

Robert Rutherford -- (c) April 2015

UNIVERSAL PARRY AND GREAT BLOW

Introduction

As I get ready to finish this work, I think it may be useful to end it with a brief dissertation that illustrates the virtues of the prima and quarta guards. The prima strikes the opponent while the quarta defends against him – the beginning and the end of any honorable quarrel. The quarta defends against any attack (feint or earnest), while the prima strikes the opponent.

It is, however, important to remark that these two guards are inseparable companions, and that one ends where the other begins; in other words, they begin and end without an actual beginning or end.¹

Where Ridolfo Cappoferro finishes his "*Great Representation of the Art and Use of Fencing*" is where I will begin to describe the distillation of 200 years of Italian martial arts, specifically in the tradition residing in the area of Bologna. Among the *infinity of settlements and positions -and- infinitesimal movement [that] forms diverse guards, [whose] movements are without number or end*, we find a recurring technique comprising *a single strike, and a single parry, and a single guard; and each of these three things together in a single tempo.*²

It may seem rather trivial to scour the extant works of these Bolognese masters to pick out one technique that shows up over and over and claim some sort of exemplar of Italian swordsmanship, and it would be the case for this particular technique, if it were not for the importance these particular masters place on it themselves. So, why among the many guards, with the sword held high or low, behind or in front, to the right or the left, coupled with all possible ways to move the sword between them, do we find a pruning of a vast system of combat down to a single guard and single strike? The answer is founded in the nature of motion between sword and body, and the principle of time or *tempo*.

Before we begin to look at that motion, we must first examine the 'rest or 'guard' that precedes it. Angelo Viggiani refers to this position as: *guardia stretta, difensiva, perfetta*. Other masters of this time and region simply give it the name *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*. Within the naming of this guard, we find the elements that begin to describe the nature of the 'Universal Parry.'³

¹ Leoni, Tom. *The Art and Practice of Fencing*. pg 87

² Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 23

³ Mele, Greg. "The Truly 'Universal Parry'"

Defining the Guard

Each master describes the guard differently, for instance, Giovanni dall' Agocchie (1572), explains it like this:

porta di ferro, owing to its similarity to an iron gate, which takes a lot of effort and skill to batter down. Just so, to wound someone positioned in this guard requires skill and wit.⁴

This will be named porta di ferro stretta; and it was named "stretta" for being a very secure guard⁵

...and Angelo Viggiani

I call it "stretta" [defensiva, perfetta] on account of the sword being close to the enemy; and he cannot be an assailant without great contest, in respect of the point, which is aimed at the enemy's chest, and your left side finds itself again distant from him, such that it cannot be offended, it still being the more mortal.⁶

Finding the right side forward, which appears to have the duty of defense, and the sword hand advanced, it is found to be as much for defending oneself as offending others; I believe that in this guard the Conte and anyone else will be defended more easily and with less fatigue than in any other guard in which they place themselves.⁷

No matter who is describing the guard, it universally comprises four properties of the sword: first, it occupies the space between the two fencers; second, it is held to the left; third, the point is directed forward; and lastly, the hand is held low. With the sword held this way, the body turns in profile to form *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*.

First Property of the Sword

The prescribed term of *Stretta* that appears in each masters' naming of this position, has various meanings depending on the way it is being used, and all of those meanings are useful. Dall' Agocchie says he calls it *stretta* for "being a very secure guard" not because *stretta* translates to 'secure,' but rather the word *stretta* means 'close' or 'narrow,' and this 'closeness' of the guard to the body keeps it protected. The sword is not only an implement to wound but one to protect as well, and the further the sword is from the body, the more time is necessary to move to defend it. It is *stretta* [adjective] for this reason, but also because it is used in the *stretta* [noun]. When the distance between fencers and their respective weapons are 'close,' they are in the *stretta* and must use guards that are also *stretta*. This single word has the ability when used as fencing terminology to codify the relationship between guard and fight.⁸

⁴ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 10

⁵ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 10

⁶ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 41

⁷ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 41

⁸ Mele, Greg "Wide and Close Play in Armizare, The Martial Tradition of Fiore dei Liberi

Second Property of the Sword

Angelo Viggiani tells us not to *give them these bizarre names* preferring to abandon brevity for descriptiveness, calling this guard *difensiva*, where others call it *Porta di Ferro*. But both have the same implication, they defend. The cleanest description of the properties of this defensive nature comes from Salvator Fabris (1606) when describing the grandchild of the guard -- 'quarta':

*This particular 'quarta' guard is formed naturally with the arm at such an angle as to make you strong and well covered to the inside. However, this angle of the hand and the arm [...] leaves you open to the outside, although your sword is stronger there.*⁹

Dall' Agocchie supports this idea when he says: *you almost never have to defend except on your right side.*¹⁰ But what good is a guard that defends one side and not the other, and why put preferences on defending the left side and not the right? The first part is easily answered in that the nature of the sword only allows defense of one side in any particular moment of time. The answer to the second part will be apparent shortly, but already alluded to from the above quote by Fabris.

Third Property of the Sword

The guard is also 'perfetta' meaning: *you need to turn the point of your sword toward my chest [...] because it engenders with the thrust, one calls it 'perfetta.'*¹¹ In a period where the thrust is the preferred attack, guards that naturally set up this attack, Viggiani calls 'perfect.' The reasons for preferring the thrust vary from master to master, but they do agree on two key points which are: the thrust arrives sooner than the cut, being that the thrust travels on a straight line from its originating guard to desired target. And because of this, the sword remains *stretta* throughout its entire action, or in other words, because it travels in a straight line, it keeps the body defended while also offending.

Fourth Property of the Sword

Though not mentioned in Viggiani's naming of the guard, but still just as important of a property as the above three, the guard is also 'low.' It is difficult to tell why the low guards are not named as such, but in contrast to their high counterparts, they lack the designation of 'Alta.' Antonio Manciolino tell us exactly why this guard should be low:

*We have both high guards and low guards. The object of the high guards is to attack and then follow with a parry; that of low guards is the opposite – to parry first and then follow with a strike*¹²

⁹ Leoni, Tom. Art of Dueling. pg 46

¹⁰ Swanger, William Jherek. Dell' Arte di Scrimia pg 37

¹¹ Swanger, William Jherek. Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani pg 41

¹² Leoni, Tom. The Complete Renaissance Swordsman. pg 74

And...

*In the art of spade da filo, you should not depart from the low guards, because they are safer than their high counterparts. The reason is that when you are in a high guard you can be reached by a thrust or a cut to the legs, while in a low guard this danger does not exist.*¹³

Position of the Body

The four properties of the sword are useless until we fully examine the position of the body. A further reading of each masters' description of the guard, clues us in to how to fully form this narrow, defensive, perfect guard:

making those same turns of the body, of the hands, and of the feet (except for the turning of the true edge toward your left side, as I taught you), do not pass your sword hand past yourself nor cross your right knee, and make the point aim at my chest; this will be the fifth guard, which we call 'guardia stretta, difensiva, perfetta.' -Angelo Viggiani¹⁴

Position yourself sideways, so that your right shoulder – as described above – faces the opponent. Both arms should be directed towards the opponent, but with the right arm extended downwards in defense of the right knee. -Antonio Manciolino¹⁵

Every time that you have your right foot forward one pace, which will be neither large nor small, but proportionate, with the sword hand on the inside near the right knee, and the point thereof aimed at the enemy -Giovanni dall' Agocchie¹⁶

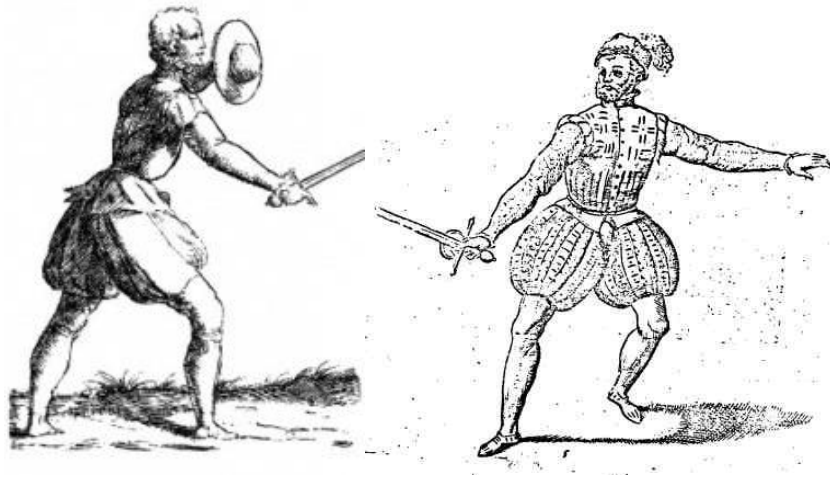
Each of these three descriptions mention the sword hand is just in front of or just to the inside of the forward, right knee. If one were to stand naturally, facing his opponent, the sword would not defend the left side of the body with the sword held in front of the right knee. So, instead of bringing the sword entirely across the body, the body should turn in profile or 'sideways' to hide behind the sword. From this position, the sword can remain rather central, or just "inside near the right knee" keeping the body well defended. Unfortunately, we do not have an illustration of this guard from head-on, but there are clues in the illustrations we do have, coupled with the descriptions, that give us a good idea of how the body resides in *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*.

¹³ Leoni, Tom. *The Complete Renaissance Swordsman*. pg 76

¹⁴ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 39

¹⁵ Leoni, Tom. *The Complete Renaissance Swordsman*. pg 80

¹⁶ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 10



Left: from Achille Marozzo's "Opera Nova" we can see the left foot turned to the left and the buckler arm a good distance behind the sword arm, both indications that the left side of the body is pulled behind the right.

Right: from Angelo Viggiani's "Lo Schermo," again, the left foot turns to the left, and here the left arm is thrown behind the body, reinforcing the notion that the left side is turned behind the right.

Now that the guard, or moment of rest, has been established, what follows is the initial action, or tempo, which is the parry itself. Because the left side of the body has been fully covered by the sword and refusal of the body to that side, any attack from a potential opponent, whether it be cut or thrust, can only be completed to the right side of the sword. This reduction of options allows the fencer to only have to consider one action in order to defeat any attempt to strike to the open side.

The Universal Parry

The trick is then coming up with a single action that deals with all potential actions to the right side or the outside of the sword. That action universally is a *roverso* (a cut from left to right), but the specific way in which the *roverso* is delivered varies within the teachings of each master. But as I hope to show, the way in which the parry is made is secondary to the overarching nature of *roversi* and its ability to defend the outside.

regard this rovescio a bit, how on the contrary it goes on an entirely rising path; don't you see how much the arm and the shoulder lengthen themselves just now, completely elevating themselves, continuously augmenting the strike, and doing greater effect [...] Look how it goes continuously, taking greater distance, and augmenting, how it

prepares itself for the enemy; if therefore the rovescio covers greater ground in order to offend the enemy¹⁷

What Viggiani is getting at here is that because the *roverso* begins on the left side of the body (in a 'defensive guard'), the cut will move to align itself with the right side of the body, where in fact the sword and arm are attached -- the right shoulder. When the arm and sword are aligned with the right side of the body, they are at their fullest extension, and thus given the designation *offensiva*. The understanding that all *roversi* end in an offensive guard is just the first important function of the *roverso* as a parry.

The Roverso is a Cut

It would be entirely conceivable that the motion arising from our initial guard towards the right side could simply be a turn of the hand, in Italian: *mezza-volta*, or an extension of the sword to that side, but universally, it is not. The fact that this action is a cut is important in that it is aggressive, and this energy, in part, is what moves the opponent's attack away from its intended target. And conversely, if the opponent was attempting to keep their attack narrow *stretta*, the *roverso* will move to displace it, forcing it wide *larga*. George Silver, and Englishman during this period explains it best:

the force of the thrust passes straight, therefore any cross being indirectly made, the force of a child may put it by. But the force of the [cut] passes indirectly, therefore must be directly warded in the countercheck of his force, which cannot be done but by the convenient strength of a man, & with true cross in true time, or else will not safely defend him¹⁸

Cuts are Angled

Contrary to the thrust, which closes distance by moving in a straight line, the cut moves through space at an angle. It is this angulation that allows it to defend against any and all blows (*mostly*). At the most basic level, an action that is meant to divert an opponent's weapon can not meet parallel to it; two parallel lines never cross, no cross, no parry. This crossing also takes place on different planes. One, on the line connecting fencer A and fencer B, and the other, facing the one who is parrying. To help illustrate these two planes or crossing, let me first explain the latter, the plane facing the fencer.

Imagine the plane facing the one parrying is like the windshield of the car he is sitting in, and it begins to rain. The raindrops are all possible threats, and the wiper blade is the fencer's sword. The wiper blade, sitting on the left side of the window (in a defensive guard), moves across, from left to right, removing all raindrops, high or low, close or far, in one motion. It is able to do this because it is moving lateral to the direction of the drops, which are attempting to strike through the plane it moves on. Luckily for the driver there is also a windshield and the raindrops do not have sharp points, but the concept is the same.

¹⁷ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 21

¹⁸ Lindahl, Greg. *Paradoxes of Defence* cap13

The second plane, which resides on the line connecting the two fencers, is important to understand, because unlike the raindrops which exist as a point, the weapons have length. As the sword parrying moves through space from left to right, it also moves to cross over and on top of the attacking sword. This motion, whether it begins low ending high, or moves from above ending low, moves to suppress the attacking weapon. Independent of the origin of the attack, be it mandritto, roverso, or thrust, the Universal Parry will move across and on top of it. This second crossing will be more evident when I discuss each masters' variation on the parry in isolation.

The Arm is Extended

It would be possible to deliver a *roverso* with great strength in the arm and body with the appropriate crossings, with the elbow quite bent or arm pulled back towards the body, but the energy would be wasted. As I mentioned in the introduction to the parry, the *roverso* moves to align with the shoulder, this alignment means nothing if the arm is not also extended. This extension not only gives the arm greater structural strength, but it also keeps the opponent's weapon at a distance. Dall' Agocchie is very clear on this:

*I also want to advise you to keep your arm well extended during your defense of both sides, because thereby you'll push your enemy's blows further away from your body, and also be stronger and faster in striking. Observing these rules, you cannot err.*¹⁹

Antonio Manciolino gives us almost the exact same advice some forty years earlier:

*As you parry on whichever side, always keep your arms well-extended. By doing so, you not only push the opponent's attacks away from your person, but you are also stronger and quicker in striking him.*²⁰

By extending this *roverso* parry into the oncoming attack, it forces the *forte* into the *debole* of the sword being parried. Angelo Viggiani describes this crossing like this:

*the forte of your sword will have met the debole of mine, whereby mine could be easily broken by virtue of the disadvantages of such a meeting, and also because of the fall of the cut; and you will also be more secure, being shielded by the forte of your sword.*²¹

Both Dall' Agocchie and Manciolino mention that one will be faster in striking with the arm extended. This is because as the arm extends, so does the sword, and thus the point. As the cut finishes, extended, and crossed, having moved obliquely through both planes, the point is ready to strike quickly.

¹⁹ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 16

²⁰ Leoni, Tom. *The Complete Renaissance Swordsman*. pg 75

²¹ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 28

The Roverso is Half

After the parry has moved from left to right, and on top of the attacking weapon, it is important to note the sword is still *stretta*. The originating guard was narrow and the ending position of the parry is also narrow. Antonio Manciolino admonishes his readers that:

*If you are near your opponent, you should never swing a full blow, because your sword should never get out of presence for your own safety. The delivery of these half-blows is called mezzo-tempo.*²²

Angelo Viggiani also tells us that, *the majority of time the strike will be in mezo tempo with a half blow.*²³ Not only is it unnecessary for one to make a full cut (one that ends in a *Larga* guard) to displace the attack, it would be imprudent to do so.

Because the parry is ‘half’ and ‘angled’ across the blade of the offender, this will direct his blade to the parrier’s *forte*, thus also giving a mechanical advantage in favor to the one who parried, even if the initial contact of the blades did not have this quality. When the parry has completed all of the elements of the guard that were originally discussed are still intact – throughout, and at the completion of the parry -- with one exception. While the position of the sword at the end of the parry is still narrow and perfect (and depending on whose version of the technique we look at - still low), the parry concludes on the right side, in a “*guard [that] will always be understood as offensive, and will be in order to offend.*”²⁴

The Great Blow

*[S]ome of those who are armored in full jousting harness, when the opponent lowers his lance, looking to the visor of their helm in order to offend it, I have seen that they happen to have a little helmet hanging from a band, well advanced from the face, to avoid the enemy’s point for fear of their eyes. And there are some that close their eyes out of fear, and these never make worthy blows, except by luck. Now if these armored men are in such fear of the point finding their eyes, how then will one unarmored be, seeing the very point of a sword directed straight at his eyes?*²⁵ –Angelo Viggiani

Universally, the *resposta*, or answer to the opponent’s attack after the parry has been made, is a thrust (a perfect blow). More specifically, a thrust from above. This *imbroccata* or *punta sopra mano* (literally, “over-hand thrust”), threatens the “most noble” parts of the opponent -- the eyes. Aside from the metaphysical implications the eyes have in a 16th century, Aristotelian context, and their abilities to recognize motion and thus time (tempo), the above quote is a not-

²² Leoni, Tom. *The Complete Renaissance Swordsman*. pg 75

²³ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de’ Angelo Viggiani* pg 28

²⁴ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de’ Angelo Viggiani* pg 33

²⁵ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de’ Angelo Viggiani* pg 34

so-subtle exhortation to those who find a point moving towards their face to, in some way, ward off this imminent threat.

However, there is more to this thrust from above than simply threatening the eyes. With all of the nuances of the parry – the crossings, the impetus of the cut itself, and the fact it ends with the point forward and extended - the response must continue to sustain the advantages gained through the parry. Fabris (1606), describes the positioning of the sword during the thrust like this:

a position that makes the sword point naturally downward and that is stronger on the underside. As he lifts his hand, the opponent's sword remains underneath (i.e. on the strongest side of the first guard). While lifting his hand as described, our fencer also gets closer to the opponent's debole and in one motion pushes forward and wounds him²⁶

The Imbroccata's Forte is High

With the opponent's blade having been parried and underneath, and for the moment, resting on the *forte* or hilt of the one who parried, when the hand is turned upward in order to form a strong angle to the underside of the blade, the *forte* moves up as well. This rising of the *forte* which naturally follows the position of the hand, keeps the opponent's *debole* on his *forte* as he pushes the sword forward to strike with the thrust. This relationship of the blades also moves the opponent's point out of presence while the *imbroccata* threatens with its own.

The Imbroccata is 'Perfect'

From a narrow, offensive guard, the shortest distance to the opponent is a straight line. The *imbroccata* moves on this straight line, delivering the point of the sword to the opponent's face or upper chest. As I have already discussed, the thrust is the preferred attack in this time period and Dall'Agocchie tell us why:

I hold wounding with the thrust to be better, because the thrust takes less time through being nearer to the enemy, and it's also more fatal, nor does it ever depart from presence, for the safety of the one who holds it.²⁷

With this general advice on all sorts of thrust, and the specific strengths of the over-hand thrust, Viggiani summarizes by telling us:

you will always be able to offend me again in the chest with the punta sopramano perfetta; therefore it is the most perfect and secure blow that can be found, and to express it succinctly, this is called "Great blow", because it is necessary to make a conjoining and a union of all the strength of the body, of the wits, of the senses, and of the art; and accompanying the said blow, reveals one to be endowed with knowledge, with heart, and with temperance.²⁸

²⁶ Leoni, Tom. *Art of Dueling*. pg 59

²⁷ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell'Arte di Scrimia* pg 15

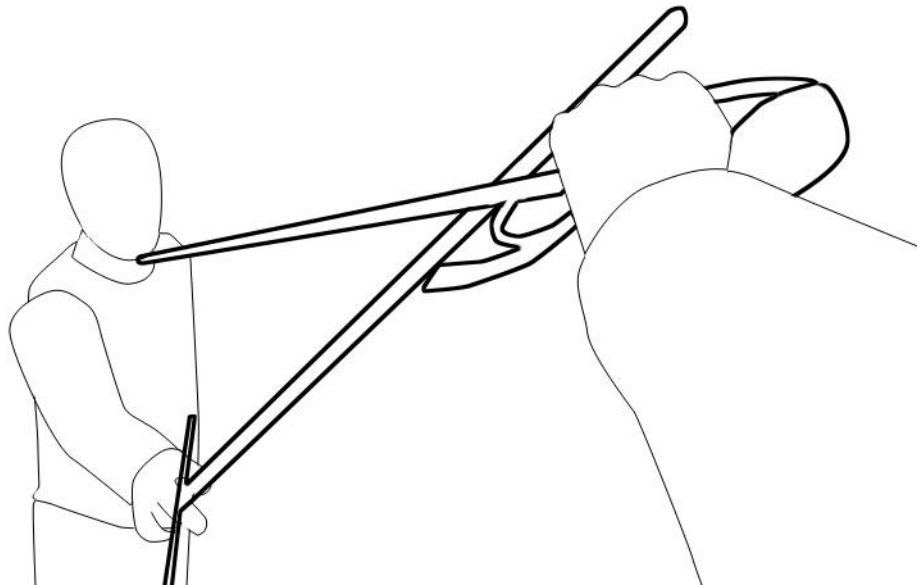
²⁸ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 54

The Imbroccata is Strong Underneath

Once the roverso-parry has constrained the opponent's sword from above, and the impetus of the cut now expended, the *resposta* must form such an angle that the blade remains strong underneath. This basic principle of the relationship between two levers, pushing against one another can be summarized like this:

*a sword is always stronger on the side to which it points*²⁹

In order for the sword to be strong underneath, the sword must point in that direction. To achieve this, the palm must turn up and to the outside, with the point virtually left in place, as if to form *Guardia di Alicorno* or in later systems simply, *Prima*. With this turn of the hand, with the opponent's blade residing below, or on the strong side the sword, it is now very difficult for the opponent to alleviate himself of this disadvantage.



Here it can be seen that after the parry has been made, the hand lifts to meet the *debole* of the opponent's weapon, with the true edge turned to meet it. His blade also lies beneath, where it is weak, and to the outside. From here, an extension of arm, body and foot puts the point to the desired target. Independent of the masters' preferred variation on the *roverso*, this position of the sword is universal the instance after the parry has completed.

²⁹ Leoni, Tom. Art of Dueling, pg 15

Variations

Though each swordsman I have discussed thus far hold the above truths, they each have their own variations on the specifics of the parry and response. It is difficult to say why each hold their version to be better than others. It could be the morphology of the weapon as it changes over the 16th century, or a tightly held tradition from master to student, but what I hope to convey are the strengths and weaknesses of each, first, starting with the earliest published master in the 16th century, Antonio Manciolino.

Antonio Manciolino

Those who learn how to parry the opponent's blows with the false edge of the sword will become good fencers, since there can be no better or stronger parry than the ones performed in this manner.³⁰

Contrary to his later practitioners of the art, Manciolino prefers parries by *falso*, or the back edge of the blade. Though he is not specific as to why, I have already mentioned some fairly convincing reasons from other sources to this preference. When Salvator Fabris describes the guard of *quarta*, which is simply the refinement of the 16th century guard of *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, he states the sword is stronger to the outside, because that is the side to which the point is directed. This strong angle that is inherent in the guard also applies to the guard Manciolino makes his Universal Parry into -- *Guardia di Faccia*.

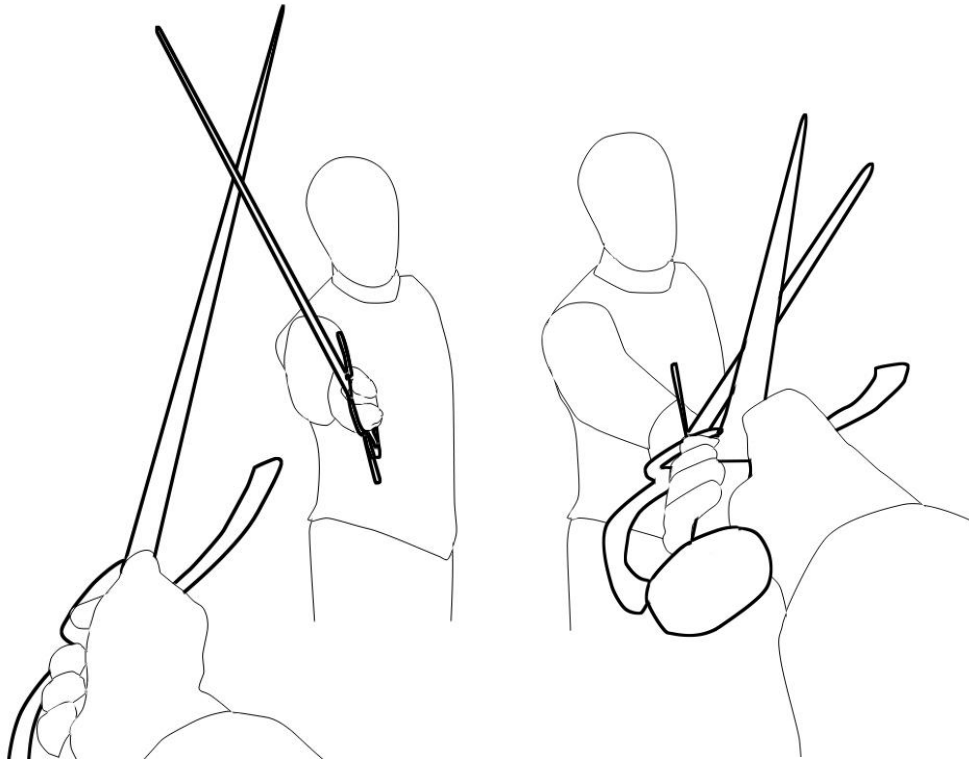
From the originating guard of *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, a parry by *falso* will end in *Guardia di Faccia*, which requires no turn of the hand, or any other motion of the sword, except for a rising action assisted by the turn of the body. This *falso* obeys all of the aforementioned rules on the *verso*, for it is a cut originating from the left. The simplicity of making a *falso* from this originating guard means the parry is quick, and requires no other thought than simply lifting the sword, for Manciolino states: *the virtue of a fencer is to be found in the raising and lowering of the guards.*³¹

Though I would side with Manciolino and agree that parries by *falso* are the strongest, his version of the Universal Parry puts the fencer in the more difficult position to deliver the *imbroccata*. With the rising action of the *falso* not requiring a turn of the hand, the turn must happen at the end of the parry, just before the *resposta* is to begin. From *Guardia di Faccia* the hand turns counter-clockwise, palm down and somewhat to the right in order to face the opponent's blade while the *imbroccata* begins its motion (see previous illustration in the chapter of the Great Blow). Where

³⁰ Leoni, Tom. The Complete Renaissance Swordsman. pg 76

³¹ Leoni, Tom. The Complete Renaissance Swordsman. pg 75

Manciolino saves a tempo during the parry, he must make up for it while delivering his response.



Left: Here it can be seen that from *Porta di Ferro e Stretta* the hand starts to lift, bringing the *debole* of the sword into contact with the attacking weapon. This is unique to *falsi* because the fastest part of the blade is used to somewhat deflect the weapon to the side. Due to the speed at which the *debole* moves, and the angle created over the opponent's blade to the outside, it displaces the oncoming attack.

Right: A depiction of the completion of the parry, where the sword has completely moved on top of the attacking weapon. The strong angle to the outside has moved to collect the momentum of the attack, whether it be cut or thrust.

Angelo Viggiani

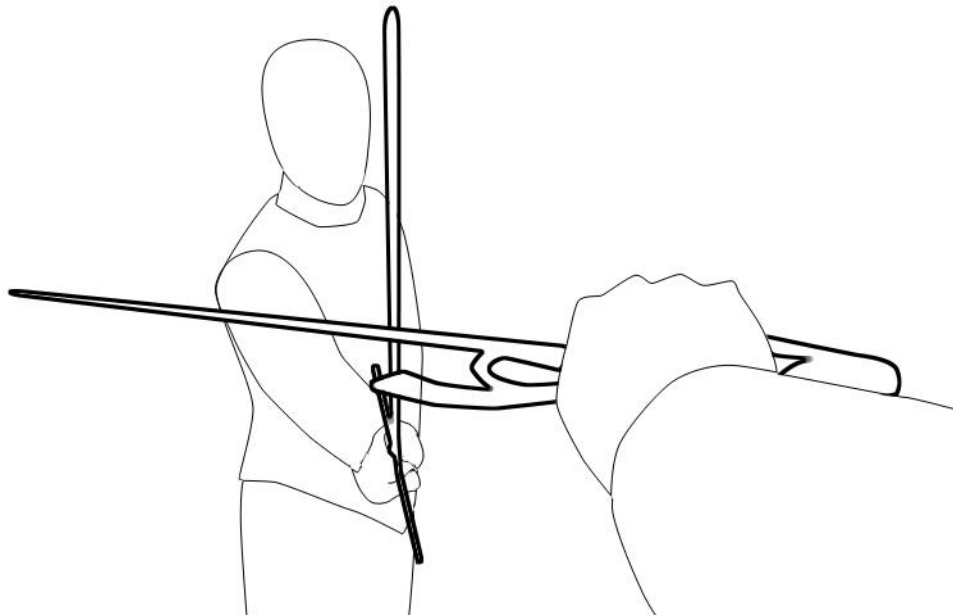
Angelo Viggiani is perhaps the most descriptive when it comes to his preferred defense, and in fact *Lo Schermo*, the title of his manuscript, roughly translates to 'The Defense.' In his fairly verbose treatise presenting his perfect defense and offense, the description of the parry in isolation lies on the final page, illustrating the culmination of his theory.

you turn the point of your sword toward your left side, diagonally, so that the point faces that same side, and the pommel is on your right, as if you wanted to lay hand to the sword, and from here uniting all the strength of your body together, do the same rovescio tondo with those same turns of the hand and the feet of which I have told you, and in the same manner; but pay heed that in this delivering of the rovescio, the swords meet each other true edge to true edge, but that the forte of your sword will have met the debole of

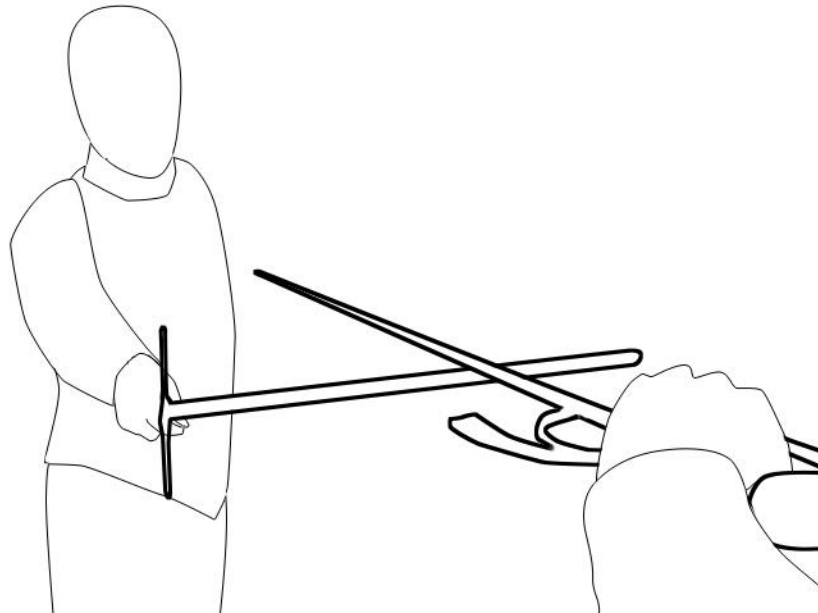
mine, whereby mine could be easily broken by virtue of the disadvantage of such a meeting, and also because of the fall of the cut; and you will also be more secure, being shielded by the forte of your sword.³²

In contrast to Manciolino's parry, Viggiani uses the true edge of the *forte* instead of the false edge of the *debole*. Roughly following the same trajectory - a rising blow with the hand ending level and just outside of the right shoulder - his hand is virtually where it needs to be to deliver the *imbroccata*. This means the tempo saved at the end of the parry must be expended in the preparation of the *roverso*. At the beginning of the description above, from *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, Viggiani has us turn the sword's point to the left. By doing so, the palm of the hand turns down, directing the true edge towards the oncoming attack. It can be deduced that he uses the time that it takes for the oncoming attack to travel through space (but before it completes!) to prepare the action of the parry, and by doing so, makes the *resposta* very quick.

However, because Viggiani initially turns the point to the left, the strong angle that existed in the originating guard is lost, and thus must use his *forte* against the opponent's *debole*. But this also means that the opponent's sword will penetrate further into the defenders space before the parry is made, reinforcing the need to make the parry as a cut with an extended arm.



³² Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 53



Top: The point is directed to the left, turning the palm down and true edge into the attack. The *forte* moves to intercept the *debole*.

Bottom: The relationship of the crossing allows the parry/cut to fall over the opponent's sword as his falls from high to low. From here, a quick turn of the hand is all that is required to deliver the *imbroccata*.

Giovanni dall' Agocchie

Compared to Viggiani's elaborate description of his Universal Parry, which was only quoted in part for sake of brevity, Dall' Agocchie's gets right to the point:

*I'd make him advance a bit toward the enemy's right side with his left foot, and in that tempo parry the blow with a *riverso squalimbro*³³*

Note, however, Dall' Agocchie mentions a step, which is absent from the other two masters. Dall' Agocchie, like Viggiani, employs the true edge with his parry, but instead of rising from *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, he immediately cuts the point down and across into its offensive counter-part, *Coda Lunga e Stretta*. The step he mentions is consistent with the general theory of fence he outlines at the beginning of his treatise and maintains throughout, which is that the rear foot moves away from the oncoming attack. This allows the body to make space for the parry and moves the body towards the open line as it presents itself, which I will talk more about in the next chapter.

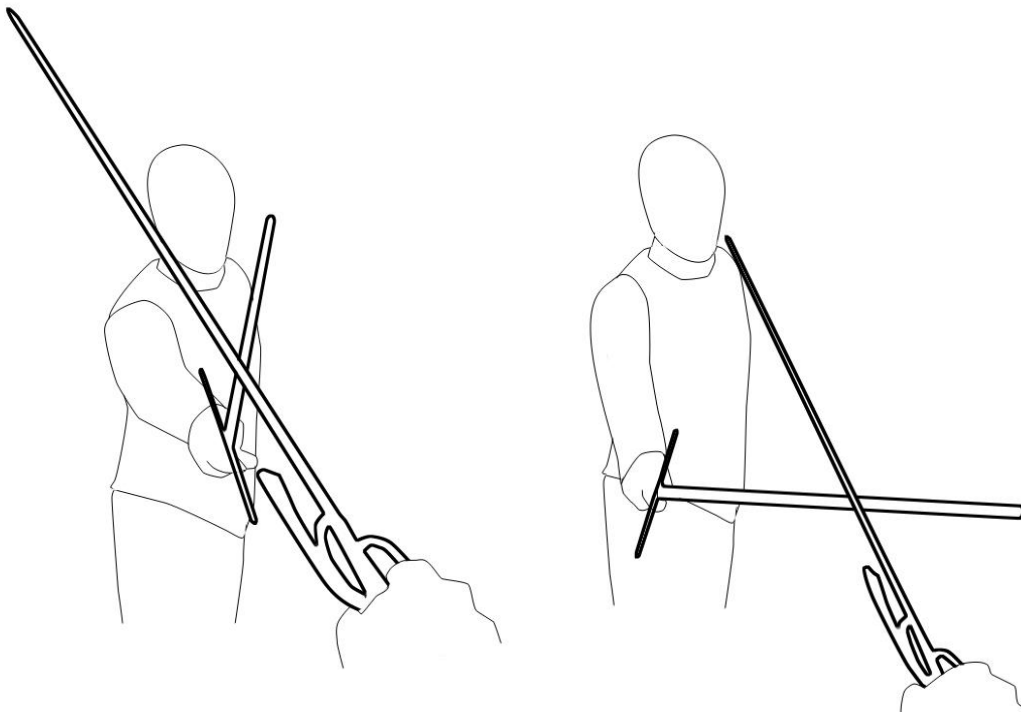
Like Manciolino's parry, Dall' Agocchie's requires very little, if any, preparation. The parry itself is a very direct action, following a descending, diagonal line from left to right. While the other two

³³ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 38

masters use the nature of the initial low guard to make a rising parry into a high position, Dall' Aggochie chooses to move from low guard to low guard, only then leaving the low position to deliver the *imbroccata*. Keeping the parry between two low guards allows the body to remain very secure in conjunction with the body moving away from the blow.

But, because his Universal Parry ends low, which is unique to him, it requires the longest tempo to deliver the *risposta* Where Manciolino needs only to turn the hand, and Viggiani simply requires a slight rise, Dall' Aggochie must lift the entire arm to when answering his opponent.

Each variation of the Universal Parry has its own strengths and weaknesses, and each master picks and chooses which elements of the *roverso* best suits their style. But each achieve the same result using the inherent strength of the *roverso* as a parry.



Left: From *Porta di Ferro e Stretta* the hand turns, making a descending *roverso* with the true edge cutting through the center.

Right: The parry follows the same cut-line, independent of whether it is being used as a parry or attack. Here, being used as parry, moves to cover and suppress the oncoming attack, ending in *Coda Lunga e Stetta*. From this guard, the entire arm raises high to deliver the *imbroccata*.

Use of the Body

Independent of the trajectory of the roverso or whether the true or false edge is employed, the motion of the body is universal. From the original guard of *Porta di Ferro e Stretta* the body is turned in profile, with the left shoulder behind the right, and the right hip brought forward. This position not only makes the body smaller and well hidden behind the sword, it readies the body to coil itself around its center.

in the selfsame tempo that the rovescio travels, that you make with your body a little turn in such a way that your left shoulder is found somewhat more forward than your right, and that your left arm follow the right through the forward side, so that it is found toward the right side; and make additionally a slight turn of your left leg on the point of your foot through the draw, and the heel should be somewhat lifted from the ground; and together with this make your right leg lie extended, with the body somewhat erect³⁴



With Viggiani's illustrations of *Porta di Ferro e Stretta* (left) and *Coda Lunga e Stretta* (right), the turn he describes becomes evident. Using the rear foot as a rudder, it directs the position of the hips and torso in turning to the outside. This turn of the body powers the cut during the action itself, and puts the body in such a position to better support the guard the *roverso* ends in.

Both Viggiani and Manciolino make this turn of the body firm-footed, while Dall'Agocchie turns the body via *mezza-volta di corpo* passing the left foot in front of the right. While stepping with the rear foot adds an extra tempo to the action, it allows the body to fully turn from left to right, adding a greater degree of opposition to the outside.

³⁴ Swanger, William Jherek. "*Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani*" pg 31

After the *roverso*-parry has been made, either by an ascending true-edge (Viggiani), a descending true-edge (Dall 'Aggochie), or an ascending false-edge (Manciolino), and the body has turned to the outside to power the cut and support the ending position, the body is coiled and ready to strike.

In order that you be able to put all the strength of your body to your service; but when you have in mind to do the punta sopra mano, make the right foot move itself, and go forward a big step, and immediately make the left arm begin to descend, and the right shoulder to propel the arm forward, dropping with the point from high to low, taking aim at my chest, without making any turn of your hand, pushing it so far forward and so long as you are able. In this tempo the heel of the left foot will follow the right, not moving, however, the point of the left foot from its place³⁵

With the left shoulder somewhat forward, and the right somewhat back, the body begins to uncoil. The right shoulder moves forward, pushing the arm and sword forward for the "Great Blow". The left shoulder is pulled back (in Viggiani's case, assisted by throwing the left arm behind), again turning the body in profile, but in this instance in order to extend the right side as far forward as possible accompanied with a step on the right foot. After the thrust has been executed, the sword comes to rest back into the initial guard of *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*.

When Capoferro states *that one ends where the other begins; in other words, they begin and end without an actual beginning or end*, he means just that; from *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, a *roverso* is made which will begin to assume the guard of *Prima* (the beginning position for the "Great Blow"/*Imbroccata/Punta Sopramano*), then the thrust is made which falls or resets back to *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, all in one continuous action or *tempo*.

Tempo and Provocation

it suffices that each motion that is single and continuous lies between the preceding and subsequent rest; [...] thus the tempo that it accompanies is a single tempo; when you rest in guard, having finished that motion, you find yourself once again at rest; it is therefore a tempo, a motion, which instead of calling a "motion", we call a "tempo", because the one does not abandon the other; and the guard is the rest and the repose in some place and form. In conclusion it is as much to say "tempo" and "guard", as it is to say "motion" and "rest". Whereby it is necessarily so, that as between two motions there is always a rest, and between two rests there is interposed a motion, apparently between two thrown blows, or two tempos, or two motions, is found a guard. And between two guards, or rests (as you wish to say) are interposed some blow and tempo. Thus a full tempo is a full perfect blow, because that would be a perfect motion and tempo.³⁶

³⁵ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 50

³⁶ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 27

An astute practitioner of the art would conclude that the Universal Parry and Great Blow are two distinct actions and thus comprise two tempi. But, if the blow immediately follows from the parry, which is to say there is no rest between parry and blow, then the entire action is considered a single tempo.

In accord with our discussion, by "tempo" I intend "motion", not the number of the motion, as you mean.³⁷

This might seem like a meaningless, semantic distraction, but it actually has a very important tactical consideration. By defining both actions as a single tempo defense and response, it eliminates any hesitation that might occur after the parry has concluded. By eliminating this pause, the opponent will be offended sooner, disallowing him any sort of counter. The true strength of the *roverso* as a parry is that it continually moves in front of the body while keeping the point in presence during the entirety of the action, all the while moving out towards the opponent, concluding in a thrust, all in one smooth, continuous action. The same cannot be said about any other actions with a sword in hand.

But, the looming question remains, why is the perfect action with sword in hand at its heart a defense? This begs the age old question of "Is it better to wait for the enemy to strike, or for him to be the first to throw a blow?" Viggiani states that *"it is better to wait for the enemy to strike [...] Because he who strikes first, uncovers himself first, and uncovering himself, cannot in the same time cover himself; hence, when your adversary uncovers himself, you can seize the opportunity to strike him."*³⁸ Each master would have us ideally parry and respond in the tempo of the opponent's attack, meaning that as his strike is being delivered, but before he is able to recompose himself back in guard, he has already been struck. This is indeed possible if all of the above rules of the Universal Parry and Great Blow are obeyed.

The last missing piece of this entire discourse resides in convincing or provoking the opponent to leave the safety of his guard and be the first to attack. Each master accomplishes this slightly differently, but can be summarized simply as giving him a tempo in which it seems enticing to strike.

Antonio Manciolino

When you are about to fence your opponent with the spada da filo, set yourself with the right foot forward and the sword in Porta di Ferro Stretta. Then, without delivering any sort of attack, press your opponent in this manner: gather forward with your left foot, and then step forward with your right. Thus provoked, the opponent will see himself compelled to either deliver an attack or retreat.³⁹

³⁷ Swanger, William Jherek, *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 52

³⁸ Swanger, William Jherek, *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 26

³⁹ Leoni, Tom. *The Complete Renaissance Swordsman*. pg 128

Manciolino closes distance while at rest in *Porta di Ferro e Stretta*, offering two tempi to the opponent, first, the step of the rear foot, and the next, the step on the front foot. Dall' Agocchie mentions that the step on the rear foot is a good tempo in which to strike, but the tempo of the front foot is preferable.⁴⁰ Viggiani, in contrast, states: *when the enemy, in stepping, lifts his left foot in order to move a step, that he is then a bit discommoded, and then you can strike him with ease.*⁴¹ In either tempo, Manciolino is offering an opportunity to his opponent to strike. This provocation or enticement for the opponent to leave the safety of his guard is the opportunity Manciolino uses to apply his version of the Universal Parry and Great Blow. While the opponent extends sword, body and foot, Manciolino, all in one smooth, perfect tempo, parries and strikes before the opponent is able to recover.

Angelo Viggiani & Giovanni dall' Agocchie

In contrast to Manciolino, both Viggiani and Dall' Agocchie prefer to provoke with an action of the sword and not that of the foot. Both begin to move through the Great Blow recovering in *Porta di Ferro e Stretta* not in order to offend, but to provoke the opponent to strike the opening as it presents itself.

*Come against me always in guardia alta, offensiva, perfetta; but not, however, in a mind to offend me immediately*⁴² -Angelo Viggiani

*Upon putting his hand to his sword, I'd want him to fix himself in guardia d'alicorno with his right foot forward. And once he's near his enemy, he'll thrust an imbroccata without any stepping, which will end in porta di ferro stretta. And I'll have him do this not in order to wound yet, but only in order to provoke the enemy to throw a blow, since in seeing the opening, he'll have a reason to respond.*⁴³ -Giovanni dall' Agocchie

Once the opponent strikes into the opening as it presents itself, both apply the Universal Parry and Great Blow in the self-same tempo.

It should be noted that whether the provocation is with the sword or with a step, the provocations are very conservative and consist of half-tempi. Manciolino provokes with a half step of the rear foot and then a half step of the front foot, and Viggiani and Dall' Agocchie with a half *punta soprmano* (over-hand thrust). Each is not passing in or delivering a full thrust or cut to provoke the opponent. These sorts of provocation might be enticing but to the detriment of the fencer. If a full tempo (step or thrust/cut) was used to provoke, the opponent could respond in *mezzo-tempo*, making any sort of response futile.

⁴⁰ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 33

⁴¹ Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 25

⁴² Swanger, William Jherek. *Lo Schermo de' Angelo Viggiani* pg 52

⁴³ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 37

The Art and Practice

all the liberal arts are comprised of theory and practice. Likewise is it so for this one, and both theory and practice must be considered. The theory of the art of fencing teaches with reason the ways to defend oneself and harm the enemy. The practice, then, is that which one acquires from familiarity with its operation, that is, by long use and continuous practice.⁴⁴

As I mentioned in the opener, my goal was not to merely find a technique that reappeared over and over in the Bolognese art of fence and compare and contrast its evolution and use between masters. The Universal Parry and Great Blow are more than just that.

The art of fencing comprises all valid techniques, approaches, theories, and actions, and some masters spend more time than other discussing all of the possible combinations of actions to that of their contemporaries -- even though some might profess to only gloss the surface (*looking at you Fabris*), the practice, however, deals with the imperfections of the body, its abilities, its condition, and the realities of the context of the fight beyond the many and diverse ways to defend and offend. The Universal Parry and Great Blow is the attempt to conform the art into the practice of swordsmanship. Many masters opt to include this technique near the conclusion of their treatise, or in Viggiani's case, make it their entire work. After the master has exhausted their knowledge of the art of fence, they inevitably explain how their work can be distilled into a single form. Capoferro is indeed one of these masters whose quote I will continue from the introduction:

The prima starts high and ends in quarta rather low, and this for two reason. Firstly, if the opponent attacks you with a thrust or a cut, you can parry with a riverso while passing with your left foot somewhat towards the opponent's right side; you can then push your right foot forwards and strike him with an imbroccata to the chest, at the end of while you would again be in quarta. Secondly, the opponent would only be able to attack your right side, which makes it easy to defend with an ascending cut from the quarta.⁴⁵

...and some 300 years prior, Fiore de' Liberi gives the exact same advice:

I'll step with my front foot a little off the line, and with the left foot I'll pass at an angle; as I do so, I'll cross and beat away your swords, find you open and strike you for sure. Go on and throw a sword or a spear at me, and I'll beat them all away as I've described, passing off the line—as you'll see from my plays just ahead. Please look at them. And even with the sword in one hand, I can practice my art, as you'll find in this book.⁴⁶

Though there exists no secret blow in fencing and consequently any action has a counter,⁴⁷ from our earliest known Italian source, well into 17th century and arguably beyond, the Universal Parry

⁴⁴ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 7

⁴⁵ Leoni, Tom. *The Art and Practice of Fencing*. pg 87

⁴⁶ Leoni, Tom. *Fiore de' Liberi*. Pg 21

⁴⁷ Swanger, William Jherek. *Dell' Arte di Scrimia* pg 32

and Great Blow exist as the best possible counter and offense when the art of fence is to be practiced.

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