r.

¹⁰ Saviolo, *His Practise*, sig. K4^r.

¹¹ References and quote in Charles Edelman, "Brawl ridiculous": *Swordfighting in Shakespeare's Plays*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 7.

¹² Quoted in Edelman, "Brawl ridiculous", p. 175.

The precise and technical quality, both of the fight and of the report, gives the measure of the familiarity, not just of Italian or Italianate fencing masters and their aristocratic students, but of the Elizabethan general public, with duelling weapons and the practice that went with them. Therefore, if modern audiences seldom notice any difference between a stage fight with long swords, sword and buckler, or rapier and dagger, we can assume that Elizabethan audiences were likely not just to see all these options as spectacle, but also to consider the symbolic implications of such choices for action and characterisation.

One reason why I am taking as examples the long sword, the sword and buckler, and the rapier and dagger, is that these three sets of weapons are the very first props introduced in act I scene i of *Romeo and Juliet*. Working like so many visual shorthands, these metonymic props most likely helped the play's original audiences to immediately place the characters on a social, generational and ideological scale. According to the stage direction in the 1599 quarto edition, Samson and Gregory, the first characters to enter the stage in act I scene i carry "swords and bucklers" in the older English fashion. Since at least the introduction of Italian fighting manners, sword and buckler (the buckler being a small shield held with the hand only, without any strap around the forearm) had been superseded in the upper classes by the trendy continental rapier. Consequently, by the early 1590s, sword and buckler were rather associated with apprentices and servants, i.e. the only people who still largely used them if they were fighting enthusiasts. Equipped in that way, Samson and Gregory were likely to evoke for early audiences "Verona's version of Smithfield" (as Edelman puts it)¹³, Smithfield being a field outside the city walls where London apprentices and common people would meet on Sundays and holidays for fencing contests and the occasional duel or general brawl.

Later in the scene, these swords and bucklers are contrasted with the long sword for which Capulet calls as he enters the stage:

Give me my long sword, ho! [...]
My sword, I say. Old Montague is come,
And flourishes his blade in spite of me. (I.i.71, 73-74)

An equally outdated weapon, the long sword was nevertheless not associated with lower class amateurish fights, but with the tradition of honour from late medieval trials by combat and jousts fought with armours. Such a blade would be at least one meter long, weighing three to four pounds and capable of cutting off a head or limb at one strike.

Between the two extremes of the highly honourable, archaic long sword and the degenerate sword and buckler, we discover a couple of hot-spirited, more fashionable and younger duellists, Benvolio and Tybalt, flourishing their rapiers to stop or start fights. Taken together, these various weapons both serve as Homeric epithets for the characters (base servants, old fathers, fashionable youths) and emblematises an overall culture of violence that affects the entire spectrum of the society of Verona, from commoners to gentlemen and from older generations to younger ones. The picture is completed by the arrival of citizens armed with clubs and partisans, as individuated fight degenerates into a general brawl.

In the absence of fully descriptive stage directions in Elizabethan play texts, we can only rely on Benvolio's report of the fight to Montague and his wife later in the scene as a

¹³ Edelman, "*Brawl ridiculous*", p. 35.

source of information on the stage business during the episode of the first confrontation with Tybalt:

I drew to part them; in the instant came
The fiery Tybalt, with his sword prepared,
Which as he breathed defiance to my ears,
He swung about his head and cut the winds,
Who, nothing hurt withal, hissed him in scorn. (I.i.104-108)

This passage, as well as Benvolio's later report of the fatal duels of act III scene i resulting in the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, were taken many years ago by Adolph Soens as evidence of a Spanish style of fencing for Tybalt, as opposed to an overall Italian manner for the other fighters of the play, i.e. Romeo and Benvolio, and above all Mercutio.¹⁴ I am not necessarily convinced by all his arguments, since many of the particularities that he attributes to the Spanish style were equally found in Italian manuals, such as the idea of "fighting by the book of arithmetic" as Mercutio calls it (III.i.102), that is to say using angles and diagrams to determine the best options for the weapon and footwork.¹⁵ What I find more convincing is Soens's reading of Mercutio as the "honest, downright Englishman confronted with foreign and affected" mannerisms.¹⁶ The following exchange from act II scene iii is particularly telling in this respect:

BENVOLIO. Why, what is Tybalt?

MERCUTIO. More than Prince of Cats. O, he's the courageous captain of compliments. He fights as you sing prick-song, keeps time, distance, and proportion; he rests his minim rests, one, two, and the third in your bosom – the very butcher of a silk button – a duellist, a duellist, a gentleman of the very first house of the first and second cause. Ah, the immortal *passado*, the *punto reverso*, the *hay*!

BENVOLIO. The what?

(II.iii.17-26)

In this extract, Tybalt's alien style of fighting is couched in musical metaphors recalling some foreign score that he would play out, using the *passado*, the *punto reverso* or the barbaric-sounding *hay* (the first two terms coming directly out of the Italianated manuals of Saviolo and others) as so many musical effects, a bit like the *allegro* or the *andante* of symphonies from later periods. Tybalt is said to be "a duellist", as we would nowadays say that so and so is "a violist" or "a cellist", except that "duellist" corresponds to a neologism for which the *OED* precisely cites this extract as the first known illustration. The use of technical terms, some of them neologisms or downright inventions (like the mysterious *hay*), substantiates the play's awareness of – and engagement with – the debates of the time on antagonistic native and alien traditions of fighting.

In stage play, such controversies could materialise – and may well have materialised in early performances – as different wards for Mercutio and Tybalt as they engage in their fatal rapier and dagger duel of act III scene i. The effect onstage would thus not be one of balance and symmetry between the fighters standing for the two houses, but of visual oxymoron as we see a clash of antagonistic fencing rhetorics. Indeed, if we are to accept the testimony of the play text, Mercutio and Tybalt did choose two rather different

¹⁴ Adolph L. Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing in *Romeo and Juliet*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 20:2, 1969, p. 121-127.

¹⁵ Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing", p. 124.

¹⁶ Soens, "Tybalt's Spanish Fencing", p. 123.

fighting options. Enraged by Romeo's submission, Mercutio clearly states that he goes for a "stoccado" strategy, that is to say a full thrust, in challenging Tybalt:

O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!
Alla stoccado carries it away.
 Tybalt, you rat-catcher, will you walk? (III.i.72-74)

But in the muddled fight that follows and in which Romeo vainly tries to stop the bloodshed, Tybalt prefers a short stabbing followed by a retreat rather than a full thrust, if we are to take the testimony of a dying Mercutio for it: "Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch" (III.i.93) and "Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death!" (III.i.100-101). Whether or not we call Tybalt's technique "Spanish" as Soens did, the contrast with Mercutio's way is there and would have contributed visually to the verbal rhetoric of the quarrel.

Accompanying the tragic action of the play like a running commentary, duel scenes crucially occur at the beginning, the middle and the end: at the start of the first act with the fight initiated by the servants, at the climax of act III where Mercutio and Tybalt get killed, and in the final scene where Romeo fights and kills Paris at the entrance of the Capulet monument. Duel scenes are an integral part not just of the spectacle of violence, but also of the culture and rhetoric of it. The play engages with that visual rhetoric of violence, just as it engages with the verbal rhetoric of Petrarchan love introduced as early as the sonnet form of the prologue and still there in the incomplete sonnet form of the Prince's epilogue. But just as the play explores the limits of Petrarchan conventions and denounces their inadequacy in coping with its tragic action, it tests the limits of duel codes and systematically exposes them as insufficient. Indeed, of the three duel scenes so prominently placed in the play, none can be said to have been able to abide by the codes of civility and honour which are supposed to govern the whole institution of the duel, as is evidenced by the second part of Saviolo's aforementioned treatise, "Of Honor and honorable Quarrels", which is as long and detailed as the technical first part on "the vse of the Rapier and Dagger". As we have seen, the first duel to which Tybalt challenges Benvolio in act I scene I degenerates into a general brawl; the second duel between Tybalt and Mercutio is equally botched by the intervention of Romeo and results in two unwanted deaths; as for the third, which results in yet another unwanted and meaningless killing by Romeo, it is fought most dishonourably on consecrated ground and only adds to a long list of moral transgressions by the hero which also includes profanating a tomb and committing suicide.

Abandoned at the entrance of the monument where Romeo and Paris have let them fall, the swords later found by Friar Laurence act once more as visual metaphors, not of honour codes, but of their limits and their failing. "What mean these masterless and gory swords / To lie discoloured by this place of peace?" the friar exclaims (V.iii.142-143). For a play which started with various types of swords as emblems of honourable fight "cutting across", as it were, the barriers of social classes, age groups and national fashions, it is significant to end with a very different set of emblems. These are the vial of poison which does not afford a manly death to the hero, the stolen dagger with which the heroine kills herself, and finally the mattock and spade, which are the last props seen onstage when the friar gets arrested while carrying them: "Here is a friar that trembles, sighs and weeps. / We took this mattock and this spade from him", says the Third Watchman in his report (V.iii.184-185). Coming last in a long list of symbolic props where duelling swords

featured prominently, the mattock and spade seem to be there to bury the whole lot, along with the codes of honourable quarrel which they all connoted, but failed to impose, either singly or collectively, on a tragedy larger than the sum total of them all.

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