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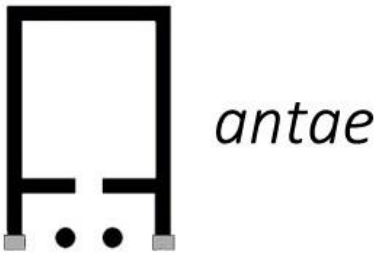

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Give Us the Foils—Fencing in *Hamlet*

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Introduction: Setting the Scene

It is a well-known fact that the final scene of *Hamlet* ends with a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. However, nothing much is known about the match itself, save for a few hardly descriptive stage directions, and some lines of dialogue that indicate which weapons were supposedly used. It remains unknown what sources were utilised—such as fencing treatises, if indeed these were used at all—or what might have influenced the portrayal of the fighting, or how the fight would have been undertaken. What is known about the fencing treatises that might have informed the actors on how to perform the match emerges from what knowledge we have about extant contemporary treatises on the subject.[1] This essay will be an exploration of the match in *Hamlet*'s final scene and will attempt to understand how this might have been carried out on stage through the use of the fencing treatises that have survived. This essay will also attempt to resolve the rapier and dagger inconsistency and to understand the significance of the fencing match itself.

Of Swords and Accidents

However, before expounding the possible modes of fencing that could have occurred on stage in Shakespeare's day, I would like to draw the reader's attention to something that is generally taken for granted, and that is the fencing match itself. Why, out of all things, does *Hamlet* end with a fencing match "gone wrong"? After Claudius's plan to send Hamlet to England to his death is foiled by Hamlet himself, Claudius could have surely invoked judicial reasons for Hamlet's execution—his murdering of Polonius, for instance—or plotted some other means of ridding himself of Hamlet instead of conniving with Laertes. One reason for the match's inclusion might lie in the fact that there seems to have been a considerable demand amongst Elizabethan theatregoers for plays to have fencing or mock-duelling scenes, to the extent that some of the theatregoers would have gone to plays solely for the sake of the fencing scene, and some playwrights would have inserted such scenes for their own sake with no consideration for the plot, sometimes even exaggerating the amount of fighting involved in the enactment of the play. Louis

[1] This includes texts such as the following: Vincentio Saviolo, *His Practise, in Two Bookes* (London: John Wolfe, 1595); George Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence* (London: Edward Blount, 1595); Giacomo di Grassi, *Ragione di adoprar sicuramente l'Arme* [*Discourse on Wielding Arms with Safety*] (Venice: Giordano Ziletti, 1570)—which was translated by I.G. and published in London by I. Iaggard in 1594, under the title *His True Arte of Defence*; and Henry de Sainct Didier, *Les secrets du premier livre sur l'espée seule* [*Secrets of the Premier Book on the Single Sword*] (Paris: Jean Mattayer & Matthurin Challenge, 1573).

B. Wright argues that this fondness for fencing spectacles was so great that '[a]dvantage was taken of serious crises in the action of plays' to insert mock-duels and shows of strength, agility, and prowess.[2]

So immense was the Elizabethan desire to see a fight for its own sake without any regard for dramatic plot or structure that it was felt by playwrights to be tyrannical. In fact, '[m]any expressions of resentment at the tyranny of public taste may be found in contemporary plays', and some playwrights would write that those who came expecting to see a mock-fight will be sorely disappointed.[3] It is perhaps one of the greatest dramatic ironies in the entirety of Shakespeare that Hamlet, the character who inveighs against 'the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise', would engage in a fencing match placed there partly for the satisfaction of those very same groundlings.[4] Yet I do not wish to diminish Shakespeare's genius by reducing the complexity and variety of reasons behind the match to simply an intention to delight the viewers, ones who would indeed have been keenly expectant of such a match. Such was Shakespeare's genius that the fight in Act V, scene ii was 'perfectly motivated [and] yet served a purpose of furnishing a spectacle as well'.[5] The form of the match in *Hamlet*, that of a public contest in some athletic skill, was so popular that Hamlet's being challenged to such a match would be one of the least suspicious events possible—at least to the audience of the match in the play, since Hamlet's misgivings lead him to think about it otherwise, possibly another instance of his 'prophetic soul'—as something that Claudius has been striving for as soon as he intended to have Hamlet dispatched by one mean or another (*H*, I.5 41).

Furthermore, having both Hamlet and Laertes engage in a fencing match with a rapier, from all weapons, establishes their aristocratic natures not only because fencing was a gentlemanly pursuit, but because the rapier itself was an exotic sword, associated with Italian masters and with the '"cavaliero" style' that was becoming increasingly popular in England.[6] The rapier itself became a fashion accessory, and one of its possible etymologies reflects this fact: the Spanish word *ropera*, coming from *ropa* (meaning attire or clothes) in conjunction with *espada*—giving us *espada ropera*, "dress sword".[7] Finally, I would like to stress the importance of the distinction between a duel and the fencing match that Hamlet and Laertes take part in: the fight in *Hamlet* is a fight insofar as Hamlet and Laertes are *applying the techniques and skills of actual duelling to a mock-fight*—otherwise, the fencing match in the last scene is not a duel. A duel is a private affair and is

[2] Louis B. Wright, 'Stage Duelling in the Elizabethan Theatre', *The Modern Language Review*, 22 (3) (1927), 265-75 (p. 265).
[3] ibid., (p. 267).
[4] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1998), pp. 293-332, III.2. 11-13, p. 311. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*H*, Act.Scene Line Number/s).
[5] Wright, (p. 270).
[6] Selma Guttman, 'The Fencing Bout in "Hamlet"', *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 14(2) (1939), 86-100 (p. 89).
[7] The most accepted etymology, however, is from Middle French *rapière*. More information here: 'rapier (n.)', <https://www.etymonline.com/word/rapier#etymonline_v_3360> [accessed 1 December 2020].

essentially a formalised form of vendetta, overspread with a code of honour in an effort to distinguish the honourable duels of the upper classes against the messy street-fights of the rising middle class that could also afford swords. In fact, Vincentio Saviolo's second book of *His Practise, in Two Bookes*, called *Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels*, deals precisely with these codes of honour in the context of "quarrels," as he puts it, and not friendly matches.[8] Participants in a duel would attempt to murder or at least injure one another with sharp, deadly weapons in vengeance. Moreover, wagers were not made on the outcome of a duel, and spectators of a duel, when any were present, were expected to be silent lest the duel might go awry due to the duellists' being distracted; otherwise, the spectators might have been punished severely, even put to death.

There is no indication at all that what occurs in Act V, scene ii is a duel: several spectators speak during the fight; there is a wager placed on the outcome of the fight, and Hamlet speaks of it as a 'brother's wager [which he will] frankly play' (*H*, V.2. 253). One must also note the constant references to the match as a form of play: the stage directions: (i) '*They prepare to play* […] *They play*. [repeated twice] *They play again.* (*H*, V.2); (ii) King Claudius's account of Hamlet's eager desire to play with Laertes upon learning of Lamord's praise of Laertes; (iii) the unnamed Lord's enquiries to Hamlet about his playing with Laertes; and (iv) Hamlet's own references to the fight, one of which has already been mentioned, the other being when he declines the King's offer to drink from the cup by saying that he will 'play this bout first' (*H*, V.2. 289). The fight seems to everyone, apart from Claudius and Laertes who know otherwise, to be a public fencing contest. However, despite the apparent innocuity of the fight, '[a]ccidental deaths did occasionally occur' in such matches, and it is precisely this that the King is hoping would acquit both him and Laertes from any accusations of plotting Hamlet's death: 'for his death no wind of blame shall breathe, | But even is mother shall uncharge the practice | And call it accident' (*H*, IV.7. 66-68).[9]

Playfulness in Hamlet

Referring to the match as "play"—that is, as a game and an instance of playfulness—has connotations that bear on the play itself: immediately, the word "play" has connotations of dissimulation, as when Hamlet speaks of 'actions that a man might play' in reference to false acts of grief, thus showing us that it is only a mock-fight (*H*, I.2. 86). Also, however, this reveals that there is deception afoot in the form of Laertes's treachery and Claudius's maleficent artifice. Furthermore, it shows Hamlet's playfulness—or 'ludic quality', as Philip C. McGuire puts it[10]—

[8] See Saviolo, 'Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels', in *His Practise, in Two Bookes*.
[9] Robert W. Dillon, 'Hamlet's Italian Rapier Teacher: Hamlet, William Shakespeare, and Salvatore Fabris', *Journal of Theatrical Combatives*, (2012), para. 30. <http://ejmas.com/jtc/2012jtc/jtcart_dillon_1209.html>. [Accessed 1 December, 2020].
[10] Philip C. McGuire, 'Bearing "A Wary Eye": Ludic Vengeance and Doubtful Suicide in Hamlet', in *From Page to Performance: Essays in Early English Drama*, ed. by John A. Alford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), pp. 235-53, p. 238.

and his being 'free from all contriving', as Claudius correctly states, which sets him apart from protagonists of other revenge plays that use stratagems to deal with their enemies (*H*, IV.7 135).[11]

It is this ludic quality, or innocent playfulness, that Hamlet displays in such instances as when he greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or the players from the city; a mixture of excitement and guilelessness that breaks off from his bouts of melancholy and apathy, or his own instances of artifice, or his moments of keen awareness of the actions that men might, and do, play. It need not surprise us that Hamlet is enthusiastic about the fencing match when we remember Ophelia's praising appreciation of his being the 'courtier's, soldier's, scholar's […] sword' (*H*, III.1 152)—where 'scholar' may also have been a reference to one of the 'established four levels of study [of fencing, which are]: scholar, free-scholar, provost, and master'.[12] Nor should we forget Hamlet's passion for theatre since, as Wright tells us, '[a]ctors were among the most earnest devotees of fencing', which might include Hamlet himself, someone who knows enough about acting to instruct some of the players that came to Elsinore.[13] This ludic element lends itself well to the revelation of Hamlet's newfound wisdom in Act V, scene ii, when proclaiming that 'prais'd be rashness [and that] indiscretion sometime serves us well' (*H*, V.2 7-8). It is through this espousal of temerity—alongside his resignation to 'a divinity that shapes our ends' and his defiance of attempts to change the future—that events are explained, such as when Hamlet explains his sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths as also performed in Act V, scene ii (*H*, V.2. 10). The roles of other revenge plays are reversed in Hamlet: whereas plays such as the *Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Spanish Tragedy* are resolved through cunning exercised by the protagonists, the dénouement of *Hamlet* is one of impulsivity employed and embraced by the protagonist. His embrace of rashness and resignation to divinity recalls us to Hamlet's belief that 'heaven hath pleas'd it so | To punish [him] with this and this with [him] | That [he] must be their scourge and minister', hence vindicating his rash murders as instances of divine retribution—to him, at least (*H*, III.4. 175-77).

The Art of Fencing in Elizabethan England

David Bevington writes that Elizabethan actors 'studied fencing and other forms of hand-to-hand combat in order to be able to choreograph their fight scenes […] or battles with grace and skill', and thus there is little doubt that these actors would have been familiar with the fencing techniques and treatises in circulation at the time.[14] In fact, the way Shakespeare employed the use of fencing in his plays shows us that both Shakespeare himself and the actors that acted them out were capable fencers and had a good knowledge of fencing, especially since his plays have 'parts which demand

[11] One here thinks of Vindice from Cyril Tourneur's *Revenger's Tragedy*, or Hieronimo from Thomas Ky's *The Spanish Tragedy*.
[12] Dillon, para. 20.
[13] Wright, (p. 265).
[14] David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through the Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 29-30.

considerable fencing skill', with the exchange of weapons between Hamlet and Laertes being one such part.[15] Nine of Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, involve a lead character entering combat in order to 'determine physically a social or political struggle'.[16] It seems as though there was no lack of education with the use of various weapons in London at the time: apart from the above mentioned treatises, a source from 1615 describes that there 'be manie professors of the science of defence, and very skilful men in teaching the best and most offensive and defensive use of verie many weapons' in London, and also enumerates an impressive, though not entirely comprehensive, list of weapons.[17]

In fact, the availability of fencing education was such that Tybalt from *Romeo and Juliet* utilises the Spanish style of rapier fencing, which is rather different than that of the Italian style, both of which are themselves different to the traditional English way of fencing.[18] According to Adolph L. Soens, Elizabethans would have been familiar with these different fencing styles, which resulted in national stereotypes being associated with them, which were, in turn, malleable to the Elizabethans' xenophobia. In fact, due to these differences in regional fencing variations, schools of fencing other than the traditionally English ones were seen as anti-English. Interestingly enough, this conflict between the different sorts of fencing can also be found in George Silver's *Paradoxes in Defence*, which was written as an attack on Saviolo's treatise that explains the Italian style of fencing with the rapier. Moreover, Soens argues that Mercutio's character 'appeal[s] to English xenophobia, [since he] plays the rough, honest, downright Englishman confronted with foreign and affected, or French, fashion in clothing and manners', which highlights the tension between the foreign and the local.[19]

Evidence of Tybalt's Spanish fencing emerges from his duel with Mercutio: in the duel, Tybalt 'swung about his head, and cut the winds', leading Soens to conclude that Tybalt is a student of the Spanish school of fence.[20] Cuts were discouraged by masters of the Italian style, including Saviolo, who writes: 'I would not advise anye freend of mine […] to strik neither mandrittaes nor riversaes, because he puts himselfe in danger of his life: for to use the poynte is more readie, and spendes not the lyke time'.[21] On the other hand, masters of the Spanish school of fencing, namely 'Jeronimo Sanchez de Carranza and Don Luys Pacheco de Narvaez […] spent time teaching cuts

[15] James L. Jackson., 'The Fencing Actor-Lines in Shakespeare's Plays', *Modern Language Notes*, 57(8) (1942b), 615-21 (p. 615).
[16] ibid., (p. 616).
[17] Guttman, (p. 86).
[18] The Italian school of rapier focuses largely on the use of the lunge, whilst the Spanish school looks like a sort of dance; whilst Italian rapierists are always poised for the lunge, ready to strike when the moment is right, Spanish rapierists are very light on their toes and are constantly on the move, trying as much as possible to close in on their opponent.
[19] Adolph L. Soens, 'Tybalt's Spanish Fencing in Romeo and Juliet', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 20(2) (1969), 121-27, p. 123.
[20] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Brian Gibbons, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, pp. 1007-1040, I.1. 111, p. 1010. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*R&J*, Act. Scene. Line Number/s).
[21] Saviolo, p. 11; "mandrittaes" or *mandritti* are cuts that start from the fencer's right, whilst "riversaes" or *riversi* are cuts that start from the fencer's left side.

from the shoulder, elbow and wrist.'[22] More evidence of Tybalt's Spanish style can be found in Mercutio's taunts directed at Tybalt, particularly when he calls him '[a] braggart, a rogue, a villain, | that fights by the book of arithmetic' (*R&J,* III.1. 102-103). This is likely a reference to Carranza and Narvaez's treatises, whose approach to footwork in their systems is complicated and presented in geometrical diagrams.

The Rapier and Dagger Inconsistency

I have mentioned that there is an awkward inconsistency in the final scene of *Hamlet*, which I will elaborate here: when Hamlet and Horatio are approached by Osric and the subject of the match is broached, Hamlet queries Osric about Laertes's choice of weapon, to which Osric replies: 'Rapier and dagger' (*H*, V.2 146). However, according to stage directions in the First Quarto and Folio texts, the exchange of swords that occurs during the bout means that the match could not possibly have been done with rapier and dagger since such a technique—disarming the opponent and taking their weapon—requires a free "off-hand".[23] The exchange of weapons, however, has still been previously explained in terms of rapier-and-dagger fencing, despite the impossibility of effecting an exchange of weapons when using both the rapier and dagger. This is due to the fact that a disarm is possible in rapier-and-dagger fencing—despite being nearly impossible to achieve due to the firm grip fencers have on their rapiers by passing a finger or two over the cross-guard—and it is mentioned in di Grassi's *His True Arte of Defence*. Yet the conclusions that are drawn in such arguments are ridiculous: they always suggest that one of the weapons is dropped so that both Hamlet and Laertes are able to wrest one another's sword.

This suggestion is ridiculous for three reasons: firstly, any experienced fencer, especially one as good as Laertes or Hamlet are made out to be, will know that losing any of one's weapons will only ever put one at a disadvantage. Secondly, the instinctive reaction to coming into such close distance during rapier-and-dagger fencing would not be to attempt to seize the opponent's sword, but to stab at them with one's dagger, which is quicker, safer, and has a much higher chance of success than dropping the dagger and attempting to seize the opponent's sword. In fact, Silver himself writes that once fencers are close to one another '[i]t is impossible […] to auiode the stabbes of the Dagger'.[24] Thirdly, losing one's sword—possibly with the inclusion of one's dagger—during combat would incur dishonour on one: 'He that his sword falleth out of his hand, shall winne no prize [and] whosoeuer loseth his sword, must presently also lose the honor and victory'.[25] This would be neither in Hamlet's nor Laertes's interests, especially when both their reputations as skilled fencers are put to the test and a significant wager has been made between

[22] Soens, (p. 124).
[23] So called in fencing, it is the "free" hand in most single sword systems: being either vacant—although not useless, as it can be used for techniques like disarms—or else used to carry an auxiliary weapon or means of defences, like daggers, shields, cloaks, and so on.
[24] Silver, as quoted in Guttman, (p. 100).
[25] ibid., (pp. 97-98).

Laertes and the King. Furthermore, Selma Guttman explains that a 'study of Elizabethan plays has not yielded us a single example of a rapier-and-dagger combat which was intended for stage performance', possibly due to the rather dangerous nature of rapier-and-dagger fencing, something I will discuss in further detail later on.[26]

For one to wrest one's opponent's blade from them, one has to be in a "measure"—that is, distance—known as "close quarters", which is when the fencers are so close to one other that most fencing techniques are ineffective, save for the ones that deal with this sort of measure—such as what is known as "half-swording", which is when the sword is grasped with both hands—and wrestling techniques can come into play. This is, in fact, mentioned in the stage direction: '*Laertes wounds Hamlet; then, in scuffling, they change rapiers*' (*H*, V.2). The mention of Laertes having wounded Hamlet is important as, once Laertes has run Hamlet through, they come into a close enough distance to "enter" close quarters. Whether Hamlet was superficially or gravely wounded, we can never know. However, the venom that Laertes uses is so powerful that even a mere scratch is enough to kill anything it comes into contact with. On the other hand, Laertes dies much quicker than Hamlet, and thus it might be concluded that Hamlet was wounded only superficially.

Errors Regarding the Exchange of Weapons

Before I go on to explain how the exchange might have occurred, I would like to argue against what I believe are errors with regards to Laertes' wounding of Hamlet and Hamlet's motivation for the exchange. James L. Jackson writes that 'Laertes attacks suddenly and hits Hamlet before they have formally resumed fencing [and that the] intense pain and shock of even a small wound would alert Hamlet to his danger', so that he would attempt the exchange of weapons to acquire Laertes's poisoned and sharp sword.[27] J. Dover Wilson is also of the opinion that Laertes strikes when Hamlet is unaware, and John Gielgud's 1936-1937 *Hamlet* enacts this as well.[28] However, I am inclined to disbelieve this: firstly, Laertes, by Hamlet's own admission and Osric's flattery, is 'a very noble youth' (*H*, V.1 222) with 'very soft society and great showing [and] a soul of great article' (*H*, V.2. 110, 118), so much so that he admits that 'it is almost against [his] conscience' to strike Hamlet, the person who killed his father (*H*, V.2. 302). Why would someone as honourable as Laertes do something as dishonourable as striking when his opponent is caught unawares, *which also goes against his father's advice* in Act I, scene iii that once in a quarrel '[b]ear't that th'opposed may beware of thee' (*H*, I.3. 67)?

[26] Guttman, (p. 91).
[27] James L. Jackson, '"They Catch One Another's Rapiers": The Exchange of Weapons in Hamlet', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41(3) (1990), 281-298 (p. 293).
[28] J. Dover Wilson in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. John Dover Wilson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1936), pp. 256-257, and Rosamund Gilder, *John Gielgud's Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 229, as quoted in Jackson, (p. 296).

Certainly, Laertes is treacherously using a sharp sword in a match meant for blunt weapons, but Laertes's noble nature seems to work in spite of him, and shines throughout until the end when it can no longer shine and when he makes his moving appeal to Hamlet to exchange forgiveness. The evidence used for Laertes's treachery is Osric's judgement: 'Nothing neither way' (*H*, V.2. 307). Osric's unsolicited judgement may have been an instance of his tendency to be ostentatious and to state the obvious. After all, 'the bout may simply have been stopped by the fencers after a sequence of hard action'.[29] If Hamlet, who states that he has 'been in continual practice' (*H*, V.2. 210), is, according to the Queen, 'fat [that is, unfit] and scant of breath', then, surely, the same might be said of Laertes (*H*, V.2. 292). Fencing is a rather strenuous activity, and it should not surprise us that, despite Hamlet's and Laertes's experience and continual practice, they need a moment to catch their breaths. Secondly, Hamlet seems unaware of any wound received—further evidence that Laertes must have struck him superficially—since he challenges Laertes to continue the match, and, in his innocence, calmly asks about the Queen's condition. Moreover, Hamlet only seems to realise that there is treachery and villainy afoot after the Queen points out that the drink is poisoned, and feels his throes in the famous line 'I am dead, Horatio' (*H*, V.2 340)—which is a significant number of lines down from when Laertes struck Hamlet with 'Have at you now' (*H*, V.2. 308).

I forward that Hamlet was unaware of any treachery until the Queen's statement about the poisoned cup and Laertes's confession, and thus Hamlet's performing a disarm was simply a reflex action on account of his skill as a fencer and their being in close quarters. However, even if Hamlet was aware of Laertes' treachery, he could not have noticed until *after or during the exchange*, since Silver writes that one should never attempt such disarms 'unless it be upon the slow motion or disorder of your enemy', or if one's opponent closes in.[30] The scuffle mentioned in the aforementioned stage direction, where Hamlet and Laertes exchange rapiers, seems to be the disorder that Silver writes of, and hence one of the conditions in which a seizure can be safely accomplished. Hamlet, as a skilled fencer, would know better than to attempt something as risky as a disarm in a measure as precarious as close quarters, unless it would be under conditions similar or identical to the ones Silver wrote about.

Explaining the Exchange

The exchange of weapons has been explained as occurring via a technique called a "left-hand seizure" or a "left-hand gryp". Expositions of this technique have been found in Saviolo's, di Grassi's, and de Sainct Didier's treatises, and have been used to demonstrate how the exchange might have been enacted. Even in Silver's second treatise *Brief Instructions Upon My Paradoxes in Defence*, with which he sought to clarify the first and which actually deals with fencing, there is an entire chapter dedicated to what he called the "grype" or "gryp", most likely referring to the

[29] James L. Jackson, 'The Exchange of Weapons in Hamlet', *Modern Language Notes*, 57(1) (1942a), 50-55 (p. 50).
[30] Silver, as quoted in Jackson, '"They Catch One Another's Rapiers"', (p. 289).

seizure.[31] In di Grassi's treatise, seizures are explained as manoeuvres that can be carried out using the left hand by taking hold of the opponent's sword near the hilt and twisting outward, which will perforce wrench the opponent's sword out of their hand. Jackson, having attempted the technique himself, agrees with di Grassi, writing that 'the defender cannot successfully resist the outward twist of the attacker's left hand'.[32] Having tried the technique myself, also with success, it can be concluded that it undoubtedly works and can be achieved with relative ease, contrary to the nigh-impossible disarm with the rapier and dagger. Laertes, being a competent fencer, would indubitably know of the technique and how to proceed after having it done to him; in fact, he reflexively does the same to Hamlet, that is, he *performs a counter-seizure*. As de Sainct Didier writes in his treatise: 'a prinse faut faire contreprinse [a seizure necessitates a counter-seizure]'; thus, the best defence against a seizure is another seizure, which would effectively end in an exchange of weapons—which is exactly what happens in Act V, scene ii.[33]

The Problem of Osric: Foolishness Feigning Wit

In the encounter with Osric, however, it is made clear that Osric is a fool feigning gentlemanly education and wit: both Hamlet and Horatio ridicule him to his face and behind his back for pretending to be eloquent and knowledgeable in things he is clearly not. His ignorance with things martial is manifest in the discussion of Laertes' fencing ability, the weapons wagered by Laertes and their furnishings:

> OSRIC: I mean, sir, for his weapon; but in the imputation laid on him, by them in his meed, he's unfellowed.
>
> HAMLET: What's his weapon?
>
> OSRIC: Rapier and dagger.
>
> HAMLET: That's two of his weapons. But well. (*H*, V.2. 145-47)

Hamlet taunts Osric for conflating the rapier and the dagger as one weapon by directly pointing out that they are two weapons; Osric's confusion is likely caused by the fact that rapier and dagger is taught as a *style of fighting* with both weapons "working together", so to speak. In fact, the first book of Saviolo's *His Practise, in Two Bookes* is titled: *The First Entreating the Use of the Rapier and Dagger*; moreover, as Saviolo writes, '[a]s farre as I can perceiue, the rules of the single rapier, and of Rapier and Dagger, are al one'.[34] Even in di Grassi's book, rapier and dagger is presented as a particular style of fighting. Otherwise, Hamlet purposely takes Osric's metaphoric usage of

[31] See Silver, 'The manner of Certain grips & Closes to be used at that single sword fight &c.', in *Paradoxes of Defense*, pp. 101-103.
[32] Jackson, 'The Exchange of Weapons in Hamlet', (p. 52).
[33] As quoted in Jackson, '"They Catch One Another's Rapiers"', (p. 290).
[34] Saviolo, as quoted in Guttman (p. 87).

"weapon" in order to mock him. Whilst Osric mentions praise for Laertes on his use of rapier and dagger by Laertes's peers, Guttman writes that '[a] true connoisseur of the noble art of defence, […] would have been aware that the single rapier […] was generally preferred by gentlemen because it represented the art in its purest form'.[35] This seems to stem from the idea that the single sword 'was the queen of weapons', an idea that fencing master Ridolfo Capo Ferro da Cagli wrote about in his *Gran Simulacro dell'Arte e dell'Uso della Scherma* (*Great Representation of the Art and Use of Fencing*).[36] He wrote that one should have it engrained in oneself that the sword is the monarch of all weapons and governs how all other weapons should be used.

Osric's ignorance is also evidently represented in the proceeding lines:

> OSRIC: […] with their assigns, as girdle, hanger and so. Three of the carriages, in faith, are very dear to fancy, very responsive to the hilts, most delicate carriages, and of very liberal conceit.
>
> HAMLET: What call you the carriages? […]
>
> OSRIC: The carriages, sir, are the hangers.
>
> HAMLET: The phrase would be more german to the matter if we could carry a cannon by our sides—I would it might be hangers till then. But on. (*H*, V.2. 150-55, 158-61).

Hamlet ridicules Osric's awkward terminology in reference to the 'hangers' of the swords: he calls them 'carriages' instead of the appropriate terms for the furnishings with which to hang a sword to one's person—baldric or scabbard, for instance—and Hamlet correctly points how the term 'carriages' would be more relevant had they cannons by their sides. 'Carriage' is the appropriate term for the wheeled mounting of a cannon, but Osric confuses this with, presumably, 'baldric', which is 'a belt for a sword or other piece of equipment, worn over one shoulder and reaching down to the opposite hip.'[37] It is beyond any doubt that Osric has scant knowledge of martial affairs, much to the amusement of Hamlet and Horatio, and so the inconsistency *might* be resolved if we argue that in his ignorance Osric mistakes what weapons will be used in the match. But, how can this be, when Osric seems to be one of the 'judges [that are asked to] bear a wary eye' (*H*, V.2. 279)? Thus, it might also be the case that Osric *does not mean to say* the ensuing fight will be fought with rapier and dagger, but, being the toady that he is, mentions one specific praise of Laertes's fencing prowess from memory and it happened to be with rapier and dagger.

Osric's lack of credentials in his knowledge of martial matters shows his unreliability in his conveyance of information concerning fighting or weapons; in fact, had he known better, he would

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[35] Guttman, (pp. 93-94).
[36] See ibid., (p. 94).
[37] 'Baldric', in *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. Angus Stevenson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 123.

have not only known the preference for single weapons, but the extremely perilous nature of rapier-and-dagger fighting: despite the dagger's main function as an off-hand mode of defence, it is still a sharp and dangerous weapon that can be used for stabbing. In fact, Silver writes that 'there lieth no defence' against stabs with the dagger due to its small size—thus lending the wielder greater speed with it, if he is within stabbing distance of the opponent, and less perceptibility.[38] Even Saviolo, in spite of writing an appeal for the use of rapier and dagger, 'admonishes [both] pupil and master to exercise caution even in practice bouts in which the dagger was employed' due to the dangerous nature of the style of fighting with rapier and dagger.[39] Had Osric known this he would not have mentioned the use of rapier and dagger in what was meant to be a friendly bout with bated weapons. Even if the daggers were bated, once in close quarters there is no reason to provoke an exchange of weapons: the quickest and most natural move would be to stab with the dagger, or strike with the pommel or the cross-guard, and neither of these is mentioned anywhere during the bout.

Driving the Point Home: The Weapons Used in the Match

However, the issue is confounded further with the stage directions based off the Second Quarto:

> *A table prepared. Trumpets, drums and officers with cushions. Enter* KING, QUEEN, LAERTES, OSRIC, *and all the state, and attendants with foils and daggers.* (*H*, V.2).

The stage direction would make out that the bout was carried out with rapiers—referred to as 'foils', possibly to indicate their having been blunted, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'blunt as the fencer's foils, which hit, but hurt not'—and daggers, but I have already mentioned the physical impossibility of the exchange of weapons occurring had the bout been carried out with rapier and dagger.[40] And, even in Act IV, scene vii, when Claudius and Laertes are discussing the plot against Hamlet, there is no mention of any daggers.

Guttman argues that this stage direction is unreliable in comparison with the stage direction in the Folio text for three reasons. Firstly, the stage direction in the Second Quarto is messy: the preparation of the table and the officers with cushions are mentioned before the King and Queen, and, in the original Second Quarto text, Laertes is mentioned last:

[38] Silver, as quoted in Guttman, (p. 87).
[39] Guttman, (p. 88).
[40] William Shakespeare, 'Much Ado About Nothing', ed. by A.R. Humphreys, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, pp. 913-40, V.2. 13-14, p. 937.

> *A table prepard, Trumpets, Drums and officers with Cushions, King, Queene, and all the state, Foiles, daggers, and Laertes.*[41]

The enumeration of people and things in the Second Quarto stage direction is awkward at best. Secondly, the stage direction in the Folio text is far neater, mentioning the persons of most importance first:

> *Enter King, Queene, Laertes and Lords, with other Attendant with Foyles, and Gauntlets, a Table and Flagons of wine on it.*[42]

Thirdly, the Folio actually contains the crucial stage direction where Hamlet and Laertes exchange weapons, which is missing in the Second Quarto; thus, Guttman argues, the Folio text is more reliable in relation to Act V scene ii. The Folio text now gives us a possible insight as to how the fight might have been carried out, and with what arms. A gauntlet worn on the off-hand with which to defend oneself with and which accompanies the single rapier is mentioned in the contemporary treatises, such as when Saviolo writes: '[m]oreover, having the use of your left hand, and wearing a gauntlet or a glove of mail […] you shall be ready to catch his sword fast'.[43]

This sentence from Saviolo is significant for three reasons: firstly, it is further evidence that the off-hand would have needed to be free to perform the exchange, hence being further evidence that the match was intended with single rapiers. Secondly, it shows us that the left-hand seizure or "gryp" could have been accomplished by the gauntleted left hand, and, in fact, Guttman writes 'that the defensive operations of the dagger could be as satisfactorily performed by the gauntleted left hand'.[44] Finally, it validates the Folio stage direction that describes foils and gauntlets being brought to the location of the fencing match by showing us that gauntlets were indeed used to fence with.

To Tell My Story: The Concluding Movement

In conclusion, I believe that the fencing match in the final scene of *Hamlet* was intended to be fought with rapiers and gauntlets worn on the left hand, which would be used to perform a seizure with as Laertes closes in on Hamlet to wound him, in one way or another, and would result in the exchange of weapons found in the stage directions of the First Quarto and the Folio editions of *Hamlet*. The exchange would not have been physically possible with rapiers and daggers; the disarm with rapier and dagger would have been ungainly at best—unsuccessful at worst—and the suggestion that Hamlet and Laertes would drop their weapons to perform the exchange is

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[41] William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet (Quarto 2, 1604)', ed. By Eric Rasmussen, V.2, in *Internet Shakespeare Editions* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 2018). <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham_Q2/scene/5.2/>. [Accessed 1 December, 2020].
[42] As quoted in Guttman, (p. 94).
[43] Saviolo, as quoted in Jackson, '"They Catch One Another's Rapiers", (p. 290).
[44] Guttman, (p. 96).

ludicrous, as I have pointed out. The fencing match seems to have been inserted both to meet public demands for fencing matches in plays as well as for dramatic purposes, such as proving Hamlet's belief that rashness can be a good thing.

Finally, it is one of the circumstances of our age—whether for better or for worse—that people are generally ignorant of fencing, and whereas Elizabethan audiences 'would have followed the intricacies of the match with interest', I do not believe that the same can be said of modern audiences.[45] Even if modern directors would implement the fencing match the way Elizabethan actors might have performed, I do not believe that many spectators would really understand—and hence enjoy—the fight that way.

Actual rapier fencing is noiseless, calculated, and precise, and modern audiences have come to 'expect much noise and energetic movement from stage fencing', such as in Kenneth Branagh's 1996 adaptation of *Hamlet* where Hamlet and Laertes are seen running around, thrusting and swinging wildly, yelling, and grunting as the bout progresses, and the exchange of weapons performed by having Hamlet trip Laertes.[46] Or, Gregory Doran's 2009 *Hamlet* with David Tennant in the lead role, where Hamlet and Laertes hit on one another's swords, swing their swords aimlessly, twirl about, yell, grunt, and Hamlet runs after Laertes in an attempt to wound him too.[47] These are highly entertaining scenes, I am sure, but it is far from what any experienced fencer—one who trains regularly and strictly so as to engrain proper fencing form and technique—would do, which is why I find it hard to believe that modern audiences would be able to appreciate a fight as it would have been performed in Shakespeare's day.

It would therefore seem that the journey I have undertaken to understand and ascertain how the fencing match would have been enacted and with what weapons is nothing more than a purely academic exercise. Whilst there is absolutely nothing wrong with such exercises for their own sake, it must be said that such a modest enactment would probably prove unpopular in an age where flashy choreography heavily dominates the visual sphere of entertainment and art. There is, however, also nothing wrong with choreography in itself—stage fencing is its own "genre" or kind of combat that is at a remove from sword-fighting, a genre which in itself requires great skill and precision. The reasons behind the gradual distancing between stage combat and sword-fighting, which seem to have been one and the same in Shakespeare's time, are historical and numerous. To a certain extent, we should consider ourselves lucky that the distance exists.

However, it is fascinating that despite the unity of difference that stage combat and sword-fighting would have held in Shakespeare's time—united under the concept of "fencing"—the two sorts of fencing would have operated in different contexts with identical techniques. Moreover, in the eyes of spectators, the two must have been completely distinct—compare the boisterous spectators of the fencing match with the dead silent spectators of a duel. However, it is likely that it is precisely

[45] Jackson, '"They Catch One Another's Rapiers", (p. 281).
[46] ibid., (p. 281). See also *Hamlet,* dir. by Kenneth Branagh (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1996).
[47] See *Hamlet,* dir. by Gregory Doran (BBC, 2009).

that unity of difference that grants Hamlet the soldier's funeral by Fortinbras. Despite Hamlet being far from soldierly, Fortinbras orders 'four captains | [to] Bear Hamlet, like a soldier' and, moreover, states that the 'The soldier's music and the rites of war | Speak loudly for him' (*H*, V.2. 402-403, 406-407). Fortinbras's reasoning behind the soldierly funeral is that, had Hamlet had the chance to do battle with Fortinbras, he would 'have proved most royally' (*H*, V.2. 405).

There seems to be a certain conflation of the royal and the military at work here, much like the ascribing of royalty to the single sword by Capo Ferro. Compare as well Horatio's description of the ghost of Hamlet's father. Firstly, when directly asking the ghost what it is: he notes its 'fair and warlike form | In which the majesty of buried Denmark | Did sometimes march' (*H*, I.1. 50-52). Secondly, when describing the ghost to Hamlet: 'Armed at point exactly, cap-à-pie' (*H*, I. 2. 200). The king appears in full armour—something enacted in Kenneth Branagh's movie and portrayed in numerous paintings, not to mention the innumerable plays than must have adopted this as well—which might have served multiple functions, the first of which being to act as an omen, something which Hamlet perceives when he exclaims: 'My father's spirit in arms! all is not well; | I doubt some foul play' (*H*, I. 2. 255).[48]

However, it might have served a further purpose of showing Hamlet's father's regality by having him dressed in full plate armour—something which would have conveyed wealth (seeing as how a full suit of plate armour would have been extremely expensive and could only be afforded by the nobility). I would argue that there seems to be a symbolic syncretism at work here that combines or almost unifies the symbols of war and of royalty, and one which constrains the portrayal of (male) royal characters—albeit not all of them, as is the case with Claudius. This is likely to undermine Claudius's ill-gotten royal position. It would be very interesting to see to what extent this merger of symbols works in other works in Shakespeare's corpus. Perhaps a study comparing the usage of symbols of royalty and symbols of war and how these work in tandem—if at all—across Shakespeare's texts would reveal further insights.

[48] Kenneth Deighton interprets these lines somewhat differently. He interprets the primary purpose of 'in arms!' to mean that the ghost has returned in vengeance and not so much that it is in armour. See Kenneth Deighton, 'Notes', in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, With Introduction and Notes by K. Deighton* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p. 148. <https://archive.org/details/hamletprincedenm00shakuoft/>. [Accessed 1 December, 2020].

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