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## Prologues, Poetry, Prose and Portrayals: The Purposes of Fifteenth Century Fight Books According to the Diplomatic Evidence

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**Abstract:** Although by far the most popular use of fifteenth century Fight Books in recent years has been their application to the study of Historical European Martial Arts and interpretations of medieval combat, this manner of learning from them was rarely what their creators had in mind. The following paper, relying primarily on the materials produced by Fiore dei Liberi, Filippo Vadi, Hans Talhoffer, and the anonymous author of *Le Jeu de la Hache*, will address modern practice and its connection to the source material via a study of the diplomatics of fifteenth century Fight Books, that is to say common tropes that are definitive of the genre. This has been done through analysing the roles of three of these; the purposes of introductions, of the use of language relating to the employment of either a prose or poetic structure, and the importance of the relationships between texts and illustrations. Through this application of diplomatics to Fight Books, the paper shall demonstrate how modern claims regarding authenticity are often overstated and in need of moderation.

**Keywords:** Diplomatics, Fifteenth Century, Fight Books, Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), Palaeography & Manuscript Studies

### I. INTRODUCTION

The practice of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) is spreading rapidly all over the globe.<sup>1</sup> From Sweden to Singapore, thousands of practitioners with an interest in reconstructing, rediscovering, or even reclaiming an extinct martial art are taking up arms, several of which in the hope of unlocking a modern martial “Rosetta Stone”.<sup>2</sup> In order to

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I would like to offer my gratitude to Iason Tzouridis, Eric Burkart, and my two peer reviewers for their guidance and suggestions regarding this paper.

<sup>1</sup> A 2013 survey carried out by HROARR with a 68% reply rate from known clubs indicated a worldwide census of HEMA practitioners at 8852. See ‘Stats for the HEMA Community 2013’. More recently, a 2015 documentary on HEMA has at time of writing reached 548,000 views, indicating a growing global awareness of HEMA. See ‘Back to the Source’.

<sup>2</sup> Clements, ‘Our New “Rosetta Stone”’.

inform what several practitioners often see as a viable means of accurately performing techniques which have gone unused in centuries, interested parties are primarily reliant on a corpus of material from the fourteenth century onwards.<sup>3</sup> This comprises the various Fight Books as well as technical literature which can be found in contemporary commonplace books, such as the fourteenth century poem ‘Man That Will’.<sup>4</sup> Common throughout modern HEMA classes are students being introduced to a technique from a specific manuscript by their instructor, who often shows them the presentation of the technique in the manuscript in addition to demonstrating it, before going on to drill the device until it begins to enter muscle memory. In the teaching of these practices, a lot of attention is often given to specifically following the written instructions or copying the visual representation of the technique. Because in these classes instructors often strive to follow the Fight Books verbatim in order to teach an historically accurate portrayal, some students and indeed several instructors, are of the opinion that despite the gap of several hundred years they are able to precisely learn the martial arts recorded in the texts they study in a manner which “truly unlocks the entire art”.<sup>5</sup> Yet as this paper argues, it is abundantly clear that teaching how to fight *in absentia* was not the original purpose for several of these sources, especially those produced in the fifteenth century. No matter how closely one follows the explicit aspects of the text, one can never claim that their performance is anything more than historically inspired. It has even in recent years been supposed that many Fight Books were designed with little to no pedagogical purpose in mind, and should rather be treated as texts which encourage the reader to ponder combat through an intellectual or emotional lens.<sup>6</sup>

The following paper is thus concerned with the means through which Fight Books, despite their often laconic nature, sought to convey the masters’ knowledge *in absentia*, and how an exploration thereof allows us to determine a range of other purposes for which they were intended. This shall be done via an exploration of their diplomatics (in this paper defined as the study of the conventions and formulae common to texts which belong to the genre of Fight Books), whilst focusing on manuscripts produced by certain fencing masters the fifteenth century. The following paper has primarily relied on manuscripts produced by Fiore dei Liberi, the anonymous master behind *Le Jeu de la*

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<sup>3</sup> The earliest Fight Book is the well-known sword and buckler manuscript held in the libraries of the Royal Armouries at Leeds, MS. I.33. There is no exact consensus on its date of origin, but recent research supposes a creation date between 1320-1330. See Binard and Jaquet, ‘Investigation on the Collation of the First Fight Book (Leeds, Royal Armouries, MS I.33)’.

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion on the place of ‘Man That Will’ amongst fourteenth century fencing literature see Hester, ‘Real Men Read Poetry: Instructional Verse in Fourteenth Century Fight Manuals’.

<sup>5</sup> Clements, ‘Our New “Rosetta Stone”’.

<sup>6</sup> Forgeng, ‘Owning the Art: The German *Fechtbuch* Tradition’, p. 170.

*Hache*, Hans Talhoffer, and Filippo Vadi. Although they comprise a minority of fifteenth century masters, each has been chosen due to how well known their works are amongst modern HEMA practitioners. Additionally, their works contain numerous explicit indicators regarding how either the master (or his patron) intended his work to be used by the reader, or for what purpose said manuscript was commissioned.

Three aspects of diplomatics and tropes common to Fight Books have been identified as topics for discussion within this paper. The first of these is the introductions common to certain Fight Books from the period studied, namely those to be found in manuscripts produced by the Italian masters Fiore dei Liberi and Filippo Vadi. Both masters use the ample opportunity provided to them in their introductions to explicitly state why they have chosen to temporarily take up the pen in favour of the sword. Fiore and Vadi similarly state that one of their prime motivators for writing is a desire to be remembered, yet by exploring other aspects of their introductions alternative purposes emerge. Introductions can serve to provide the reader with a fencing master's credentials and proof of martial skill, as in the case of Fiore's tales of dueling and lists of students, or encourage the reader to consider the intellectual and emotional aspects of fighting, as done by Vadi across several chapters.<sup>7</sup>

Moving on from this is an analysis of the role of linguistics in these manuals, in particular the choice to write in either prose or poetic verse. On one hand, there are cases of the former where it appears as if the master was attempting to compose a didactic manual, such as in the case of *Le Jeu de la Hache*, although they remain problematic sources for the recreation of historical fighting arts. On the other hand, a pedagogical or mnemonic purpose would be implied by masters such as Fiore or Vadi who chose to write in poetic verse. Scholars such as Hester have also debated the role played by poetic verse in technical fencing literature, arguing that this decision often represents a deliberate choice on behalf of the master in order to provide his reader with further pedagogical tools.<sup>8</sup> This is often the case, but one must be wary of assigning a generic and overarching purpose to texts in this genre, and an inclusion of rhyming instructions does not alone necessarily indicate a solely pedagogical purpose.

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<sup>7</sup> Although not discussed in this paper, it should also be noted that a study of the introduction can also allow historians to interpret in what martial context certain masters envisioned their devices being used. As argued by Burkart, interpersonal violence is always guided by social norms (in this case using Talhoffer's manuscripts to emphasise the potential for serious over sportive combat), and a future in-depth study solely on the role of introductions could further help contextualize the sorts of violence which fencing masters were addressing in the Fight Books. See Burkart, 'Body Techniques of Combat: The Depiction of a Personal Fighting System in the Fight Books of Hans Talhoffer (1443-1467CE)', p.111.

<sup>8</sup> Hester, 'Real Men Read Poetry: Instructional Verse in Fourteenth Century Fight Manuals', pp. 175-83.

The third and final area of these manuscripts to be discussed is the role played by the illustrated depictions of combat which characterise so many Fight Books and their relationship with the text. In modern practice these images can be fundamental to an individual's interpretation of several aspects of the art. Factors affected can include, but are not limited to, how the weapon is held *en garde*, how the feet are positioned, and from which angle a blow should both originate from and pass through in order to reach its target. Although modern interpretations of historical martial arts can certainly benefit from assessing their illustrations in the aforesaid aspects, they nonetheless lack critical information necessary to performing what is beyond doubt a historically accurate recreation. Nonetheless their inclusion was not without purpose. In some instances, when paired with appropriate text, it is clear that they serve a mnemonic and not instructive purpose, and are designed to assist one in remembering a previous technique. Alternatively, they may serve the function of acting as a declaration of martial competence on behalf of either the master or owner of the manuscript.

As a final note to the introduction it may be worth noting that given the rising global popularity of HEMA in the last two decades, several masters would be turning in their grave if they knew to what extent attempts were being made to understand and teach their closely guarded secrets. The fifteenth century Fiore dei Liberi insisted on secrecy from those who wished to study under him; Fiore states how he taught his art so secretly that if his student wished for another to observe the lesson then they were made to swear an oath not to reveal what they had witnessed.<sup>9</sup> This was not Fiore's only attempt to prevent others from learning his approach to the art, as he faced stiff opposition from contemporary fencing masters eager to practice and learn from him. To this end across the course of his career Fiore claims that he fought in single combat no less than five times against his contemporaries in order to defend his honour, professional reputation, and the secrecy of his art; the Friulian expounds on the seriousness of these duels by highlighting how they were fought without any armour aside from a gambeson and pair of gloves, where failing in just one parry could lead to a quick and bloody end.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, by fighting with these masters, each opponent had a potential chance to learn from Fiore first-hand; the exact thing which he wished to prevent. Similar sentiments regarding the secrecy of swordsmanship are shared by another master active in the latter half of the fifteenth century, whose text is thoroughly inspired by Fiore's; the Pisan Filippo Vadi.<sup>11</sup> In *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* Vadi states an express desire that his art should not "fall in to the hands low born men", the majority of us modern practitioners and scholars of

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<sup>9</sup> Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fol.1v.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the relationship between *Flos Duellatorum* and *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* see Porzio and Mele, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, pp. 7-10.

the subject, but should be reserved for “anybody of perspicacious talent and lovely limbs....courtiers, barons, princes, dukes, and kings”.<sup>12</sup> However, it is worth mentioning that such concerns regarding secrecy and the spread of knowledge only to suitable candidates was not always the case. *Le Jeu de la Hache*, an anonymous fifteenth century manuscript and the only text dedicated solely to the use of the pollaxe, advocates that “the said axe-play is honourable and profitable for the preservation of a body noble or non-noble”, contravening the principles of secrecy and elitism advocated by Fiore and Vadi.<sup>13</sup> Yet these attitudes of exclusivity have not deterred vast numbers of men and women from seeking to understand fencing in the same way as these earlier fencers, despite basic yet critical principles such as how to strike, parry, or feint being left for modern practitioners to interpret. In short, as stressed by Mondschein, Fight Books “are not how-to manuals”.<sup>14</sup> As discussed in the accompanying paper by Eric Burkart, these manuals represent only a symbol of the sum of medieval knowledge regarding combat which still survives, the tradition and practice being lost to us.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, for scholars with an interest in these books, and how they represent communication strategies for martial education in the Late Middle Ages there is much left to be researched and written in order to ascertain the purpose of these manuals and propose how their creators wished them to be used. Here one must be wary of assigning a common purpose to medieval Fight Books; as with every other genre of literature their authors were writing with different aims and audiences in mind, which understandably had an impact on the depictions of combat to be seen in their works.

## II. THE PURPOSE OF PROLOGUES

Mondschein notes how Fiore admits that one of his key motives in setting pen to paper was in order that he may be remembered as a master of arms, making use of the new literary culture of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>16</sup> Yet reading *Fior di Battaglia* it becomes apparent that Fiore was also very much concerned with how others perceived him during

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<sup>12</sup> Filippo Vadi, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* (trans. Porzio and Mele), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Jeu de la Hache* (trans. Anglo), p. 116; It has also recently been suggested that the author of *Le Jeu de la Hache* was a Milanese instructor named Ambrose employed at the Burgundian court throughout the 1440s. Whilst this theory makes a great deal of sense there is no hard evidence to link the master and this manuscript. See Mondschein, ‘The Italian Schools of Fencing’, p. 300.

<sup>14</sup> Mondschein, *The Knightly Art of Battle*, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Burkart, ‘Limits of Understanding in the Study of Lost Martial Arts. Epistemological Reflections on the Mediality of Historical Records of Technique and the Status of Modern (Re-)Constructions’, pp. 7 – 32.

<sup>16</sup> Mondschein, ‘The Italian Schools of Fencing’, p. 295; Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fol.1v.

his life. As we have seen through his willingness to fight five duels, Fiore would go to extreme lengths in order to protect his character. Aside from the corpus of techniques presented across the manuscript which display Fiore's proficiency, Fiore also uses his introduction to convey a sense of his martial abilities. One of the most intriguing elements of the Getty version of Fiore is his list of previous students and customers. On the first folio the reader is presented with a list of several former patrons who have had to fight in duels, with Piero del Verde, Nicolò Waizilino, Galeazzo da Mantua, and others amongst those who went on to use their lessons to defend themselves and their honour in combat at the barriers.<sup>17</sup> To anyone reading the book, this list demonstrates how several individuals have entrusted Fiore not only with their coin but also their physical well-being; most single combats in the Middle Ages were not fought to the death, but even in chivalric games there was the risk of severe injury and it was important to know how to defend oneself.<sup>18</sup> One may further take Fiore's declaration that he has been well rewarded by "obtaining the esteem and the affection" of his students as a means of convincing the reader that he was a successful teacher and that his customers left satisfied with that they had learned.<sup>19</sup> This becomes even more apparent when one considers that Fiore is not just describing any set of students whom he has taught (although he does make reference to students who learnt without a cause to fight), but those who have had to use their lessons in order to defend themselves at the barriers. Therefore, by means of their inclusion it is strongly implied that the techniques on the following pages are ones which have been repeatedly and successfully involved in combat, and are techniques that one can trust, cementing Fiore's reputation as a fencing master. Indeed, Fiore even claims that not one of his students has he "made a loser in this art", further exhorting the prestige of his own martial repertoire and ability as an imparter of this knowledge.<sup>20</sup> If one looks further in to the personal lives of the individuals mentioned in this list, then their inclusion further reinforces this point. For this we need look no further than Galeazzo, a man who fought against Jean II le Maingre, otherwise known as Boucicaut, one of the most renowned fighters of his age, on two separate occasions.<sup>21</sup> When viewed as part of the entire manuscript, the purpose of this list is easier to define. It is clearly supposed to be a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> One such instance was the feat of arms fought between two English and French squires in the late fourteenth century, Gauvain Micaille and Joachim Cator. Despite the combat taking place shortly after a skirmish, when Joachim's lance pierced Gauvain's thigh it was considered "tilting dishonourably". See Jean Froissart, *Chronicles* (trans. Johnes), pp. 613-5.

<sup>19</sup> Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fol.1r.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; For a quick summary of Boucicaut see Brough, Gideon, 'Boucicaut, Jehan II le Maingre (1366 – 1421)'.

declaration of Fiore's ability both as a teacher and more importantly, as a fighter, reinforcing the validity of the techniques on the following pages.

Yet Fiore is not the only fifteenth century master to preface his material with a prologue. Filippo Vadi, whom is often seen as at best a later disciple of Fiore and at worst a shameless copyist, also opens his manuscript with a lengthy introduction before delving in to his martial repertoire.<sup>22</sup> Like Fiore, he provides the reader with an introduction including limited biographical information, in which he also champions the usefulness of learning how to fight and voices his wish that through the writing of this manuscript he wished to be remembered.<sup>23</sup> But the vast majority of the introduction of *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* is actually a sixteen-chapter tract, to which this paper now turns, in which Vadi outlines his martial philosophies, prefaced with the message: *Si tu auerai nel cernuol tuo sale, / Elte bixogna qui considerate / Qual via sa copra da salir tal scale.*<sup>24</sup>

Vadi's introduction covers a lot of ground, with the Pisan discussing the relationship between science, art and fencing, when one ought to fight, the qualities a fighter ought to possess, and how seriously one should take a fight once it has begun.<sup>25</sup> His decision to discuss such topics at length can be taken as him trying to establish his credentials as a fencing master. When one bears in mind that Vadi's manual was a gift to the Duke of Urbino, at whose court he may have desired patronage, we once again see that like Fiore, Vadi's main focus here in the prologue is not the teaching of swordsmanship but in fact rather to show off his ability as a fencing master.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, Vadi's introduction is more explicit than Fiore's regarding the tenets of swordsmanship; Vadi also writes concerning basic footwork, the role of cuts and thrusts, and how to act once the swords have met in a bind.<sup>27</sup> The existence of these passages in Vadi's work have led Porzio and Mele to advocate that Vadi wished to produce an "explanatory manuscript" based on the

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<sup>22</sup> In *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* Sydney Anglo argues that Vadi's manuscript is "scarcely an advance on Fiore's" *Flos Duellatorum* in regards to presentation and depiction of combat. See Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Europe*, pp. 131-2. However, recent work by Mondschein disputes this; "though the structure by which Vadi composed his book may borrow from Fiore's organizational schema, his fencing is not the same: He uses a longer sword, and changes some guards, as well much of the footwork". See Mondschein, 'The Italian Schools of Fencing', p. 298.

<sup>23</sup> Filippo Vadi, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* (trans. Porzio and Mele), pp. 30-85.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.46. Translated literally the quote means "if you are of clever mind, / You must consider here/ The best way to climb these stairs."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 30-85.

<sup>26</sup> Porzio and Mele, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> Filippo Vadi, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* (trans. Porzio and Mele), pp. 30-85.



earlier *Flos Duellatorum*.<sup>28</sup> When one considers the readership of Vadi's work, likely courtiers at Guidobaldo's court, this argument seems less compelling; men trained in the art of combat their entire lives would surely have known many of the physical principles that Vadi here is espousing. What is of more importance in the introduction is Vadi's lengthy tract regarding the philosophical nature and role of swordsmanship, reinforcing Forggeng's arguments that fencing masters wished their students to also consider how to think and feel about fighting in addition to the practice itself.<sup>29</sup> The different approaches seen in the introductions of Fiore and Vadi highlight how both are concerned with highlighting their prowess as martial artists and teachers. Where they differ is simply in how they use their introductions to accomplish this end; whilst Fiore provides evidence of past students and combats, Vadi launches in to a discussion of the basic physical principles and philosophies of combat. Despite the different methodologies, it is arguable that neither master intended their work to be used as a tool for learning how to fight, as is the case with practitioners today.

### III. THE USE OF POETRY AND PROSE

Similar conclusions can be reached via a study of how both masters make use of language in setting forth their plays. Several authors of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance decided to record their knowledge of fencing in poetic verse (although this was not the majority), as can be seen in the examples below from the two Italians' plays with pollaxes.<sup>30</sup>

*Per questa presa io faro una uolta presta  
Tua aça perderai la mia ferira in la testa.*<sup>31</sup>

*La presa chio ti facio sera questa,  
Perderai l'aza e ferio la testa.*<sup>32</sup>

It is undeniable that these verses, representative of others to be found in the rest of the manuscripts, are too brief to convey any real knowledge of how to perform a complex martial technique to an unstudied reader, yet an introductory instructional role was hardly

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<sup>28</sup> Porzio and Mele, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Forggeng, 'Owning the Art: The German *Fechtbuch* Tradition', p. 170.

<sup>30</sup> Other fifteenth century examples of individuals deigning to record martial knowledge in verse form can be found two English poems, 'Man that Will' and the 'Poem of the Pel' in *Knyghtboode and Bataile*. On the other hand, one can also find a number of cases where an author has relied on verse and also prose, as in the work of Lecküchner, who wrote mnemonic verse immediately followed by descriptive glosses. See Hans Lecküchner, *The Art of Swordsmanship* (trans. Forggeng).

<sup>31</sup> "Through this catch will I make a quick turn, your axe will you lose and mine shall strike you in the head"; Fiore dei Liberi, *Flos Duellatorum*, 1409 (ed. Novati), Carta 28a.

<sup>32</sup> "The grapple I do will be this one, you'll use the pollaxe and I will hit your head"; Filippo Vadi, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* (trans. Porzio and Mele), p. 130.

the purpose of this literature. Arguably, to a student having already studied under Fiore or Vadi, these lines are not meant to be instructional but rather to act as a pedagogical, mnemonic tool. The individual lines are short enough to be remembered, a structure assisted by the simple rhyme scheme; if the reader vocalizes the above lines and makes an attempt at memorization this may become clearer, albeit depending on one's familiarity with Italian. It is then apparent that due to their simple structure they are intended to assist in remembering previous lessons, where the intricacies of each technique would have been engrained through muscle memory, as opposed to imparting new knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Certain masters indeed hoped that their books would serve a practical purpose; Fiore argues that without books one is hard-pressed to remember even a quarter of the art.<sup>34</sup>

Whether or not they were used in this manner by their owners is another matter entirely. For texts with a supposedly practical purpose several fifteenth century Fight Books survive in a near pristine condition. In Fallow's analysis of Menaguerra's *Lo Cavaller*, a late fifteenth century military treatise dedicated to horsemanship, he notes how poor a condition multiple copies survive in; the frontispiece is missing from a 1493 version of the text, whilst a 1532 edition has had every page repaired along the inner seam.<sup>35</sup> In Fallow's words, this indicates that "these books were never meant to be preserved as treasured artefacts. Quite the opposite: they were meant to be used".<sup>36</sup> Such a gap in the physical states of these different works would perhaps imply that the majority of fifteenth century Fight Books remained unused. Reasons for this may be due to methods of learning in the Middle Ages; as late as the fifteenth century it was still unusual to learn from a book, with an emphasis on individuals memorising their education as continued access to specific material could never be guaranteed.<sup>37</sup> This is especially true in the context of Fight Books; medieval combats rarely took place in libraries. Yet one must differentiate between the purpose of these books and their eventual functions; the linguistic diplomatics from several fifteenth century Fight Books indicates that they had the potential to serve a mnemonic role, but it would appear as if their owners decided not to employ them in this manner.

Certain fencing masters were also responsible for multiple versions of their manuscripts, in which are employed altered linguistic structures. Fiore dei Liberi was involved in the creation of multiple variants of his text, with the Getty *Fior di Battaglia* possessing arguably

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<sup>33</sup> Mondschein, 'The Italian Schools of Fencing', p. 295.

<sup>34</sup> Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fol.1v.

<sup>35</sup> Fallows, *Jousting in Medieval and Renaissance Iberia*, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 8.

more explicit descriptions than those seen in *Flos Duellatorum* above. The below example is the Getty variant of the previous quote from Fiore, detailing a disarm in axe-play;

*Cum mezza uolta ti cavarò questa azzza de le mane. / E tolta che io tella avevo, in quello propriu uoltare, / io ti feriro in la tua testa, come fa questo scholar che me di dredo, / tu cazerà morto come io credo.*<sup>38</sup>

It appears to all intents and purposes that Fiore, at the request of Niccolò III d'Este to produce a more comprehensive version of *Flos Duellatorum*, has attempted to acquiesce to this request whilst continuing to follow his principles of secrecy and not really providing much more information, resulting in what Anglo has characterised as verse “so bad as to be barely recognizable as such”.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless these differences have led to scholars asserting that the Getty Fiore suggests an effort on behalf of its author to produce a complete synthesis of his methodology as opposed to a mnemonic text.<sup>40</sup> Yet even in this more detailed edition, Fiore still leaves so much unsaid that it cannot be seen as having the purpose of instructing anyone other than a previous student how to fight. Such manuals would not become commonplace for well over a century. In the late sixteenth century Joachim Meyer would author such a manual designed to be used by those who had never had the chance to study under him, an altogether different purpose than many fifteenth century masters, containing vastly more detailed instructions than those which can be found in the works of many earlier manuscripts.<sup>41</sup> The reasons for this shift in the means of communication of information and the authors’ intent is clear. Increasing literacy, rising living standards, and the expanding role of the printing press in the sixteenth century led to unprecedented numbers of lay consumers of books, which allowed Meyer and other sixteenth century masters to present their knowledge in new and improved ways, and more importantly profit from it.<sup>42</sup>

That is not to say that the concept of producing a didactic manuscript as opposed to a commentary on certain devices was necessarily a sixteenth century concept. The author of *Le Jeu de la Hache*, for example, chooses to employ what appears to be descriptive rather than mnemonic language. Whereas several masters rely on rhyming couplets or short sentences to describe an entire technique, the anonymous author of *Le Jeu* writes with

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<sup>38</sup> “With a half turn I will take this axe from the hands, and having removed it from you, in that same turn, I will injure you in your head, as this student below does, I think you will drop dead”; Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fol.37r.

<sup>39</sup> Mondschein, *The Knightly Art of Battle*, p. 14; Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 121.

<sup>40</sup> Mondschein, *The Knightly Art of Battle*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> See; Joachim Meyer, *The Art of Combat* (trans. Forgeng).

<sup>42</sup> Whittock, *A Brief History of Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 179.

lengthy and informative paragraphs.<sup>43</sup> As well as practitioners in their research, this also serves to help scholars understand the original intent of the author; due to the lengthy explanations as opposed to rhyming captions it is a plausible theory that the author's purpose was pedagogical without necessarily being mnemonic, in a manner similar to the latter Joachim Meyer. The anonymous author directly addresses the reader, providing several instructions regarding how if an opponent does a, b, or c, one can respond with x, y or z.<sup>44</sup> For example, whereas Fiore is likely to state in his section regarding axe-play simply that a student can place the axe between an opponent's legs, cover his visor with the hand, and wait for him to fall, *Le Jeu* offers far more comprehensive suggestions.<sup>45</sup> This leads one to assert that unlike the commentary orientated focus of the aforementioned Italian manuscripts, *Le Jeu* is more didactic in construction. That said, this view is open to question as the author still makes several assumptions of the reader. In several instances we are often told how in order to perform a particular technique that one ought to be *en garde* with either the *queue* or the *dague* forwards, but aside from this there is little indication regarding how the weapon should be held.<sup>46</sup> Vague descriptions such as these can lead to a variety of interpretations, especially if one consults other sources on axe-play. For example, in the German *Fechtbücher* of Hans Talhoffer and Paulus Kal there are clear examples of combatants leading with the *queue*, either of which could be what is described by *Le Jeu de la Hache*.<sup>47</sup> Whereas the combatant in Talhoffer leads with the *queue* at roughly waist-height, in Kal's manual it is above his head. Yet one ought to remember that *Le Jeu* exists in an unfinished state; there are several gaps in the manuscript which seem poised to contain images of the accompanying instructions. Had these been completed it is likely that the above problems regarding the position of the guards of the *queue* and the *dague* would be lesser. As such, although the original purpose

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the first and most basic technique described is as follows: *Quant on vous donra de tour de bras droittier. Se vous avez la croix au-devant vous pouvez marchier auant du pie gauche en luy recevant son coup en cueillant de la queue de la hache dune venue ferez contre bas pour la luy faire cheoir a terre. Et de la pouvez en marchant lung pie après lautre de signant luy baillier destog de ladite queue en coulant par la main gauche au visage. Ou la ou bon vous samblera. Ou luy baillier a tour de bras sur la teste. Le Jeu de la Hache*, p. 22 ; Or in English "When one would give you a swinging blow, right-hander to right-hander. If you have the *croix* in front, you can step forward with your left foot, receiving his blow, picking it up with the *queue* of your axe and - in a single movement - bear downward to make his axe fall to the ground. And from there, following up one foot after the other, you can give him a jab with the said *queue*, running it through the left hand, at the face: either there or wherever seems good to you. Or swing at his head", *Le Jeu de la Hache* (trans. Anglo), p. 116.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fol.36v; Refer to footnote 43.

<sup>46</sup> *Le Jeu de la Hache* (trans. Anglo), pp. 116-122.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Talhoffer, 1459 (Kopenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliothek, Thott 290 2°), fol.131r; Paulus Kal, c.1470 (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 1507), fol.37v.

of *Le Jeu de la Hache* may have been primarily didactic in nature, its uncomplete nature ultimately prevents one from re-creating its take on axe-play.

The exact opposite approach to the transmission of knowledge can be seen in the work of Hans Talhoffer in his 1459 and 1467 manuscripts, the latter of which has been labelled by Rector as “intentionally arcane” for the uninitiated.<sup>48</sup> Aside from some basic captions set alongside some of the illustrations, or no text at all, these two versions contain little explanatory text alongside their specific devices.<sup>49</sup> It is this which has led Rector to conclude that in a matter not dissimilar to the purpose of the prologues of Fiore and Vadi, Talhoffer’s primary purpose is a declaration of his ability as a master of arms.<sup>50</sup> Once again, through reading the captions where they are provided the reader can gain a basic understanding of what is being shown on the page, but has few clues on how to accomplish these techniques for themselves; Talhoffer must be sought out and his services hired. As such, several of Talhoffer’s modern critics have labelled his sources as “overrated” because of their overly cryptic nature and lack of overt information.<sup>51</sup> Clearly, nearly six hundred years later his works continue to serve their original purpose in that viewers are left simultaneously fascinated and frustrated.

The above examples show that the choices of language in fifteenth century fencing literature hold a great deal of clues as to how their authors intended them to be used. *Flos Duellatorum* and *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* seem designed to serve as mnemonic tools which could aid in the recollection of a previous lesson, but twist coherency in the name of poetry to the point where it has little use for anyone but former pupils. These can be compared to Fiore’s other work *Fior di Battaglia*, which despite longer commentaries still lacks the keys to unlocking the art. Traces of the sixteenth century instructional literature can also be observed in the vocabulary of *Le Jeu*, which arguably resembles the most informative manuscript of the fifteenth century, yet again it cannot be considered a fully sufficient source for the recreation of a dead martial art. Yet nowhere is as a master as oblique as in the manuscripts of Hans Talhoffer. These various examples all highlight how fencing masters consciously used language in a way which would suit their aims for the manuscript, none of which unfortunately coincided with their modern applications in the HEMA community.

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<sup>48</sup> Rector, *Medieval Combat*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Hans Talhoffer, 1459 (Kopenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliothek, Thott 290 2°); Hans Talhoffer, 1467 (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.icon. 394a).

<sup>50</sup> Rector, *Medieval Combat*, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Walczak, “The Importance of Studying *Fechtbücher*”.

#### **IV. THE ROLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN FIGHT BOOKS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE PURPOSE OF THE TEXT**

However, the majority of these manuscripts are not simply comprised of text. Today, images of combatants locked in single combat are hugely important to the practice of Historical European Martial Arts; practitioners use these illustrations to inform much of their information regarding the art, including important aspects of fencing such as how the weapon should be held when executing a certain technique, where on the opponent's body their strike should be directed, and how they should position their feet during these combats. Similar methodologies have, in the last twenty years or so, also become of greater importance for historians of medieval warfare.<sup>52</sup> Yet for all that these images convey to modern practitioners, there is a wealth of valuable knowledge left unsaid. Today's swordsmen are often left to their own devices on several fronts, and use of images is one fraught with potentially problematic interpretations. Despite the information it is possible to glean via an illustration in a fencing manual, many only detail a single moment in time. Several masters demonstrate devices of varying complexity, yet rarely provide more than one or two images to illuminate the entirety of any given play, leaving practitioners with no choice but to provide their own interpretations of what has been depicted. Referring once more to the pollaxe plays of Fiore, modern readers are only given the *poste*, or guards, from which to begin, then an illustration of one combatant beating the axe of the other to the ground, from which the rest of the plays derive.<sup>53</sup> The illustrations of the plays themselves depict either a moment in the middle or at the end of the technique. It hardly needs to be said that this is incredibly problematic for the reconstruction of Historical European Martial Arts. Such problems have been noted by other scholars; Anglo arguing that "the information provided by most pictures is so ambiguous that the mind can provide far too many hypotheses about what has happened before the moment illustrated, and what may happen afterwards" perfectly describes the state of axe-play in Fiore's works.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Porter, 'The Ways of War in Medieval Manuscript Illumination', p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> Fiore dei Liberi, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1410, fols.35v-37r.

<sup>54</sup> Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 42.



Fig.1: Disarm with pollaxe. Near identical images can be seen in *Flos Duellatorum* and *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*. *Fiore dei Liberi*, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1400, (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig XV 13, fol.37r.

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that these time-consuming and expensive illustrations were included solely for decorative purposes.<sup>55</sup> In several cases one can witness how images too play a pedagogical role when placed alongside the corresponding text. Returning to the above examples of Fiore and Vadi in their demonstration of a disarm in axe-play, the text alone offers little information in Vadi's assertion that "the grapple I do will be this one".<sup>56</sup> Aside from the assertion that a grapple will be performed, and that it will be followed by a disarm and a strike to the head, this statement contains no real information. In order for this to become understandable it must be read alongside the image.<sup>57</sup> Although the unison of image and text is still unable to provide a complete understanding of this play, if one has performed a technique time and time again, then these brief instructions and single illustration may be all a student needs to recall much more information about any given technique. As seen above, Anglo has argued that for modern readers the images often provide far too few details regarding how to perform certain plays, yet for historical combatants familiar with the temporal extensions of the image, then this would suffice and arguably be a stronger memory aid than text.

<sup>55</sup> It should, however, be noted that ownership of a particularly richly decorated fencing manuscript could be seen as a means of associating oneself with the art of swordsmanship and therefore claims to nobility. See Forgeng, 'Owning the Art', p.172.

<sup>56</sup> Fillipo Vadi, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* (trans. Porzio and Mele), p. 130.

<sup>57</sup> See Figure 1.

Yet not all illustrations of techniques are provided with partially informative captions. There are, rather, a large number of fifteenth century Fight Books whose illustrations are accompanied solely by the most cryptic of clues as to what is taking place in a specific technique. The most well-known master who utilizes this combination is undeniably Talhoffer. If one turns to the 1459 edition of his manuscript, then only the vaguest of descriptive terms is employed in describing several of the techniques, including as little information as *das gver fachen* or *stuck verbracht*.<sup>58</sup> Talhoffer has also chosen, in certain folios, to not employ these laconic captions at all; several devices are accompanied by no text, with the reader left to interpret the devices based on their previous experience of martial arts.<sup>59</sup> Potentially the images here serve an altogether different purpose than those discussed above, relating to Talhoffer's desire to make clear the value of hiring him. Here the images themselves, much like Fiore's list of former students, serve as a declaration of his martial ability; they aim to impress the reader through their visual content, and entice him in to purchasing Talhoffer's service as a master at arms. Although they act as a denotation of a specific action, they seldom add further knowledge.<sup>60</sup> This is almost certainly true of the 1459 edition, believed to be a personal version of the manuscript which he would be able to show to potential customers without them gleaming any real knowledge from the illustrations.<sup>61</sup> Similar notions of images conveying a sense of martial ability can be applied not only to the creator but also the owner of the Fight Book. Forgeng has displayed how the physical ownership of a *Fechtbuch* could confer on the owner the intellectual possession and understanding of its contents, a further purpose which likely proved attractive to individuals keen to enrich their social standing through perceptions that they were proficient in an ennobling martial art.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Hans Talhoffer, 1459 (Kopenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliothek, Thott 290 2°), fols.71v-74v.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., fols.131r-137v; See Figure 2.

<sup>60</sup> Burkart, 'Body Techniques of Combat: The Depiction of a Personal Fighting System in the Fight Books of Hans Talhoffer (1443-1467CE)', p.110.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Forgeng, 'Owning the Art', p. 172.



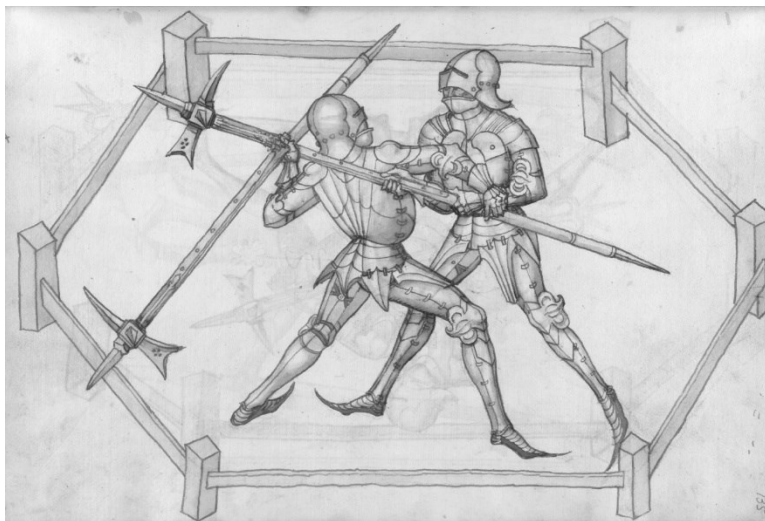


Fig. 2, Uncaptioned combat with pollaxes. Hans Talhoffer, 1459 (*Kopenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Thott 290 2<sup>o</sup>, fol.135r.*)

However, attempting to use such visual portrayals of combat to provide historically accurate reconstructions of combat is fraught with difficulties. It is not as simple as has been previously stated in “that with a little effort, the mists obscuring the master’s teachings may be blown clear and his true meaning revealed”.<sup>63</sup> Arguably, it is through an attempt to mimic some of the vague imagery of various fencing manuals, produced by artists of differing levels of ability, which has partially led to the attempts of John Clements to establish the use of the flat rather than the edge to displace oncoming strikes.<sup>64</sup> In his article, Clements proposes that the idea of parrying with the edge is a myth, and that a close study of fencing literature instead reveals that it was instead the flat of the sword which was a preferred means of parrying an incoming strike.<sup>65</sup> Whilst a full discussion of the flat vs edge debate is beyond the scope of this paper, its existence nonetheless serves to highlight the potential for vastly different interpretations of fifteenth century Fight Books. If fifteenth century fencing masters wished their texts to serve as explanatory manuals from which anyone could learn swordplay, surely such material would have been covered. Others, including Guy Windsor, have noted that the

<sup>63</sup> Rector, *Medieval Combat*, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Clements, ‘The Myth of Edge-on-Edge Parrying in Medieval Swordplay’.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

gap between practical technique and its pictorial representation is a difficult one to bridge.<sup>66</sup> In an attempt to cross this divide, Windsor has produced several interesting and thought-provoking books attempting to explain the material to be found in the manuscripts of Fiore and Vadi.<sup>67</sup> However, the existence of these books dedicated to explaining the meaning behind their manuscripts highlights several of the problems with their presentation in the original texts in relationship to their use by modern practitioners; if such additional texts are necessary to understand the originals, then it is fully apparent that this transmission of knowledge was not the purpose of the manuscript. Arguably, modern texts to instruct one in historical swordsmanship act in a similar way to the Liechtenauer glosses, expounding on cryptic texts to make their contents clearer to a reader.

## V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this paper we have witnessed how fencing masters of the fifteenth century utilised the diplomatics of their Fight Books in order to fulfil a variety of purposes. The first part of this paper assessed this in relation to how fencing masters such as Fiore dei Liberi and Filippo Vadi set out their introductions, directly addressing their audience. Fiore's retelling of his numerous duels and list of former students serve as evidence that Fiore wished his work to not only survive him after death not just as a reminder of his existence, but also act as proof of his martial competence whilst living, perhaps with the aim of securing further custom. Vadi's introduction shares broadly similar goals, but ultimately relies on alternative means to accomplish the same end. By composing such a lengthy tract on the philosophies of swordsmanship it is clear that Vadi wanted to create a perception of himself as an individual that one could approach in order to heighten one's understanding of combat. On the other hand, there is some evidence in the linguistic structure of the techniques that these manuscripts did in part have some educational role to play, and were not only supposed to stimulate thinking about combat. Here must one consider the choice of the author to write in poetry or prose. By agreeing to conform to the restrictions of a poetic structure, an author is from the outset limiting the potential clarity of his work in relation to conveying instructions, as seen in the works of Fiore and Vadi. However, it may still serve a pedagogical purpose to a reader familiar with the technique described. Contrarily, a master writing in prose may wish his thoughts to be more accessible to the reader; yet often so much is left unsaid that the exact reconstruction of this remains implausible. This has been observed in the example of *Le*

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<sup>66</sup> Windsor, *The Swordsman's Companion*, p. 35.

<sup>67</sup> Windsor's bibliography which heavily refers to the fifteenth century Italian masters also includes *Mastering the Art of Arms Volume One: The Medieval Dagger* (Whaton: Freelance Academy Press, 2012) and *Mastering the Art of Arms Volume Two: The Medieval Longsword* (Helsinki: The School of European Swordsmanship, 2014).

*Jeu de la Hache*. Two of the above purposes, the declaration of martial competence and the commemoration of former lessons, can also be observed when one examines the role of illustrations and visual portrayals of combat in Fight Books. Arguably, when provided alongside a few lines of text they can assist in a pedagogical role, as evidenced by the examples taken from Fiore's axe-play, but without even the briefest caption their purpose is often more a brazen display of what either the author or owner are capable of. Talhoffer's 1459 manuscript is a clear indicator of a Fight Book's illustrations being purposed to demonstrate one's mastery of the craft rather than designed to assist anyone not personally familiar with what he had to offer.

Thus in linking these conclusions to modern common practice of HEMA, it is readily apparent that the intended use of the majority of fifteenth century Fight Books has very little to do with their modern application in the community. For the most part fencing masters such as Fiore, Vadi, and Talhoffer believed themselves to be keepers of an art which relied on secretive means of transferring knowledge.<sup>68</sup> As such, although their manuscripts serve a wide range of purposes, there are very few which can be said to explicitly possess useful didactic functions. Even the notably descriptive *Le Jeu de la Hache* requires a certain level of knowledge on behalf of the reader, and in its incomplete state lacks crucial information regarding how to achieve its numerous plays.<sup>69</sup> Those claiming that through study of these manuals we can be certain that we are practicing "thoroughly authentic" styles of swordsmanship are guilty of overstating the potential knowledge that we can glean regarding what is a lost practice.<sup>70</sup> The manuals we study were rarely created with this direct transmission of knowledge in mind. In addition, this is a principle which ought to be born in mind in claims not just to one another, but perhaps also the general public. In demonstrating HEMA to a wider audience, practitioners have a duty to inform the audiences that our presentations are often historically inspired rather than necessarily being historically accurate. Thus, one would argue merely that a wider acceptance of the limits of studying and practicing HEMA is required by the community.

Indeed, the author would not wish to imply that the physical practice derived from reading these works in the pursuit of knowledge regarding historical martial arts and the use of medieval weaponry is fruitless.<sup>71</sup> Such work, carried out both by academics and by practitioners, is incredibly valuable in providing further evidence that historical combatants were more skilled and sophisticated in their approaches to combat than is still widely believed. One example exists in that HEMA is an incredibly valuable tool in

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<sup>68</sup> Jaquet, 'Fighting in the Fightschools', pp. 48-9.

<sup>69</sup> Price, 'Ponderous, Cruel & Mortal: A Review of Medieval Poleaxe Techniques', p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Windsor, *The Swordsman's Companion*, p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> For more on this see Jaquet and Sørensen, 'Historical European Martial Art. A Crossroad between Academic Research, Martial Heritage Re-Creation and Martial Sport Practices'.

disputing archaic yet surviving notions that medieval combatants were little more than brutish thugs where the victor of an armoured bout “was determined, in a great measure, by the resistance of their armour and, ultimately, by their power of endurance”.<sup>72</sup> As stylized depictions of medieval combat become increasingly mainstream in the media, thanks to the phenomenal levels of popularity enjoyed by franchises such as *Game of Thrones*, the work of practitioners and scholars alike can act as a counter-balance to the untruths present in these aspects of mass media. Viewers of such films and shows will no doubt be familiar with the trope that a man in heavy armour represents a slow, lumbering target. The potential for these portrayals to be taken as fact thus heightens the importance of a recent public outreach project on Youtube headed by Jaquet, demonstrating the potential mobility of an armoured fighter, which has at time of writing surpassed 360,000 views in four months.<sup>73</sup>

In conclusion, despite the large amounts of research yet to be undertaken in Fight Books, through study of these and similar areas scholars can gain a much stronger understanding of historical martial arts, the context in which their practitioners taught and fought, and communication strategies and the role of memory in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>72</sup> Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fencing from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century*, p.14.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Can You Move in Armour?’.

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