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Arms and the Man.

MARIE HARRISON

Weaponry and military equipment often has a role that extends beyond the merely functional. Through a juxtaposition of Shakespeare's representation of Sir John Falstaff, with an early seventeenth-century rapier, this article explores how weaponry is used not only to communicate a potential threat, but may also indicate the status and even the philosophical and cultural positions of the bearers.

London in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a dangerous city: the routine bearing of arms in civilian life had spread from the aristocracy and gentry to less elevated members of society.¹ The mere possession of a sword was therefore no longer a marker of social distinction. The type of weapon borne, however, could be strongly indicative of social and economic status, and might also suggest the philosophical and cultural stances of its owner. Although there has been some resistance to the forging of such conceptual connections, notably among twenty-first century practitioners of renaissance martial arts,² this essay seeks to demonstrate that, during the early modern period, weapons were laden with meaning, and that such meaning was so widely recognised that it could be used as an identifying shorthand in the literature of the period.

The importance of the choice of bladed weapon, whether in military or civilian life, is underlined by the volume of contemporary writing on the matter, wherein one of the most contentious issues was the place of the newly-fashionable rapier. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the rapier (commonly teamed with a *main gauche* dagger) became the blade of choice for gentlemen,

¹ Tobias Capwell, *The Noble Art of the Sword: Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe 1520-1640* (London: Wallace Collection, 2012).

² J. Clements, 'The Sword and Buckler Tradition', <<http://www.thearma.org/essays/SwordandBuckler.htm#.WoIIL2acaWY>> [accessed 21 Jan 2018].

supplanting the more traditional sword and buckler.³ Any discussion of the emergence of the rapier is complicated by problems of terminology, but by the end of the sixteenth century, the term can be securely attached to long, narrow-bladed swords, particularly suited to the thrusting manoeuvres advocated by continental fencing masters. These weapons were better adapted to individual combat than to the field of battle, where the enemy might well be armoured, and space confined. It has been suggested that the word ‘rapier’ is derived from the Spanish *espada ropera*, or ‘dress sword’, thus emphasising its importance in terms of display more than its functionality.⁴ Indeed, in England, the domains of weaponry and dress were firmly coupled in royal proclamations which sought to curb excess in both, as Edmund Howes reports:

He was held the greatest Gallant that had the deepest Ruffe and longest Rapier: the offence to the eye of one, and the hurt unto the life of the Subject that came by the other, caused her Majesty to make proclamation against them both, and to place Selected grave Citizens at every gate, to cut the Ruffes and breake the Rapiers poynts of all passengers that exceded a yeard in length, of their Rapiers, and a nayle of a yeard in depth of their Ruffes.⁵

The popularity of rapiers had been stimulated by the travels of wealthy young men to Italy, and by the arrival of Italian fencing masters in London, in the 1580s. Men such as Rocco Bonetti and Vincentio Saviolo maintained expensive schools, which attracted the sons of the nobility and gentry, whom they could charge substantial sums for their services.⁶ Predictably, these weapons came to be associated both with these wealthy patrons, and with an ‘Italianate’ style, attracting robust criticism on these grounds.⁷ In the literature of the period, rapiers are often described disparagingly as ‘bird-spits’⁸ and the English fencing-master, George Silver, dismissed them as ‘fit for children, not fit for men’.⁹ Much scholarly opinion maintains that rapiers were exclusively civilian weapons.¹⁰ While the trend seems to have been in that direction, the testimony of Sir John Smythe, a soldier and diplomat, suggests that they were also taken into battle, despite their practical drawbacks:

³ Sidney Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴ Capwell, p.29.

⁵ John Stow, *Annales*, (Continued by Edmund Howes), (London, 1631) p.869.

⁶ Stow. p.64.

⁷ George Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence*, sig, B1v, (London: Edward Blount, 1599).

⁸ As, for example, in Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemakers’ Holiday*, Sc.18, in *Renaissance Drama* ed. by Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014).

⁹ George Silver, cited in Egerton Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fence from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century* (London: [n.p.] 1892).

¹⁰ E.g. Anglo, p.37; see also, ‘Rapier’, *V&A Search the Collections* ([London]: V&A, 2018) <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/o97281/rapier/>> [accessed 05 April 2018].

Rapiers of a yard and a quarter long the blades, or more [. . .], and made of a verie hard temper to fight in private fraies, in lighting with any blow upon armour, do presently break and so become unprofitable.¹¹

Even within the domain of civilian fights, however, the rapier had its critics, most notably George Silver. Although Silver clearly had a commercially protectionist agenda, he shared Smythe's concerns regarding the utility of rapiers. He argued that the increasing length of these weapons made them not only difficult to draw, but also hard to manage beyond the formal exercises of the fencing school.¹² In addition, Silver observed that the *politesse* of these schools did not apply in the wider world and that 'many valiant men thinking themselves by their practises to be skilful in their weapons, are yet manie times in their fight sore hurt, and manie times slaine by men of small skill, or none at all.'¹³ The various criticisms of the rapier imply that contemporaries discerned distinct categories of armed civilians: the effete, 'Italianate' man, exemplified by Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, who practised a mannered, choreographed martial art, and his antithesis, the traditional English brawler, such as Falstaff.¹⁴

The rapier, then, was a controversial and symbolic weapon, as well as an important part of the 'panoply' of the gentleman of fashion and the courtier. A particularly interesting early seventeenth-century example of this type of weapon is held in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle. The provenance indicates only that the item was purchased from Bland and Foster, sword cutlers in London, by the future George IV 'before 1806.' It is an English rapier although, by tradition, it is said to have belonged to the Emperor Charles VI (1685-1740). Its dating (1600-1625) indicates that he was not the first owner.

The blade has a single cutting edge (hence 'back rapier') ending in the relatively fine point associated with swords of this type. Functionally, it is a relatively modest weapon, being 99.5 cm in length, of which the blade represents some 84.6 cm. These dimensions suggest that it would be easy to draw, unlike some of the more extravagant versions, whose blades might be 115 cm or longer. The blade is German and thought to have been manufactured in Solingen, a city famous for the skill of its cutlers, but the richly-decorated hilt is of English manufacture.¹⁵

¹¹ Sir John Smythe, *Certain Discourses Concerning the forms and effects of divers sorts of weapons and other verie important matters Militiarie*, (London: Richard Jones, 1590) p.4/ image 22, <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2176/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=V18222> [accessed 25 Jan 2018].

¹² Smythe, p.6.

¹³ George Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence* (London: Edward Blount, 1599) p.5. <https://www.umass.edu/renaissance/lord/pdfs/Silver_1599.pdf> [accessed 31 Jan 2018].

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Rene Weis (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), II.iv.20-26.

¹⁵ Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 67121, <<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/67121/back-rapier>> [accessed 05 April 2018].



Figure 1. Back rapier, c.1600-25, iron and steel, wood, silver wire, silver, gilt, 99.5 cm in length, Windsor Castle
© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2018.



Figure 2. Detail of pommel, The Royal Collection Trust, ©
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2018.

The *ricasso* and top-most part of the sharpened blade are etched, gilded, and inscribed on either side with apposite Latin quotations: ‘*Qui gladio ferit, gladio perit*’ (‘He who wounds by the sword, dies by the sword’)¹⁶ and ‘*Consilio pollet cui vim natura negavit*’. The first inscription is biblical, while the second is a quotation from a collection of Latin apothegms and can be translated in a number of ways, one of which is ‘he to whom nature has denied strength, gains his ends through craft’.¹⁷ In translating ‘*consilio*’ as ‘craft’, the motto is framed to acknowledge both the skill of the cutler and that of the swordsman. Having said this, the sentence can also be construed as: ‘He to whom nature has denied strength prevails through good counsel,’ suggesting that the blade might have been owned by an individual with extensive responsibilities.¹⁸ Both interpretations, however, point to an owner of delicate constitution whose intelligence will be required to supplement the sword, and counter the advantage of brute strength in an opponent. The question inevitably arises as to for whom the message is intended: perhaps the most likely addressee is the bearer himself. The common practice of inscription of the blade emphasises the sword as an extension and a projection of its owner: while the wording may have some invocatory or protective value, a fine etched and gilded inscription announces the wealth and status of the owner.

The development of the swept hilt is thought to have been a response to the decline in popularity of the buckler: as the swordsman no longer had an independent defensive device, some alternative protection was required for the dominant hand. What further distinguishes this rapier hilt, however, is its elegance: both hilt and pommel are lavishly decorated, being encrusted and overlaid with silver and gold.¹⁹ The decoration takes the form of stylised acanthus plants, from which emerge winged female figures. While such ‘grotesques’ are popular in the decorative arts of the period, the female-acanthus motif seems to recur from Classical times onwards as, for example, on the neck of the Apulian Red-Figure ritual vase shown in Figure 3. No consistent interpretation seems to have been established for these hybrid figures, although it is tempting to postulate the idea of renewal or transition, especially given the funerary associations of the vase. In these images, the individual is presented as the fruit of a much larger and self-renewing organism, making them an apposite, if poignant, reference in relation to a death-dealing, if elegant, artefact. The hilt of the rapier is also counterfeit-damascened, a decorative technique that is seen on many European bladed weapons from the 1530s onwards.²⁰ Given their

¹⁶ Loosely based on Matthew 26.52.

¹⁷ Dionysius Cato, *Catonis Disticha* 2.9

<http://www.pievedirevigozzo.org/07latino/Disticha%20Catonis/02libro_secondo%20.htm> [accessed 30 Jan 2018].

¹⁸ John P. Spielman, ‘Leopold 1, Archduke of Austria, King of Bohemia and Hungary, Holy Roman Emperor (1640-1705)’ in L. Frey and M. Frey (eds.), *The Treaties of the War of the Spanish Succession: An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (London: Greenwood Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Spielman.

²⁰ *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts: Aalto to Kyoto Pottery* ed. by Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p.38.



Figure 3. Apulian Red-Figure Loutrophoros, c. 330 B.C., Terracotta, 98
× 37 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (Open Source).

display value, it is perhaps not surprising that, during the reign of Elizabeth I, weapons were covered by the same sumptuary laws that governed apparel. In a proclamation of 1580, it was specified that ‘Damasked’ weapons were to be carried only by ‘a Knight of the order, one of the privie Counsell, a Gentleman of the privie chamber’.²¹ Clearly, this rapier, although dating from slightly later than the proclamation, was intended for a person of high social status. It projects for its owner the identity of a cultured, educated renaissance gentleman, capable of exercising intellectual, as well as martial skill.

Rapiers were evolving throughout the early modern period, but retained a cutting edge until the end of the sixteenth century.²² Nevertheless, the Italian fencing schools emphasised thrusting, rather

²¹ *By the Queene. A proclamation vvith certayne clauses of diuers statutes, & other necessary additions, first published in the xix. yeere of the Queenes Maiesties reigne, and now reuiued by her highnes commandement to be put in execution, vpon the penalties in the same contened.* (1580) <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:15765> [accessed 01 Feb 2018].

²² Capwell, p.32.

than cutting manoeuvres and this, together with the trend towards ever longer, narrower blades, prompted royal concern. Elizabeth I's proclamation of 1562 sought to prevent the use of weapons 'sharpened in such a sort, as may appear the usage of them cannot tend to defence, which ought to be the very meaning of the wearing of weapons in times of peace, but to murder and evident death.'²³ This stated, the discourse surrounding rapiers and their bearers is varied: official alarm at their lethality contrasts with the mockery and disdain they provoked in literary and other unofficial circles, and the criticism of their practical limitations by experts such as Smythe and Silver. Furthermore, there appears to have been an ongoing dialogue among fencing masters of the period, in which the detailed method and finesse advanced by the Italian schools was opposed by the 'manly' English tradition. Indeed, references in contemporary literature to 'rapier men' and 'sword-and-buckler men' suggest that the practitioners of each approach formed discrete groups or tribes, each with its own culture.²⁴ Italian master Vincentio Saviolo, for example, boasted that the advanced skills he taught could offer real advantages against less cultivated opponents, while George Silver's riposte was that the Italian methods contributed more to fashion and culture than to fighting prowess.²⁵ It is with some delectation that he relates the defeat and merciful sparing of his major rival 'Signior Rocco' [Bonetti] by one Austen Bagger, 'not standing much upon his skill, but carrying the valiant heart of an Englishman', using a sword and buckler.²⁶ For the English master, this represented the triumph of 'honest' native violence over continental chicanery.

In contradistinction to Silver's stout defence of traditional methods, John Florio, an Anglo-Italian author and translator, declared the buckler to be 'a clownish, dastardly weapon, and not for a Gentleman'.²⁷ Although his position might seem as partisan as Silver's, the dramatic literature of the period suggests that Florio's views were widely held by Englishmen, and Shakespeare uses the sword and buckler to designate ne'er-do-wells and troublemakers. In fact, while there are thirty references to rapiers in the Shakespeare canon, there are only four to the sword and buckler, three of which come from *Henry IV*, parts one and two. Significantly, the other reference is in *Romeo and Juliet* (I.i.15), where the stage directions for the entry of the pugnacious Capulet retainers, Samson and Gregory, specify that they are carrying these weapons.

²³ Cited in Capwell, p.30.

²⁴ Silver, p.35, Henry Porter, *The Two Angrie Women of Abington*, (London: C. Richards for the Percy Society, 1841), p.61.

²⁵ Vincentio Saviolo, *Vincentio Saviolo, his Practise. In two Bookes, The first intreating of the use of the Rapier and Dagger. The Second, of Honor and Honorable Quarrels* (London: John Wolfe, 1595).

²⁶ Silver, pp.65-66.

²⁷ John Florio, *First Frutes* (London: Thomas Woodcock) p.18 <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2175/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.882003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:5933> [accessed 05 Feb. 2018].

The pairing of sword and buckler was considered old-fashioned, implying that those who still carried them were of modest financial means and socially undesirable, and there was a strong association with ruffians. In Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* which was first staged in 1614, for example, Scrivener, who presents the 'Induction', exhorts his audience 'neither to look back to the sword-and-buckler age of Smithfield, but content himself with the present'.²⁸

By the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, this combination of weapons provided a convenient shorthand for authors, who could rely upon their audiences interpreting it correctly. Shakespeare uses such shorthand as early as the first act in *I Henry IV*, when Hotspur refers scathingly to his Lancaster rival as 'that same sword-and-buckler Prince of Wales'.²⁹ Given this background, it seems fitting that Sir John Falstaff should emerge from his famous 'triumph' at Shrewsbury, to make his first appearance in *2 Henry IV*, preceded by his 'mandrake' page, who carries his sword and buckler.³⁰ Just as his defeat of Hotspur is illusory, Falstaff's equipment indicates that his knightly status is similarly questionable, in spirit, if not in fact. This scene has great visual comic potential, as the diminutive page struggles on stage, encumbered by weaponry, followed by his corpulent master, in solemn procession. Falstaff, then, is the 'living' vindication of Florio's disdain for the 'clownish' buckler, and it might be speculated that Shakespeare's familiarity with the linguist's work influenced his arming of the fat knight.³¹ In any case, both writers clearly shared the perception that the buckler was not a badge of knighthood.

Given that Falstaff cannot rely on a historical back-story to support his characterisation, he is more exclusively a projection of the language with which Shakespeare endowed him than are the other principal characters in the *Henry IV* plays. Nevertheless, Shakespeare creates for him a personal history, with textual hints that point to his earlier life as a brawler. According to Justice Shallow, Falstaff had been a page in the household of the Duke of Norfolk as a boy, and was thus probably the scion of a prominent local family.³² As Shallow meanders further down the by-ways of his memory, however, he recalls various beatings dealt out by the young Falstaff, and that he was a 'good back-swordman'.³³ A.R. Humphreys, in the Arden edition of *2 Henry IV*, identifies backwords with fencing practice

²⁸ Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, in *Ben Jonson, Four Comedies* ed. by Helen Ostovich (London: Longman, 1997), 'The Induction on the Stage,' ll.98-100.

²⁹ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part One*, ed. By David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1981), I.3.543.

³⁰ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part Two*, ed. by A.R. Humphreys (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013), I.2.14.

³¹ Desmond O'Connor, 'Florio, John (1553–1625), author and teacher of languages', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-9758>> [accessed 13 Feb. 2018].

³² *2 Henry IV*, III.2.24.

³³ *2 Henry IV*, III.2.24.

undertaken with sticks designed for the purpose, and this might seem to support the notion of Falstaff as a man who has played the role of knight, rather than truly fulfilling that responsibility. However, a ‘back-sword’ is also defined as a sword with a single sharpened edge, as opposed to the broadsword, for example, where both edges are sharpened. Furthermore, this second documented meaning of the word antedates the first by more than a century (1611, compared with 1747).³⁴ Given that *2 Henry IV* is thought to have been written before 1599, it seems that the battle-shy captain has a pugnacious past, consistent with the image of a sword-and-buckler man.

It cannot be disputed, however, that from the moment he first appears in *1 Henry IV*, Sir John is a knight in decline. He was presumably deemed worthy of knighthood at some stage, even if solely through his inherited social position. Although his origins are gentle, his tastes and activities, mainly drinking and consorting with prostitutes, are coarse and reflect his downward social trajectory. Falstaff’s past, however, challenges the view of him as a coward, suggesting instead an extinguished firebrand and ex-‘swaggerer’ who has become older, fatter and wiser. His sword and buckler position him firmly in the ‘tribe’ of English-style brawlers, albeit as an *emeritus*.

So strong was the association of bucklers with antisocial behaviour that they have entered the language in a way that reflects how both they and their owners had come to be perceived, by the late sixteenth century. In *2 Henry IV*, Justice Shallow fondly remembers his coterie of friends as ‘swinge-bucklers’.³⁵ The related term ‘swash-buckler’ has persisted to the present day, although perhaps without its sixteenth-century sense of ruffians who announce their arrival by beating their swords on small shields. Bucklers were highly accessible, being for sale at ‘every haberdasher’s’, according to Stow and, thus within the financial range of ‘roarers’ and impecunious knights.³⁶ These small shields could be attached to the owner’s belt and forming an important part of their visual image, as well as being conveniently placed for ‘swashing.’ A man in the habit of wearing a buckler might well have a taste for violence and certain areas of London, and just outside the city walls, were notorious for the activities of such quarrelsome characters. West Smithfield (about 15 minutes’ walk from Falstaff’s haunts in Eastcheap), for example, was renowned as a ground for brawling to the extent that it was known as Ruffians’ Hall and, more specifically, as ‘the usual place of frays and common fighting during the time that swords and bucklers were in use’.³⁷ These were pragmatic weapons, designed to preserve the life of the bearer and defeat his opponent, not to cut a dashing figure and conduct an elegant ‘tap for

³⁴ ‘back-sword, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2355/view/Entry/14467?redirectedFrom=backsword#eid>> [accessed 01 Feb 2018].

³⁵ *2 Henry IV*, III.2.20.

³⁶ Stow, p.869.

³⁷ Castle p.27; Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London: Volume 2* (London, 1878), *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/old-new-london/vol2>> [accessed 05 Feb. 2018] p.345.

tap, and so part fair'.³⁸ Indeed, Falstaff uses this last phrase merely to frustrate the Chief Justice and win their verbal skirmish, the only form of fencing in which he will engage. The subtext is that, like George Silver, the fat knight has little time for courtly niceties: both his feigned death at the battle of Shrewsbury and the post-mortem wounds he inflicts on Hotspur in Part One, indicate that he is willing to stoop for his weapons, both metaphorically and figuratively.³⁹

Although the context of the *Henry IV* plays is military and, thus, the usage of a sword and buckler might have much to recommend it, it is significant that it is only Falstaff's weaponry is that is specified in such detail. Significantly, when he is dealing with the unruly Pistol at Hostess Quickly's tavern, Sir John orders his page 'Give me my rapier, boy', which he then uses to subdue the 'swaggering' ancient.⁴⁰ Falstaff may be producing the same blade that he has carried throughout the play but, in his choice of language, he is firmly reclaiming the ground of social, as well as military superior in this tavern brawl, underlining the symbolic value of the weapon. For once, the knight is re-imposing a sort of order in a situation where Pistol has stolen his place as chief disruptive influence, as well as challenging him on the linguistic front: Falstaff is the superior ruffian.

While Sir John may be thought to share some of intellectual traits referenced on the Windsor rapier, his 'craft' reflects the improvised and ungentlemanly methods supported by Silver, rather than the courtly 'dances' of the continental fencing masters. He is the antithesis of the Italianate Englishman, not only in his weaponry, but also in his habits, attitudes and demeanour. For Sir John, fencing is to be done with language, and within this domain he displays a degree of skill and sheer *chutzpah* that buys him a place at the table of his social superiors, for a time. In the field of combat, the rules of chivalry, or indeed any other code, have no value: in his own famous words, 'honour is a mere scutcheon' and in his unchivalrous feigning of death, he aspires to be 'the true and perfect image of life indeed', again mirroring the stance of the English master.⁴¹

Weaponry may be dismissed as brutish and functional but, while the pen is proverbially mightier than the sword, the latter is certainly not silent in its partnership with the fighting man of the early modern period. The Windsor rapier speaks to the wealth and status and possibly even the stature, or physical robustness of its owner, both through its material qualities, its dimensions and its inscriptions. Likewise, Falstaff's weaponry is consistent with his *déclassé* position, with his history as a brawler, and his unwillingness to be constrained by codes of behaviour, just as his linguistic weapons allow him to escape the bounds of his social and dramatic role.

³⁸ 2 *Henry IV*, II.1.192.

³⁹ 1 *Henry IV*, V.4.110-128.

⁴⁰ 2 *Henry IV*, II.4.197.

⁴¹ 1 *Henry IV*, V.1.131-40; V.4.128.

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